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Criteria for Innovation in Language Teaching

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The following is an analysis of leadership skills in the EFL classroom, the goal being to describe, consider, and determine the type of leadership behaviours and qualities most effective, and desirable, in creating an optimal language acquisition environment. Developing leadership and autonomy in students should be a primary concern of teachers/classroom leaders. Delegating tasks and roles, and inspiring and encouraging initiative taking and responsibility for learning and goals, are paramount to success in the EFL classroom. The role of the teacher as leader should not be that of an absolute dictator, but more that of guide, facilitator, mentor, role model, provider of stimulus, active participator, observer, friend, advisor, and peer.

According to Bennis and Nanus (1997), “Leaders are perpetual learners” (p. 176). The most successful leaders are those who learn in an organizational context, develop new skills, and focus on what is most important for the collective. Like students, no two teaching contexts are identical. Goals, motivations, attitudes, backgrounds, experiences, culture, and other affective factors will all influence the learning environment and the methods and strategies that will be effective. A good teacher/leader will take general experience and apply it to various classroom situations, but in order to be most effective, this experience and wisdom must be combined with flexibility, innovation, sensitivity, and ability to respond to varying needs and perpetual change. Parry (1996) states that an effective transformational leader needs to be able to formulate a mission statement and generate a vision; encourage participation; create heroes or models of desired behaviour; use humour and engaging language; make symbolic acts, including rewards and punishment; and be a public figure acting as a role model, or inspirational motivator and delegate, encouraging risk-taking and responsibility for actions and initiative.

In light of this, what qualities can the teacher/classroom leader bring to, or instill in, the group/class? And how can these best be used to serve the needs and interests of the class?

Analysis and context

The environment under discussion here, a Japanese science-oriented University, provides a unique range of leadership challenges and opportunities. Most of the English classes taken by students, are required courses, with low or neutral levels of student motivation. There are few electives, or

selected courses, which tend to encourage more positive student attitudes and motivations. This is largely due to the lack of goals, purpose, or a realization of the potential role English will play in their future. Students who are aware of the importance of learning a second language will invariably choose English as an elective and, consequently, display positive motivation.

These classes can also be characterized as undergoing a difficult transformation from typical teacher-centered to more student-controlled approaches. Having experienced primarily teacher-centered methods throughout high-school, students now find themselves in unfamiliar, autonomous territory, needing to take initiative, and responsibility for their own learning and future. The overall attitude towards learning among students at the University is passive, as program and course goals seem arbitrary and unclear, thereby making it difficult for the students to take initiative, or any positive steps towards realizing, reaching, or even developing, goals. Without understanding how English will fit into their future, the classes continue to be perceived as an irrelevant and unnecessary distraction, and attitudes towards learning reflect this accordingly.

Maintaining the status quo appears to be the primary concern of the administration. There appears to be little or no quality control: teachers are given free rein in terms of syllabus and classroom procedures, and are not held to any particular standards, or required to prepare the students for any particular criteria, such as tests, or pre-determined level of proficiency. There are also no incentives, either in the form of punishment, or reward, to motivate teachers or students to go beyond the bare minimum.

Unfortunately, due to administrative and budgetary restrictions, many of the controls necessary in ensuring quality, such as

supervision, evaluation, training, or publication, are not in place. As most teachers, both part- and full-time, are also either on limited, non-renewable contracts, or juggling heavy workloads with uncertain futures, the investment they are able to put into their work quality is limited. The students, having no clearly defined goals of their own, seldom challenge the system, and the cycle of underachievement is thus perpetuated.

The effective leadership role required in this case would primarily focus on breaking this cycle by motivating the students, inspiring them to realize that they are responsible for their learning, and for setting their own goals, as well as giving them the necessary tools, encouragement, and desire to reach those goals.

My teaching style involves developing autonomy and attempting to pass authority to the students; however, their learning styles are unaccustomed to a student-centered, or student-controlled, environment. The instructional paradigm held by students is one of passive learning and teacher-centered instruction, and consequently, the biggest challenge is to empower them to make their own choices and decisions regarding their learning. This is reflected in the 6th mode of innovative learning suggested by Bennis and Nanus (1997), “unlearning”, in which members of an organization are required to discard old, or out-dated, ideas and habits conflicting with new goals and a changing environment (p. 188). Often, students need to go against 12 years of teacher-controlled learning experiences in order to adapt the innovations and strategies I promote. To overcome the pitfalls inherent in this context, and to achieve a viable state of active learning in which the students are able to develop and pursue meaningful goals, I propose four areas in which a teacher can work effectively to become a leader, and exercise influence over the class. These areas will be explained and described as follows: *Innovation, Vision & Planning, Modeling & Guidance, Management & Organization.*

Innovation

Within this teaching context, I apply the following techniques, strategies, methods, and materials to achieve effective leadership and productive learning. The primary leadership task in this context is to enable the students to realize that they do, indeed, have goals, and to show how these goals are connected to future plans, how they can work towards these goals, and finally, what sort of learning strategies or approaches will efficiently and effectively allow them to reach their goals. In pursuing this goal, I endeavor to design interactive, relevant materials, as well as dynamic and effective student centered teaching methods, with the intent of building positive motivations and attitudes to deepen interest in content, and even stimulate learning outside the classroom.

One such method is the keeping of a Vocabulary Notebook and Progress Journal. This is a self-directed learning strategy which I found useful when studying Japanese *Kanji*. This activity helps the students build vocabulary necessary to become confident and competent in all areas of communication.

In a notebook, the students are required to write five new words including a translation and five original example sentences every week. They are free to choose any words they like from any source--textbook, song, movie, magazine--on the condition that they challenge themselves and do not select words which are either too easy, or too difficult. This provides the relevance and student-centered responsibility necessary for remembering the words and overall success. At the end of the year they will have a notebook with several hundred words, most of which they can remember and use correctly. Although I do not use an official means of testing students to evaluate their actual word retention,

by checking their notebooks weekly, interviewing, and quizzing briefly on past vocabulary, I am able to get a good sense of their overall improvement. This provides students with a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction at having reached a goal.

The second part of this weekly undertaking involves keeping a record of difficulties, successes, questions, comments and specific communication with the teacher. This provides an outlet for some of their major concerns which may otherwise go unchecked and cause mental blocks, discouragement, fossilization and a general decline in motivation, as well as opening a private and direct channel of communication with the teacher through which they can voice any concerns and receive valuable feedback without embarrassment, or having to worry about their peers. This also provides a record of their learning experience and progress which may well serve as a template, or incentive, for the future. The Progress Journal also encourages independent learning, self-monitoring of progress, and the overall learning process.

A further innovation geared towards fostering independent learning, relevance, and motivation is student-controlled, directed, and enacted role play. This activity uses communicative means to expose the students to practical and authentic language, which they can practice and use appropriately, within context. The goal is to elicit representative language in real life situations, and provide a way to replicate the real life qualities of language and other non-linguistic factors necessary for successful communication. Role plays also provide the context and authenticity that many other methods lack. This sense of control and relevance affords a strong cohesive force to encourage the students to cooperate and work together in teams to achieve a common goal.

Vision and planning

Instilling a purpose and desire to learn is a very important, yet difficult, task in this teaching environment. Without drive, or interest, in achievement, student motivation and production will be poor. To prevent the onset of aimlessness and apathy, I have the students complete a simple but comprehensive *Goal Sheet*. At the beginning of the first class, I give the students a short pep talk and explain to them the challenges involved in learning a foreign language out of context. Having been subject to mostly teacher-centered instruction for many years, they are usually well aware of the difficulties. Following this, I provide them with a goal sheet upon which they are to reflect and brainstorm about their English proficiency. On this sheet, they complete a self-rating scale regarding their present English ability, aspects they want to improve, and the level they would like to achieve by the end of the course, as well as the ultimate level of proficiency they would like to acquire, or require, for their life. They also include details about the reasons they want to learn English, and their thoughts on the best way for them to improve their English.

The purpose of this goal sheet is two-fold: first, it gets the students thinking about their roles in class, and the roles of English in their lives; and second, it provides me with important information regarding students' needs, attitudes, motivations, learning strategies, and strengths and weaknesses. I check these sheets and provide some positive feedback, support, or advice, make copies for my records, and return the originals, which students keep in the front of their notebooks in order to monitor their progress, and to inspire them.

This is helpful in laying a foundation for student-centered learning and initiating a reversal of traditional roles; where the

students take control of their learning agenda, and the teacher acts as facilitator. Wheatley (1999) echoes the importance of such autonomy, pointing out that *participation* is an ever-present, organizing principle of life: “All life participates in the creation of itself, insisting on the freedom to self-determine” (p. 163).

Modeling and guidance

One of the most important elements of the learning environment, and a key variable upon which the levels of all future success and accomplishment depend, is the image and role of the teacher. As classroom leader, the teacher will ultimately play a major part in shaping student opinions, attitudes, and general experiences of language learning. Therefore, it is paramount that the student's perceptions of the teacher are positive. The teacher is, in effect, a linguistic sales person, or a spokesperson for the target language and culture. As such, fundamental objectives should include earning the student's respect, establishing good rapport, or clear, efficient, and effective means of communication; and enabling students to accept, understand, adopt, and ultimately emulate, the teacher's relevant ideas or behaviours. This can be achieved through a variety of means. Through varying social distance, the role of the teacher can become dynamic and flexible, taking the form of wise mentor, approachable friend, knowledgeable guide, or authoritative and empowering leader.

Other useful strategies include the use of different behaviors and strategies to complement these roles, such as: the use of humour; comprehensible language; authority; camaraderie; professional, as well as personal, communication; demonstration, through example; and reflection upon, and sharing, past experiences as a student or language learner. Such actions will assist in the creation of a non threatening presence

in which the teacher is: aware of the environment and context; open to change; sensitive and sympathetic to student's problems and difficulties; and observing and providing appropriate feedback, error correction, advice and support

Management and organization

A final area in which the teacher can transform the group into a more productive entity is through management and organization. An effective management tool for getting to know the students, keeping records, and generally building trust and rapport, involves the creation of *Picture Information Sheets*. The learning and remembering of names is one of the biggest challenges a teacher faces, but also one of the most important tasks, as the name is the single most important linguistic unit for the student, and is the fundamental building block upon which relevance is created, and learner's needs are addressed. Knowing names also facilitates evaluation, taking attendance, and other management issues. Most importantly, when a teacher correctly addresses a student by name, it shows students that the teacher cares, and consequently builds student confidence and motivation, adding to the overall rapport in the classroom.

Using a digital camera, I take pictures of students in groups, in the positions that they usually sit. I then enter these pictures into a chart representing the floor plan of the classroom, upon which I can write short comments, keep attendance, and record grades and scores. With only a quick glance, it is possible to get a large amount of information, save time, and create a more comfortable environment.

A similar introductory activity with high relevance, offering elaboration and more indirect information regarding student's

backgrounds, interests, and more personal affective traits, involves the creation of a personal business-card style information profile. This project has the students creating a personal information, business card style profile of themselves. I provide a template and a sample card with some of my information on it. There are a number of blanks on this, encouraging students to ask questions in order to get a complete profile. Students may put any information they wish on their cards including pictures, or illustrations. Incorporating more creative and interesting information such as favourite food, actor, music, hobbies, special skills, and dislikes, is also encouraged. This allows students to communicate meaningful content in a more realistic and open-ended way. A great deal of secondary communication can be stimulated from this, as they all want to know about each other, as well as find out my likes and dislikes. The cards are also useful for giving me information upon which to initiate real, meaningful communication. If I know a student likes a particular kind of music I can ask some questions, or stimulate a conversation between other students with similar tastes.

A further activity providing an opportunity for interpersonal communication and expression of concerns, or individual needs, to the teacher, and acting as a means of developing rapport, confidence, trust, and a need to communicate is *Group Conversation Time*. As with the profile cards, the group conversation helps me to learn more about the students, allow them to learn about me, and each other, and create rapport. In groups of no more than four, the students are to decide on a topic or some questions they would like to discuss with me. I meet with a different group every week for about ten minute before, or after, class. This gives everyone a chance to communicate in a more realistic situation with highly relevant content. The main idea

is that they can talk about anything they want in a more relaxed context, discussing subjects or questions that they may not feel comfortable bringing up in front of the whole class. Shy students have a chance to speak without being nervous and, as a result, may gain some confidence. The friendly, no pressure atmosphere created is able to break down many formal barriers, and in some cases even form a bond which carries over into the classroom, and facilitate communication and classroom task management. Even after only a few of these private sessions the atmosphere in the classroom seems to be transformed, as different groups begin to look forward to their conversation time, and those that have finished no longer view me as an unapproachable teacher, but rather more like a friend and a facilitator.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to describe successful leadership qualities and strategies in my EFL teaching context. Although many of the activities and materials described herein are context specific, it should be possible to generalize them to other situations without difficulty. The priority to bear in mind is that for the teacher to serve as an effective leader, a versatile and dynamic role must be adopted in which the teacher can be transformed into a guide, facilitator, mentor, role model, provider of stimulus, active participant, passive observer, friend, advisor, peer, while also interacting with the students in an equally diverse manner, which is fair, authoritative, approachable, charismatic, humorous, serious, organized, flexible, neutral, strict, positive, rewarding, supportive, communicative, compassionate, confident, consistent, hardworking, empathetic, innovative, and open-minded. In order to make the most out of the teacher's skills and expertise, regardless of context, such behaviours and transformational leadership are essential, especially if the goal is the creation of an optimal language acquisition environment.

References

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Appendix 1: Goal sheet

Personal Language Goals																	
Why is English important for you?																	
get a job			make friends			travel			learn about culture								
Your idea:																	
What is the best way to study English?																	
with friends			university			language school			alone								
Your idea:																	
How do you want to use English in your life?																	
Which English skills are most important for you?																	
reading			writing			speaking			listening								
Why?																	
Rate your English skills now.						What level do you want to have after this year?											
reading		1	2	3	4	5	6	reading		1	2	3	4	5	6		
writing		1	2	3	4	5	6	writing		1	2	3	4	5	6		
speaking		1	2	3	4	5	6	speaking		1	2	3	4	5	6		
listening		1	2	3	4	5	6	listening		1	2	3	4	5	6		
What level do you need for your life goals?						What should you do to improve these skills?											
reading		1	2	3	4	5	6	<table border="1" style="width: 100%; height: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr><td style="height: 25px;"></td></tr> <tr><td style="height: 25px;"></td></tr> <tr><td style="height: 25px;"></td></tr> <tr><td style="height: 25px;"></td></tr> </table>									
writing		1	2	3	4	5	6										
speaking		1	2	3	4	5	6										
listening		1	2	3	4	5	6										