Beyond Proficiency: Engaging Adult 'Beginners' At The Level Of Their Intellect And The Depth Of Their Humanity

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English as a second language (ESL) materials for language learners at the beginning levels gravitate towards the practical and functional, yet may fail to address the deeper need of adult students to be engaged on the level of their intellect and humanity, regardless of their second language (L2) proficiency. Community-based ESL teachers can engage adult students at this deeper level by using principled teaching methods that maximize learning opportunities and by establishing a 'safe' affective environment in the classroom that respects and empowers learners, encouraging them to take risks with language. This paper will describe the theoretical underpinnings of such an approach, and will offer examples of two lessons taught at a free community-based ESL class in Indianapolis that engaged adult students at the level of their intellect and their humanity, rather than on the basis of their limited L2 proficiency.

English as a second language (ESL) materials for immigrants and refugees, especially at beginning levels, gravitate toward what Auerbach and Burgess (1985) call "survival English" (p. 475). Survival English aims to teach "those skills that provide the students with the practical abilities that enable them to function in the new society" (Vaut, 1982, p.1), such as making doctor appointments or buying a car. The curriculum is "experience-centered and reality-based," focuses on what students can do with language rather than what they know about language, and is often "situationally oriented around daily living tasks (shopping, banking, housing, health care, and so on)" (Auerbach and Burgess, 1985, p. 477).

Yet despite the focus on making language learning "manageable and immediately meaningful" (Grognet & Crandall, 1982, p. 3), such survival curriculum may fail to address a deeper need of adult ESL students: the need to be engaged on the level of their intellect and humanity, rather than on the level of their limited second language (L2) proficiency. According to Auerbach

and Burgess (1985), survival ESL materials "divorce language from thought and language teaching from the creation of meaning" (p. 476). Furthermore, survival ESL materials may violate basic principles of adult education by concentrating on what students *do not know* rather than activating their background knowledge, failing to invite students to compare their life experiences in two cultures, and emphasizing forms and content which do not correspond with those found in the learners' lives, such as discrimination or lack of insurance.

It can be a daunting task, however, for community-based ESL teachers to develop materials that engage all students at a deep level and satisfy the demands of their teaching contexts in the limited time available to them, particularly if they are volunteer instructors. In this article, we will briefly discuss the theoretical significance of engaging adults on the level of their intellect and humanity, rather than their L2 proficiency, and then present two examples of lessons from our classroom that accomplish this. We argue that this type of engagement leads adult learners to feel acknowledged, respected, and empowered and creates a classroom environment where learners feel comfortable taking risks in producing language to express their thoughts and opinions. We taught the lessons described in this article in the spring and summer of 2012 at a free, community-based ESL class in downtown Indianapolis comprised of high beginner students. We developed this class in June 2011 and continue to co-teach the class as volunteer instructors.

SITUATIONAL CONTEXT

The learners who participate in our class have lived in the United States for varying lengths of time, from a few weeks to many years. The substantial Hispanic community in Indianapolis, of which most of the students are a part, offers a social and cultural 'safety net,' but unfortunately, a robust native language (L1) community can make it more difficult for adult immigrants to acquire English. Data from the US Census Bureau (2010) illustrate this phenomenon; in 2010, 7.7% of respondents in Marion County indicated speaking Spanish at home, and 58% of these Spanish-speakers indicated that they spoke English less than "very well" (see Table 1). The cohesiveness of the learners' community, with strong social bonds expressed through the L1 and little language interaction outside the community, is one aspect of what Schumann (1986) describes as social distance, an impediment to second language acquisition (SLA). We therefore strive to establish a new L2 language community for these adult learners, where they can bring the background of their life experience and education and can communicate with other adult language learners in an affectively safe environment: a warm and inviting atmosphere where learners feel comfortable producing as much

spoken language as possible.

As Schumann points out, "[s]econd language learners always comprehend more than they can produce in English. As teachers you have the responsibility to create a learning environment where students feel safe in taking risks to demonstrate what they know, verbally and at times non-verbally" (as transcribed in Teemant & Pinnegar, 2007, sect. 8, p. 4). We have indeed seen a new English language community grow in this class, as students scaffold material for each other, share stories about problems or successes they have had communicating in the L2 in various settings, and offer each other friendship and camaraderie during class.

In each class session, the authors strive to incorporate a principled teaching approach, grounded in SLA research (Brown, 2007; Kumaravadivelu, 2006) while taking into account the learners' expressed linguistic, social, and economic needs, including communicating at work, establishing meaningful relationships with native speakers of English, and improving their speaking, reading, and writing skills. We incorporate ongoing needs assessment in the form of periodic brief written questionnaires (with translation provided) as well as informal conversations with students before and after class. In these assessments, students repeatedly report frustration at not being able to express themselves in English as well as they desire in their daily interactions. Their inability to communicate in the L2 in a way that reflects their intellect and humanity leads them to feel powerless and disrespected in certain situations, whether from not receiving appropriate service in a retail setting, being laughed at when they try to communicate in the L2 at work, or not being able to adequately express their feelings and opinions about current events with neighbors and acquaintances. The instructors seek to address these needs by offering learner-centered, student-empowering instruction, which involves not presupposing objectives in advance, but rather using techniques that allow for student creativity and maintaining a classroom atmosphere that enhances the "student's sense of competence and self-worth" (Brown, 2007, p. 52). Instructors also acknowledge "the authentic need humans have to connect and communicate with one another" (Teemant & Pinnegar, 2007, sect. 2, p. 19) by focusing on interactive and communicative activities in class. In sum, the class draws its curricular momentum from participants' lived experiences and needs, rather than contrived "survival" materials.

Many of the most effective strategies and principles for teaching ESL are those that have an unpredictable result. Inviting the unpredictable means, for example, that teachers surrender control over classroom activities by creating a student-centered, interaction-rich environment in which students are invited to introduce and discuss issues the teacher may not have anticipated. As Brown (2007) aptly states, language teachers "are daily called upon to deal with the *unexpected*. You have to engage in … unplanned

teaching that makes demands on you that were not anticipated in your lesson plan" (p. 245). The authors find that embracing this concept of unplanned teaching when working with adults is an effective way to maximize student learning opportunities in the classroom. Asking referential questions (those with an answer not known to the questioner), activating students' background knowledge, and relinquishing some of the design of each class to the students are examples of ways to allow and encourage the unexpected in the classroom, empowering adult students to work with the L2 at the level of their intellect. Neither of the lessons described in this article would have been possible if the instructors had not been willing to yield a good deal of control over the classroom discourse to the students themselves. The following section describes two lesson plans, which seek to leverage students' existing knowledge in ways that maximize their opportunities to express their ideas and opinions as well as to acquire additional language awareness, described by Donmall (1985) as "a person's sensitivity to and conscious awareness of the nature of language and its role in human life" (p. 7). In both instances, engagement with the learners is based not on their proficiency level but rather on what they bring to the activity from their overall life experience. The first lesson focuses on reading poetry; the second involves a speaking activity about a current event.

CELEBRATING POETRY AND ITS READERS

Theoretical Underpinnings

In *Context and Culture in Language Teaching*, Kramsch (1993) argues that literature should be taught in the ESL classroom in order to "represent the particular voice of a writer among the many voices of his or her community and thus to appeal to the particular in the reader" (p. 131). Kramsch notes that teachers may be reluctant to teach literature because it is unpopular with students or they feel inadequate as teachers to interpret literary texts. Additionally, in the adult ESL context, teachers may erroneously reason that literature is not relevant to students' daily lives or that beginning students with limited education in their native languages are not ready for the complexity of literature.

Reading literature, however, can benefit learners more than survival English texts. Rosenblatt (1978) distinguishes between two types of reading: efferent and aesthetic. Efferent reading requires readers to retrieve information from a text, while aesthetic reading asks readers to focus on "what he is living through during his relationship with that particular text" (p. 15). In most survival texts, such as maps or medicine prescriptions, students are required to perform an efferent reading, drawing upon their knowledge of grammar and vocabulary to extract pre-existing meaning

from a text. However, as Kramsch (1993) notes, when "the understanding of someone else's experience" is at stake, rather than "the practical outcome of the reading" (p. 123), an efferent reading is not enough. Readers must bring their own experiences to their interpretation of the text. They must pay attention to the "associations, feelings, attitudes, and ideas that these words and their referents arouse within them" (Kramsch, 1993, p. 123) and put their reaction into dialogue with the text. Most ESL learners are not prepared to do this, perhaps because they perceive their task as students is to understand the meaning and pronunciation of every word placed in front of them. Teachers reaffirm ESL students' perceptions by using 'survival' texts or efferent readings, which affirm the habit of approaching texts from the lens of deficiency. Aesthetic readings, on the other hand, celebrate and maximize learners' intellect and humanity by encouraging them to bring previous experiences to the text.

In the lesson described below, we use Frost's poem "Fire and Ice" to teach beginning adults the difference between efferent and aesthetic readings and encourage them to "[draw] conscious pleasure from [poetry's] visual and prosodic features" (Kramsch, 1993, p. 157). The lesson capitalizes on the opportunities to "test the limits of available meanings within [learners'] restricted linguistic resources" (Kramsch, 1993, p. 171), even at the beginning levels. Seizing these opportunities not only draws students' attention to particularity and invites their voices into the classroom; it reminds them that their ability to use language is far greater than the sum of linguistic resources they feel they possess!

Classroom Application

We began by asking students to arrange their chairs in a circle. Students were told they did not need anything but a pencil. When students were seated, we asked students to share what they read in their L1 or the L2. Most indicated that they rarely read in their L1 for pleasure or enjoyment, but instead read functional texts, like cookbooks or instruction manuals. Many of the students had revealed in previous discussion that they had completed only a few years of schooling in their home countries, which led them to feel insecure about reading in the L1 as well as the L2. Then, we asked students to describe *how* they read a text in their L2. Most described looking up unfamiliar words on the computer or in a dictionary, and several described feeling frustrated and discouraged at constantly consulting a dictionary.

After soliciting students' reading habits, we told students they would be reading a poem. We explained that there are two types of reading. The first reading involves reading to understand a text, like when a child eats poison, and his parents have to read instructions quickly to give him medicine. The second reading involves reading for fun. In the second kind of reading,

readers enjoy the sounds of the words and the rhythm of language while focusing on their particular responses to the text. We asked students if they had ever done the second type of reading; most had not. Finally, we told them that they would be trying out this second (aesthetic) reading.

Before handing out the poem, we asked students to close their eyes while we recited the poem from memory:

> Some say the world will end in fire,
> Some say in ice.
> From what I've tasted of desire
> I hold with those who favor fire.
> But if it had to perish twice,
> I think I know enough of hate
> To say that for destruction ice
> Is also great
> And would suffice (Frost, 1920, p. 67).

First, we asked students to describe the rhythm and sounds. At first they approached the task cautiously, suggesting answers and looking to us for affirmation of correctness. Once they realized we were not going to correct them, they contributed more freely, responding not just to the teacher, but to each other, as well. They noted the rhymes in the poem and pointed out that different foreign languages they overhear "sound different." Next, they were given a copy of the poem. We asked them not to focus on words they did not know. Instead, they recited the poem, emphasizing first the verbs, then the nouns, and considering which emphasis they liked better. After that, they divided the poem into sections and performed various read-alouds, alternating between men and women. We asked them to pause at line breaks, and then at the end of punctuation marks and discuss the differences. At this point, the students started generating their own discussion based on their responses. The students offered their impressions of the title, wondering why the author chose fire and ice rather than fire and water. They shared their thoughts about how the 'fire' of passion can cause destruction, with one student recalling a Spanish idiomatic expression about the smoldering embers that remain after a fire has burned away. The students debated whether the world ending in fire or ice would be preferable, and why. It was clear that these language learners were deriving pleasure from this process, from the way the poem grew on them over time, the way they experimented with meaning, and the way they could bring their background experience to bear to relate to the metaphors in the text. Unlike survival texts, which often paralyze beginning students by emphasizing what they do not understand, this activity empowered students by inviting them to participate in meaning creation. It furthermore reaffirmed that they were competent readers who

could intelligently deconstruct texts on their own through discussion and reflection, even without teacher-provided "answers."

REFERENCING REAL LIFE AND EMPOWERING LEARNERS

Theoretical Underpinnings

Kumaravadivelu (2003) identifies teacher-questioning patterns as one way to maximize learning opportunities for students, a macrostrategy that he believes is "our first and foremost duty as teachers" (p. 44). Drawing upon SLA literature, Kumaravadivelu distinguishes between display questions, which "permit predetermined answers already known to the teacher" (p. 50) and referential questions, which "permit open-ended answers containing new information" (p. 50). Mehan (1979) subdivides referential questions into process questions, which ask for learners' opinions or interpretations, and metaprocess questions, which ask the learners to formulate the grounds for their reasoning (ibid). In a study designed to test whether a higher frequency of referential questions had an effect on adult ESL student discourse, Brock (1986) found that referential questions elicit longer, more syntactically complex answers from students than display questions and that students used more connectors when answering referential questions than they did display questions. As Kumaravadivelu points out, "Although [display] questions do have a place in L2 classroom teaching, process and metaprocess questions, by nature, are likely to facilitate negotiated interaction and, therefore, create more learning opportunities" (p. 49). Therefore, a teacher who maximizes learning opportunities will use a variety of referential questions, including process and metaprocess questions. In the lesson below we seek learners' opinions and interpretations by engaging them with referential questions in a dialogue about personal characteristics and a relevant current event: the shooting in Colorado.

Classroom Application

The class began with a warm-up activity and segued into an activity on the theme of 'personal characteristics' such as having a good sense of humor, being a good listener, or being caring and compassionate. The phrase 'personal characteristics' was chosen particularly because most of the students in the class have Spanish as their L1, and we use vocabulary that has Spanish cognates when possible in order to increase the students' language awareness and to provide scaffolding in understanding meaning ('*características personales'* would be the description of the theme in Spanish.) The activity was adapted from a Breaking News English lesson

plan (Banville, 2012).

We first asked the students to think of a good friend, then requested that they name one characteristic they admire about their friend. Students offered phrases such as 'listens to me,' 'knows my mind very well,' 'makes all the people laugh,' 'compassion for the people.' We wrote these characteristics on the board as they were given, clarifying meaning and pronunciation as requested. The students were then given a worksheet on which ranked six given personal characteristics from most important to least important, in terms of what they value in a friend. We provided the Spanish translation of the six characteristics on the worksheet in order to emphasize to the students that the goal of the activity was not explicit instruction in new vocabulary words, but rather to express their personal opinions about characteristics they value in others.

Students completed their rankings individually while we wrote the six characteristics horizontally across the large whiteboard at the front of the classroom. As the students finished their individual worksheets, they came to the board and wrote the number of their ranking under each characteristic. When this was completed, we asked the students what they observed from the rankings on the board, and a discussion ensued about which characteristics were ranked most disparately by the class ('has a lot of energy' and 'has a lot of brain power') and which were ranked highly by everyone ('being caring and compassionate' and 'being patient and tolerant.') We then asked each student to state what characteristic he or she had ranked as number one, and why. Students also debated the question, posited by the teacher, of whether these attributes are of the same importance in a spouse as they are in a friend. Opinion was mixed on this point!

On the heels of this interactive discussion about positive personal traits, we took the opportunity to address a recent current event: the mass shooting in the Colorado movie theater that had occurred the previous day. To make this transition, we reminded the students that they had been reflecting on positive characteristics, and we asked them to consider the implications when a person lacks characteristics such as compassion and tolerance. We then referenced the Colorado shooting incident. Most of the students immediately indicated by their body language and facial expressions that they understood the change of topic; one required some clarification in the L1 from a fellow student to understand the segue, while one had not yet heard about the incident.

The students were immediately forthcoming in sharing their thoughts and opinions about the shooting. The atmosphere established in the first part of the activity was one of respectful dialogue about value judgments, and this likely led the students to feel safe and confident in taking risks both with expressing their own personal opinion about this salient current event and in using untested language to do so. The students were especially interested

in considering *why* such events happen, and drew parallels to the personal characteristics under consideration in the previous activity, for instance: the shooter lacked compassion for others. Responding to prompting through process questions (e.g. "Should everyone be able to own a gun?") and metaprocess questions (e.g. "You said the shooter does not have a strong family. Why do you think that?"), the discussion ranged from gun control and violence in the media to a lack of compassion in today's youth and mental health issues. One student indicated that she had advice to offer President Obama about how to prevent such tragedies in the future. Taking this bit of unplanned language and using it to maximize learning opportunities, "Advice to the President" on the board, and opened the question to all the students. Each student offered at least one piece of advice, which the teacher paraphrased on the board. The students' advice included

- teaching compassion in the schools,
- having psychologists in the schools to regularly check the mental health of students,
- having more restrictions on selling and buying guns,
- helping families stay together and be strong, and
- providing more activities for youth to interact in a respectful and caring way with other people.

Throughout both parts of this activity, the students demonstrated a strong willingness to communicate, a learner characteristic that Brown (2007) describes as combining "concepts of self-confidence and risk-taking" (p. 73). The referential nature of the questioning patterns allowed students to combine language elements over which they had control and apply them to the process of creating new thoughts and utterances. Furthermore, the real-life themes and issues under discussion encouraged the students to analyze, evaluate, and express value judgments. Thus, these high-beginning language learners were communicating in the L2 at the level of higher-order cognitive processes as described by Bloom (1956) in his taxonomy of learning objectives. Although Brown (2007) suggests that "the higher the proficiency level you teach, the more you can venture into the upper, referential end of the continuum" of questioning types, (p. 219), this activity demonstrated that referential questions within an established environment that respects all learners' responses, leads learners to communicate from the level of their intellect and the depth of their humanity, no matter what their proficiency level.

CONCLUSION

Volunteer ESL teachers who create their own lesson plans for adult students are likely to find an abundance of survival materials online and in print, materials which may be temptingly easy to utilize in the classroom. However, the theory and lessons outlined above illustrate that there is great benefit in capitalizing on what adult students already know rather than presenting tasks with predetermined objectives and questions with predetermined answers, both of which focus on what students do not know. To successfully engage adult ESL students, teachers must first recognize that "[l]earning must always be situated in the individual: the individual's linguistic abilities, cognitive abilities, social abilities, and affective dispositions" (Teemant & Pinnegar, 2007, p. 5). When teachers maximize learning opportunities by offering students multiple opportunities to safely offer their own opinions and interpretations in the language classroom, they reach the learner as a valued and respected person rather than as a deficient speaker of the target language. Engaging learners on the level of their intellect and humanity does not have to be daunting. A conscious effort on the part of the teacher to view learners as intelligent, experienced adults with much to contribute will go a long way toward facilitating language growth and encouraging some of the most vulnerable students—adult immigrants and refugees in community-based programs—to view themselves as empowered and reflective, not deficient, language learners.

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