

## OPTIONS FOR CLASSROOM ORGANIZATION

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In his article, "What is Applied Linguistics?" (Mexesol Journal, Vol. II, # 2, 1977) Javier Bravo, addressing the question from the point of view of the teacher, suggests that if we seek to define Applied Linguistics, it might be useful to ask an additional question: What, for what purpose, and how am I going to teach?

After posing this second question, he presents considerations for defining objectives (for what purpose?), selecting and ordering items for a syllabus, elaborating teaching materials (what?) and establishing a methodology (how?) which is consistent with all of these.

In this paper, the author will further examine the question "How am I going to teach?". I will not enter into the controversy over which method - the audio-lingual, the cognitive, or the eclectic - might be better or more successful in a given context. This very important question and the equally important questions of how syllabi can be derived and materials elaborated will not be dealt with in this paper. Instead, I would like to explore some of the more practical methodological considerations which we as teachers have a certain amount of direct control over, such as teacher - student roles and options for classroom organization.

First, let us look at the teacher-student relationship and the roles each plays in the classroom, given that this basic consideration will affect the other. Traditionally, the teacher has been regarded as the authority, both in academic and administrative matters. She is the source of information, the organizer and the evaluator. Thus, responsibility for learning seems to rest in her hands. More recently this view of the teacher-student relationship as a master-apprentice or an authority-novice relationship has been challenged by the view that the relationship could better be thought of as a referee-player relationship. (Pit Corder 1977)

This more recent view suggests that the teacher is still in control but in a very different sense. The teacher is now seen as a manager or supervisor of teaching/learning activities. Of course she is still an 'expert' in the sense that she has more knowledge of the language and more experience in language teaching. Now, however, she can put that knowledge to use in different ways and in a greater variety of ways.

Viewing the students as 'players' also places them in a much more active role which means that they assume more responsibility for what goes on in the classroom and for their own learning. This new definition also suggests "Learner independence from the teacher and peer interdependence" (Allwright 1976) and takes into consideration individual differences in learning strategies and previous knowledge.

The traditional authority-novice model, in addition to affecting the learning process by fostering overdependence on the teacher, can influence the type and variety of language used in the classroom. For example, if someone tells his friend, "There's a letter on the floor," it may be interpreted as providing information or as a request to pick up the letter, depending on the situation. However, as the teacher is always or nearly always in a position of authority and can demand that the students do something, the utterance is very likely to be interpreted as an order.

Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) have recorded a good example of this in Towards an Analysis of Discourse. They report a situation in which the teacher asks a student the following:

T: What kind of a person do you think he is?  
Do you - what are you laughing at?

P: Nothing.

The pupil in this case interpreted the teacher's question as a directive to stop laughing, although that was not the teacher's intention at all. The teacher manages to clarify the situation when he says: "I: You're laughing at nothing, nothing at all?" This time the student realizes that the utterance is a request for information and provides the information. However, we can't expect that this will always be the case.

It is perhaps unrealistic to expect that the teacher's utterances will not usually be interpreted as commands given present circumstances. However, it is important to be aware of the ways in which the traditional teacher-student roles may limit the range of communicative functions that the student will be exposed to in the class.

One possible solution to this problem would be to create classroom situations in which the teacher does not intervene directly. One way of doing this is the use of pair and group work where the roles open to students are more varied since the very absence of the teacher delegates to them responsibilities which result in different kinds of language use.

Group work has many advantages in addition to the one just mentioned. It is especially useful in large classes because it enables the students to speak more often and more freely. That is, it loosens the pressures students feel as a result of what Barnes (1973) calls the "audience effect," i.e., the inhibitions resulting from having to speak publicly in front of a large group of fellow students and the dominating figure of the teacher. This audience effect creates in students a need to provide the short, polished "finished article" in the form of a grammatically correct sentence in which generally truth value and adequacy and appropriacy are hardly considered either by student or teacher.

By way of contrast, small group work, if well organized, may provide students with a more intimate setting in which the above inhibitions disappear and in which what Barnes calls "exploratory" talk may occur. Barnes writes:

An intimate group allows us to be relatively inexplicit and incoherent, to change direction in the middle of a sentence, to be uncertain and self-contradictory. What we say may not amount to much but our confidence in our friends allows us to take the first groping steps toward sorting out our thoughts and feelings by putting them into words. I shall call this sort of talk exploratory. (1973)

Another advantage of group work is that it enables the students to begin learning and practicing discourse rules and strategies. So often in whole class activities led by

the teacher there is a certain pressure felt by the teacher to maintain a rapid pace during student oral work in order to avoid boredom among the learners. One of the results of the pressure on teachers is a tendency for them to limit individual student production to isolated sentences. (Long et al., 1976) These isolated sentences very rarely fit together in a way that resembles natural discourse. In contrast, group work, in addition to giving students the opportunity to construct their own longer, incomplete "exploratory" utterances, enables them to practice a variety of types of responses to other people's utterances. They learn to agree, disagree, ask for information, interrupt, etc. That is, they learn how language is used to communicate with others, i.e., what can be done with and through language. We seem to believe that one of the most important end goals is that the students be able to communicate in English. But if we don't provide them with the opportunity to practice these communication skills, how can we expect that they will learn them?

It is always tempting to leave these "communication" exercises for more advanced classes when the students are supposed to know some of the language already. However, might it not be possible for our students to begin to learn about the language i.e., about grammar and lexis, and to begin to learn to communicate i.e., to learn how to use language in a social context, at the same time?

Perhaps it would be useful to look at a transcription of a tape of a beginning level class, where one student is arranging geometric figures on a table and explaining to another student how to duplicate the pattern. (The second student can't see what the first is doing):

- S1: take the rectangle, take the rectangle, the triangle, excuse me, take the triangle.
- S2: Which triangle?
- S1: With the ...with the rombo,<sup>1</sup> and put it er above above the triangle.
- S2: Which triangle?

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<sup>1</sup>rombo Spanish for 'diamond'

S1: With the ... small yellow square. Take the triangle with answer<sup>2</sup>... with (inaudible) and put it below the rectangle.

S2: The rectangle.

S1: O.K.

(Long and Castaños 1976; 45)

We can see that in addition to the repetitions, hesitations, false starts, and changes in direction which are characteristic of language performance, i.e., language in use for communication, the students used certain strategies such as requesting further information, ("Which triangle?") and clarifying ("with the small yellow square") and confirming. (O.K.) Note also the use of the anaphoric 'it' in the first student's utterances.

Although it seems obvious that there are many advantages to group and pair work, it is one thing to physically place the students in pairs or groups and another to activate this difficult process of loosening dependence on the teacher which has (been?) developed in the students and moving toward peer interdependence and student independence which is the goal.

Initially it may be a question of breaking old, established habits. Teachers, instead of answering students' questions immediately, may encourage them to ask each other first, or to consult their books. The teacher may also facilitate the group process by giving individual members specific tasks. One person may be designated as group leader, another recorder, one may be in charge of seeing that the tasks are finished on time, another that everyone speaks in English as much as possible, etc.

Another important variable is the nature of the task which the students are asked to perform and the materials made available to them. If the task is structured so that there is only one correct answer and if there is no other source of information (books, pictures, etc.) than the teacher to evaluate that answer, then once again dependence on the teacher is being encouraged. If, however, there are many possible solutions and/or the solution can be checked by consulting a picture, a book, or some other source, then the groups can be more self-sufficient. (Recently there has been an increased interest in developing materials for pair or

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<sup>2</sup>One of the triangles had a question mark "?" on it.

group work activities of this type. See: Allwright 1976; Phillips & Shettlesworth 1975; Findley 1977; Gutiérrez & McLean 1977.)

It is not necessary for the teacher to remove herself completely from the group activities. Keeping in mind that the teacher's role could be defined as manager or referee, we can see that her presence, especially at the beginning, may be necessary to encourage and support student efforts. Even when the students have become quite independent from the teacher, she may wish to participate because it is interesting and exciting to observe what the students are doing.

In this paper we have looked briefly at teacher-student roles and alternative ways of classroom organization - group and pair work. It has been said that reassessing teacher-student roles and providing for greater flexibility within these roles, and also providing greater variation in types of classroom organization will increase the range of communicative functions that the students will be exposed to, as well as the opportunity for them to communicate i.e., to use language, not just to learn about language as an unapplied system.

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