

Teachers' Role in the Ever-Changing Adult Learners' Classroom in Language Schools

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Abstract

This paper details chosen personal experiences of a teacher of English while dealing with adult learners from different backgrounds in a language school. It aims to highlight certain affective filters adult learners need to overcome in a participative learning process and the teacher's role in facilitating such learning. A few brief examples of lessons that unfold in a rather unusual classroom experience, which catalyses a teacher's multifarious roles, and the realistic expectations learners need to shape in order to reap the full benefit, are shared. Although several different contexts for such reflection and learning exist, only those pertaining to interaction, collaboration, constraints and building relationships are examined here.

Keywords: Affective Filters, Collaborative Learning, Experiential Learning, Passive Learning

1. Introduction

Language schools consist of different types of adult learners from varied backgrounds. Although placement tests ensure learners share the same level of language proficiency, when they come together in the classroom, they discover they are a motley crew. A classroom may consist of an entrepreneur, an eminent lawyer, a judge or a college student. At times, learners don't want to reveal their identity completely because of their tendency to evaluate their contemporary quotient based on who they share space with. This heterogeneity can pose unusual challenges for the teacher and the taught.

2. Student Interaction in the Classroom

Expression involves using language; learners have to be encouraged to express what they feel without fear of reprisal. Such personalization of language can help them

gain confidence and drive them to try harder every time they want to speak their mind. All the same, activities involving discussions or debates that call for personal opinion on issues that are disputed can be delicate to handle. The classroom sometimes turns into a place where agreements in views lead to some form of bonding and disagreements lead to arguments or cold distancing.

What comes to mind as an incident worth sharing is one, in which, a discussion on gender pay gap based on an authentic material from a popular newspaper turned disconcerting. In a Business English class, when two work-place colleagues, one male and another female from the same rank refused to see eye to eye, the teacher had to moderate and call a truce to save further embarrassment.

Considering both argument and agreement as being essential to the overall learning process, the teacher has to stand back and ensure such disagreements do not lead to a discord in relationships. This may sound ominous but it is also essential to get everyone to contribute to the discussion and freely share views that are contrary

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to what is socially acceptable and continue to be able to work together despite their differences. Often, because of the contexts being discussed in the lessons, the teacher has to assume roles that could be outside the purview of traditional teaching. Any vociferous conflict must be defused immediately by the teacher without taking sides which is a fine balancing act.

3. Collaborative Learning

Most of the learners who approach these language schools are casualties of passive learning that is inexorable in the Indian education system. Having had little or no opportunities for meaningful or active learning in their lives, learners cannot stir themselves to perform in collaborative learning models that they are thrown into, all of a sudden. A plethora of complex affective filters act as deterrents to their critical thinking, reflection and immersion. Typically, when a teacher tries to check on students' progress by asking questions directed at learners in particular by nominating them, they tend to recoil if their answers turn out to be incorrect.

A case in point could be a learner who is shy to admit they don't know something and lets an opportunity for learning through curious questioning pass by because of this. Moreover, what took a lot of coaxing for reticent learners to open up can be undone in no time if teachers squarely tell them that they are way off the mark. Subtleties are crucial to keep enlivened spirits from being dampened.

Engaging them in peer assisted learning can also be quite daunting. Some learners desire experiential learning involving a lot of games and activities and don't mind the time it can take to learn while others disregard such activities as base enjoyment and a waste of time. Occasionally there are learners with special needs like disability or dyslexia for whom exceptions are made, but may not be consistent, as it could drastically alter the pace of the lessons. Overt reactions like fallen faces in group work and pair work can make teachers wonder if learners can work effectively with each other. On such occasions, turning the spotlight on the opportunities and the ensuing benefits these learners have in such classrooms, assumes significance to forestall undermining of confidence levels. Elimination of trepidation can be achieved by reinforcing an environment that garners mutual trust and harnesses individual strengths, to work for a common purpose that is mutually beneficial. Eventually it reposes in them the confidence to participate with characteristic aplomb.

4. Constraints Beyond Control

Mature adult aspirants take to learning after a long gap, driven by the belief that it is difficult to command respect if inaccuracies are predominant in their language, or clarity is missing. Under duress, they scurry to such language schools with mounting pressure on them to perform better. Unlike younger learners, they have a deep rooted purpose and clear intrinsic motivation which is central to their sudden thirst for new knowledge.

However, while a few are passionate and committed, a few others need heavy doses of inspiration to stir them out of their lackadaisical attitude. This stems from their past learning experiences in teacher-fronted classes where they did not have to shoulder enough responsibilities to acquire skills, but assumed instead, that it was the teacher's responsibility to help them learn. This can be sensed when a few learners communicate deadlines to the teacher for the noticeable progress they need to achieve, either because they are the next in line for a promotion at their workplaces, or because an offshore assignment is in the offing.

Another issue is the perceived quality and usefulness of the constructive feedback given by teachers on the learners' productive skills. It is possible to tell them what to work on, where they are wrong and how they can improve themselves, but not possible to replace every bit of their production with correct language on their behalf. The well-meaning intent to give learners deep insights into their errors which will expedite self-correction is obscured by desperation. Expectations of eloquence in a short duration, inability to immediately apply what has been learnt and absence of instant gratification eventually results in erosion of tenacity. Resistance and denial is almost palpable when the onus is shifted on them. To quote an example, a learner who was a professional lawyer, expected to be endowed with fumble-free argument abilities in the court room with all the vocabulary that he might need just by attending a module on spoken English for around forty hours.

So, often the role of the teacher extends beyond just focussing on doing the job to paying sensitive attention to understanding their concerns and setting right expectations if not meeting them. When patience begins to wear thin, teachers have to ensure they augment learners' skills with renewed vigour which gradually aids in self-contained sustenance.

5. Persona beyond Teaching and Informal Relationships

We live at a time when teachers who are too distanced from learners are considered deplorable. Because of their intuitive sensitivity to their environment, it is hard for the teachers not to give credence to the lurking voices within which can result in them engaging in difficult discussions to build mutual respect and trust. Despite such candour, learners discreetly question teachers, inquiring beyond their classroom persona with an aim to foster informal relationships but only after teaching quality and standards of excellence are critically analyzed and weighed.

A teacher's demeanour may or may not leave room for lingering or lasting relationships. While the young adults want the teacher to be fun personified, the not so young ones expect to see in the teacher, a picture of dignity. This may seem far removed from reality, but a teacher has to be an embodiment of all kinds of personalities tactfully packed into one. There are occasions when learners expect teachers to be at their beck and call to clarify doubts in the use of language. Considerable discretion is called for, in dealing with such expectations of sustained support. When rapport is established in the first ever encounter, cementing relationships later becomes relatively easier.

6. Conclusion

Despite the innumerable challenges teachers have to take

head on, the profession also unfolds a myriad of glorious moments to cherish. There are times when learners, who absent themselves often for genuine reasons, have told teachers that they profoundly missed attending classes for the first time ever in their lives. There are times when learners have been so deeply engrossed in the tasks given that they have taken no notice of the time and needed to be informed that the day's session is over. There are times when teachers have had to nudge learners out of the classroom to make way for the next class to begin. To say the least, there are times when learners' questions have set teachers apart by accentuating their learning, knowledge and presentation, which have been honestly and unabashedly acknowledged by the beneficiaries.

7. Other References

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