

Apparent Problems and Suggestions  
For Solving Them:  
a Study of the EFL Conversation  
Class in Thailand

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In both teaching and observing Thai tertiary class I have found many problems. In this paper I would like to point out these problems and make suggestions to deal with them. The following problem areas are pragmatically discussed:

1. The use of the student's native language in the classroom.
2. The student's expectations of what it means to learn to converse.
3. Talking **about** language in the classroom.
4. The over-use of the textbook in the classroom.
5. Activating the students.

**Problem area 1: The use of the students' native language in the classroom.**

From my observations in several countries where English is being learned as a foreign language, students often find security in reverting to their mother tongue, for whatever reasons. Likewise, the teacher, especially if he or she shares the same mother tongue, will often feel pressured to explain things (e.g. instructions, rules, a point of grammar, a function) in the student's first language. For example, while working in a teacher-training program for non-native speakers I was faced with statements (spoken in beautiful English) like, "The students can't understand unless I explain what I want them to do in my native language" or "It takes too long to explain what I want them to do" or "I'm the same nationality. They expect me to speak in our language."

Suggestion: my suggestion to teachers who make statements like these is provided by Diller:

*"To get a person to think in the language and to use it for communication, we must provide the students with something serious to think about. We must provide something challenging. There is nothing more challenging in a foreign language than trying to learn something new while using the language. If the teacher reverts*

*to the students's native language every time he has something serious to say, then he loses his best opportunity to get the students to concentrate and to think in the foreign language.” (1978:76)*

**Problem area 2 : The students' expectations of what it means to learn to converse**

Students have expectations and attitudes which are the result of their past learning experiences. Many students have experienced studying through programs which are heavily influenced by empiricist thinking. Two premises of this line of thought which have had influence on students' thinking about language learning : (1) it is a habit forming process and “correct” language should be drilled into the student by the teacher ; and (2) students cannot learn from their mistakes. An incorrect response is seen as the beginning of an incorrect habit. (Diller 1978 ; 49)

The method derived from this line of thought has often resulted in defensive learning. “Such learning sees the foreign language as a vast set of sounds and words and rules and patterns that are to be transferred from the teacher or textbook into the mind of the student. In this view, the teacher is seen as hurling darts at the learner. If a dart strikes an unprotected area (that is, if the learner makes a mistake in speaking or understanding), the experience is painful.” (Stevick 1976 : 110)

If the student has experienced and perhaps suffered through this type of learning then (1) he will probably not be willing to speak a great deal ; (2) he will expect the teacher to lead the exercises ; (3) he won't necessarily be aware that he can learn from his mistakes ; and (4) he won't be aware that he can learn from his classmates.

Suggestion : If such notions exist, as mentioned above, try to reverse the process. Try to teach the students that : (1) to acquire the language, especially speaking skills, you need to speak a lot ; (2) to acquire the language, **you** have to initiate the process and raise questions within yourself and search out the answers for yourself. The teacher can only provide you with information, feedback, and encouragement ; (3) to acquire the language, you have to go through a process which includes making mistakes. If you make a mistake, this is good because if you actively pay attention to your mistakes and especially the corrections, you can learn very rapidly ; and (4) to acquire the language, you need people who are sharing the use of the same language. Native speakers can, of course, share the language with you. However, so can your classmates. Since each member of the class has his own unique experiences in learning, each individual will know different things from you. If you listen, ask for and accept feedback from other class members, you are going to learn a great deal.

**Problem area 3 : Talking about language in the classroom.**

It is easy to talk about language. In fact, you can even talk about talking about language as I am doing now. However, many students have heard the teacher talk about language and studied texts about how to use the language for many years and yet cannot communicate even simple ideas.

Suggestion : Avoid talking about language. Teachers who have had success let the students experience the language and discover how to use it. This does not mean the teacher should say nothing. The teacher can introduce functions, wisely correct usage, and guide the students through exercises. If done simply and with few words, students can gain a great deal. If done in an overly detailed manner, students only gain more passive knowledge.

**Problem area 4 : The over-use of the textbook in the classroom.**

In Thailand and other countries where there is a lack of professionally trained native speakers to teach conversation, textbooks are heavily relied on as a major part of a course. These books, such as Richard's and Long's *Breakthrough* series (1977), provide an excellent source of information, but it also is possible they provide the teacher and students with an undefined feeling of security. In other words, books in general have been a major part of most courses studied at school, and not having one can make the teacher and students feel uncomfortable.

However, it is my opinion that in learning to converse, the textbook can actually hinder learning. My reasoning is as follows. Books are generally thought of as a source of information; and generally, how the student makes this information active is up to him. In fact, in some subjects information from books often never becomes active until the student takes a test. In learning to converse the student has to be active either listening or speaking, but as I have seen, *this same attitude* is often apparent about the textbook. Instead of seeing the language in the text as examples of language which the student can adapt and activate in his or her speech, he or she often views it as simply a source of passive information to be digested at some later date. As a result, students gain some inkling as to what conversation is all about, but gain little ability to converse.

Suggestion : Take the book away or in the case where a book has to be used, the students should be forced to actively use the language being studied beyond the textbook exercises. In this way, the book can be deemphasized and the more passive students activated.

**Problem area 5 : Activating the students.**

Teachers sometimes complain that teaching conversation is difficult because the students will not speak in class or only a few will participate. The reasons for this are complex. One reason, as discussed, deals with the students' expectations of

what it means to learn to speak a language. However, another reason deals with the teacher. The function of the teacher is very important, and because of this fact, I would like to make three suggestions which I have found helpful in activating a class :

1. draw on the passive knowledge of the student.
2. consciously maintain control of the exercises.
3. encourage and guide the students to strive for a "group interest" in learning to communicate in the language.

**1 : Draw on the passive knowledge of the student.**

Since many students have studied in a passive setting, they often enter a conversation class not being able to express themselves. However, they usually do have at least two important assets 1) an abundant storehouse of knowledge about grammar and language in general and 2) their own unique experiences. The teacher can use these as tools to draw on by giving the student as many chances to speak as possible. In other words, "it's not our job to cram the student's head full of new facts, but to take what he/she knows and help him/her to expand it" (McLean 1980 : 19). In this case, we should try to make the students' passive knowledge active.

To draw on the students' passive knowledge, get them involved. To do this, the teacher needs to "do exercises where the students are actively searching out, discovering, and depicting" (Stevick 1976 : 25). This includes doing exercises so that the students speak much more than the teacher.

Many types of approaches and exercises can fulfill this purpose. Strip stories, Via's technique using plays, role playing and simulation exercises, problem solving exercises, buzz groups, community language learning, and the Silent Way all get the students involved in their own and each other's learning process.

As to which approach the teacher chooses, I agree with Mullins (1980) who suggests that the successful foreign language teacher—the one who is self-confident professionally—is the one who can eclectically choose the techniques on the basis of his own personality, the students' personality, and the local situation.

**Suggestion 2 : The teacher should consciously maintain control of the exercises.**

How successful an exercise is often depends on how well it is presented. Facilitators have long known the importance of consciously thinking about and organizing an exercise before presenting it to a group (e.g. T-Group).

"Facilitate" means to make learning easier. This concept is very relevant to teaching EEL skills. If I can make the process of learning easier for the student, I feel as if I am doing my job. In other words, our job as teachers is not only to present information, exercises, and a means for the students to get feedback, but also to help them to learn as quickly and easily as possible. Learning should be

easy, and the way the teacher presents the exercise has much to do with how easy it is for the student to acquire the language. If it is difficult for the student, especially in understanding what the teacher wants them to do, the student will most likely not be active during the exercise.

Pfeiffer and Jones (1972) present a model for facilitating an exercise so it is clear for the learner. It basically consists of three stages: (1) brief; (2) do; (3) debrief.

'To brief' means to frame the exercise or define what exact task is expected of the learner. This includes directions, time limits, rules, etc. In the context of EFL, it is important the students know exactly what they are to do. They should also know, in most cases, what the exercise is designed to teach them (e.g. how to request, when to apologize, realize the behavioral differences between their culture and say the teacher's culture).

'To do' means to carry out the instructions given. It is important for the students and the teacher to comply with the instructions. Often an unexpected interruption in the middle of an exercise creates confusion, and in some cases deactivates the students.

'To debrief' means to go over what happened during the exercise, and to discuss what was difficult or easy. If the exercise is a problem solving exercise with only one possible solution, it is a time to help the students discuss how well they did and reasons for success or failure. Unfortunately, many teachers ignore this step. I think it is important as this is often the point which acts as a catalyst for many students in realizing their abilities, weaknesses, and what they need to learn within themselves. It also serves as a time when the teacher can maintain his authoritarian role as well as motivation for the students. Students who are motivated and have had a chance to express themselves using the language being studied, will most likely become more active.

**Suggestion 3: strive for a classroom atmosphere with a community spirit geared towards learning to communicate in the language.**

The teacher can best understand his own limits in creating such an atmosphere by understanding what motivates the students. Each student will be motivated quite differently, depending on his or her experience. In foreign language teaching, the teacher often discovers that primary motivation for students is 'instrumental' (Lambert 1963). In other words, many students study the language in order to pass a test, obtain a degree, get a good job, or to go abroad to study in a university. Often these goals are still vague or not immediately important for the student. Creating a community spirit among the students in the sense of having them help each other to acquire the language is difficult under such circumstances. Through my observations, students who are 'integratively' (Lambert 1963) motivated tend to help each other more by providing feedback, raising questions, and generally encouraging each other.

As 'integrative' motivation is based on such factors as general interest in the language, attitudes toward the teacher, and the students' ability to strive toward goals (Stevick 1976 : 48), the talented teacher, through his own personality, can help to encourage students to become more integratively motivated. For example, if the teacher creates a favorable and realistic image of himself and the culture he comes from, the students will tend to be more attracted towards him and his culture than if he and his culture are presented in an unfavorable way. The teacher can also make the language as interesting as possible through the types of exercises he does.

Much of this has to do with the teacher's own personality and personal behavior of which he needs to be constantly aware and ready to change if necessary. A teacher who is highly defensive, over-critical, shows little or no self-disclosure, and is generally not very empathetic towards students' opinions, feelings and situations is not going to be able to create a climate favorable for learning beyond the 'instrumental' level (e.g. a grade). A community spirit will never get off the ground, unless it is supported by the teacher. The students will not, in other words, be very active.

However, from my experience, if a teacher attempts what Barnlund (1968) calls 'a constructive communicative relationship' with the students, a more favorable climate for learning results. In other words, the teacher: (1) *needs to be willing to become involved* with the students, and in doing so show positive regard for the learner. He should not try to manipulate them into doing what he wants or try to stop them from saying things which displease him; (2) *needs to be empathetic* towards the students' problems and feelings. In doing so he should be especially careful not to project his own culturally biased perceptions onto the student; (3) *needs to allow a permissive psychological climate*. This includes sharing feelings and with holding judgements. Students who feel they are being judged everytime they speak are not going to speak a great deal; (4) *needs to listen openly to the students*. This includes the active ability to focus on many of the things the speaker is saying through words, inflections, and non-verbal behavior. It also includes letting the speaker finish before commenting (5) *needs to be genuine and congruent in his communication with the students*. This includes not misleading them, being honest with them, and making sure the things he says and does reflect his real thoughts and feelings.

Thus, if the teacher remembers to draw on the passive knowledge of the students by doing exercises where students are afforded the chance to communicate with each other, and if the teacher presents these exercises in a way which is easy for the student to understand, and then follows through with a debriefing which motivates the students, and if the teacher encourages and guides the students toward maintaining a community spirit toward learning to communicate in the language then that teacher is going to have a very active class.

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