
5. The Laws of Good Teaching or How People Learn

Roslyn Young

Abstract

Back to Basics - and the Most Basic of the Basics is Awareness. In any teaching situation, whatever the subject being taught, there are just a very few basic rules which, if they are followed scrupulously, systematically lead to high quality learning. These rules are very simple and easy to understand. The most basic of them is "Only awareness can be educated". The aim of this article is to state the rules, examine them in detail and mention the impact on any classroom situation.

In any teaching situation, whatever the subject being taught, there are very few basic rules which, if they are followed scrupulously, systematically lead to high quality learning. These rules are very simple and easy to understand and are based on readily observable facts of life. Common sense shows them to be true. The most basic of them is "Only awareness can be educated". Once we understand how awareness is omnipresent in the classroom, we can use this fact to generate learning at all times.

1. The Most Basic of the Basics - Awareness

Everything I know to be within me is the result of my awareness, and comes into existence through a series of awarenesses. I stop typing this text for a moment to be with the outside world and immediately I hear the cars in the street, noises from around me. I begin typing again and, instead of bringing my presence to the contents of what I am writing, I put it in my ears. Immediately, I become aware of the noise made by the keys when they reach the bottom of the keyboard. I move my presence again and hear a car drive off not far from here; a bus goes by. I bring my presence inside again and instantly become aware of the taste of a banana I ate half an hour ago, the feeling of my feet on the floor, of my sweater which makes me itch in a very precise spot on my skin. Each of these tastes, of these sensations, of these noises, is the result of a movement of my mind, and each creates a very tiny individual awareness.

Law N°1 - All learning takes place through awarenesses

In a learning situation, an awareness happens when there is a coming together of certain necessary elements of which the student becomes aware, either in the form of a new problem or in the form of a solution to a problem she knows she already has. The following description of how people learn can be applied to any learning situation, whatever the age of the learner, whatever his or her social or cultural background, and regardless of what is being learnt.

Learning takes place in four stages.

Stage 1. To learn is to be confronted with the unknown.

The first stage consists of a single awareness which allows me to know that there is an unknown to be explored. I'm sitting beside a lake and I see a kind of sailing boat go past - a sailing boat, without the boat! There's someone standing on it who seems to be holding the sail in his hands! And I say to myself "Wow! That's for me! I want to be able to do that!" Until I realise this sport exists, I can't begin the learning process.

Stage 2. The exploration of the unknown is done through awareness.

Once I begin the learning process, I must explore in order to understand what is to be done. Because I am not yet an expert in the field, I can, and usually do, make many mistakes. These mistakes allow me to make progress. As I watch what happens and become aware of it, I can adjust my trials according to what the environment sends back to me. I get on the windsurf, and immediately fall off the other side. But even as I fall, I say to myself "You leaned over too far. Next time, stay straighter." This stage comes to an end when I know what I have to do, but I can only do it if I am completely present to what I am doing.

Stage 3. The time to practise.

The third stage is a transition stage. At the beginning of this stage, I can do what I am trying to do, but only if I remain present all the time. As a result of practice, at the end of this stage, what I have learnt is mastered, which means it has become entirely automatic, freeing me to go about my business of meeting a new unknown and learning something else.

Stage 4. Transfer

The fourth stage is that of transfer. For the rest of my life, what I have learnt is

there if it is needed as a contribution to any other learning process I might engage in. When I learnt to run, I used walking as a springboard towards this new learning process. Both walking and running helped when I took up cross-country skiing. Everything that has been learnt contributes to all my subsequent learning processes. And this is true for the rest of my life, unless an accident intervenes.

Learning is measured in awarenesses. Some awarenesses give the state of the environment after a trial (feedback), whilst others provoke a new and more adjusted type of trial. People rarely become aware of their awarenesses as they take place because they are immediately involved in the content of which they have just become aware, and do not take the time to examine the process. They rarely say to themselves "Ah! That was an awareness", because they are much too busy living a life of doing new things. Nevertheless, the process of learning always consists of a series of awarenesses which are easily visible if one takes the time to look at them.

Students are learning only when they are dealing with what is unknown to them.

So...

The role of the teacher in this world of awarenesses is not to inform the students of the existence of this or that, or to give them rules, but to lead them into making their own discoveries through their own awarenesses.

An illustration

Learning a foreign language follows the same stages as learning to use a windsurf board. All the stages described above are present, and they are present in all the aspects of the language: sounds, words, structures, rhythm, and intonation.

Thus, the situation is very complex. In any one sentence a student is saying, all four stages may be present together and in any one word, several stages may be present at the same time, depending on the difficulty of the word. For example, in a class of French students after 80 hours of English, when a student says "I have been living in Lille for twenty-three years", the situation might well be as follows. "Lille" has been totally automatized, since the pronunciation is practically the same in English as in French. "I" has been used for many hours, and is probably moving towards the end of stage 3. For some students in the same class, it

may even be completely automatized. The word "live" has been in circulation for many hours. It may be moving from the end of stage 2 into stage 3, or, for some students, already have reached the end of stage 3. The word "twenty" is probably automatized from the point of view of pronunciation, but more than likely does not yet present itself spontaneously when required -we all know how hard it is to count spontaneously in a new language! For "three" on the other hand, the pronunciation of the combination "th" and "r" probably still requires a high level of presence -stage 2- but the word may well present itself easily in the student's mind when required, a sign that, from this point of view, it has reached the end of stage 3. The construction "has been + -ing" is brand new, dating from a few seconds ago, and belongs to stage 1. The student is just about to realize, or has just realized, that there is a new field requiring investigation. Thus, even if we examine the situation for just one student, it is highly complex.

Law N° 2 - I can only learn if I am present to what I am learning

I can recognize where I am with respect to each of the four stages by looking at what I do with my presence. The first awareness of something unknown has the effect of focusing my presence.

During **stage 2**, I am actively engaged in the exploration of the activity, and my presence is completely devoted to what I am trying to understand. I can't be looking at the mountains round the lake while I am learning the basics of windsurfing. I am too busy with my windsurf.

During **stage 3**, my presence usually becomes intermittent. I gradually become freer to look at what is around me.

Stage 4 is not usually recognized by people going about living their lives, since it is characterized by the fact that it requires almost none of my presence in order to function. I can spend the day enjoying the wind in my hair without having to worry about how to use the windsurf. However...

Motivation

Motivation is also a function of the amount of presence the student needs to furnish. The interest human beings show in hobbies comes from the fact that any hobby, whatever it is, requires the sustained presence of the person who is living

the experience. Whether it be reading a good book, collecting stamps or climbing a mountain in winter, one is fully present when one lives one's hobby. It is easy to see, too, that one can remain deeply involved for hours on end in the most outlandish things if one is driven by interest. To be totally present is exhilarating for all human beings. The origin of motivation is to be found in presence.

So...

Since learning only begins when the student becomes aware of a new field of investigation - **stage 1** - the teacher's job is to provoke as many awarenesses of this kind as possible. "This, that, these, those" is a field of investigation, for example. This implies that the teacher must work in such a way that the student will encounter such fields and then help him to investigate them.

Since learning takes place through the feedback system described above, in which the learner tries something out and studies the environment to get a feedback concerning its adequacy in the given situation - **stage 2** -, the teacher's job is to provide a classroom in which the students can carry out their trials and make their errors freely, all the time providing them with the necessary feedback about the correctness of what they are trying to say or do so that they can construct criteria for the various uses of the language. And since the only way people can construct criteria is by becoming aware of what is possible and what is not, the teacher's job is to make sure that the students know at all times whether what they are saying is in accordance with the conventions of the language or not. Whenever the teacher neglects to provide feedback about what the language demands, she hinders the student from establishing criteria as to how the language works, and thus from making progress. The teacher's job is to provoke an environment in which many awarenesses can take place in the shortest possible time.

Since learning a know-how requires practice, the teacher must allow as much time as necessary for practice - **stage 3**. This, too, means maintaining tight control over the quality of language being used. To practise speaking is similar to practising in music. It is not enough to simply chatter on or to communicate. This is not focused enough to be of use to the students, since they require constant feedback on the quality and the conformity of what they are producing. The teacher, once she is aware of the stages of learning, actively watches over what the students are producing to make quite sure that anything they say which is in the process of

becoming automatized is exact. If it is not exact, it must immediately be brought to the student's attention - this is the same as saying that it must be brought back to **stage 2** - to avoid the fossilization of the mistake.

To create a class in which the students are present to what they are doing (and thus motivated) at all times, constant, well-measured challenges are much more useful than entertainment. The most difficult challenge, but also the most useful, is of course to speak the language.

Law N° 3 - Knowledge never spontaneously becomes a know-how.

This is evident when one thinks of playing the piano or skating. Reading books or being told what to do never made anyone a skater or a pianist. For that, skates and ice are absolutely necessary. One must, absolutely must, spend the necessary time playing the piano. But it is equally true of learning a language. Learning all the rules and lots of vocabulary never made anyone a speaker of the language. Only practice can do that.

Knowledge is always produced by a process in which someone who "knows how" examines what she does and describes it sufficiently clearly for it to become knowledge, stocked in articles or books in libraries. Know-hows can be made to produce knowledge, but knowledge never produces know-hows. Only practice can produce a know-how.

So...

There is no point in teaching grammar. To do so would produce knowledge, but not a know-how, which is a "know how to speak English".

Law N° 4 - Imitation has no part in the learning process.

When I was young, I learnt to walk a tightrope. If I installed a rope between two buildings and told you, the reader, "Now off we go. Just do like me." Would you try? Of course not, because you know perfectly well that you can't imitate me in this. You would have to develop the sensitivity to your centre of gravity, the muscular power in your feet and in your abdomen and all the other technical skills which would allow you to do it.

This is an extreme example, but a little thought shows that in all circumstances,

without exception, it is only possible to imitate what one can already do. If students don't already possess the gesture, they can not imitate someone else doing it. If imitation were part of the learning process, we could all be champions in any discipline we wanted to learn. Just watch and do.

Imitation exists of course, but when someone is imitating, they are not faced with the unknown. They are using skills which they already possess.

So...

There is no point in modelling for one's students. If they can imitate, they are doing something they already know how to do. If they can't, trying to imitate won't help.

How do students learn completely new sounds?

First of all, learning a new sound requires that each student realize that there is in fact a new sound to learn (**Stage 1**). Once a student has realized this, she can move to **stage 2** as she tries to create the sound. Here, she works using the feedback system mentioned above. In this specific case, she is dealing with two independent but closely related systems, the mouth and the ear. Only one of these systems, the mouth, can be controlled voluntarily. All the muscles of the ear are involuntary muscles. The student can only modify the voluntary system. With her mouth, she produces a sound which she guesses might be as close as possible to the sound she is aiming for. She hears this sound with her ears. Since she produced it with her own mouth, she knows that, muscularly speaking, her mouth was used in a new or special way and consequently, she knows she should listen for a sound which is different from what she usually hears. She can probably predict at least to some extent in what ways the sound will be different from what she usually produces. She speaks here with the deliberate intention of hearing something unusual and she listens to the result with the specific intention of hearing this unusual sound she has just produced. This is the process we all use to learn to produce new sounds. Once the student has managed to produce the sound to her satisfaction (**end of stage 2**), she must practise it in a wide variety of different situations and contexts until she is completely at ease with it. She thus reaches the end of **stage 3**, the sound has become completely automatized and the learning process for that particular sound is over. If that sound can be useful for the learning of any other new sound at any time in life, it is there to be used (**Stage 4**).

Law N° 5 - Getting the right answer quickly can be counterproductive in the long run

It can be very tempting to help students to get the “right answer” as quickly as possible, but this may well hinder them from making more lasting progress. It is important for the students to build their own inner criteria, so that they know intuitively when they are right or wrong themselves, without having to rely on the teacher to tell them. This is far more important in the long run than their being able to give the right answer quickly when they are asked. This law applies to all aspects of language learning but is particularly true in the area of pronunciation.

So...

In the area of pronunciation, it can be really useful if the students remain at least partially in the dark for quite a long time, and the easiest way to keep them in the dark is to be very picky when what is said is even slightly wrong. They do need to know when someone says a sound correctly, or when someone is quite close (or was quite close at the last try, even if the next try it was not so good). But while they are not absolutely certain what the correct sound is, they have to listen very closely to everything that is said, all the time trying sounds out for themselves, and developing their capacity to make and to hear smaller and smaller details in pronunciation. They become much more at ease with differences in accents, for example, since they develop an enhanced ear for all the shades of pronunciation they might come across in the class and outside.

Of course, it is relatively easy to help them acquire reasonably correct pronunciation quite quickly, and many might pick it up fairly rapidly - or pick up something at least reasonably close to accepted pronunciation -, but the sensitivity to the kinds of sounds the language is made of is not as developed as when the teacher works in this way. The more time the students take to get the pronunciation correct by homing in on it slowly, the less time is spent later when elisions and contractions are used by native speakers in fast speech.

Law N° 6 - The memory is our organ for forgetting, and it is very efficient.

It is our memory which clears out of our systems all the extraneous things which would clutter us up if we held onto them.

Learning can be of two types, according to the quantity of energy we spend in

order to learn. Some types of learning are extremely expensive whilst others are entirely free of cost.

Every time students have to memorize arbitrary facts, they are required to spend their own energy to do it, since they have to "stick" the arbitrary facts in their memory. The cost in energy can be very high, especially if whatever is being learnt is not interesting. Much of the learning done in schools is of this kind - dates and lists of kings and queens, tonnages of wheat harvested here or there in such and such a year, the names of rivers and chains of mountains, poems, mathematical formulas and theorems are all arbitrary, at least for children.

But this kind of learning takes place elsewhere too. When we meet a person for the first time, we have to learn his or her name, and this is arbitrary, at least for those who do not belong to the family. Frederick could have been called Charles or Paul. For all learning of this type, it is necessary to use one's own energy in order to stock the arbitrary facts. "Mental glue" is very expensive and so this type of learning costs a lot in energy. Not only is learning of this kind expensive, but it is characteristically very fragile. Even if we make a real effort to remember, we often forget. It is common to remember a face without being able to put a name to the person. And what of all that was learnt at school? How many hours were spent learning history or geography and how much is left a few years later? We forget most of what we memorize in a very short time.

But there exists another way of functioning, which is retention. Retention consists of the reception and stocking of sensorial images. When we look at a street, a film, a beautiful scene or a person - photons leave what we are looking at and strike our retina. When we listen, we create auditory images which allow us to remember what was heard. Images such as these cost nothing. They come into each of us very easily and remain for a very long time. We often retain scenes or tunes after having heard them just once.

For example, I went back to a village in the south of France after twenty years, and I was able to say "Ah yes, the pharmacy is over there behind the baker's shop", and it was. I had never tried to memorize the layout of the village square. Quite simply, it found its way into my system and stayed because I was there in the village and I looked at it. It was retained.

I go into a supermarket and wander round the aisles. I see a woman with her trolley. Three aisles further on, there she is again. I didn't try to remember her. I saw her and I can recognise her again a few minutes later. When I make up my shopping list - I need a list because what I need to buy is arbitrary from one day to the next - I use my retained images to check the list against the supermarket. This capacity also allows me to choose which shop I need to go to.

Our system of retention is very efficient. We remember vast quantities of things with great ease, simply because we have seen them, heard them, felt, smelt or tasted them. This faculty is part of human nature. This is what allows us to walk in the streets of our city without getting lost, to ski, to read a book - in short, to live our lives easily and efficiently.

So...

Logically, all education should be founded on retention rather than on memorization. Memorization costs so much with no guarantee of success. Retention costs nothing at all and the long term success rate is much higher. Efficient learning will be based on retention every time it is possible, which is almost all the time.

Quick-check test for teachers

How much revision is necessary in your class? Revisions are only necessary when the students are memorizing knowledge. Know-hows are retained and don't have to be revised.

These ideas and other similar ones are what lie behind Caleb Gattegno's "Silent Way". Silent Way was specifically designed to enable teachers to put them into action in their classrooms.

More information can be obtained from: uneeducationpourdemain.org

Roslyn Young teaches English at the Centre de Linguistique Appliquée in Besançon to anyone who wants or needs to learn the language quickly - from people working in business and university lecturers to school students and retired people. She is also deeply involved in teacher education, in particular in Japan, but also in many other countries. She worked with Caleb Gattegno for many years and has published extensively on Gattegno's work and on Silent Way.

Gattegno, Caleb. *The Common Sense of Teaching Foreign Languages*, New York: Educational Solutions, 1976