

Classroom Personas: An Action Research Project

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Many educators and researchers (Van Lier, 1988; Holliday, 1994) maintain that listening to students' opinions is important for successful language learning. Accordingly, it is beneficial to discover students' opinions on what makes a teacher a good teacher and what the teacher needs to do to ensure that learning takes place. This article discusses the findings of an approach called *Anecdotal Circles* taken at the British Council Singapore to discover the students' opinions regarding these questions. The most common responses given were:

Teacher personality, Error correction, Teacher praise, One-to-one interaction with the teacher, Course book use, Meeting students' needs, Organisational skills, Learner Autonomy and Practicing speaking

The implications of the results are relevant to the wider Singaporean context given the multinational nature of the participants and the government's policy of encouraging EFL students to come to Singapore to study in its ESL context.

■ Introduction

In early 2008, The British Council undertook an extensive market research exercise which examined attributes of the learning environment that students really value. The results underlined the importance of the classroom experience. Despite the large investment in technology resulting in every classroom having an interactive whiteboard and visualiser, for example, the students' priority was their interaction with their teacher. This highlighted the need for a greater understanding of quality from the students' perspective, which echoes Van Lier's (1988) view that L2 classroom research should take into account of the social relevance of the classroom and of classroom learning from the learners' perspective.

Consequently, it was felt that more information was required regarding quality in the classroom from the students' perspective at both the regional and local levels. The Seoul centre felt especially strongly about this due to student feedback showing their teachers to be a popular and highly regarded asset. This was despite the fact that a number of the lessons that Line Managers observed would probably have failed current teaching criteria for the Cambridge CELTA (Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults) and/or DELTA (Diploma in English Language Teaching to Adults) qualifications. This confirms Holliday (1994), whose findings showed that the student's agenda for each lesson varies from the teacher's agenda, partly due to the contrasting expectations regarding the two roles and what should happen in lessons.

In order to discover students' opinions on what makes a teacher a good teacher and what the teacher needs to do to ensure that learning takes place, the Teacher Personas' project emerged in the East Asia region with seven teaching centres, including Singapore, participating. This paper reports on the results of the project conducted in Singapore.

The original audience the project targeted was teachers who were either planning to move to the region or were new to the region, with the results being collated for an in-house publication entitled 'Teacher/student personas: A teacher's guide for effective learning practices'. However, the research has immediate implications which transcend these rather narrow parameters. These include:

- Teacher personality
- Error correction
- Teacher praise
- One-to-one interaction with the teacher
- Course book use
- Meeting students' needs
- Organisational skills
- Learner Autonomy
- Practicing speaking

■ Methodology

The qualitative approach taken was the structured Focus Group technique of *Anecdotal Circles*. This involves getting around eight students sitting in a circle along with a facilitator and note-taker, preferably without the mental

and physical barrier of desks or tables. This number is felt to be the optimum group size for extracting quality data from the participants, as it provides plenty of time for exploration. Also, the rather limited number of participants makes it an intimate experience, allowing the students to feel more relaxed than if they were in a bigger group. This approach ties in with the views of Van Lier (1988: 87) that “[C]onversation about language learners frequently turns to issues of language learning and language use, and a wealth of anecdotes about in-class and out-of-class experiences is displayed.”

However, some of the Circles included more than this number as an ‘open invitation’ approach was adopted, due to the fear that an insufficient number of students would attend. It was deemed inappropriate to turn away students who had expressed a desire to participate so the largest Circle conducted contained 11 participants. In contrast, the smallest Circle had three.

The Circles were conducted in English, whilst the participants were given the opportunity to write in their own language, which was then translated. This offer was taken up by 4 participants. In other centres in the region, it was feasible for the anecdotal circles to be conducted in L1, but in Singapore, this was not felt to be possible due to the multi-cultural nature of the classes.

The first stage of the approach involved encouraging the students to talk about their learning experiences in an open forum in order to explore in detail their learning preferences and the qualities inherent in their ideal teacher. The experiences could be either negative or positive and could come from any learning experience—driving, fishing, pottery and so on. In other words, the anecdotes were not restricted to the English language classroom. The rationale of collecting narratives for reconstruction was to enable a rich tapestry of insightful data to emerge which wasn’t facilitator-lead. There was no agenda, and the learners could give a real account of their experiences. Despite the options available, the students tended to concentrate on the classroom learning experiences in every Circle conducted, with particular emphasis on the English language classroom. Two questions formed the focus of the participants’ anecdotes:

1. What is your ideal teacher like?
2. How do you like to learn?

The facilitator’s role was to ensure that all the participants were provided with the opportunity to contribute and to try to get the students to reformulate their turns when there was misunderstanding or ambivalence. If the students came up with a negative narrative, the facilitator tried to establish the reasons for the negative experience and what the student felt could have been done in order for it to have been made positive. An example of a negative narrative taking place was a student commenting on the high level of teacher talk time on one of their courses. After the facilitator’s prompt, it transpired that the student wanted to be given the opportunity to speak, instead of having to listen to the teacher.

The note-taker’s role was to transcribe what was said, though s/he was also at liberty to play a participatory role if it was felt to be necessary. For all of the Anecdotal Circles conducted as part of this project, the note-taker did not feel it necessary to intercede.

The next stage involved participants discussing in pairs/small groups the macro-patterns that had emerged from their experiences in order to ‘internalise’ their thinking.

The final stage was individual, involving the participants writing anonymous narratives based on what they, as individuals, believed to be the ‘answers’ to the two questions.

This raw data from the students, as well as that of the note-taker, was then synthesised and common responses and quotes, were selected for publication in the guide. The number selected varied from Circle to Circle, depending on the number of participants and the variety of responses given. The findings were also made available to existing members of staff via in-house training sessions.

■ Participants

Due to the British Council Singapore’s cosmopolitan student base, it was decided to organize the Circles based on class types. The following were conducted in mid-2008:

- Business English
- Exams English
- General English part-time
- General English full-time at both the pre-intermediate and upper intermediate levels.

Two Anecdotal Circles were conducted for each class type. In total, 53 students participated.

The most common responses are given below. There was a strong overlap among the eight Circles with regard to the responses. Due to the anonymous nature of the approach, quotes cannot be attributed. Ambiguous responses and one-off answers are not represented.

■ Findings

Teacher personality was widely commented on. Common adjectives used were kind, cheerful, friendly, helpful, approachable, motivated and humorous, all of which aid in the development of rapport in the classroom. Learning the names of the students, and using them, was also commented on. Typical examples from respondents were:

“...should get along with students well.” (N14)

“He/she should be motivated in teaching and able to communicate with students in humorous and polite way.” (N49)

Many students saw the teacher as the font of all knowledge and error correction was seen to be an important aspect of the classroom experience, with explanations being given by the teacher for the students’ inaccuracies. Having said that, the students were aware that it wasn’t possible for the teacher to correct every

incorrect utterance, but correction was seen to be essential in order for each individual to improve. Examples from the narratives include:

"... encouragement and objective criticism." (N03)

"It is good idea for the teacher to correct students' wrong pronunciation. (Teacher! Don't be embarrassed. We are ready for learning)." (N11)

"Give feedback to students regularly." (N31)

This desire for feedback is in keeping with the findings of Cathcart & Olsen (1976) who found that learners wanted to be corrected more while acknowledging that the correction of all errors would make communication impossible. It is also in keeping with Horowitz (1987), whose research discovered that a large number of students felt that beginners would probably be unable to correct errors which had been allowed to remain uncorrected early on in the learners' language learning experience. Furthermore, Katayama's (2007) research showed that students had strongly positive attitudes toward teacher correction of errors.

The students also commented on the importance of the teacher offering praise when it was deserved. This ties in with Bolitho, Granescu, & Adam (1994), who raise concerns about learner sensitivity to correction and dissatisfaction with how it is handled and with Senior (2008), who advises teachers to reward students by being generous-minded in their words or gestures of approval. One respondent wrote:

"Don't only say 'wrong' also say 'well done' if speaking is correct." (N47)

One-to-one interaction with the teacher was widely appreciated. It was felt to be the best way for teachers to get to know their students and consequently, these students' needs, strengths and weaknesses and what they hoped to have achieved by the end of their courses. Some students interpreted one-to-one interaction to be face-to-face, whilst others saw it as being via written communication. The students felt that simply doing group/pair work meant that the teacher could not effectively monitor their spoken production and give feedback on how to improve their performance. Examples of such comments include:

"Teachers to promote email to student." (N19)

"...knows what the students need." (N42)

"If the teacher has the time, we can sit together and chit-chat. In the course of this informal talk, the teacher can correct my mistakes and hence increase my spoken proficiency". (N43) (Translated from Mandarin)

The teacher simply using the text book and doing every exercise on every page in chronological order was seen as being unacceptable due to the books' failure to meet the needs of the students. The teacher's ability to replace the more inappropriate parts of the book with interesting supplementary materials was thought to be integral to an interesting, enjoyable, and beneficial lesson whilst creating variety over the duration of the course.

The importance of making an impact by creating affective engagement through the use of appropriate materials is also emphasised by Tomlinson (1998: 7):

"...when the learner's curiosity, interest and attention are attracted, ...there is a better chance that some of the language in the materials will be taken in for processing."

Typical examples were:

"Never follow the coursebook – boring." (N22)

"...not only follow the book better get other preparation from other books too." (N27)

"...Not just follow the book, but create some topics that the students are interested in." (N38)

The cosmopolitan nature of the classroom with students from a plethora of backgrounds results in each student having different needs, and the respondents commented on the teachers addressing each learner's needs. A similar advice was given Senior (2008: 4): "Make your teaching points resonate with the class, by selecting topics, themes, vocabulary items or examples of language in use that reflect the students' own experiences and have relevance for their lives." The students were aware that the focus of the lesson might not always be of relevance to them due to the variety of requirements in each class, but were happy with this as long as a balance was struck. Some examples were:

"...give a variety of activities to the students." (N02)

"...can find a balance between different exercises/skills like speaking, listening, grammar." (N36)

Concept checking was seen as being an integral part of being organised. Time management was another issue. It was felt that an awareness was needed of the fact that different students work at a different pace and that the first to finish shouldn't be 'punished' by the teacher allowing the lessons to drag by waiting for the weaker students to finish before moving on. Being punctual and well-prepared were respected traits in a teacher. Being well-prepared included 'signposting' lessons by telling the class what they are going to do and why they are going to do it before the lessons begin. Typical comments were:

"Come to the class on time." (N51)

"Prepare everything before the class start." (N47)

"...check list about what they are going to do..." (N39)

There was a realisation that the amount of time spent in the classroom wasn't enough in itself for the students to improve their English to the extent and/or at the speed that they were happy with. Advice on how the students could help themselves to improve in their free time was seen as being an integral part of each course, providing them with the ability to take charge of their own learning. The setting of interesting and relevant homework with feedback provided was seen as being a part of this, which meant not just setting pages from the workbook. Examples from the narratives include:

"...teach students on how to learn English." (N17)

"If we can use website at home it will help to learn the listening..." (N51)

"Always keep students informed of new leads like new URL links..." (N06)

A large majority of the students emphasised the importance of being given the opportunity to practise speaking in class, and the pleasure derived from speaking to classmates from different cultures. Classes often have many different nationalities and students enjoy learning about different cultures. Being involved in the learning process was important, so the students commented on the advantages of the communicative approach undertaken by their teachers. They also appreciated being given time to practise new language in class, in pairs or small groups, followed by feedback, in comparison to teacher-led lessons with an emphasis on grammatical accuracy. However, the students felt that simply doing group/pair work meant that the teacher could not effectively monitor their spoken production and wanted the teacher to listen just to them occasionally, and give personalised feedback on their performance. Some of the examples given were:

"...give us more confidence to speak English out because everybody attending the class are worrying about the quality of their speaking..." (N47)

"...encourage the students to speak, giving them the confidence..." (N33)

For some students, the classroom environment is the only chance they have to meet people of different nationalities and to practice their English without having the opportunity to resort to L1. However, the learners believe that the other language skills should not be neglected and grammar and vocabulary should be regularly revised. This is in contrast to Horowitz (1987) whose findings were that language learning beliefs equated to memorizing vocabulary and grammar rules.

■ Suggestions

Going beyond the project's original aim of providing information for British Council teachers newly arriving in the region, the major implications are as follows:

Holistic Approach

The project has refocused the emphasis on the learners, rather than the syllabus, and highlighted the importance of the 'human factor' in terms of a personal touch for students and the fundamental centrality of the human element in teaching and classroom interaction.

Counselling

Offering a one-to-one counselling session to the students. This should be arranged near the beginning of a course as opposed to (near) the end of a course. Given the strength of feeling and number of responses, this personal interaction time with the teacher should be integrated into a syllabus and consistently undertaken. Also,

organising a contact sheet for students to share email addresses on an optional basis could be set up for each class. This could include the teacher's email address.

Self-study

Making an Academic Officer widely available and easily accessible to students. In addition, sessions/lesson materials/homework which promote learner autonomy could be integrated into the courses offered.

Materials

Providing training to enable teachers to produce materials which are pedagogically sound and meet the needs of the students could be offered to teachers who view the coursebook as a 'crutch'.

Feedback

To prevent a dichotomy between the feedback the teachers give and the feedback the students require and/or desire, the teacher could undertake needs analysis to determine the extent of the feedback required. Also, learner training could be systematically integrated into the courses to explain the rationale for the error correction that is done. Training sessions could be arranged for teachers who feel they lack the techniques and/or ability to effectively undertake correction.

Meeting needs

Explicitly asking for the needs of the students and making the results known in order to show that the teacher is attempting to satisfy the needs of the entire class could be undertaken. The teacher could give a rationale to a class if s/he feels that they are used to a teacher-centred classroom and view the teacher delegating this task to the students as a dereliction of duty on his/her part. Also, some one-to-one time might be needed if the views of the students lack insight and are simply expressed as the need to 'upgrade', for example.

■ The next stage

Despite *Anecdotal Circles* being relatively untested in the educational context, though widely used in the business world, the qualitative participant-lead data gathered was rich, and allowed for the extraction of trends, issues and themes. This approach could be used by other researchers interested in pursuing similar qualitative research. The investigation could now be taken a step further with the creation of a complementary questionnaire to allow for the extraction of quantitative data to ensure that the suggestions made are appropriate before they are implemented.

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