

Taking responsibility for appropriate methods

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Abstract

The search for appropriacy is a fundamentally different quest from the search for correctness. The appropriate is always developing and never complete. Also, an assesment of what is appropriate demands evaluation from different perspectives. A person seeking to act appropriately, therefore, must always be investigating the data of those perspectives and acting on interim conclusions. These general observations can usefully be applied to TESOL methodology. The author gives an example from his own experience.

La recherche de ce qui est approprié est fondamentalement différente de la quête de ce qui est correct. Ce qui est approprié est en constante évolution et n'est jamais achevé. Et pour juger de ce qui est approprié, il est indispensable de le faire de divers points de vue. Celui qui cherche à agir de manière appropriée doit donc toujours rechercher les informations que lui apportent ces divers points de vue et agir sur les conclusions provisoires qu'il en tire. Ces observations s'appliquent avec profit à la méthodologie de l'enseignement de l'anglais aux étrangers. L'auteur de cet article en donne un exemple tiré de sa propre expérience.

Introduction

There is a running tension throughout many aspects of human life between a view of things in terms of right/wrong, and a view of things in terms of appropriate/inappropriate. We can find these differing perspectives expressed with regard to table manners, to how people drive automobiles, to politicians receiving gifts, to the interpretation of divine revelation, or to the presence of an alien expression in our language, be it an Anglicism in French, or an Americanism in British English.

A collection of TESOL papers with the theme of 'appropriate methodology' has its ideological colours pretty securely nailed to the mast. I take it that our underlying position here - in line with the contemporary consensus in TESOL - is that we are no longer convinced of the possibility of a 'best method' of teaching English which can be implemented in all situations.

As Prabhu (1990) points out, however, there are other cul-de-sacs which we

need to avoid, more attractive though they may appear than the ultra-dogmatic approach we have left behind. One such sees appropriacy as being a matter of designing the most appropriate method for each context, and another is a reliance on eclecticism:

To say that the best method... varies from one teaching context to another does not help because it still leaves us with a search for the best method for any specific teaching context. To say that there is some truth to every method does not help either, because it still does not tell us which part of which method is true. (ibid: 175)

Both these formulations preserve the idea of a method which exists as an abstraction to be applied by teachers, an abstraction which exists in the absence of a particular teacher and a particular group of students in their own particular context. While such models do have their uses in teacher education, they miss the dimension of methodology which arises continually from the individual teaching experience and which is, therefore, never complete.

Appropriate methodology is, of its nature, always in a process of *becoming*. As such, it demands of the teacher that he or she be always in a process of investigation. Daunting though this might sound, it also offers each teacher who wishes to take on this challenge of self-development a view of methodology which is in itself empowering:

The most appropriate way for you to teach is exactly the way that you do teach - provided only that you are committed to an ongoing investigation of just what it is that you do, with a view to enhancing the processes and outcomes both for your students and for yourself.

The forms which such investigations might take are many and various (See, for example, Edge & Richards 1993), and for those so inclined, the arguments which they involve lead off into related fields of human study, such as education, linguistics, psychology, sociology, ethnography and philosophy.

Rather than discuss these issues, however, my aim in this paper is to report on an investigation into my own teaching. The details of my situation and my immediate teaching concerns are not likely to correspond directly to those of many of my readers, but neither will they be unfamiliar. My purpose in recount-

ing them is to exemplify the approach to teaching which I have evoked above. My hope is that, for some readers, this example among the others in this volume will encourage them to claim their methodology as their own - both as a right and a responsibility.

Distance learning and teacher education

The central part of my current work involves me as course tutor on a distance-taught master's course for English language teachers. The fact that course participants remain in their working contexts while studying means that the course can be organised to encourage the type of investigative approach to which I have referred in the introduction to this paper. In other words, course components which focus on topics such as Methodology, Syllabus Design, and Materials provide frameworks which participants can use to deepen their understanding of their own professional situations. Participants are not called upon to study decontextualised theories which they should later apply, they are called upon to articulate the principles which they forge from guided reflection on contextualised experience.

In this way, the purposes of teacher education and the mode of distance education dovetail perfectly (Richards 1991a). They are also in tune with what we know about the situationally-indexed nature of learning and cognition itself:

Activity, concept and culture are interdependent. No one can be understood without the other two. Learning must involve all three.
(Brown *et al.* 1989: 33)

Distance education makes its own special demands on course participants and on tutors alike (See Richards and Roe 1993). When I began this type of work in 1990, it quickly became obvious to me that one element of the job, which I then thought of as marking assignments, was going to be particularly important. This provided a natural focus for an investigation of my teaching methods.

Giving feedback as major teaching act

I should acknowledge that I have never really enjoyed the assessment side of teaching. In the context of distance education, however, the giving of feedback on written assignments takes on an importance far greater than it has in face-to-face education. It is an occasion of highly focused interaction in which the

participant, probably feeling extremely vulnerable after having made a considerable commitment of time and effort, now awaits assessment from afar (Lawless 1981).

What the tutor has to keep in mind is that, while assessment is an important part of what must be achieved, the giving of feedback may be his or her major *teaching* act as far as distance learners are concerned. I say *may* be, because learners differ in the amount of guidance they request during the writing of assignments, but in very few cases do tutors have a pre-assignment sense of being involved in the interpersonally rich process of *teaching* which has probably been the mainstay of their previous professional experience. And for all their course participants, the post-assignment responses which they receive from their tutor will have a formative impact, both intellectual and emotional, on their readiness and ability to continue to improve their future assignments and, in more global terms, to be able to continue to grow and develop via the course (MacKenzie 1976, Rickwood 1992).

The Open University (1988: 66) expresses itself to its tutors in these terms:

Your primary goal as a correspondence tutor should be to promote the learning of each student. Effective learning takes place when students process the material they have studied, and completion of assignments and assimilation of your responses to them is an essential part of this learning.

So, - and let's be clear about this, because an investigative approach to methodology is not about having problems in one's teaching - I did not have a problem about giving feedback. I have a commitment to the continuing development of my own teaching, and this area of giving feedback provided a focus for exploration.

Taking soundings

In teaching, as in any human encounter, there will be a variety of perspectives on what actually happens. This is the point of Fanselow's (1977) groundbreaking article, *Beyond Rashomon*, and of much of his subsequent work (e.g. Fanselow 1992). If we want to investigate our teaching, therefore, we need to ensure that we do not privilege our own perceptions, much less mistake them for objective facts.

The three most obvious sources of other perceptions on what is going on in

our teaching are our students, our colleagues, and the written record of other people's experience which is available in the literature of our field.

From my colleagues, I had a format for giving written feedback which earlier evaluation had proved to be popular with course participants. Participants received both a general statement and detailed comments, given with specific reference to page and line of their original texts. Furthermore, investigation by Richards (1991 b) had shown, among other things, the basic soundness of what is generally known as the feedback sandwich: you begin and end with positive comments and fit your criticisms in between the two.

In the literature, I found those articles cited above, as well as the Open University document already referred to, which contained (ibid: 75) a very useful statement of questions which a tutor should keep in mind when giving feedback. I used these as the basis of a questionnaire with which I approached course participants in Spain, and which I have since used with participants in other countries, including France. I attach the questionnaire as an appendix.

I am not going to attempt to deal here with the mass of insightful comment and intriguing data which this questionnaire has elicited, nor do I want to work at the level of overall findings. Instead, I want to write briefly about a number of cases which stand out for me at the moment. In addition to expressing a general intention to write about this area which I made clear when we began the investigation, I have written to all participants actually quoted, asking their permission to use these data in this way.

Just negativity

I was pretty well taken aback by one questionnaire, the whole tenor of which can be fairly represented by its response to question 4:

Do you have any suggestions for me about giving feedback?

I'd like a few more helpful suggestions instead of just negativity -

I don't know what it is that you want.

Knowing how long I had spent working on this assignment, and looking again at the pages of detailed clarification and advice which I felt I had given, I went through a lot of defensive anger, returning often to some very positive and gratifying comments from other participants, before I was ready to learn from this one.

Eventually, I began to see that a comment such as:

page 3 This goes for too broad, and consequently too superficial an approach.

could just as easily, and probably more helpfully, be written as:

page 3 Next time, focus more closely on a smaller area. This will allow you to discuss it in more depth.

And I am now simply ashamed to discover that I wrote to someone attempting their first academic assignment:

page 4 para 3. I have nothing against popular journalism, but Krashen did not "rock the world," and why would his theory 'be wonderful in an ideal world'? Do you mean that his theory would be wonderful in a world where his theory fitted the data? Is this worth saying?

This is bad feedback (and I hope and believe my worst single instance). It is pompous, insensitive, and completely unusable by a course participant. In words with which I was intellectually already familiar from my reading about tutor comments (Open University 1988:13):

If they are read as abrupt, dismissive, harsh or, worst of all, humiliating, they cannot effectively teach. The pain and anger caused will prevent the student from learning from them.

As I reflected on this uncomfortable realisation, I saw a connection between the amount of time which I was spending giving feedback on assignments (about two and a half hours each), the tiredness and petulance which was showing through in some instances, and the obscuring of what I wanted to say by the attempt to express myself briefly, given the time it takes to express oneself at all in writing.

The response which occurred to me at this point was to shift medium - to

continue to give a brief written statement of overall evaluation (both for immediate reference and for the keeping of records), but to record my detailed comments on cassette and to send this to participants.

A change of medium

I checked with participants that they would be happy to try out the new medium, and sat down with a small, hand-held cassette recorder with built-in microphone and easily manipulable pause switch.

My basic technique was to read through the whole assignment, making notes in the margin as I did so. I then recorded a statement of overall impression, using the feedback sandwich organisation. I then went back to the beginning of the assignment and talked through the notes that I had made, giving careful reference to page, paragraph and line on the tape.

The main advantages for me were immediately obvious:

- Quantitatively, there was so much more language available to use in the same time. This simple fact facilitated important qualitative effects.
- Qualitatively, my role as reader was transformed. I was, quite simply, more *involved*. During my initial reading, I was much more relaxed, and consequently more able to suspend judgement of where the writer was going and of what he or she had to say. Similarly, once I had got used to imagining the participant and addressing the tape recorder, I felt much closer to the person I was communicating with, more able to express exactly what I wanted to say. I was more likely to include praise in passing and, equally important, it was easier to be critical and to offer advice in ways which the informal familiarity of speech and the paralinguistic features of the spoken voice could make acceptable and usable.

Participant response was extremely positive, with expressions such as 'warmer', 'more personal' and 'clearer' being used. This chimed in with one of Richards' (1991 b) key findings: that participants most appreciated comments which were formulated in terms of direct engagement rather than detached evaluation.

This personalisation worked in different and interesting ways, for example:

I appreciated feedback taken from different stances - i.e. personally, not as a representation of a certain academic community (whose rules I don't know).

The interactive power of the medium was also directly referred to:

There was a personal touch to it. I felt I wanted to interrupt several times and explain, justify, clarify, defend myself!

The feedback (and mode of feedback) also has the effect of giving participants a new perspective on their ideas, as those ideas go out to make their own way in an academic community:

It is unsettling to hear one's own words in the mouth of someone else. They seem to take on an emotional importance which they didn't have before.

The most forthright statement of approval was:

I think that this new mode of feedback allows such a greater flexibility that it should be adopted as standard from now on. It is so much more convenient! You can sit down, listen to the comments and read your copy of the assignment at the same time. You get a more integrated feedback. I liked it very much.

And then, beyond explicit commentary, I want to include a response which grew out of the relationship which this approach to feedback, *and the process of investigation*, helped bring about. In response to Question 3 on the questionnaire:

In response to my comments on this assignment, what thoughts or feelings do you have about the next one?

I have finally realised something very important. Whenever I have

done any work since university, I always come to a point where I stop making the effort and tend to do just what I think is sufficient. The reason - I realised it upon seeing my results this month. My immediate reaction was, 'Not bad,' and 'You know you can do better.' Interesting, eh? I am afraid of reaching the limits of my competence, to find out this is the best I can do and it's only this good. I seem to have a terror of knowing my intellectual limitations, so I send in mediocre work knowing it's mediocre, but happy that whatever mark I get, I can always say, 'I could've done better.' Am I the only case you know of this? By the way, now I know this consciously, everything has changed. I spend every day, if not with pen and paper, then thinking about the next assignment and I'm going to put my heart and soul into it. It's pretty scary, but enough shilly-shallying! I'm not sure how I've come to see this so clearly, but I think it has something to do with your obvious and sincere interest in my assignments. If you're taking them seriously, it's time I did, too.

To be involved as tutor in such a process of self-examination and the articulation of growing self-awareness is the most uplifting and humbling experience that I know of in my work. The particular point I want to make here is that the power of the experience - negative and positive - that lies behind the techniques that we use in our teaching is there and functioning, whether or not we choose to investigate it, and whether or not we try to understand it better.

Finally, in this section, it is important to acknowledge - in fact, to re-assert - the fact that the investigation of one's teaching is not a simple matter of solving problems. Despite what I have learned about giving feedback, my comments are still capable of eliciting in reply to that same Question 3:

In response to my comments on this assignment, what thoughts or feelings do you have about the next one?

Discouragement and confusion.

In principle, we have to accept that none of us can be a good teacher for everyone. In practice, we keep trying.

Outcomes

At the level of technique, two drawbacks remain with the giving of spoken feedback: It demands a greater time and effort commitment on the part of participants, and it is much more difficult to refer to than written notes are. A response to Question 4 on the questionnaire takes up this last point:

Do you have any suggestions for me about giving feedback?

A short list of essential points to improve on would be helpful.

As things stand, I have my doubts about how negative such a list might appear, but there should be room here for a certain amount of individualisation of response. We shall see.

Our external examiner has commented positively on the use of recorded feedback, and three colleagues are now experimenting with it. For me, the technique is proving both efficient, in that I spend less actual time on each assignment than I did, and effective, in that I am doing what I want to do better than I did. In a culture which has all but abandoned the latter goal in a misguided quest for the former, this is particularly satisfying.

Interaction with the literature continues. Course participants have brought my attention to other reports on taped feedback from teachers using it with second language learners (Hyland 1990, Boswood et al. 1993). In their comments, I find my own experience re-validated and its potential extended - via reflection and imagination - across contexts with which I was unfamiliar.

The purpose of this paper, however, is not so much to discuss modes and media of feedback, but to provide one personal example of a continuing effort to take responsibility for becoming more appropriate in terms of individual teaching methodology. In this sense, the heart of the matter is the continuing, interactive spiral of action, reflection, reading, and the sharing of perceptions with colleagues and students.

This approach can be pursued, according to personal circumstances and inclination, with a bias towards research (e.g. van Lier 1988) or as a form of methodology in its own right (e.g. Allwright 1993). It is in the fertile ground between these two that teachers are finding the confidence to investigate what they actually do in their classrooms, and to distinguish this without embarrassment from external visions of what others have suggested they should be doing.

In the (to me inspirational) words of Naidu et al. (1992: 261):

By naming what we do, we have recovered our practice, which otherwise might have been lost irretrievably (a fate we believe many teachers have suffered).

As we then go on to develop our practice, our abilities increase and our sense of self-authorship grows. And in parallel with these developments are our responsibilities to others: to our students, our colleagues, and our societies, whose values we express and contest by the ways in which we, as educators, behave.

As I said at the beginning of this piece, we are dealing with issues which permeate human life in general, and of which TESOL provides some manifestations. A commitment to appropriate methodology is a commitment to socially aware, individual responsibility, to conscious self-development, and to an enduring respect for the right of other people to develop differently from oneself.

I hate it when people contrast classrooms with 'the real world'.

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Appendix

Investigating Feedback: PDI

As I mentioned in my last newsletter, I want to investigate and improve the feedback I give on your assignments. If you want to take part in this investigation, I'd be grateful if you'd respond to the following questions, either on this sheet or separately. Make a copy of your responses for yourself and send a copy to me.

1. *What feelings do you have about:*
the grade given?
the general comments?
the detailed notes?
2. *Intellectually, what comments do you have on:*
the grade given?
the general comments?
the detailed notes?
3. *In response to my feedback on this assignment, what thoughts or feelings do you have about the next one?*
4. *Do you have any suggestions for me about giving feedback?*
5. *According to the following criteria, please grade the feedback you have received on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (absolutely).*

<i>The feedback:</i>						
5.1	seems personally addressed to me.	1	2	3	4	5
5.2	encourages dialogue.	1	2	3	4	5
5.3	encourages further learning.	1	2	3	4	5
5.4	clearly explains the strengths and weaknesses of the assignment.	1	2	3	4	5
5.5	justifies and explains the grade given.	1	2	3	4	5
5.6	shows how I can improve my work.	1	2	3	4	5

6. *Please make any other comments you wish to here or overleaf.*