

Different strokes: Variations on a theme

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What makes for effective teaching and learning? Are the optimum strategies common across the different levels of education i.e. primary, secondary and tertiary? Several years of teaching experience of two senior practitioners will, using a reflective methodology, inform on the teaching and learning situation in the Malaysian context. One of the most important factors that make for successful teaching is the importance of building confidence and self esteem vis a vis ability to speak the language effectively. This paper will elaborate on some of these strategies used successfully for building confidence in the primary, secondary and tertiary levels in Malaysia.

¿Que hace que la enseñanza y el aprendizaje sean efectivos? Las estrategias óptimas son las mismas en los diferentes niveles de educación, es decir primaria, secundaria y nivel superior? Mediante una metodología reflexiva, la práctica docente de los maestros experimentados servirá para informar sobre la situación de enseñanza-aprendizaje en el contexto de Malasia. Uno de los factores fundamentales que contribuyen a que la enseñanza sea exitosa, es la importancia de desarrollar la confianza y la autoestima para tener la habilidad de hablar la lengua de manera efectiva. El presente trabajo describirá algunas de las estrategias utilizadas exitosamente para construir esa confianza en los niveles de educación primaria, secundaria y universitaria en Malasia.

Palabras clave: *reflective methodology, prior knowledge, communicative strategies, feedback, self-esteem and confidence building.*

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Background to setting

In Malaysia, since the implementation of the *Second Malaysia Plan* (1971) all English medium schools have been absorbed into the national system with a common curriculum. By 1983, the national language, Malay became the sole medium of instruction in all secondary schools and in all public institutions of higher learning (for further details on language policy and effects see David 1999). The status of English changed from the medium of instruction in schools to that of a subject.

There has been a decline in the standard of English and this has been a cause of concern.

However, more recently, the importance of English has increased with Malaysia's new policies of globalization of its economy as it strives to become an industrialized nation. This importance of the language is reflected in the change of government policy towards English. The *Private Higher Educational Institutions Bill* (1996) allows courses to be taught in English with the approval of the Minister of Education. Another sign of change was reflected in 1997 with the revamping of the secondary school *Sijil Pelajaran Menengah* (SPM) or the Secondary School Certificate which is the equivalent of the O-Level English paper. This paper has now incorporated the GEC O-Level 1119 with the SPM 1322 English paper. This was done to ensure that Malaysian students would have a grade in English that would be universally accepted by foreign tertiary institutions. More recently, as from 2000 local undergraduates have to pass the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) before they can graduate (David 2000). Furthermore, the teaching of English in schools which starts in the first year of schooling and which came to an English at the SPM level has recently (2000) been reintroduced at pre-university level, *i.e.* Form 6.

In Malaysia, the teaching of English can be seen as that of second or foreign language. The learner is exposed to English in varying degrees depending on the environment the learner is in. For example, a learner who grows up in Kuala Lumpur is inevitably exposed to a lot of English. In comparison, a learner who grows up in a FELDA (Federal Land Development Authority) scheme where the population consists of one ethnic group, *i.e.* Malay, will have very little, if any, exposure to English. Furthermore, in such an environment, the learner may have an indifferent and sometimes even hostile attitude towards the learning and use of the English language.

Where language use is concerned, in the Malaysian context, the learners from the rural and the FELDA (Federal Land Development Authority) scheme have little or no chance to use or even hear the English language. Therefore, except for learners in the towns, the opportunity to make use of the language is almost nil in such locations, and this does not encourage the effective learning of the language (see David 2000 for effect of setting on language teaching and learning).

Therefore, in such settings, motivation plays a very important part in learning. All learners need to be motivated to learn, motivated to process what they have learned and then be motivated to use what they have learned in the target language (Willis 1996: 14).

How do we as language teachers give confidence and self-esteem to our learners? This paper elaborates on the building of confidence and self-esteem in order to motivate learners.

Profiles of the learners

Profile of a primary student

All children have an ability to learn. Even as a child your learner knows the power of language so as to satisfy their needs or let their feelings be known. The primary learners come to school at the age of six and already have everyday knowledge of language taught by their care-givers. This prior knowledge is the 'every-day' language which is usually the mother-tongue or the home language which is spoken if the care-givers are not the parents but baby-sitters or maids. Once in school, the learners have to learn to adopt and adapt their knowledge to learn either a new language or if it is the same, a new variety or a more formal or standard variety.

Profile of a secondary student

The secondary school learners also enter the secondary school with prior knowledge of the skills required in learning a language. The learners who are from the cities and towns have been more exposed to English as compared to the rural students. Secondary school learners need to be cautiously and sensitively guided along. They have 'learnt the art of social niceties, albeit in their mother-tongue. They know, for instance when and how to open a conversation, how to interrupt and how to conclude a conversation' (David, 1994).

Profile of a tertiary learner

The tertiary learners are adults. As with the primary and secondary learners, they do not come to us 'tabula rasa', *i.e.* with no prior knowledge or information. Additionally, they are already proficient speakers of their first language. They may even be proficient in more than one language as they have completed their primary and secondary education especially if they were educated in the vernacular schools which are primary schools teaching in the mother-tongue (Chinese or Tamil). In addition, tertiary learners have some background knowledge of the subject they are specializing in. For example, an engineering student will have background information about his subject. Being adult learners, they have to be handled carefully. They will not like to be talked down to.

The role of the language teacher

The teacher has to be the role-model for the lower primary. The classroom is generally teacher-centered where the teacher teaches the basic skills required in language learning. In the upper-primary classroom, the teacher's role changes and becomes more that of a facilitator. However, the teacher still is the role-model, and in some instances, as in the case of the FELDA schools, the only role model of the target language available.

The responsibility of the teacher is heavy as it is effective first teaching or scaffolding of what is virtually a foreign language especially for the FELDA scheme learners that will motivate interest in learning the target language. We believe that it is only through maintaining interest, constant practice and insisting on regular use of the target language that learners can learn the language.

In the secondary and tertiary levels, the teacher must keep in mind that the learners are adults and have to be treated with respect. The teacher has to bear in mind that they are able to think for themselves and form opinions. A good teacher or facilitator will utilize this thinking ability to the fullest potential. By building up the learners' self-esteem they will have the confidence to participate in learning tasks in the learning situations. The teacher must be a guiding hand that organizes the learning situations to encourage language interest and proficiency.

Teaching strategies are methods or techniques one uses to help in the learning of new input. Learning is facilitated if the teacher taps on prior knowledge when disseminating new information. This will now be discussed.

1. Tapping prior knowledge

We know that the primary school learners come to the class with some knowledge. They are already able to communicate in one language. The secondary school learners are competent in the home language and Malay (the medium of instruction in school) and basic English which is taught as a subject in the primary school. Similarly, the tertiary learner already has the basic proficiency in English and Malay and also the home language, if it is not Malay.

To give confidence and self-esteem the learners have to be made conscious of the number of lexical items they already know in the target language. They are not consciously aware of this knowledge. Since Malay has borrowed extensively from English, learners see these lexical items as Malay words and are not aware of their origins from the English language. The teacher should make learners aware of the origins of these words so as to build confidence and facilitate learning (David 1993). The teacher should also inform learners of the similarities of Malay syntax to English. If made aware of the stock of English words they have, the learners might feel more confident and might attempt to speak and use the target language (for further details on capitalizing on the known language, see David 1994a, 1999b).

Tapping on prior knowledge is a strategy that can be used even in the primary level. Word recognition is one memory strategy taught in the primary classroom. Learning is done by tapping the learners' knowledge based on the known and then moving towards the unknown. An example of this is the use of simple words such as the items in the classroom —*a chair, a table, a window*, etc. The pupils already know these words in the LI. Using matchstick figures to show visual pictures and create mental images can help the learners form associations with their prior knowledge while learning new items or new words in the target language.

Dictionary skills are another strategy taught in the upper primary schools. These skills continue into their secondary education. Students are taught to use the bilingual dictionary, thereby utilizing their prior knowledge in their LI to help in their grasp of the L2. They are also encouraged to begin using a one-language dictionary once they have the basic vocabulary and they feel confident. With the dictionary to fall back on for support, the children feel more confident and willing to participate in task-based group activities. At the tertiary level, however, the function of the teacher is to de-emphasize the use of the dictionary as an aid or confidence booster. Instead learners are told to depend on their schemas and scripts, *i.e.* world knowledge. They already have learnt how to use a top-down and bottom-up processing system to decode both written and verbal text and how to overcome any problematic lexical items. At this higher level the resources are internal and not external. These strategies can boost confidence.

The younger learners are taught to read from the left to the right. The basic skill as how to hold a book, turn a page, for example, should be simple, as at home they would have seen their parents read and these skills would have been enculturated. The teachers use the Big-book method to read aloud. They teach the young learners how to pronounce and read, for example, the genre of stories. This teaching and learning is facilitated as children could have been read books or been told stories by their parents and older siblings, though not necessarily in the target language. By exposing the children to a wide variety of books and materials, interest in reading is generated and sustained.

Even at a young age cognitive skills can be taught. For example, young learners' inferencing skills, deductive skills and summarizing skills can be gradually developed as the teacher uses leading questions to guide them along. As the teacher reads the learner should be asked to deduce the ending or conclusion. If learners participate in the process their interest is maintained as the attention span of young learners tends to be very short. Active participation such as requesting the learner with the shortest attention span to help turn the pages of the big book, can sometimes make the learner feel important. The learner's attention is focused as he tries to be sure to know when he has to turn the page, preferably without being told when by the teacher.

Another way to ensure that the learners' attention is sustained is to get them to write down their own interpretation of the story. The primary learners should be allowed to write in their own words without feeling that the teacher is going to correct the spelling and reorganize the whole story. The cover of the 'story book' could be drawn by each individual learner and the 'book' be put in the classroom shelves for the peers to read. This will give a boost to the self-esteem of the learners. As the level of the learners knowledge of the target language improves, more encouragement and guidance from the teacher can help the learner move on to write better individual compositions.

The tertiary learners will have to be given the basic guidance on the genre of the type of writing they need for their specific subjects. In fact if they already possess this knowledge of the genre be it in LI, then the job of the teacher is to make them aware of their already existing knowledge and its transferability to the target language, especially

in the teaching of reading skills like decoding, inferencing, skimming, etc. These strategies can be explained in the early or initial stages of learning (see David 1992b).

2. Capitalizing on communicative strategies

In an experiment carried out by David (1992), it was found that in raising learners awareness consciously in relation to the strategies they use instinctively, it was possible to develop the learners' communicative competence. This awareness of communicative strategies (Faerch and Kasper 1983) should also be disseminated to primary and secondary learners (for details see David 1999c). With the practice provided in task-based activities these learners are able to internalize the strategies that they have been made aware of, assimilate them and make them part of their emotional and mental make-up for the target language. When they start feeling good their self-esteem and confidence will grow and they will be encouraged to talk in English, the target language.

The effect of peer influence and group activities as a motivating factor

The primary school learners enjoy group tasks that are challenging or intriguing. For example, looking for hidden treasure when given maps. It is essential that every member of the group is given a role to play. With role-play we will see the quiet and shy learners coming out of their shell. After a few lessons these learners will confidently put up their hands to be selected for more active roles. Peer feedback helps motivate the learner to try harder and peer guidance is sometimes useful as they read each other's writing and learn what comprises good writing. This is helpful especially in a classroom of thirty to forty students as it leaves the teacher time to focus on learners who need more attention. Secondary students and tertiary learners can audio or video record their group discussions and listen /watch these recordings.

The use of peers as role-models can be psychologically uplifting. Seeing their peers, especially of the same ethnic group, being able to speak relatively eloquently in English does give some of the less proficient learners a psychological boost. "Hey they can do it so can I!" or "I am not so bad as they are, they too make grammatical mistakes" (David 2001).

However, the use of a VCR in a primary classroom must be carefully evaluated. If a pre-orientation is not done, the learners can sometimes act up and not concentrate on the lesson at hand. Children love seeing themselves on tape and it might be difficult to focus on the finer points of the lesson when viewing the tape in the feedback session. It may also not be feasible to do this on a regular basis due to the curriculum time-frames. At the university level, the use of tapes, both audio and video are used as a teaching and learning aid. Learners are able to self-correct and also observe and learn from their peers.

Importance of feedback for the language teacher

Feedback for the language teacher is an important teaching strategy as it informs the teacher whether the information being disseminated is being understood. Teaching must

be seen as communicating and the communication cycle is incomplete without feedback from the receiver, in this case, the learner (David 1996). There are many ways of obtaining such feedback.

Keeping a log/diary

Primary learners can keep a simple record of daily events, homework and anything else they want. The tertiary learners and secondary school learners can be asked to keep a log of what the English they learn daily in and outside the classroom. However, it is important that the teacher emphasizes the fact that all information in such diaries/logs is confidential and they need not write their names in the log. These logs can help the teacher to conduct a study on the students' language problems and accumulate data to discuss common grammatical problems without singling out anyone by name.

Seating arrangements

Seating arrangements are important. The teacher should get the learners to sit in a circle to gather feedback by watching out for non-verbal cues of all learners. As they speak, the teacher should praise them for at least trying. The learners should be allowed to share their feelings and thoughts too in a caring and conducive environment. For the older students, a summary of the lesson is essential to ensure that the key points of the lesson have been understood. The learners can also be asked to provide an oral or written summary of the main issues understood and learnt. This will immediately inform the teacher of what has gone right or wrong with the lesson and the teacher can take immediate steps to rectify the situation.

Conclusion

Learners' self-esteem and confidence must be strengthened and not eroded and motivation towards learning the target language must be high. A teacher should, can and must use any strategy or teaching pedagogy that will help enhance self-esteem and motivate learning, especially in a foreign language setting. We have listed four factors, *i.e.* tapping on prior knowledge, making learners aware of communicative strategies, being aware of the importance of peer influence and ensuring feedback as the strategies we have used across the different levels of education to build confidence and self-esteem in our learners. It is our belief that what makes for effective teaching and learning is that learners of all ages need to feel confident to try using the target language, English in the Malaysian context.

For the teacher, this must be remembered

- To you they are only students...
- To them you are everything...

By equipping learners with confidence and self-esteem it is our hope that they will be able to confidently say

- If I think I can —I can.
 - If not... I can at least try!
- (Dhas 1996)

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