
Classroom Language Learning:

Who's in Charge?

**a talk by Dick Allwright
transcribed by Christiane Malnoy
and edited by Roslyn Young**

Autumn 1988
Volume VIII
Number 3

To say I'm in charge gives me the sense of power, the sense that somehow it ought to be under my control. What is more important is the reality. Is it that I'm responsible for it? That it's in my charge rather than I'm in charge of it? That's the sort of ambiguity I want to talk about in terms of who's in charge in the classroom.

It's a mixture then, of power on the one hand and responsibility on the other.

It's an old problem in pedagogy in general and a particular problem in the history of language teaching because of the influence of behaviourism in our past, in particular in the sixties, where the emphasis in the theory of behaviourism was not trying to understand what happens, but trying to control what happens, trying directly to give teachers a way of making absolutely sure whatever they taught would be whatever the learners learnt. We're still trying to get over that, I think, in our history. We're having a great struggle round the world to get over the feeling that somehow or other we ought to be in control, we ought to be in charge, we ought to have power over what the learners learn.

What I want to do today is re-open the question of who's in charge, whether it's possible to have control over learner's learning, and put into that debate some evidence of further understanding that help us to see more clearly what we mean when we talk about being in charge of classroom language learning.

I see myself as a research methodologist, like a research chemist; not someone who creates chemicals, not someone who creates methods, then, but someone who researches methods, who tries to find out how it is that methods work or don't work, or how it is that anything works or doesn't work in the language classroom.

Who then, is in charge?

Obviously we can start with the people inside the classroom, the participants: the teacher and the learners.

The teacher is in charge in the sense that the teacher is legally the responsible

adult, if it's a secondary class, responsible for insurance purposes in my country, paid to be in some important and official sense in charge and pedagogically accountable as well, for the results of getting learners together with the teacher. So at least we can say that the teacher has the responsibility of being in charge. But that's quite different from saying that the teacher has the power to be in control of the learning.

The learners have little formal responsibility, but how do they stand with regard to the power? Our perception of the power learners have is mostly negative: it is seen as the power of veto. They can destroy everything we try to do. They can utterly ruin our attempts to provide good instruction. They have an absolute power of veto over our attempts as teachers.

The teacher has the responsibility, but not very much power; the learners apparently don't have responsibility but they do have an awesome sort of power which we hope they don't use on us.

The classes typically take place within an institutional framework, and we have strong influences from outside the classroom - administrators, department heads, who bring to the teacher the work of methodologists, syllabus designers and materials writers.

Through methodologists, teachers may be told to teach in a certain way. It may look as if it's the methodologists who are in charge of language teaching because what they write about can become a prescription from a power figure to a teacher to behave in a certain way, even if it's voluntary.

Again, we have syllabus designers who have potentially a huge influence on the language classroom. Teachers may be told - very often are told - that they must follow a certain syllabus, must even be at a certain point in the syllabus at a certain time in the year. All round the world, that seems to be a frequent complaint of teachers that they are under the pressure to conform to a syllabus.

And of course, the methodologists and the syllabus designers themselves have their work mediated by materials writers. It may be that teachers are under pressure from outside to use certain course books.

So we have the possibility of outsiders being enormously influential on the language classroom.

Another question is: what is there to be in charge of? I want to distinguish two major things here. It is one thing to be in charge of whatever happens in the classroom, and quite a different thing to be in charge of whatever gets learnt in the classroom.

I want to analyse a little what I mean by what happens in the classroom in terms of three different aspects.

Firstly, what happens in the classroom is that learning opportunities are created for and by learners. Secondly, the practice possibilities they get to do something with the language they hear, the language they see on the blackboard or in the textbook. So there are two aspects of the learning opportunities that arise, then: the input they get to the language, the practice possibilities they get with the language. But also, a major part of both these things is the general atmosphere within which all this happens, whether it happens in an atmosphere which will make it more likely that people will pay attention and be able to learn something or an atmosphere which is punitive and unpleasant.

What evidence do we have that these various agencies do in fact have a strong influence over what happens in the classroom, what gets learnt?

Methodologists have a very high profile, but the only research I know of on methods seems to suggest that when teachers teach, how they teach doesn't vary greatly from teacher to teacher, not nearly as much as one would expect. The teachers who think they are teaching in a quite different way from other teachers are not, in fact, on analysis. Not very many things teachers do are particular to particular methods. Methodological thinking seems to bring classes to be more or less the same as each other, rather than to differentiate classes from each other.

Similarly with syllabus designers. But lessons are not simply the transmission of the syllabus. Research analysis shows that so much more happens in the course of a lesson, so many things become available to be learnt from by the learners that we end up having to say the same thing as about the methods. Wherever teachers are trying to use the target language as the means of communication, then we see a tremendous number of other possibilities arising in lessons for people to learn from.

Do materials writers have an influence on what happens in the classroom? The classic study, Philips and Sheppard (1975), shows that materials were not in fact having any effect on what happened in the classroom.

Moving on, we can wonder whether the outsiders have a great influence over what gets learnt. Here again research shows that what learners learn is in some important way independent of the syllabus, although content is precisely the area syllabus designers would wish to influence. All the research done keeps on adding up to the notion that the syllabus does not control whatever gets learnt in the classroom. The work of Manfred Peanemann seems to suggest that it is possible to

design a syllabus which would meet the needs of the learner, but the very precise problem of timing arises. It is only worth putting something on the agenda when a learner is ready for it, and no class of thirty learners is made up of people who are all ready for the same thing at the same time.

The research of Slimani in Algeria shows that what pupils say they have learnt from lessons is not predictable from the focus of the lesson from the teacher's point of view. Her research shows that there is a vast amount of idiosyncrasy among learners.

The materials writers, who try to incorporate the methodologists' insights, those of the syllabus designers and their own into particular course material don't have much influence either. They provide the context for what happens, the resources, but they don't determine what learners take from lessons.

This brings us back to the participants. The teacher typically takes the initiative for the broad outlines of what happens. But it seems that teachers do not in fact control this in detail, because lessons are interactive events. They are something that is produced between teachers and learners, not something the teacher simply produces and transmits to the learners. Even in the worst of lessons, where the teacher is trying very hard to be fully in control, they do feel bound to respond to mistakes learners make. Each lesson is the product of the interactive work of all the participants.

Let's look at the influence that the teachers and the learners have on what actually gets learnt from the class.

Obviously, the teacher is in control of most of the resources brought into the classroom, the textbook, what goes onto the blackboard, the walls, in control of the tapes and films that are brought in and so on. The teacher is also influential in deciding who has the initiative in the discourse in the lesson, so the teacher controls some of the major aspects of the opportunities that arise for learners to learn. The teacher raises the topics for discussion and decides who can talk.

Slimani, however, cites cases of people claiming to have learnt words which are not on the tapescript of the lesson. They had generalised from things that were taught to new things which they created for themselves and considered they had learnt.

Learning is very idiosyncratic. Learners have their own way of focusing their attention. They have tremendous influence on what they get from the lessons. She also shows that it is not always the person who asks the question who benefits from the answer because the stress of asking takes away the "mental space" necessary

to process the answer. Often, other learners benefit more from a question than the person who asks it.

What I'm saying is that what gets learnt is essentially in the hands of the learners. They determine in a large measure the range of things that happen in lessons. They are in fact interactively producing the lesson, so that there is a much richer source for them to take things away from. However each individual may be profiting more from what other people do in the class than from what they personally do. Here, research seems to suggest that this depends not on the absolute proficiency of the learner, not on how good the learner is at learning, not on his ability, but on the relative ability and proficiency of the learner in the class group.

Whatever the level, the stronger learners end up putting on a show for the rest of the class, which may be good for their practice but isn't good for them in terms of new material. The people in the middle of the course are the ones who are doing well because there is enough new material coming from the stronger learners and from the teacher, and they are able to keep up with it, unlike the weaker ones, who find it embarrassing and difficult to contribute themselves, and when they do contribute, find it impossible to profit from it.

The answer to this, presumably, is to divide the classes up in some other way to arrange that learners get a chance to be sometimes in a more proficient group where there are people who can offer them things; sometimes in a group where they are the more proficient people, and sometimes in a group where they are with people of entirely equal level.

In the last resort, the learners are in charge of what is crucial, that is to say, what they take away from the lesson. They are in fact in control, no matter what the teacher does. As someone once said, "No teacher teaches except by consent". The power is in the relationship between the teacher and the learners, in their attempts to get to a good co-production. And since the power is shared, the responsibility should be shared too. It's unfair on teachers to have all the responsibility and only half the power. Learners need to know that they are in control and that therefore they are responsible. They can be blamed for the outcome just as much as the teacher can be blamed. If they don't learn, it isn't just the teacher's fault, it cannot just be the teacher's fault. Just as it cannot only be to the teacher's praise that they have learnt.

So my aim in this talk is to reinforce the people who are trying to find ways of helping the learners realise the positive power that they have with their teacher for taking charge of their own learning. The power they have for creating learning opportunities, but at the same time the responsibility they have for making the most

of the learning opportunities that they and the teacher create in language lessons. The difficulty is that learners don't necessarily know how to use that power and that responsibility effectively. They may need help from us to understand the situation of being a language learner, and to use their understanding as effectively as is humanly possible.