

# **Beyond the roles of dispensing English Language Teaching: creating interactive rural learning.**

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## **Abstract**

Teachers in large class environments may have status as the dominant source of knowledge and language, yet interactive teaching/learning approaches require a shift in attitudes and skills away from known safe paradigms. When provided with skills for empowering learners, teachers may feel challenged as roles change and language demands expand. Language development tools to create an interactive learner-centred classroom include teachers' own language learning, the use of specific task types, and specific classroom techniques which build English language confidence. To build confidence to change from the 'aajan' fronted environment requires tools based in cultural sensitivity, techniques tailored for large class needs and tailored approaches to teacher education.

This paper will be based on the Malaysian Schools CfBT English language project that began in September 2003. The nation-wide Centre for British Teachers-Malaysia/ Ministry of Education, Curriculum Development Centre project has chosen to use the presentation of pedagogy as a medium of building confidence and skills in English language. The in-service approach is derived from practicality as well as principle, and recognises that many rural teachers have relatively low levels of English language proficiency. Teachers need tools to meet examination demands, while building motivation and enjoyment in the English language learning process. The language tools to empower teachers are critical as motivation and building confidence in an acquired language feed on each other. Courses therefore focus on the language for instruction, transition, group management and learner talk facilitation. Without the acquisition of specific classroom language, teachers will remain bound in textbook-centred grammar translation – a common mode identified in CfBT/ MOE's large-scale needs analysis (Hall and Dodson, forthcoming).

This paper will draw on research and experience in rural Malaysia and wider settings to suggest a framework for developing interactive language acquisition within a nationwide teacher education project. A team of 32 teacher trainers co-operate with Malaysian classroom colleagues to raise the levels of proficiency and confidence of language learners in rural settings. Approaches to building a child-centred approach to English language acquisition are presented through a report of the processes which create positive trainer-teacher partnerships to foster successful teacher and learner responses within rural schools. The importance of partnerships between administrators, training providers and classroom practitioners is also described with implications drawn from the presenter's SEAMEO-RELC experience and CfBT's regional work in promoting new ways of teacher development.

## **Teachers status in a large class and moves to interactive teaching**

Teachers in large class environments may have status as the dominant source of knowledge and language, yet interactive teaching/learning approaches require a shift in attitudes and skills away from the known safe norms of the teacher as the omnipotent source of wisdom. When provided with skills for empowering learners, teachers may feel challenged as roles change and language demands expand. This challenge for teaching and empowering learners is by necessity focused on classroom change and it is to this aspect that we address a context for English language development: namely large scale classrooms and change through partnerships in teacher development. In particular this paper will focus on rural large-size classrooms with reference to Malaysian and ASEAN experiences.

Given that the large class environment is the main setting for English language learning in the ASEAN region, it is worthwhile to examine the context of learning which most impacts on motivating each learner, that is classroom dynamics with teachers at work. The classroom is often the only context for English language learning in rural areas in countries such as Malaysia, apart from television, which is usually inaccurately subtitled. Rajaretnam and Nalliah observe that in rural Malaysian schools there is a challenging common pace with urban schools 'irrespective of the students lack of exposure to the language at home or the immediate need to learn the language' so that rural classroom processes are often the sole source of empowerment and motivation to learn English (1999,13).

### **Moving to empowerment of learners**

Providing empowerment of learners involves the relationship between the teacher and the learner, as most classroom encounters are embedded in the roles and power of the teacher (Gardner,1985; Randall and Thornton,2001). If the objective is to develop learner's internalized language then one needs to see how teachers create the climate so that learners want to learn and enjoy learning, while in an environment managed by one in a position of respect and power. A simple trichotomy of such power is that of coercive power, reward based power and referent power (Wright, 1987; Greene and Effery, 1998). Coercive power involves punishment. Rewards in a classroom may involve marks, an encouraging word or a tick in the exercise book. Referent power is where individuals appeal to the commitment and interest of others to create intrinsic interest. This is proactive and effective power building and in classroom terms means that authoritative statements, the use of punishment and obvious rewards need to change to the learners wanting to learn.

With more frequent referent power approaches, direct classroom management is superseded by task facilitation through changes in teacher behaviour. Referent power also involves varied learning arrangements and specific use of group work (Hall and Jacobs, 2002). Such changes in teacher behaviour from transmission of knowledge mode to facilitator require confidence, language skills and workable techniques to move towards more open tasks and open interaction. Yet as motivational research shows, change will only come if one is confident enough to move out of the safe and known to share the power of learning (Dornyei,2002: Dornyei and Otto, 1998)

## Teacher behaviour and confidence

Teacher behaviour is a powerful motivational tool especially in a setting where the teacher has status as the important 'aajan', 'cikgu' or 'guruji'. She is viewed as a powerful person for the time that the caregivers hand over responsibility (Hall and Yuliasri, 1995). The teacher is therefore often a revered model and one who can be the most effective model for language learning (Randall and Thornton, 2001, Woodward, 1991). The same applies in teacher training where the importance of modeling and congruence is critical. Central to this term is the notion that one motivates by doing what one wants to see done. Tessa Woodward (1991) has coined the term 'loop input' to describe the process where tasks about task types use the task type itself to provide experiential learning. An extreme example of the antithesis of this was experienced by this writer in a regional workshop on group work which began with a thirty minute teacher fronted session of one way talk. As Maldarez and Bodoczky (1999:25) note when speaking of teacher trainers as mentors:

On a course where modeling is a specific course objective it is essential that leaders practice what they preach, and model the kind of modeling mentors are expected to perform. Broadly speaking, this involves matching what is taught with how it is taught. Such an approach is essential to building **partnerships** to shared learning and aid confidence development. (My italics)

An issue at stake in a changing linguistic setting such as Malaysia is the levels of confidence in classroom English language usage by all, especially in rural settings (Hall and Dodson, 2003: Pillay, 1998). Until learners see that a teacher is confident and prepared to invest in using the target language there is little room for the celebration of reliance on technological support. Creating greater teacher confidence and modeling requires a sensitive pedagogic approach as issues of the teacher's own language level will involve concepts of self awareness and self image. Cullen (1994), commenting on Tanzania, points out that language improvement and feeling confident in one own language skills may be central to a sense of security as an English language teacher. After all the teacher with her unique status 'is the sole person responsible for what is said, who says it, and what is to be said' and as such is imbued with a sense of power and control (Farrell, 2004:22). The teacher also has many areas of knowledge that she is working with including: curriculum knowledge, content knowledge, knowledge of wider political linguistic issues, knowledge of learners and methodological knowledge (Spratt, 1994). The last is a central concern reflected in much English Language Teaching research (see Freeman and Richards 1993; Bailey and Nunan, 1996) and it was one reflected in the majority of teachers training requests in this writer and colleagues' needs analysis of 168 classroom teachers in Bentong, Malaysia .

The approach of the nationwide Centre for British Teachers / Curriculum Development Centre of Ministry Of Education Project is to build a partnership of confident English language use in rural classrooms. 10 Project English Teachers work as classroom teachers in select rural schools, while a greater multiplier effort is developed in 32 of the 120 Education Districts of Malaysia through District English Language Coordinators who train classroom teachers. The Project works directly with confidence building and indirectly with language development through classroom process training. The 32 experienced rural trainers use pedagogy to drive teachers' own language development. Working with pedagogical change, trainers usually focus on teachers' roles and a variety of task types to add depth to what is often a transmission mode of

learning. The techniques recognize that management of learning for 40-50 cannot rely on conventional TESOL approaches from well- resourced urban settings.

The Malaysian Schools English Language Project approach to pedagogic change is based on the following principles:

- Teacher development uses task types which can be used in classrooms
- Spoken English in and outside the classroom is strongly fostered
- Interaction other than a dominance of teacher talk is encouraged through pair work & group work
- Techniques to replace grammar translation build confidence for change
- Resources for free on the internet are plentiful if not always accessible
- Success is celebrated through a mentoring approach
- Training sessions include classroom tasks for teachers to feed back into later sessions
- Lesson observation is for growth not for career evaluation
- Performance in a course is not part of career monitoring yet completion of learning is recognised
- Materials produced by local teachers include an interactive approach
- Lesson plans produced are shared
- Local District Language Officers assist with implementation
- The DELC is part of the local community and office within a national support network

There is a strong teacher training emphasis on `activation' as much current classroom practice focuses on the `study' part of Harmer's (1998) `Engage, Study Activate' approach. The training approaches then provide learning moments through modeling the classroom processes in training to create teacher reflection. This is useful as often ones everyday challenges leave little time to consider the many roles of a teacher.

### Choices in proportioning teachers' roles

Critical to being aware of our classroom work is consideration of the time and energy spent in differing teacher roles. Many teacher roles relate to dealing with external accountability while others focus on the core processes of learning. While this is a complex area, it is still worthwhile to firstly, examine some roles as in the following basic model and secondly, as teachers to reflect on the proportions of effort we expend. It is worthwhile to consider how much time is spent on the roles in the upper sections of the figure and how much on those roles relating to intrinsic motivation in the lower sections of the figure.

The left side of the table contains primary classroom teacher talk collected by this writer as examples of less than skilled approaches to building learner motivation.

<b>Assessor</b> -grading, marking	`That's not even worth a C.' How to pass the real exam.'
<b>Controller</b> - managing behaviours	`Class be quiet. You need to be quiet to learn.'
<b>Organiser</b> –setting up tasks, organising learning	`Please open the book at page 16 and copy down the story.'
<b>Resource</b> –providing information, answering questions	`I will tell you the answer to make it easier.'
<b>Supporter</b> - of pair and group peer learning	`Ask your friend if you are not clear.'
<b>Encourager</b> - giving positive feedback	`That one is OK you know.'
<b>Tutor</b> –providing individual guidance and pastoral care	`Got a brain there. Can use or not'

Critical to any input is the way learning is managed in the classroom. If we are to develop learner motivation, a key area is how the management of learning develops alongside confidence in English for interactive tasks. Once teachers gain confidence in using English language in their own classrooms a sense of safety to move beyond the roles of controller and organizer will develop. Exploring pedagogic approaches is one way of using and developing more linguistic confidence. In the year and a half of rural teacher training in the Malaysian Schools English Language Project some of needs captured in an earlier large scale needs analysis are beginning to be addressed (Hall and Dodson, 2003). In 32 Districts involved in the nation wide project, teachers are very positive in their course evaluations that using a variety of task types and techniques helps them generate learner motivation. Through exploration of varied techniques teachers and students move from transmission of knowledge modes to greater interactivity.

### **The partnership of change**

The development of interactive learning in classrooms, which are often teacher- fronted requires a number of partnerships. No change is possible without the partnership of head teachers or principals who have a critical role in creating school `climates.' Recognising this, the project has conducted courses in English for School Principals to foster the use of English in school assemblies. These courses addressed training methodology by sharing the process of learning by doing, in contrast to the transmission of content knowledge. Of equal importance is sharing the change through local skills development and the prime focus in this project is skills development for teachers at the core process level rather than a mass cascade approach. One awaits support for changes which recognize that quiet classrooms do not always equal real learning as well as the recognition that examination skills are skills which can be acquired by more ways than doing mock exams. Yet, we work with great support when policies are evolving with rapidity (Pandian, 2003), for example; the introduction of English for Maths and Science, extensive software distribution and an English language extensive reading scheme which all work to foster English language development. The CfBT/CDC project is able to complement other training which the Ministry of Education leads in this time of vast language policy changes. We work at the significant level of educational development for classroom change in rural areas to empower learners with effective language tools. It is in classrooms of empowered and confident teachers of English that change will bring language choices for all.

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### **Bio-data**

Stephen Hall is Senior DELC, Prior to moving to Malaysia, he was Principal Consultant with Specific English Training, Singapore and trained teachers and corporate clients. Clients included front line and supervisory staff of Changi airport, SIA Commercial Training, and VISA. Stephen managed the Language and Communication Division of Temasek Polytechnic, Singapore (1995-1999) and trained teachers throughout Southeast Asia for RELC (1992-1995). He has taught in multicultural primary and secondary schools in New Zealand, Nauru and Solomon Islands. He has also worked in tertiary TESOL training.

Stephen has authored books on English for Tourism, texts for ASEAN English for Specific Purposes and articles about cultural factors, pronunciation, oracy skills and task-based learning. His latest book is 'English for Tourism: First Class 2.'