A voyage of discovery

Penny Ur
Cambridge University Press

Learning is indeed a lifelong voyage: a voyage of discovery. As teachers, we learn as we travel on, and the main goal is not to reach a destination, but rather the experience of the voyage itself and the knowledge, insights, and skills that we acquire on the way. This plenary talk provides an opportunity for me to share with the audience my own voyage of discovery as a teacher and teacher educator: some of the key events in my professional life and their learning outcomes. These events are things like turning-points in my own early teaching career, encounters with memorable personalities, exposure to key books and articles. The learning outcomes are sometimes theoretical–principles that have informed my teaching ever since–and sometimes practical: techniques and procedures that work. I hope these will resonate with the audience and perhaps trigger further discussion and personal learning.

学習は一生続く旅、発見に満ちた航海のようなものである。教師として、我々は旅をしながら学んでおり、主な目標は、目的地に到着することではなく、航海そのものの経験や途中で獲得する知識、洞察力やスキルである。この基調講演は、教師でありティーチャートレーナーでもある私自身の航海を聴衆と分かち合う機会とし、私の職業人生のいくつかの重要な出来事とその時々の学習の結果を紹介したい。それらの出来事とは、教師というキャリアの初期の頃のいくつかの岐路や転機であり、記憶に残る忘れられない人々であり、素晴らしい本、記事や論文との出会いである。学習の結果とは、時には、ずっと私の教育方針に情報を与えてくれる理論的原理であり、時には、うまく行く授業テクニックや手続きなど実用的なものだったりする。これらの話題が、聴衆と共感し、場合によっては、さらなる議論や個々人の学習のきっかけになることを望んでいる。

As we travel on the voyage of professional teaching, we gradually discover more and more about it: when looking back, we can often identify key events or 'aha' moments when we became aware of insights that moved us forward. I shall be discussing some of these in my plenary at the JALT conference in October. But another way of using the metaphor is to look at the ideal destination of our voyage—the goals—as compared to where we are at the moment.

Here's an experiment.

Would you agree with the statements displayed in Box 1?

Box 1

1. You learn language best through communicative activities.
2. Vocabulary is at least as important as grammar.
3. Learners' ideas and opinions about their learning are important and to be respected.

I expect that many, if not most of you, will agree with these statements in principle, though you may have some reservations.

Now look at the questions in Box 2 and answer them honestly.

Box 2

1. Think about the second-last lesson you taught: about how much of it (%) was based on communicative activities?
2. Which can you more easily recall: the last vocabulary (expansion or review) activity you did, or the last grammar exercise?
3. How many times this year have you asked the students their opinion of their own learning or invited them to give feedback on English lessons?

Many of you will find that there is a discrepancy between what you say you believe (Box 1) and what you actually do (Box 2). You may think you believe in using a communicative methodology, but actually spend more time on non-communicative activities. You may consider vocabulary more important than grammar, but in fact do more of the latter. And you may accept the importance of students' ideas on their own learning, but actually not listen to these very often.

Don't worry. Such discrepancies are normal, and even fairly typical of the conscientious, think-

ing teacher. We all adopt certain aspirations and are often unaware of how far we are falling short of achieving them. Our "espoused" theories—the ones we consciously claim to believe—may not accord without "theories in action"—the ones we actually do believe—as betrayed by our behaviour (Argyris & Schon, 1974). It is, however, important to become aware of the discrepancies as far as possible, and to decide what to do about them: Am I going to try to change my practice in order to achieve a desirable goal, or am I going to face the fact that I do not in fact believe that the goal is achievable or perhaps even desirable—and lower my aspirations?

Re-examining where I am

As the exercise presented at the beginning of this talk may have made clear, we are not always aware of what we are actually doing, and vague impressionistic introspection about our own teaching is not usually very helpful or even accurate. There are three main ways of increasing self-awareness.

The first is simply to write things down systematically: by noting down experiences after a particularly successful, unsuccessful, or interesting lesson; or by keeping a journal. The act of writing, as I and many others have found, forces us to define our ideas in a systematic way, and often leads us to interesting self-discovery.

The second is to ask our students. It is important if you do a student questionnaire, however, to make sure that students are asked to self-assess as well as comment on you and your lessons; and that the questions are framed in such a way as to lead them towards constructive, not destructive, criticism (Ask "What suggestions can you make to me to help you learn better?" and not "What's wrong with my lessons?"!).

The third is to ask colleagues to observe our lessons and give feedback. This is not an easy thing to fit into a busy routine, and may take some courage and effort. In some institutions inspectors or supervisors observe teachers mainly for hiring-and-firing purposes rather than to give feedback that will help their professional development—and such observations are often stressful and not very useful. It is better if you can come to some agreement with a sympathetic colleague: I'll watch you, you watch me, and we'll try to help each other.

Re-examining the destination

There is a kind of unspoken assumption that whatever the "experts" recommend—at a conference such as JALT, for example, or in books—is automatically "right," and represents things we should be trying to do. One result of this is that we start feeling rather guilty if we do not do them. I remember as a young teacher feeling, for example, that there was something wrong with my teaching because I was using quite a lot of the students' mother tongue: the "experts" told me I should be speaking only English.

We are professionals; and one of the rights of any self-respecting professional is to use his or her own judgement in making decisions about his or her own practice. Nobody else can tell us what to do. Academics and experts can advise—and we should certainly listen carefully to all the advice and information we can get—but the decision as to how far we adopt their counsel is ours and ours alone. If, for example, I find that giving grammar exercises is a useful thing to do that helps my students to learn, then I will carry on doing so—even though many authoritative lecturers tell me not to—and feel perfectly confident about my right to do so. Others of their recommendations I may gratefully adopt, since they accord with my own experience and professional judgement, and I feel will forward my students' learning and my own development.

Adapting one to the other

Perhaps the most helpful strategy, once we have critically assessed your own position and the ideal destination you want to reach is to *adapt*: to adapt our own performance in order to take on board new practices that we believe are positive and worth making an effort to accomplish, and to adapt the new ideas so that they are practicable for us. Sometimes that means modifying some aspects of an original suggestion. Sometimes it means taking someone else's model and building a different variation of your own on the same principle.

Though my own books suggest a large number of activities, many of which are used as they stand, I regard it as the highest compliment and the best use of my ideas when a teacher comes to me and says, "It wasn't quite right for me as you wrote it, so I changed it like this . . . and it worked."

To summarize

There is an inevitable gap between the ideal destination, and where we are on the journey towards it. This is a normal and a healthy state of affairs. But it is important to be aware of the distance, and do everything we can to make it smaller: to move forward on our voyage.

There are three main things I have suggested we can do:

1. We can re-examine our own position: take sightings, as it were, through our own reflection, student feedback, or peer observation and discussion. What in fact is going on in my lessons? How far are they, or are they not, satisfactory to me in terms of what I would like to be doing?
2. We can re-examine the destination: Is this in fact where I want to go? Or should I change it to somewhere nearer or slightly different?
3. We can try to do both of the above: in practical terms, modify the 'target' ideas or principles so that they suit us, or modify our own practice so as to include the new ideas. Can I change this activity so that my students can do it? Or modify that theory so that it fits my own context? Or change what I do in order to move nearer to a recommendation that makes sense to me?

Conclusion

Good teachers never in fact reach their ideal destination on the voyage of discovery I have been describing here. It is typical of experts that they are constantly looking for new problems to solve (Tsui, 2009). It's the voyage itself which is important, and the constant progress and development that accompanies it. The important thing is not to get becalmed in the middle of the ocean, and not to get stuck at a comfortable port en route, but to keep moving on. Such progress in the form of constant discovery and development is one of the joys of our profession.

References

Argyris C., & Schon, D. A. (1974). *Theory in Practice: Increasing Professional Effectiveness.* San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Tsui, A. (2009). Distinctive qualities of expert teachers. *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*, *15*(4), 421-439.

Penny Ur has 35 years' experience as an English teacher in elementary, middle, and high schools in Israel. Now retired, she has taught B.A. and M.A. courses at Oranim Academic College of Education and Haifa University. She has presented papers at TESOL, IATEFL and other English teachers' conferences worldwide. She was for ten years the editor of the *Cambridge Handbooks for Language Teachers* series. Her books include *Discussions That Work* (1981), *Five-Minute Activities* (coauthored with Andrew Wright) (1992), *Grammar Practice Activities* (2nd Edition) (2009), *Vocabulary Activities* (2012), and *A Course in English Language Teaching* (2012), all published by Cambridge University Press.

Foreword continued from page 2

TLT 7/8月号へようこそ！　この年次大会特集号では、基調講演と招待講演の演者が、それぞれの講演の内容に関する短い論文を寄稿してくれています。皆様が学会を準備・計画するのに役立ててください。

年次大会特集に加え、通常のラインナップからも様々な記事を掲載しています。Feature Articleでは、Masaya Kanekoが東京大学の英語入試問題の読解に必要とされる語彙サイズを調べています。Readers' Forumには3つの記事があります。まず、Marc Bloomが自己調整学習(SRL)について論じます。Adam Murrayは大学契約教員の「燃え尽き」について調査し、John P. Racine、Marcos Benevides、Alastair Graham-Marr、David Coulson、Charles Browne、Joseph Poulshock、Rob Waringは、語彙習得、インプット、多読について意見交換します。My Shareでは、John Spiri、Mark Swanson、Kazuko Namba、Nathan Duckerが、教室で使える役立つアイデアを紹介します。さらにBook Reviewsでは、Tyler BurdenがEnglish for Presentationsの書評を行います。

*TLT*作成に協力してくださる寄稿者や制作スタッフの方々にはいつも大変感謝していますが、特にこの特集号を編むにあたって、いつも以上の働きをしてくれた皆さんにお礼を述べたいと思います。また、これまでMy Shareの共編集者として長年にわたり献身的に仕事をしてくれたDax Thomas とHarry Harrisに感謝すると共に、新しいMy Share共編集者であるChris Wharton とDonny Andersonを編集チームに歓迎いたします。皆様にこの特別号をお楽しみいただき、10月に年次大会でお会いすることを楽しみにしています。

Jason Peppard, TLT *Coeditor*