

The language clinic: the teacher as an agent of change.

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Abstract

This paper suggests that the (language) teacher has an important role as learning-physician in the classroom, helping students to identify their cognitive and affective ailments, and suggesting courses of treatment. In view of the destructive potential of modern society, and the humanistic learning goals espoused by official government policy documents, this paper also proposes that the teacher is an agent of social change, and has a responsibility to model society in the classroom, and to promote an ethical learning curriculum in addition to cognitive and affective ones.

1. Introduction

In suggesting that the learning environment be compared to a “clinic”, the title of this paper might prompt the reader to ask in what way language students can be described as ailing or sick, and also in what way the language teacher can be compared to a physician. In order to clarify this situation, let us step back from the chalk face for a moment and ask what role language teachers have in the classroom. Are they:

- benevolent autocrats?
- practical instructors?
- classroom policemen/women?
- facilitators of learning?
- learning physicians/therapists?

In advocating the last of these definitions, this paper suggests that language students typically suffer from a number of primarily affective ailments, and that the teacher has the opportunity and the responsibility to deal with these in the manner of a caring physician-figure. In addition, it is proposed that it is the responsibility of all teachers to model and to foster appropriate social behavior and social skills.

2. The symptoms: affective filters

Research over the last thirty years has identified and described various affective filters that affect learning considerably, both in a positive and in a negative manner. Thus, Stern (1983, p. 383) goes so far as to claim that affect is more important than cognition in the learning process. Some of the component factors of affect are as follows:

- *Beliefs about learning* (Horwitz, 1988, p. 292).
- *Learning preferences/styles* (Griffiths & Sheen, 1992; Gardner, 1999).
- *Anxiety* (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994, p. 298; Horwitz *et al.* 1986, p. 128).
- *Confidence* (Finch, 2000, p. 42).
- *Motivation* (Van Lier, 1996, p. 98; Dörnyei; 1998, p. 117; Tremblay & Gardner, 1995, p. 505; Williams & Burden, 1997, p. 111).
- *Attitudes to learning* (Cotterall 1995, p. 195; 1999, p. 495; Harris, 1997, p. 20; Victori & Lockhart, 1995, p. 225).
- *Learning agendas* (Allwright, 1984).

3. Diagnosing the sickness

Learning that occurs in the classroom is thus subject to a wealth of affective barriers and filters. Here is the sickness with which language students are afflicted: i) they have multiple intelligences and learning styles, which are not being addressed; ii) their cognitive attention is taken up by anxiety, fear of failure, lack of confidence and lack of motivation; iii) their learning energies are diverted by unrealistic beliefs and negative attitudes to learning. Furthermore, society demands of students that they develop cooperative team skills and critical thinking abilities, despite evaluation systems that all too often focus on competition and individual success, as measured by intellectual criteria. Those who do not fit in to the “education from the neck up” (Rogers 1951) approach are labeled as “failures” (even though they might have excellent potential in other areas) and thus cease trying to learn.

4. Finding a cure

Having identified the sickness and its symptoms, the question arises concerning the cure: What is to be done? How are affective filters and barriers to learning to be dealt with? If we take a look at the conditions for learning that were identified by Rogers (1951) over half a century ago (Appendix A), it is interesting to note the key words that appear: *active, personal meaning, subjective nature of learning, difference, the right to make mistakes, tolerates ambiguity, cooperative, self-evaluation, openness of self, trusted, respected, accepted, permits confrontation*. In other words, language teachers can focus attention on making the classroom into a non-threatening learning environment (Finch, 2001, p. 145). Irrespective of teaching method or lesson content, classrooms can become storehouses of learning opportunities, in which students are confident, respected, and motivated. As can be seen from Kelly’s (1996, pp. 95-96) macro- and micro-skills of language counseling (Appendix B), this environment requires that the teacher becomes an affective and cognitive counselor. Once more, exciting keywords appear: *introducing, promoting, helping, reduce uncertainty, enable, offering advice, suggesting, demonstrating encouragement, reinforcement, constructive reaction*.

The application of such concepts in the classroom evolves the teacher into a learning counselor, who gradually loses the teaching function (Appendix A), as students become

concerned and committed (an important gauge of growth), feeling good about themselves and maximizing their learning potentials. This learning physician identifies negative affect and its causes, and encourages students to take courses of treatment which will provide solutions in the long and short term.

5. Agents of social change

It is inevitable that various problems will arise in this situation. For example, how are students to be assessed in terms of personal growth, when they have to pass competitive exams in order to “succeed” (i.e. get into a “good” school; find a “good” job)? Having reached this point, let us pause once more, and consider the role of education in society.

It is not unusual to see the results of man-made disasters on television or in the newspapers. We see man’s inhumanity to man, lack of consideration, selfishness, stupidity, etc. We see the earth being ravaged and destroyed by greed, corruption and narrow-sightedness, and we feel that there is nothing we can do. However, the technology that began the industrial revolution and that inspired mass education, is now showing destructive potential, and we can no longer stand mutely on the sidelines. As H. G. Wells remarked early in the 20th century: “Civilization is a race between education and catastrophe” (*The quotations page*).

Teachers can in fact make a positive contribution to this situation, since they can model the skills and characteristics of responsible citizens in the micro-society of the language classroom. They can focus on the sort of problem-solving skills and critical thinking skills that students will need when they enter the society outside the classroom, and can manufacture situations in which students can experiment with the social skills that they will need. In short, teachers can promote the sort of positive qualities that are needed in society; they can help students develop the moral strength to refuse bribes and to say “no” to drugs; they can give students responsibility for learning and assessment and help them learn how to use and respect that responsibility.

Humanists, philosophers and educationalists (e.g. Bruner, 1960; Dewey, 1916; Krishnamurti, 1981) have been making these points for more than a hundred years, and it is noticeable that a number of current ministerial policy statements cite holistic and humanistic principles as educational goals. The definition of the educated person offered by the Ministry of Education in Korea is significant in this respect:

The Ideal Profile of the Educated Person

The objectives of Korea's education are, under the ideal of hongik-ingan (contributing to the overall benefit of humankind — the founding spirit of the first kingdom in Korean history), to assist all people in perfecting their individual character, to develop the ability to achieve an independent life and acquire the

qualifications of democratic citizens, and to be able to participate in the building of a democratic state and promoting the prosperity of all humankind.

On the basis of the stated ideals of education, the well-educated person targeted by this curriculum is defined as follows:

- 1) A person who seeks to develop his/her own individuality on the basis of well-rounded and wholesome development
- 2) A person who demonstrates creative ability on the basis of a solid grounding in basic knowledge and skills
- 3) A person who explores career paths on the basis of broad intellectual knowledge and skills in diverse academic disciplines
- 4) A person who creates new values on the basis of an understanding of the national culture
- 5) A person who contributes to the development of the community where he/she lives on the basis of democratic citizenship. (http://www.moe.go.kr/eng_26/)

6. Implications

6.1. The non-threatening learning environment

If (language) teachers are agents of social change, then how does this transpose into the classroom? The first point to make here is that teachers can do the things they always do, putting them in the context of humanistic goals through promoting a non-threatening learning environment (Finch, 2001). Language teachers can also:

1. develop a stress-free climate;
2. develop peer-support networks;
3. promote self-confidence without focusing on competence or performance;
4. examine hidden agendas (our own and those of the students);
5. offer unconditional trust, inspiring confidence, motivation and independence;
6. reflect on our assumptions;
7. reflect on counseling skills and management of affect;
8. reflect a holistic, affective, student-centered view of language learning;
9. act as learning resources.

As appendix C shows, the American Association for Supervision of Curriculum Development (for example) has also been making these points for some time.

6.2. The project syllabus

The project syllabus is particularly appropriate in this situation, exemplifying process and task-based ideas by being collaborative, avoiding competition, and promoting decision-making, critical thinking and responsibility for learning (Skehan, 1998, p. 273). Project-based syllabi are also notable for the product which emerges from the process (e.g. oral presentation, drama, written report). This product is seen as part of the process continuum (a means rather than an end), useful for the feedback (and therefore opportunities for assessment) which it gives to the learners concerning their progress, as well as functioning as a “sort of public record of the project, of which the participants have ownership, and which will give the project some durability” (Skehan, 1998, p. 273, cf. Willis, 1996).

6.3. Alternative assessment

The day-to-day management of a humanistic, project-based learning environment will involve looking at means by which language teachers can fill their classrooms with learning resources, provide learning opportunities for different learning styles and preferences, cater for differing language levels and ages, and assist students to identify and pursue their learning needs. Alternative assessment (ongoing personal needs analyses, portfolios, learning diaries, self-assessment, peer-assessment) can be used as a means of consciousness-raising, goal setting, reflection upon learning achievement, and further goal setting. In this setting, learning can be personalized, and learners can be encouraged to make choices for themselves regarding what and how they learn.

6.4. The teacher as physician

Teachers can empathize with their learners, getting to know them as individuals, and seeking to understand the ways in which they make sense of the world. Treating the classroom as a doctor’s clinic, educator/teacher/counselor/physician can prescribe various learning “treatments”, such as acquisition of learning skills, awareness of learning preferences, involvement in (student-directed) learning projects, and alternative assessment. This perspective provides some interesting analogies, in that the teacher/doctor:

- does not need to be a model for correct language (healthy life);
- does not need to have mastery of every aspect of specific use of the target language (e.g. Engineering English, Nursing English, Legal English, etc.);
- does not need to ask every student to learn the same thing or to be at the same proficiency level;
- can talk with and counsel those who need assistance in the classroom;
- can focus on learning-problems (symptoms);
- can prescribe courses of learning action (cures) – the appropriate thing for the appropriate student at the appropriate time.

7. Conclusion

Teachers have the opportunity and the responsibility to expand their role to that of cognitive and affective physician in the classroom, diagnosing learning and social ailments and offering courses of healing. Such an approach to teacher/student roles focuses on the learner as a potential responsible member of society, and concentrates primarily on helping him or her to develop the critical-thinking and problem-solving skills necessary if he/she is to make a positive contribution to that society. Humanistic goals (for example those exemplified by the Korean Ministry of Education) must therefore determine everything that happens in our classrooms. If we treat our students with love and respect, then they will learn, and we will be initiating social improvement. We cannot “sit on the fence” and let the world look after itself. In short, teachers are agents of social change, and must respect themselves as such. They must also take on the responsibility that this involves.

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Appendix A: Conditions that facilitate learning (Rogers, 1951, p. 122)

Conditions that facilitate learning:

Learning is facilitated in an atmosphere ... :

1. ... which encourages people to be active.
2. ... that facilitates the individual's discovery of the personal meaning of ideas.
3. ... that emphasizes the uniquely personal and subjective nature of learning.
4. ... in which difference is good and desirable.
5. ... that consistently recognizes the right to make mistakes.
6. ... that tolerates ambiguity.
7. ... in which evaluation is a cooperative process with emphasis on self-evaluation.
8. ... which encourages openness of self rather than concealment of self.

9. ... in which people are encouraged to trust in themselves as well as in external sources.
10. ... in which people feel they are respected.
11. ... in which people feel they are accepted.
12. ... which permits confrontation.

Appendix B: The macro- and micro-skills of language counselling (Kelly, 1996, pp. 95-96)

Macro Skills		Description	Purpose
Initiating		introducing new directions and options	to promote learner focus and reduce uncertainty
Goal-setting		helping the learner to formulate specific goals and objectives	to enable the learner to focus on a manageable goal
Guiding		offering advice and information, direction and ideas, suggesting	to help the learner develop alternative strategies
Modelling		demonstrating target behaviour	to provide examples of knowledge and skills that the learner desires
Supporting		providing encouragement and reinforcement	to help the learner persist; create trust; acknowledge and encourage effort
Giving feedback		expressing a constructive reaction to the learner's efforts	to assist the learner's self-awareness and capacity for self-appraisal
Evaluating		appraising the learner's progress and achievement	to acknowledge the significance of the learner's effort and achievement
Linking		connecting the learner's goals and tasks to wider issues	to help establish the relevance and value of the learner's project
Concluding		bringing a sequence of work to a conclusion	to help the learner establish boundaries and define achievement
Micro Skills		Description	Purpose
Attending		Giving the learner your undivided attention	to show respect and interest; to focus on the person
Restating		Repeating in your own words what the learner says	to check your understanding and to confirm the learner's meaning
Paraphrasing		Simplifying the learner's statements by focusing on the essence of the message	to clarify the message and to sort out conflicting or confused meanings
Summarizing		bringing together the main elements of a message	to create focus and direction
Questioning		using open questions to encourage self-	to elicit and to stimulate learner

	exploration	disclosure and self-definition
Interpreting	offering explanations for learner experiences	to provide new perspectives; to help self-understanding
Reflecting feelings	surfacing the emotional content of learner statements	to show that the whole person has been understood
Empathizing	identifying with the learner's experience and perception	to create a bond of shared understanding
Confronting	surfacing discrepancies and contradictions in the learner's communication	to deepen self-awareness, particularly of self-defeating behavior

Appendix C: Ways in which to help pupils to expand the self (American Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development: Individualizing instruction, 1964, pp. 161-162):

1. Observing and listening to learners with care and concern.
2. Achieving openness in pupil-teacher relationships, to permit improved response and interaction.
3. Helping learners toward the objective of personal relevance.
4. Recognizing and accepting different ways of responding, according to learners' individualized styles and needs.
5. Stimulating creation and recreation of self-image that encourages further development.
6. Questioning, probing, and responding in ways that lead learners to assume responsibility.
7. Standing aside judiciously to let the learner discover and exercise his own resources.
8. Making development of the learner the chief goal in teaching subject matter.
9. Achieving free affective responses and seeing its relevance to intellectual development.
10. Achieving free and constructive communication with learners.
11. Helping learners sense the living dynamics of man's creations, as revealed by history and the current scene.
12. Clearing the way, by whatever means, for stretching learners' minds and abilities in creative, self-fulfilling endeavor.
