

Strategies for teaching: An experiment with two students

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This paper is the result of a brief tutorial experience, with two scholarship students at a private school in the south zone of Rio de Janeiro. Considering the particular difficulties of the two students, two teaching strategies were chosen for the classes, repetition and first language (Portuguese), both of which are not approved of by most EFL teachers. The results are presented and commented on, and a reflection is offered on the usefulness of repetition and L1 in this kind of teaching setting.

Key words: *tutorial, repetition, memorization, L1 in the EFL class, teaching techniques.*

BACKGROUND OF THE EXPERIMENT

In the beginning of the second semester of 2006, when I began my second term of teaching practice in the middle school section of Escola Teresiano, I was asked by a teacher to give tutorial classes to two fifth grade students who have enormous difficulty in learning English. One of the students, Gean, was part of a group I had been observing in the first term and I had already noticed he was an extremely shy student who always got low grades and who was always a little bit “lost” in the classes – it seemed to me he never understood what the teacher was saying. I didn’t know the other student, Alex, but a colleague who did the same work with the boys during the previous semester told me that he had even more difficulty in learning and that both of them seem to have some kind of learning disability. Gean got low grades compared to his classmates, but Alex got even lower grades.

It is perfectly understandable that they have difficulty in learning, especially in learning English. They live in a poor community, and they have a scholarship to study at the school since their fathers work there. One of them is an elevator operator but I never learned what the other one does. Most students who attend the school are from the middle

and upper-middle classes, and many of them have been attending English courses since they were 7, 6 or even 4 years old.

As I noticed there, students who have a scholarship suffer a subtle form of discrimination from their schoolmates. They are put aside by the others and grouped as “students who have a scholarship”. These groups suffer because of the immense “cultural abyss” which divides them from their schoolmates. While most of the students talk about going abroad on the next vacation, these boys talk about spending their free time playing soccer in the streets of the poor community where they live. They don’t have the same cultural background and it reflects in their learning, as the school is not ready to receive them. English classes are designed as a **reinforcement** of what students learn in the private language courses, and that is why the lessons proceed so fast and most of students have excellent grades. Due to this fast pace, most scholarship students fall behind and cannot catch up with the content without one-on-one classes.

So I accepted the challenge to give Gean and Alex the tutorial classes. I found out that Gean had better grades and Alex needed to raise his grades so he would not fail in the end of the year. I began by helping them with their homework, giving them exercises and playing games for vocabulary acquisition (they especially love “hangman”). However, I noticed that as soon as I taught them a word, they forgot it. When I asked for a word, even if it was written somewhere in the book or on the blackboard, they didn’t answer. It was as if they were afraid to try to answer my questions. I also noticed that they did not know basic things that they learned in the very beginning of the year and that were necessary for the progression of the lessons.

I finally realized the problem was bigger than I had imagined. My tutorial classes would not help the boys learn English, because they would have to start from the beginning to be able to learn (and two hours a week wouldn’t be enough). What I could do was just try to help them raise their grades and avoid failing in the end of the year, since I strongly believe that attending the fifth grade for the second time would in no way help them. But how could I do that? I decided, as an ultimate resource, to try two things that I have always learned to be wrong and that I hated when I saw teachers using them: repetition and translation. In the beginning it seemed that these techniques would work out satisfactorily.

REPETITION AND TRANSLATION: DO THEY RESULT IN UNDERSTANDING?

Repetition for memorization and substitution drills are part of almost every ESL/EFL classroom. The repetition techniques for grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary memorization have been either supported or strongly rejected by specialists in language teaching/learning over recent decades. As a university student learning to be an English teacher, I can say that they have been much more rejected than supported. According to Diana Natalicio (1979):

Repetition has been used as a pedagogical strategy throughout the recent history of language teaching. The grammar-translation approach to language teaching made frequent use of repetition in the required recitation of both literary passages and grammar paradigms such as verb conjugations or noun declensions. The clear presumption was that repetition assisted students in both acquiring and retaining important linguistic information.

After the Second World War, when the audio lingual approach was in evidence and grammar-translation began to be rejected, repetition in language learning became even more important. At that time, the behaviorist theorists claimed that repeating was a way of developing language **habits**. Over the years specialists have been questioning repetition especially because of the ways it was used: for mechanical drills and memorization.

In present days, when the adoption of **methods** has been replaced by the development of **personal methods** and combinations of different teaching techniques, each teacher may choose how he is going to work and whether he is going to use repetition or not and how he is going to use it.

In my case, I felt the boys needed to memorize words to be able to do some exercises on the tests, such as the **fill in the blanks** kind of exercise. I started to give them exercises which exhaustively repeated words and sentence patterns they had to learn for the next test and started to repeat the words on the hangman game for them to memorize. It was not my intention to make them memorize the sentence patterns too; I wanted them to understand the patterns and to be able to make questions and to answer the questions they would find on the tests. However, with the repetition of the exercises, they were memorizing the patterns and, in the end, as I could not make them understand/memorize the rules, I ended up giving strategies for them to answer or to make questions (*“when you have*

the 'does' in the question, you have to use 'does' in the answer too", for example). It is not that I gave up explaining the rules to them. I did that every class, but as explanations did not work, I had to find other ways. In conclusion, I started using strategies I have never believed in and that I have never thought I would use.

Like repetition, the use of translation into the student's mother tongue is a very complex issue. Recent theories say that it should be avoided as much as possible, as students have to get used to hearing English in the classroom and they have to start thinking in English to be able to produce language more accurately. A survey¹ which was recently carried out by BBC showed that the use of the students' native language may serve as a good resource for enriching the learning process in some cases, although it is seen with skepticism by most students, who expect **good teachers** to speak English all the time during the classes. In the same way, other articles are being published with the claim that translation may be used positively in the ESL/EFL classroom. In her article "Translation in the classroom – a useful tool for second language acquisition", Cindy Cunningham (2000) says: "Even though it [translation] is still widely used throughout the world, no teaching methodology exists that supports it (Richards and Rodgers: 1986:4), and many speak out against it". She discusses the lack of favorable literature on the topic and considers some arguments for and against translation. One of the arguments against it is that "as a result of word-for-word translation, learners develop neither target language thinking skills nor efficient reading ability, their speech is halting and intra-language errors are embedded". This fits into the way I used translation.

To help the students understand what they read, I started to translate texts they had to read sentence by sentence, explaining the meaning of the sentences and words. I also helped them to construct their compositions by explaining, sentence by sentence, the texts which were being used as a model, helping them to substitute the words to write their own texts.

¹ The survey results are available at
http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/think/methodology/mother_tongue.shtml

RESULTS AND CONCLUSION

My **experimentation** with the use of translation and repetition would have to be longer to obtain further, more consistent, results. However, I did see some consequences.

For one thing, I asked to see a test the boys wrote and, to my surprise, Alex's grades improved, but the opposite happened to Gean. Although I cannot say what caused Alex to have better grades, I know that Gean went through difficult times as he suffered an accident and was forced to stay at home for almost a month. This surely affected his grades.

However, I also noticed that:

- 1) The boys still did not understand the questions.
- 2) They repeated expressions they memorized whenever they could, without thinking.

When they memorized a question with an answer (for instance, *how old are you?* when the answer to this question would be *I am 11 years old*) they could answer it accurately. But they generally could not understand the questions or the texts on the test.

The test had, for instance, a text about a boy who had a friend called Jessica. To the question *Who is Jessica?* one of the boys answered *Yes, I do*, just because he had memorized the *Yes, I do/No, I don't* pattern. Actually, he answered *Yes, I do, No, I don't, Yes, she does, No, she doesn't* to all the text interpretation questions. As he did not understand the text and the questions, he just answered what he remembered as an answer to a question.

A positive aspect I found in the use of Portuguese in the classroom was that students feel more comfortable about talking to the teacher using their mother language, especially shy and insecure students. It also works better to give instructions and to explain to the students the mistakes they made in a composition or on a test. When I was explaining to the boys, in Portuguese, the mistakes they made in the text, one of the students said to me he likes my class better than his **official** English class because at least he "could understand what I was saying and it was so much easier". The boys were telling me several things: "Oh, you showed me that it is wrong and now I know it was a dumb mistake", "It was an easy question", and "I should have paid more attention to the question before answering it". I realize it was very productive to explain their mistakes in Portuguese.

To conclude, I understood that the use of repetition and translation may be beneficial depending on the way you choose to use these techniques. Repetition may be

helpful for pronunciation exercises and vocabulary acquisition, but over-repeating the grammar rules will not make students understand them and learn how to use them. Using the students' mother tongue in the classroom may make them feel more comfortable and keep them from getting lost concerning the explanations and instructions. However, if the teacher speaks English in the classroom, students will be more exposed to the language and it may improve their listening skills.

Teachers need to experiment with the techniques they want to use, so that they can see whether they work out or not and how they work out or not. In this way, teachers can try to find a balance of strategies that work better with their groups of students. The more **experiments** the teachers do, the more they reflect about their practices and the consequences, and the more they can find a balance to gain better results with their students.

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