



TO ASSESS THE STUDENTS OR OURSELVES?

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Abstract

We the teachers try to do our best to provide the greatest means for the learner groups we interact with. At times, but quite rarely, we find it easy to reach our aim but at other times we are forced to face a great challenge. In such times we, just as any human being would do, tend to put the blame on the groups we interact with: "They are not good students," or "they do not study enough" are only a few of the sample phrases we utter and yet we discover in the end that complaining or trying to change our learner group prove to be useless. In that case I would suggest changing ourselves since it would be much easier to deal with the hundreds in particular schools. The scientific description of this approach in educational sciences is "self-reflection" which could also reasonably be termed as "self-criticism". In line with this approach present discussion aims to provide a general outlook on self-reflection and positive results likely to arise once we adapt this perspective as a new teaching trend.

Key Words: Self-reflection, learner groups, perspective.

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between teachers and students and the ways to strengthen this relationship for the sake of providing the best learning outcomes has always been a subject of curiosity for teachers as well as learners. A great quantity of approaches such as Audio Lingual Approach, Silent Way, Total Physical Response (Richard J.C. and Rogers T.S., 1986) have been suggested and developed towards this end and it goes without saying that all systems are, with their pros and cons, geared towards one particular goal: to achieve learning in the best way possible. Despite the good intentions of traditional and modern teaching methods, teachers may at times sadly realize the bitter fact that theory and practice are not always supportive of each other. One method that seems to be practical in one situation or for a particular group of learners may trigger disappointing results in a different setting and with different groups of learners. Since it is quite a hard task to alter one's learning habits and inner feelings towards a particular lesson, especially in adult learners, I suggest it would be much easier and beneficial to try to adapt our teaching habits according to the group we interact with. The simplest way to achieve this objective could be by following "self-reflection" method.

On a broader scale, self-reflection is putting a mirror into our face and be as honest as we can. As underlined by Dewey (cited in Pollard and Tann, 1933: 14), reflective behavior demands to contemplate upon one's actions which implies "flexibility, rigorous analysis and social awareness". Dewey also notes that "reflective teaching requires attitudes of open-mindedness, responsibility and wholeheartedness". In that way teachers could draw a clearer and neater picture of themselves before criticizing the students.

Becoming and acting like a reflective-teacher on the other hand requires certain changes in oneself. As emphasized by Bartlett (1990), to become a reflective teacher, one has to move beyond the "whats" towards "hows". In that case self-reflection goes beyond simply looking at oneself and listing the weakest and strongest points one exhibits as a teacher. In order to extract the best effects from self-reflection, which may reasonably be regarded as the bridge that connects one to the next harbor, it is a must to organize the further steps and follow those steps meticulously. The steps to take on the road to become a competent teacher are very much intertwined with acting as a good student dedicated to self-development.

Bailey et al. (2001: 6) divide the opportunities for development into formal and externally organized means (e.g. participating in courses, conferences, working on higher certification) and informal, more private (e.g. teaching journals, teacher chat-groups, studying a language) means. Participating in a wide range of courses on different topics, learning a new language to realize the difficulties students go through, attending national and international conferences, pursuing a higher academic degree, following teaching journals and joining teacher forums, collecting peers' and students' comments are just a few examples to demonstrate the ways to become a better teacher which in the end would help the practitioners to view the world of students from a different perspective. Another practice that could be fruitful in self-reflection is keeping diaries to record interesting or challenging situations one can experience in class. In that way it would be a lot easier for the teachers to handle similar problems effectively in future. The channels that would serve the instructors to be better reflective teachers are all beneficial in the long term, but one method I particularly find eye-opening is peer observation which, through the assistance of a colleague, enables us to criticize ourselves in a more neutral way.

METHOD

In a peer observation project initiated in Department of Foreign Languages at the beginning of spring term to the end of enhancing cooperation amongst teachers, an instructional observation form prepared on the basis of observation principles specified by Kathleen Mc Enerney was distributed to each teacher in the department. The specific points to be observed were listed as structure of the lesson; clarity and relevancy of instructions; teacher's style including use of movements, gestures, eye-contact; interaction with students; effective use of materials. In addition to observing the teacher, students would also be monitored with respect to their level of participation and attentiveness. The highlighted points in the form were:

1. Each participant would be both an observee and observer and in that way a mutual interaction and sharing would be possible.
2. A Pre-observation session would be conducted. In this session the participants would direct questions to one another about the size and level of class, lesson plan and any specific points that they would like to be observed on during the process.
3. Observation would be based on the items listed above.
4. Post-observation session would be conducted with no further delay to create the best effects on the observed teacher.

FINDINGS

At the end of this peer observation project, all participant teachers reported to have gained new perspectives on their own teaching. Personally listing, my insights have changed as in the following ways:

1. My observer noted that I initiated the lesson by determining whether students have accomplished the assignments given in previous lesson and directed them questions on their personal experiences involving questions on present perfect tense which was the grammar point covered in previous week. That was, in a way, an ice-breaker for the current lesson. She said that this was a good way to start a new lesson therefore I decided to stick to that approach in further classes.
2. My observer reminded me that students tended to answer my questions in their native language (Turkish) which naturally seemed to be the easiest way for them to communicate. She suggested paraphrasing the questions that seemed to be difficult for them to understand my instructions clearly and I agree that instead of repeating the same question, it would open a new way of providing answers for the students if I re-expressed the same question in a simpler way.
3. My observer remarked that my use of language was applaudable but at times I unconsciously spoke too fast which put some of the students into confusion. She also said that sitting at the back of class amidst students enabled her to view them from a wider angle thus she could directly notice the moments they got panicked when I spoke fast. Her warning guided me to pay more attention to my speed from now on.
4. My observer shared her opinion that I sometimes failed to allow sufficient length of time to students to provide their answers and tended to formulate my own reply to the question I directed whenever the

- student in question seemed to linger on the question excessively. That had been quite a useful notice and I plan to be even more patient from now on.
5. My observer reminded me that writing highlighted points on whiteboard was a good practice to attract students' attention more into the course but I needed to wait for a while before erasing the board so that all students could have a chance to see and jot down in their notebooks. It is true that I sometimes forget to ask whether they have finished writing. Next time I will remind myself to seek the approval of the whole class before cleaning the board.
 6. My observer congratulated me on periodically checking students' understanding before skipping to a different activity. Nonetheless she advised me to direct mixed questions covering previous grammar forms as well so that I could see a larger picture of their comprehension.
 7. My observer noticed that I tried hard to add some humor to class atmosphere whenever they seemed to be disconnected. She suggested playing a popular song or video in which they could all join which I think would be a lively way to draw them into lesson.
 8. My observer indicated that I seemed to forget to demand the participation of students in the back row since eager ones in the front rows came up with the answers many of the times. This has been a common problem in other classes too and I was already aware of that fact. However I had thought silencing an eager student would be discouraging so I tended not to warn him/her but she suggested that I might talk in private with those 'enthusiastic' ones after class and explain them the reasons why I needed to wait for a while to allow all students to participate in class discussions.
 9. My observer noted that I did not need to provide students with all the details of daily lesson plan because it might kill curiosity. In the next lessons I shall avoid being too specific about hourly lesson plan and leave some parts open to their imagination.
 10. My observer congratulated me on my punctuality and noted that I paid respect to students' break time as well.

The comments I listed above were restricted to two class hours and it is plausible to think of the greater numbers of positive effects that I would gain in the course of self development from different peers.

In addition to collecting peer comments as a way to improve one's own teaching methods I believe that the views of students, who are in essence the first-hand observers of our class activities, are also remarkable means. Their comments are, with no question, a remarkable assistance to help us to become more competent instructors. With that conception on my mind I have been following a technique of collecting students' comments for the last two years. In this collection procedure I did not follow a formal approach and preferred them to state their opinions freely.

In order to make sure that students would state their comments as freely as possible, I assure them that their identities shall remain confidential. The general outcome of student papers I have collected so far indicated that their first impression was that I would be a bossy teacher and that it would be really hard for them to adapt to my classes. However they added that after spending a few weeks together, they realized that they actually had the freedom to connect me easily and ask any questions they wanted. It is a fact I cannot deny indeed. As most of my colleagues I preferred to start in a strict and disciplined way and tried not to divert from subject matter at all but now I tend to follow a different approach. Instead of acting like the autocratic leader leaving not much personal space for students, I now try to be a democratic one allowing classroom rules and regulations to shape as more time passes.

Another way I changed myself in line with students' comments is that I care much more about students' personal characteristics to seek if I can find individual methods for problematic learners. In the first week of academic term, I try to know them better by asking personal questions on their educational background, aspirations, family relations and even their hobbies and fears. In the past I used to ask them to write a short biography indicating anything they wanted, even the deceased ones in their families etc. but in line with the comments I received from students I prefer to conduct a speaking activity now.

As argued by Pollard and Tann (1993: 4) "the process of self-reflection feeds a constructive spiral of professional development and competence". Upon receiving the views of my colleagues and my students I was



then able to put the mirror into myself and check my own teaching journey from the beginning till present day. I set the clock to a decade earlier and made a comparison between me as a teacher then and me as a teacher now. The self analysis allowed me to see that my students were right about my strict approach; however as I get more experienced and mature in this profession, I abandoned this extreme discipline and now tend to start in a milder approach which might change or shape according to class atmosphere. The reason I found it necessary to change my attitude is that starting out very strict in the very beginning might at times be discouraging for adult learners in particular.

One other point that reminded me with the help of students' views is that in the beginning of my career I thought that my main duty was to stick to the lesson plan and avoid any extra activities. However as Harmer points out (2007: 33) playing different roles in class and moving away from the plan whenever students seem to be distracted might indeed prove to be useful to involve students into the lesson.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSIONS

Self-reflection or self-criticism is one of the most effective ways to help teachers on the way to professional development. There are a variety of methods such as keeping diaries, journals, notes, video records (Brock, Ju and Wong, 1991) that can be employed in self-reflection and they all provide significant means to alter oneself accordingly. Nonetheless amongst these methods peer observation takes the stage as one of the most eye-opening experiments since it allows the teacher to view himself/herself from the perspective of an equivalent sharing his/her neutral comments for the sake of providing better teaching and learning in the end. However the main limitation of the peer-observation project conducted in my department was that it covered two class hours thus in the future a more comprehensive research based on larger groups of instructors might be conducted.

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