Theory-to-Practice

Reflections on Educational Metaphors for Teaching English as a Second Language to Adult Learners

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Introduction

"Repeat after me, class…" are the four familiar words spoken by many teachers in classrooms around the world. When I was preparing for a cross-cultural teaching assignment in Sweden, I took a beginning language class at a local college that required the memorization of numerous dialogues and lists of vocabulary words. Sitting behind a desk, the teacher drilled each dialogue into our minds, line by line. I can vividly recall students reciting the material back, in choral repetition, that eventually became monotonous.

Although I memorized the dialogues, I had difficulty transferring that knowledge to the situations I encountered while abroad. My inability resulted in frustration. I wished that my instructor had emphasized something more than lecture and memorization.

Expecting a similar teaching approach at a *folskola* in Gothenburg, I entered my first course in language study with an acute sense of dread. To my surprise, my teacher, Katarina, was altogether different. Not only was she energetic and enthusiastic, she enabled us to use language practically in the surrounding community. She found a way to balance accurate and precise language teaching while incorporating relevant cultural experiences. The outcomes of this class, radically different from the first, were rooted in primary assumptions and principles of teaching and learning.

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The Value of Metaphors

Metaphors prove useful when examining different approaches to learning in adult education (Apps, 1995). Postman and Weingartner (1969) further suggest that many adult educators conceptualize teaching and learning through the use of metaphors. Young (1996) offers the following perspective:

> Metaphors form visual constructs through which we associate, interpret and organize thought. They dominate and delimit our consideration of experience and phenomena. Because one's metaphor of teaching and learning interacts with fundamental issues such as the nature of knowledge and the nature of persons, it impinges directly on the way pedagogical decisions are made (p. 79).

If metaphors do represent an educator's fundamental notions, such as the nature of knowledge, it is not only important to capture and align a proper metaphor for the learning structure, but essential for educators to investigate the advantages and disadvantages of these metaphors. In doing so, an appropriate concept of teaching and learning can be forged to create deeper success for educators and students alike.

Assumptions Within Education Metaphors

There are a number of common teaching and learning assumptions represented by metaphorical terminology (Ward, 1996). According to Ward, three contrasting metaphors account for most of the current thinking, planning, and operation in adult higher education, including many English as a second language (ESL) programs. We will examine the first two metaphorical representations, "filling a container" and a "manufacturing process," before taking a closer look at the third. Ward comments on the first two representations stating,

> These two [approaches] are closely related, though they use different symbolism. They are both faulty. One of the key problems in both of these concepts of education is their rooting in the *tabla rasa* view of childhood. Worse yet, this view of the learner as an empty slate to be written on by "those who know" is even applied to the teaching of adults (pp. 45-46).

These assumptions have influenced teaching and learning as a whole, but more specifically, they have influenced the approaches of teaching English as a second language to adult learners. In contrast, the metaphor, dubbed, the "life-walk" or "traveler" method, offers adult ESL educators a valid and effective alternative.

The Metaphor of Filling

Like a bucket ready to be filled (Young, 1996), the transmission of knowledge from teacher to learner is viewed as a unidirectional act in this conceptualization. The teacher transmits knowledge, most often through lecture, directly into the students' minds. Freire identifies this approach as "banking education" and describes it as follows:

Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits, which the students patiently receive, memorize and repeat. . . The scope of the action allowed to the students extends as far as receiving, filing and storing the deposits (Freire, 1970, p. 58).

The disadvantages of this model are often discussed in the adult education literature. One suggestion is that this traditional model places tremendous pressure on the teacher, who must continually demonstrate the highest level of expertise, while at the same time, deny the experience, knowledge, and skills of the learners (Wickett, 1991, p. 139). Smith suggests that proponents of the filling approach assume that learners understand the information in the same way it is understood by the teacher (Smith, 1992). In contrast, Ward focuses on the learner, arguing that the filling orientation tends to encourage learner passivity, which diminishes their creativity and skills of evaluation (Ward, 1996, p. 46).

Despite these limitations, this model remains dominant in Asian as well as in Central and Eastern European institutions of higher learning, particularly in language education (Lynes, 1996).

This approach to adult higher education may have legitimacy if, Young suggests, the active role of the learner is included, by encouraging critical and independent thinking in the classroom. But Joyce and Weil (1992), and Habermas and Issler(1992) point out that even with the student taking an active role, learning within this model remains restricted

to the cognitive domain (Krathwohl, Bloom, & Masia, 1964) and fails to address affective issues as well as individual differences learners bring to the learning context.

A Filling Approach to Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language

Through the Grammar Translation Method, the filling metaphor can finally find application in language learning. This approach, which dominated European foreign language teaching from 1840 to 1940, is still widely practiced in modified forms in both Eastern and Central European higher learning institutions (Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Lynes, 1996). Learners view language instruction as the tedious process of memorizing lists of rules and facts, in order to translate sentences and texts into the target language (Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Lynes, 1996). Richards and Rogers summarize their critique of "filling" stating,

> …though it may be true to say that the Grammar-Translation Method is still widely practiced… It is a method for which there is no theory. There is no literature that offers a rationale or justification for it or that attempts to relate it to issues in linguistics, psychology or educational theory (2001, p. 7).

This evaluation by itself should be enough for teachers to examine its use in language teaching.

The Metaphor of Manufacturing

This mechanistic model views the learner as a machine. Learning therefore becomes a result of conditioning with evaluations based on quantifiable "products" of learning. Even if the student is more actively involved in the learning process, than in the filling model (Skinner, 1957), administrators, program planners, and educators focus on quantifiable educational goals and objectives—a process that tends to ignore the learners' actual learning needs. These educational strategies which have emerged from behaviorists such as B. F. Skinner, include both programmed instruction and behavioral modification techniques.

A Manufacturing Approach to Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language

The Audiolingual Method (ALM) stems directly from the manufacturing metaphor. Along with this method, compatible teaching materials for English as a second or foreign language are also currently used in language classrooms throughout Eastern and Central Europe (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). In the 1940s and 1950s, audiolingualism (Brooks, 1964) developed as a reaction to the Grammar Translation paradigm and the movement toward positivism and empiricism. Audiolingualism was built on the premises of structural linguistic theory, contrastive analysis, aural-oral teaching procedures (as mentioned above) and behaviorist psychology. Proponents claim that learners are able to master a foreign language more effectively and efficiently using audiolingual techniques than with earlier grammar-based methods.

This method was also widely adapted in North American colleges and universities. It provided the methodological framework for university level foreign language curricula and teaching resources for more than three decades.

However, Chomsky's theory of universal "deep structures" in language caused audiolingual approaches to decline in popularity as early as the 1960s (Chomsky, 1957). Other factors contributing to this decline include psychologists' recognition of the affective and interpersonal nature of human learning (Brown, 2000), as well as the limited roles available to learners who were only seen as stimulus-response mechanisms (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

In spite of the difficulties with both these approaches, Knowles (1993) suggests that there is a place for both the filling and manufacturing models in adult higher education, although, as he states, they appear inadequate as comprehensive models. He writes,

I believe each of these models describes part of our reality. In some circumstances we, indeed, do behave like machines. When I learned to type, it seemed appropriate that behaviorist strategies be used to teach my fingers to hit the right keys. But most learning, and certainly most significant learning, seems far more complex than either of these models [filling and manufacturing] takes into account (p. 95).

It seems therefore that a more comprehensive framework is needed that addresses the complexities of the language learning process such as the affective as well as the linguistic and cognitive needs of the learner.

The Metaphor of Life-Walk

In contrast to the "filling" and "manufacturing" metaphors discussed above, Ward offers the alternative metaphor of "life-walk" (or travel) (Ward, 1996). According to Ward, this educational approach to adult learning suggests a destination, adding that the experiences of "getting there" are as important as the result. With an emphasis on process as well as product, this model may be described as more organic, offering considerable contrast to the filling and manufacturing approaches. Kliebard (1972) explains,

> The curriculum is the route over which students travel under the leadership of an experienced guide and companion. Each traveler will be affected differently by the journey since its effect is at least as much a function of the predilections, intelligence, interests and intent of the traveler [learner] as it is of the contours of the route. This variability is not only inevitable, but wondrous and desirable. Therefore, no effort is made to anticipate the exact nature of the effect on the traveler, but a great effort is made to plot the route so that the journey will be as rich, as fascinating and as memorable as possible (p. 404).

By creating and facilitating an atmosphere of learning within the life-walk context, both teacher and student have the joy of traveling on an educational adventure together. In Gothenburg, my teacher understood the need for the process as well as for the product. Katarina was not only a teacher, but also a companion who led us to our final destination, as we each journeyed toward learning the Swedish language.

She began our class by conducting a needs analysis so that she became familiar with our motivation for learning the language. In doing so, she placed the focus on the students instead of the teacher. The language tasks were then designed to equip learners to first use the language in every-day settings. In order to ease us into the early stages of language learning, she first encouraged us to practice in pairs, before we spoke in front of the class. By implementing such a technique, she could more easily facilitate learning, by walking throughout the classroom, listening

to our conversations. She provided a range of excellent exercises for working on both fluency and accuracy in the language. When these different exercises were completed over several weeks, a passerby on the street or local shopkeeper could understand us.

The most helpful activity was when Katarina taught us how to order coffee and pastry in the local café. By first modeling the situation in the classroom, she helped us to differentiate a successful encounter from an unsuccessful one. Through a mutual exchange of laughter and understanding, everyone practiced and felt confident enough to go to the café and place their order. Though I was nervous, my joy after actually receiving what I had ordered far outweighed my anxiety beforehand! Afterwards, all of us sat around a large table and debriefed our experience. At this point, our instruction deepened. Katarina took the next step to assist us in evaluating and strengthening our performance by further teaching us to use appropriate non-verbal strategies (e.g., gestures, eye contact) to compensate for gaps in communication. Over the duration of the course, our ability increased to using the language effectively for real communication purposes in communicative settings.

By operating as both facilitator and instructor, Katrina engaged us in the learning process and created an atmosphere conducive to appropriate implementation. By showing the balance of fluency and accuracy and coupling it with appropriate behaviors, she demonstrated effective practices in teaching and learning that I still apply in my classrooms, today. Although learning a language can be difficult, poor teaching techniques and inappropriate methods should not make the process boring or frustrating for the adult learner. Katarina's approach surpassed lecture and memorization—she created an atmosphere of interaction that was exciting and memorable for us all.

The Value of the Life-Walk Metaphor

According to Ward (1996), exploration and discovery are the keys to the life-walk educational process. In this way, the learning experiences and learning styles the participants bring with them contribute to the educational process. Freire's (1970) version of the "life-walk" metaphor offers an approach that places both teacher and learner on equal plains. His method includes the three essential elements of avoiding the filling approach to adult education (discussed above).

"Conscientization" refers to the personal and critical examination of one's own learning. Rather than agreeing with and repeating what is being taught, adult learners are to be continually involved in a conscious

examination of the facts, as they relate to their own experiences and that of their community (Freire, 1970). The process of conscientization is realized through dialogue where all participants are engaged in a common search for truth. Freire refers to this form of dialogue as "the horizontal relationship between persons" (Freire, 1973, p. 45). A literacy curriculum then emerged from this process that was thoroughly based on students' needs and motivations.

"Praxis," on the other hand, refers to the reflection between theory and practice (Freire 1973). Praxis is a necessary element for the learner who wishes to incite change in themselves and their community (Wickett, 1991). The correlation between conscientization and praxis "helps the learner 'to transform the world through man's reflection on himself and the world' and to take direct, considered action upon them" (Freire as cited in Ward & Herzog, 1974, p. 30).

The components of Freire's process of dialogue, reflection, and action, are essential to this approach and must remain in balance with one another. As Freire argues, reflection without action degenerates into "verbalism," and action without reflection degenerates into "mindless activism" (Freire, 1973, p. 75).

A Life-Walk Approach to Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language.

Based on the "life-walk" metaphor, the Communicative Approach to teaching and learning language begins with the theory of language "as communication" (Richards & Rogers, 2001). Richards and Rogers also suggest that the Communicative Approach appeared at a time when the method was ready for a paradigm shift. Such methodology appealed to a more humanistic technique in which interactive communication processes were emphasized.

In addition, the Communicative Approach focuses on the central role of learners in the process of communication. Breen and Candlin (1980) explain these types of learner roles in the following description:

> The role of learner as negotiator—between the self, the learning process and the object of learning—emerges from and interacts with the role of joint negotiation within the group and within the classroom procedures and activities, which the group undertakes. The implication for the learner is that he should contribute as much as he gains and thereby learn in an interdependent way (p. 110).

According to Richards and Rogers (2001), this cooperative approach may be unfamiliar to adult learners who were trained in traditional approaches. In order for this type of cooperative method to be effective, traditional teachers and learners may need augmented training in its techniques and procedures.

However, while special training is frequently beneficial, educators may simply be advised to assess learners' needs, rethink some of their methods, and creatively facilitate meaningful experiences for their students. Katarina's example of guidance and implementation was an excellent way to help students actualize and value the language learning experience. Making connections to real-world use is a challenge in any learning environment, but the teacher who attempts to offer students not only language but also tools to continue learning outside the walls of the formal classroom is truly equipping students for their journey.

Yet, language learning is not a one-size-fits-all proposition; it is a dynamic process that requires considerable motivation and commitment from the learners. By helping students understand their own styles of learning, and giving them strategies to use their strengths, a successful educational experience is attainable. In my personal experience with Katrina, I not only learned the basics of the language, but also how to continue my language learning journey long after I left her classroom. In turn, when I studied at a higher level in a Swedish university, I was able to use some of the same life-walk principles she so effectively modeled.

Conclusion

The valid alternative of the life-walk metaphor is worth exploration—especially when compared to the historical approaches of teaching and learning expressed metaphorically as filling and manufacturing. Instead, the life-walk promotes interdependence between the teacher and learner, enables conscientization in the student's learning processes, and promotes praxis within the student community. The process of learning achieved during this type of experience provides some of the foundation needed for students to become life-long learners. But what is encouraging, and perhaps most important to some, is that through the acceptance and implementation of the life-walk method, learners will not be forced to hear and respond to the monotonous phrase, "Repeat after me, class…" as the only mode of instruction.

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