

An Evolving Philosophy of Teaching

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ABSTRACT

In this article, which was a writing assignment for the Integrated Skills Practicum, a course at Teachers College, Columbia University in Tokyo, the author reflects on how the course has helped shape her teaching philosophy since its start in January 2011. Here, she focuses on how she works with students, her observations of her classes as a language teacher, and her development as a teaching professional.

INTRODUCTION

Writing maturity develops through practice and trial and error.

We must first challenge our writing to improve it.

Safe writing allows no room for growth.

Dennis Sjolie (2006)

I open my final writing assignment with the quote above, written by Sjolie (2006), Associate Professor and ESL Coordinator at the University of South Dakota. I chose it because it encapsulates my position in many aspects of my life, including being a language professional. The word “writing” is merely an analogy; it can be substituted with anything. I further realize that the more I challenge myself, the stronger I gravitate to these words. What does this quote have to do with my philosophy of teaching? It has more to do with simply my philosophy of teaching – it has become my way of thinking.

Through the Integrated Skills Practicum I can best summarize my experiences inside and outside the classroom at both Teachers College and my teaching context by stating that learning curve has been *very, very* steep. I write this with humility as a teacher returning to teaching because the years I spent away from the classroom created gaps in my own learning as a teacher, which this

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course has started helping me fill. The gaps are twofold: one, which is created by a career change resulting in my discontinued involvement in the field of education. The other and even bigger gap is related to my past and present teaching contexts, i.e., Spanish bilingual education in the United States in contrast to teaching EFL to college and university students in Japan. While the first gap is easier to fill, as I only need to consider myself a new teacher in the field, in order to fill the second gap, it almost feels as if I am on an ongoing journey in search of what I can do *for myself* in order to give my best *for the students*.

To answer this question, I write my philosophy in the following three sections: (1) Working with Students; (2) The Language Teacher; and (3) The Teaching Professional. In the first section, I describe what I try to provide to the students and how that is reflective of the way I work with them. Next, in the second section, I write about how the course readings have impacted my thinking about teaching in my current context and what changes in my teaching I plan to make in the future. In the last section, I discuss my own personal growth and professional growth, which are integral to my further development. Reference is made to my posts on the online discussion forums as there have been developments over the months – these changes have been crucial in formulating my current teaching philosophy.

WORKING WITH STUDENTS

In February 2011, I wrote about the three pillars of “Exposure, Experience and Practice,” as they comprised my philosophy of education at the time. However, I now realize that they form only one part of my current philosophy, on how I work with students.

Regarding exposure, I wrote how I would like to provide background knowledge to my students, which was a comment I received from Prof. Hale. To further elaborate on how I can help develop this schemata for my students, I can provide information on a topic from various media, such as audiovisual materials, supplementary reading, appropriate realia, and technical vocabulary. In terms of vocabulary, I always hoped that students would look up unfamiliar vocabulary on their own in advance. However, after reading about the study by Hu and Nation that one of the conditions which make meaning-focused input successful is that “95 percent to 98 percent of the running words should be within the learners’ previous knowledge,” (Nation & Newton, 2009, p. 3), I realize I need to give my students a vocabulary list which covers the minimum required words, such as those from the AWL. Furthermore, I can have them research background of the topic even in their L1, in order that they become receptive to the same information in English because this is a form of L1 transfer in which one uses “the knowledge of one language to facilitate listening in another” (Vandergrift, 1997, p. 394). This is especially important, as when I started working with college and university students,

I used to, and still catch myself overestimating their language abilities, thus not providing sufficient schemata through scaffolding opportunities.

It is no coincidence my second pillar – experience – is what Dewey writes extensively in *Experience and Education* (Dewey, 1938). Dewey writes about the “principle of the continuity of experience” or the “experiential continuum” (p. 9). For any student, experience is not an isolated incident but a continuum of events experienced. Therefore, it is necessary that teachers provide ongoing opportunities for students to interact with the material and information taught, in order to experience them. Further, as Dewey writes that “education is development within” (p. 10), students need to keep experiencing what they learn in order to internalize the information.

When writing about how every experience influences the conditions under which further experience is had, Dewey uses the analogy of a child who learns to speak (p. 14). Naturally, there are parallels with what he writes and what L2 learners experience:

“[A] child who learns to speak has a new facility and new desire. But he has also widened the external conditions of subsequent learning. When he learns to read, he similarly opens up a new environment” (Dewey, 1939, p. 14)

I agree with Dewey’s statement because as a teacher, I am responsible for providing a learning environment which can help open up an environment to promote more learning, which lead to further experiences. In other words, teachers are giving their students building blocks of experience which can be built on top of each other.

Dewey further writes that individuals live in a world which is a series of situations, or more specifically, that “interaction is going on between an individual and objects and other persons” (p. 17). Interaction is a crucial part of the education process, as a foreign language cannot be acquired in a vacuum. L2 students need each other and their teachers with whom to interact in order to learn, which comprises practice, the third pillar of my philosophy I wrote in February.

I have been trying to give even more specific directions to my students on ways to practice language-focused learning. For example, with speaking and pronunciation I suggest to my junior college students to listen to a native-speaker’s speech and trying to make their own pronunciation come as close as possible to that of the native-speaker. Many times, I can usually tell when students get something out of practicing when I make my directions and expectations clear. In my philosophy from February, however, I wrote that there have been times when “I was guilty of providing less than meaningful practice activities.” I can clearly tell that I feel that my lessons could be improved when my directions have not been specific enough, that the students had to figure out what to do on their own, instead of getting sufficiently scaffolded directions.

Although I wrote separately about the three pillars – exposure, experience and practice – I believe they are deeply intertwined and indispensable in supporting the contribution we educators make. I end this section of my philosophy with the quote below, as it lies on the foundation of how I work with students:

“In what I have said I have taken for granted the soundness of the principle that education in order to accomplish its ends both for the individual learner and for society must be based upon experience – which is always the actual life-experience of some individual” (Dewey, 1938, p. 39)

THE LANGUAGE TEACHER

In writing this section, I had a choice of writing about different activities in the four strands by Nation and Newton (2009) and how they can fit in the different courses I teach, or writing about concentrated areas in which I want to improve. I chose the latter, since my time in the classroom was limited during this spring semester to implement many of the activities that were suggested in the reading. In addition, as writing about the areas which I find challenging agrees with the idea of the quote written by Sjolie (2006) on the first page, it seems fitting to include in my teaching philosophy.

First, I briefly revisited the posts for the third online discussion forum (February 19 – 25, 2011). When I reread my post from the discussion forum based on the readings from Vandergrift (1997), my answer shows that there was a clear shift in my strategies of how I studied languages as a learner myself. When I used to study Spanish as an academic subject area I utilized the metacognitive strategies of self-management and double-check monitoring (p. 392). However, once I started studying Spanish for the purpose of using it in a future career, in addition to communicating with other native Spanish-speakers, the cognitive strategies I have utilized were transfer, academic elaboration, and world elaboration (pp. 393-394). This shows that there is not only one strategy, but a combination of many strategies which can make foreign language learning a successful experience. This is how I started approaching possible activities for my third-year engineers’ reading class.

Going back to the learning strategies, I started wondering how to plan lessons with activities which lend themselves to utilizing certain strategies because for my third-year engineers, if left to their own devices, the strategies they would most often utilize are translation (p. 394) and resourcing (p. 395). Looking back, I have already implemented language-focused activities such as looking for synonyms, using contexts to guess the meaning of unfamiliar words, and recalling information, but not consistently. I realize it would be impossible to incorporate such activities every week, but by alternating them, my students have some opportunities to rely on strategies such as inferencing and elaboration (p. 393). In order to come up with relevant and meaningful activities, I need to further study the text and look for strategies which match them. Hopefully, providing my students more meaning-focused input activities through intensive reading exercises (Nation, 2009, pp. 27-28) can be more intellectually stimulating to them.

I would also like to write about the first steps of my action research, which involves my first year advanced-level communication students. They are the group with the highest TOEFL scores (approximately 500 – 640) among the new freshmen in the department, based on the language

assessment they took after entering in April. The majority of the communication majors like to speak English, regardless of their level of fluency. However, year after year, I was puzzled as to why they revert to Japanese during small group discussions. My frustrations eventually led me to make this an action research idea, which I wrote about in another online discussion forum (February 28 – March 6, 2011). I have launched a weekly journal writing activity, for which I find the entries to be very enlightening reads. Many of their entries are about how much they enjoy English as a result of overcoming some kind of past difficulty they experienced, such as their inability to hear and understand English. What was interesting is that while I have not found the answer to my question in their journal entries yet, when I monitor the students' discussions, I caught them speaking in both English and Japanese, depending on the topic. They were not reluctant to speak in English when talking about topics familiar to them, such as about themselves, their feelings and thoughts. However, when I had the students discuss a newspaper article on the topic of their choice, I heard them switching back to Japanese. My assumption is that the topic was something they are not familiar with, and vocabulary, too advanced, for them to initiate a group discussion in English without scaffolding sufficiently. This made me realize that no matter how advanced the students' level, there is always a need for scaffolding. I have yet to find evidence in their journals about why they revert to Japanese in group discussions, but as this course is only one semester long, there would not be enough time to code their writing and conduct an ethnographic study.

That being said, I can allow the students to discuss in their small groups in Japanese what they would be presenting in English to the entire class. I need to give clear guidelines on formal speaking as discussed by Nation and Newton (2009). Furthermore, there is a section on monitoring formal talks (Nation & Newton, 2009, pp. 129-130), from which I can create a rubric to assess my students' presentations.

The above two classes which I included here are only examples of the problems I encounter in my classes. Although I enjoy teaching English, as well as teaching *in* English, I cannot allow the joy to overshadow the problematic areas, thus leaving them unaddressed. To be able to face such problems, I need to take a look at myself and my attitudes to see what I can do to learn and grow from situations, which is addressed in the final section.

THE TEACHING PROFESSIONAL

Unless there is the desire to develop and grow, I cannot see how I can possibly be a good teacher for my students. Yet, it has been my experience that many professional development opportunities for educators seemed to be centered around the acquisition of new teaching methods/skills, while in the corporate world, such opportunities may be geared more towards the development of the individual. I believe I was always looking for ways to grow as a person more than as a teacher, hoping that my personal growth would cross over to my professional growth. It is

difficult to say, which comes first – the chicken or the egg. However, during the course of this semester, I realize that there have been changes in my thinking, which need to be supported with the changes in my teaching, not only in willingness but also in practice.

In the second online discussion forum (February 6 – 11, 2011) where we were asked about our beliefs and assumptions when exploring our teaching, based on the readings from Gebhard and Oprandy (1999), I chose “Attention to language and behavior” (p. 10) and “Personal connections to teaching” (p. 15), which are areas focused more on the effectiveness of my teaching. However, three months later, when I revisit this question, I see that my attention has shifted to “Avenues to awareness through exploration” (p. 13) and “A beginner’s mind” (p. 17), which invite me to contemplate more about my personal development. While these assumptions are only superficial, however, as illustrated on page 18, the past three months have been a process in which I felt like I kept peeling the onion skin to reach the middle, which guide me to my new choice of assumptions.

First of all, I feel as if I need to be a beginner, almost every day. Although I may not be aware of how it happens, I acknowledge that people do make progress every day. That means after I get elevated to the next level up and I come back to being a beginner again, this time in the new stage. In addition, what spoke to me in “Avenues to awareness through exploration” are the “roads less traveled” (p. 13), especially everything listed after “problem solving.” The “seeing what happens” and “seeing what is” can almost feel threatening to me, which is why they are the roads less traveled for me. My students are not taking the heavily traveled route of grammar-translation if they enroll in my class; I need to trust myself and my students that we are capable of growing together by taking the road less traveled a little at a time. That being said, I need to be reminded that taking the road less traveled involves more risks, which require me take stock of my lessons on a regular basis, by further polishing what worked and fine-tuning what needs to be improved.

In terms of ways for me to take stock, I realize that journal writing, as described in Chapter 5 of Gephard and Oprandy (1999) is the most effective tool for me. However, due to time constraints, instead of taking the time to actually write a journal entry, I have learned to take a mental inventory of what took place during the lessons. This is similar to an intrapersonal journal which Bailey recommends, as quoted by Gephard and Oprandy:

“[A]fter a period of time and a number of entries, a logical step is to review journal entries, analyze teaching and record prominent events, and look for patterns in teaching behaviors. I add that we can also try to understand our feelings related to what went on in the classroom” (Gephard & Oprandy, 1999, p. 81)

I must admit that while it is easy for teachers, including myself, to blame others – even students – for what does not work in the classroom, I am once again reminded today that my students remind me that they are the catalysts to my growth as a teacher. This takes me back to my fourth journal entry from February 24, where I quote Gebert and Joffee on the chapter written on Soka education:

“There is recognition that personal development is crucial to the teaching process. In almost all the reports, teachers describe inner conflicts, efforts to challenge the urge to run away, and finally learning to appreciate problematic children as spurs to their professional growth” (Hansen, 2007, p. 80).

CONCLUSION

While this paper only covers my change during the three months of this course, I trust that my teaching philosophy will keep evolving throughout my career as long as I teach. The details – teaching contexts such as courses, levels, proficiency of students – may change. But the three parts which comprise my philosophy will keep expanding, including more ideas about students and their experiences, more problems and solutions about teaching, and more about my growth as a teaching professional.

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