

Contemplative and Reflective Practices in Second Language Teaching and Learning

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As a second language teacher and also a teacher of meditation, I have often looked at the teaching of language and of meditation and been puzzled by the fact that, with a few exceptions, there seems to have been little attention given to the interface of second language acquisition and reflective and/or contemplative practices. One anecdotal item in this regard comes to mind. In an e-mail message about this issue to my 60+ language teaching colleagues at the community college where I teach, in which I invited a response to my questions and a possible discussion, I received a response from only two. As I have thought over this puzzle, my deliberations have led me to look at three overlapping issues in my language teaching. My thinking is focused on the nature of second language teaching and learning, the cultural issues imbedded in language acquisition and teaching, and the population of second language learners with whom I am most familiar.

First is the nature of second language learning itself. Why do the predominant classroom practices and prevalent pedagogy of second language acquisition rely in large part on a philosophy which steers clear of introspective learning?

I have come up with a partial response only. Successful learning of a second (or 3rd or 4th or ...) language requires an immersion in the spoken and written language; generally, the deeper the immersion, the more successful the language learning. So most language teachers have focused on surrounding students with the target language as much as possible. The thinking is that a volume of language, adjusted to the ability of the learner, will result in a greater level of acquisition. To be sure, teachers may give writing students exercises such as journals to reflect on themselves as learners and writers; however, the emphasis is often on the product of the writing exercise (quality of writing rather than the process of self-introspection), and teachers' responses may be quite perfunctory and based on students' knowledge of the language forms rather than students' self awareness. One very interesting exception comes from a service learning class for 2nd language students in which students provided service as a way to work on knowledge of language and culture. This kind of class is in itself highly unusual for language students, and the response of one student from Brazil even more so, given the cultural context. At the end of the class, all the students were asked to reflect on what they had learned. In her journal, this student, who had worked for 8 weeks in a nursing home, responded with 2 words, "Unconditional love".

So what happened with this student and why is it important in the discussion of language learning? Very clearly the student was deeply impacted by her experience, not just at the cognitive level as she improved her oral/aural English language skills, but more importantly for her, at the affective and emotional level. For her, this was the most important part of her learning; both heart and mind were deeply affected by her work. Who could ask for more important learning than what she touched within herself as a result of her experience working with elders with severe disabilities?

Interestingly, there have been innovators in 2nd language instruction, for example Georgi Lozanov and Caleb Cattedno, who have focused heavily on the affective aspect of language learning. Lozanov, from Bulgaria, in a language teaching model he called “Suggestopedia” or later “Desuggetopedia”, made extensive use of music and art in language learning classes, asserting that, “The method (works) not only on the conscious level of human mind but also on the subconscious level, the mind’s reserves. Since it works on the reserves in human mind and brain, which are said to have unlimited capacities, one can teach more than other methods can teach in the same amount of time. Dr. Lozanov believed that powerful learning must engage both the analytical brain and the emotional brain, along with both states of mind – the conscious and unconscious. Harmony of form and color, music and rhyme reach not only the human heart but also the mind by a much shorter route than logical facts and arguments. Music works by activating the right brain in this way; the right brain and left brain are independently stimulated.” <http://www.rapidspanish.com/3.html>

Dr. Lozanoz’s conclusions about the engagement of “both the analytical brain and the emotional brain, along with both states of mind – the conscious and unconscious” have great relevance to the learning of the young Brazilian woman in the nursing home. The work on and improvement of her language skills (analytical/conscious) was greatly enhanced by the learning of “unconditional love” (unconscious/emotional). Through her articulation of that learning in her reflective journal, she gave voice to her deepest thoughts and emotions.

Another language teaching pioneer, Caleb Gattegno, devised a system of language teaching/learning, which he called “The Silent Way”. As the name implies, silence is one of the key tools of the teacher. With the use of silence the teacher moves the attention from him/herself to the students, who then give all importance to working with the language. Self-awareness becomes a key feature of this method, wherein students give attention to their own process of learning as well as the language structures they are working on. However, Gattegno insisted that ... “silence ... {was not} essential to his approach, but rather a principle which he called “the subordination of teaching to learning. This common-sense principle is, in fact, the very backbone of Caleb Gattegno’s “Silent Way”. Gattegno felt that second language learning traditionally suffers from the over use of teacher talk. He believed that the students have plentiful resources within themselves to help in language learning and that it is the job of the teacher “to work on the students so the students can work on the language.” He affirmed that, “In the case of foreign language learning, most students walk into their classrooms with all the mental equipment needed to pick up new languages, simply because they had already learned their native tongue at a tender age – without the help of teachers and books.” <http://www.saudicaves.com/silentway/>

As a graduate student (The School for International Training, 1986-7) with Gattegno, I learned firsthand the effectiveness of teaching which creates an environment where the students’ awareness of self and the language, often through silent but directed reflection, becomes the key to learning. Gattegno’s primary focus in any language lesson was the

requirement that students work on the development of full awareness; silence is fundamental to this process and leads to deeper and more effective learning.

It is interesting to note that the language teaching methods of both Lozanov and Gattegno have moved more to the fringe of teaching pedagogy in spite of their proven efficacy. It seems to me that expediency has been a key reason why neither of these methods is used extensively in language classrooms at this time, especially in the U.S. They require extensive training, commitment, and with Suggestopedia, complex lesson preparation on the part of the teacher. So I wonder if the lack of reflective practices in the 2nd language classroom reflects in part on the preferences, prejudices, and comfort level of the large majority of teachers rather than on the nature of the discipline itself.

Second, there is the question of the effect of cultural issues. How do differences in cultural background, values, and practices affect students' receptivity to and even awareness of a variety of teaching and learning styles? Of special concern to me are those teaching methods which may give importance to alternatives to top-down teacher directed/centered learning, with which most of the Asian students I teach are familiar.

Only a partial response to this question has emerged for me. Most of the students with whom I have worked over the past number of years come from educational backgrounds (primarily Asian) where the teacher is the unquestioned authority, who not only presents all the necessary information to be learned but also is solely responsible for the assessment and measurement of student learning. Students are expected to accept the lessons without question, never mind reflecting on their own process of learning or looking at learning as anything more than a left-brain exercise.

Interestingly, many of these students come from cultures where contemplative (especially religion based) practices are given some importance. However, my anecdotal research has shown me that these practices have often become more ritualistic than contemplative, especially for the college age students I work with. Also interestingly, these same students come from cultures where thinking before answering is the norm and expectation, unlike the West, where spontaneity of response is the practice. However, the reflection is generally fact-based, a search for what the teacher will think is the "correct" answer. So these students are coming to the West with little or no experience in alternative ways of learning, which may emphasize reflection and process as well as production of correct answers. In addition, these students are coming from families whose expectations are very clear and linear; good grades will lead to better colleges and universities, which will lead to higher prestige, which will lead to better jobs, which will lead to more money, success, and recognition. This progression is a part of the cultural norms and values which these students carry and ascribe to.

So it is clear that the norms and values of the cultures from which these students come have a very important effect on the ways in which they have learned in the past and which they choose to learn in the present, in classrooms in the West. Does this mean that they are opposed to other ways of learning? Not at all; however, comfort level (the "affective filter", a term coined by the advocate of The Natural Approach to language

teaching) seems to be key to language learning, so innovative and unfamiliar teaching and learning methods which emphasize the affective domain may be embraced with initial reservation and hesitation.

The third question is about the population of second language (especially English) learners (mostly Asian) with whom I regularly interact. How do these students' age, social and economic background, and family influence affect their willingness, interest, and ability to look deeper within themselves to search for what may be troubling answers?

As with many of us, the population of students who I meet inside and outside the classroom has grown up in a technology driven world in which time is measured by sound-bites rather than tides and lunar cycles and seasons. We have all acknowledged the challenges that asking students to engage in reflective/contemplative practices brings to our teaching/learning environment in which it is often a matter of some concern when students are asked to set aside their cell phones and iPods. The step of looking within and listening to their own hearts and minds can be a huge and demanding leap. I have found these challenges tend to be even greater with a population of international language students, whose backgrounds, interests, and goals have been so heavily influenced by the demands and priorities of the countries and cultures from which they come.

For example, in response to a talk and class visit by environmental and social justice activist Julia Butterfly Hill, we focused part of our subsequent discussion on the issue of environmental sustainability in contrast to economic growth, a common topic and one of particular importance to students 50% of who are from mainland China. The prevailing response and attitude of these students, when asked which of these concerns were of more importance to them, was clearly on the side of economic growth. They are studying in the U.S. so that they can return to well paying jobs. Yes, preserving our environment is important, but individual wealth is more important. Interestingly, in the past few years, economic strength and environmental sustainability have become more compatible in China. However, this response still tends to be a common refrain from college age students from less developed countries than the U.S., especially those who have been here for a shorter period of time. In the program which I teach in there is a telling example about the fact that these topics themselves are not necessarily attractive to many of our students. A class offering entitled "Sustainability Around the Globe" attracted only 7 students in the spring of 2011, so the class was cancelled and has yet to find its way into the curriculum again. As the students from China particularly are more affected by a changing economic agenda in their country, which emphasizes environmental sustainability, it remains to be seen whether their interest in these topics will increase.

Interestingly, when I have asked these same students to take time to reflect on the implications of their thinking, in writing and oral responses, they invariably speak to the importance of a quality of life which is not determined by wealth. They also thoughtfully respond to questions about the long-term effects of some of their countries' environmental and social justice practices. Yet, the default position on a practical level and one which is very heavily influenced by their families is that financial success is #1.

In this sense, reflection may well take them to a place where there is a seeming disconnect between the values they have grown up with and their own emerging wisdom. This is not a place of comfort. However, in spite of what may be troubling issues of cultural and linguistic adjustment, I have found that these same students willingly engage and become invested in exercises that ask them to become aware of more than cognitive mind states.

These three questions have raised themselves time and again, and my answers are at best partial. Similarly, they reflect my own opinions only and perhaps not those of my colleagues. Nonetheless, I continue to ask students to explore their inner lives as a way of learning more deeply, about both the English language and American culture as well as about themselves as learners and responsible world citizens.

In response to this quest in my own teaching, during the Fall of 2011, I decided to approach some of these questions more intentionally, particularly in an intermediate level writing class which I had taught several times before. My intention was to explore the effects of a more reflective based pedagogy on students' written language acquisition. I was interested to find out if the quality of students' writing would be influenced by the nature of the materials I provided, the questions I asked them to reflect on, and my expectation that they approach their writing from a place of introspection, of inner searching, in response to particular materials and writing prompts I provided.

First, I chose many materials readily accessible on the Internet as it is a medium which students are very knowledgeable about and familiar with, and when used appropriately, can be extremely engaging. Examples included the Playing for Change Project, familiar quotes by Gandhi picked up by President Obama about "being the change we seek", Dr. Masaru Emoto's work with water crystals (*The Miracle of Water*), the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the challenges of people with disabilities. In each case, we spent time in discussion, interviews, research, reflection, and written response. I posed questions which asked that students explore their own thoughts, feelings, and senses in response to the issues that each of these topics brought up. Some of this exploration was in the form of dialogue with classmates; some was in the form of written journals; some was in the form of questions; some was in the form of silence. In each case, a written composition was the summation of their work on a particular topic; the assessment by peers, self, and instructor reflected each step of the process.

My own analysis of the results of this process on the production of students' written language was subjective to be sure, but the analysis revealed two things. First, the quality of the writing improved significantly; this means that the appropriate use of language structures reflecting the students' level of ability was higher than what I had observed when I have used other instructional modes. Second, students themselves reported that they engaged with the material in new and unfamiliar ways, and that they were asked to think and feel more deeply than they ever had before in a writing class. They deeply appreciated this. Both of these results confirmed for me the efficacy of an approach to language instruction in writing that makes use of reflection and contemplation as an intentional language learning pedagogy.

This process is in no way novel for many writing instructors working with native speakers. However, I have rarely seen similar approaches used with second language learners, who, in this case, were writing English as a second language at an intermediate level. I have become convinced that these approaches can affect language learners in multiple ways that both enhance language learning as well as understanding of the self as a learner and communicator.

For me, second language learning is a vehicle to explore the ways in which all of us, students and teachers, can communicate better for the good of all people. In this sense, language becomes a multi-dimensional tool for greater understanding on many levels. So language learning and teaching is much bigger than simply developing and helping develop linguistic competence; when practiced with awareness, it is a vehicle, a tool of exploration that can lead to bridging the gaps that are preventing all of us from reaching solutions to increasingly challenging global problems. The international language students in our classrooms are the future leaders of their countries and will play an important role in their development. Changes in thinking, planning, policy making in these countries will reflect the ideas of the students coming out of the American classrooms; therefore, what better way to serve these students than to help them develop the ability to look deeply within themselves whenever they are called upon to make decisions which will affect the lives of those who they will in turn serve?