Reflections on the Gaps between Teaching and Learning

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One of the classic conundrums studied by psycholinguists is the well-known fact that people do not necessarily hear what is said, even when both interlocutors share the same language. Of course this is a common complaint of spouses and friends, but psychologists can document the problem in extremely specific ways, even in situations where the listener clearly understands virtually every word in the sentence that is spoken. Thus, in a famous experiment on one aspect of this puzzle called the phoneme restoration effect (Warren, 1970), researchers taped a group of similar sentences all of which had the initial consonant of the sixth word erased, so that the subjects heard sentences like the following pair.

1. It was found that the _eel was on the axle.
2. It was found that the _eel was on the orange.

When asked to write down every sixth word that was heard in sentences like these, almost none of the listeners wrote down "eel," the actual English word that was spoken, but filled in a word which appropriately fit the context of each of the sentences spoken. Thus, virtually all of the listeners wrote *wheel* for the sixth word in (1) and *peel* for the corresponding word in (2), demonstrating that even when carefully attending to what is said, speakers of a language do not always accurately perceive what is said. The much more relevant conclusion, of course, is that comprehension is an active and dynamic process and is shaped by contextual cues as well as by the schematic knowledge of the listener or the reader.

I choose this very specific research finding as an introduction because if native speakers of a language who are instructed to listen carefully to short, simple sentences can so easily mis-perceive what they hear under laboratory conditions, it should come as absolutely no surprise to those of us who teach ESL that there can be frequent and telling gaps between what we think we are teaching in our classes and what our students think they are learning! Obviously, there are enormous differences between the findings of one short, tightly controlled experiment on a narrow aspect of comprehension and a diverse and dynamic class of students struggling to acquire a multiplicity of skills in a second language over a period of several months.

Individual differences among students in terms of motivation, aptitude, and native language and literacy backgrounds greatly affect their ability to understand and acquire what we present to them and their responses to what we require they do in any given lesson. However, we can help our students acquire English by improving our communication with them, carefully focusing on what they most need to learn instead of what simply is easy for us to teach and test. Nevertheless, Warren's experiment, as well as many similar psycholinguistic studies, clearly demonstrates that there is no easy link between what we teachers say and teach and what our students hear and learn.

Although I will touch upon a few illustrations of specific ways students might mis-perceive what we teach, in this article I promise not to dwell on microscopic examinations of linguistic comprehension but look instead at some much larger issues which appear to me to interfere with the transmission of what we teachers deem important to teach in contrast to what our students might actually need to learn. In particular, I would like to reflect on three topics of professional concern for all of you who teach academic ESL in North America, although I believe these ideas are also applicable to English language teaching in many of the wider contexts found across the globe.

A few prefatory observations are needed before I share these reflections. First, it is a pedagogical truism that teachers traditionally focus on material that is easy to teach and to test. The major reason why the Grammar-Translation method is still extremely popular in foreign language classes in the United States and in EFL classes around the world even in this new postmodern, post-methodological millennium (Kumaravadivelu, 2003) is because it is relatively simple and sure to teach and to assess. In short, Grammar-Translation demands very little from the teacher and, I might add, a great deal from the student. It is equally true that language teachers tend to focus on field independent details because, once again, they are easy to transmit and to verify.

These comments do not mean that I believe that all traditional teaching practices should be discarded, however. For example, I see many advantages in employing dictations as both a teaching and an assessment activity in my college level ESL grammar classes, although I never emphasize or grade either spelling or punctuation. Yet I am surprised at how often ESL teachers seem to believe that evaluating spelling and punctuation is important in the grading of dictations. Why, for example, do so many teachers fret about the natural confusion students display when writing the contraction *it's* for the possessive pronoun *its*? Obviously because it's so easy for a teacher to teach and test and so difficult for a student to learn to spell!

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I am not arguing that all teaching and assessment should be confined to field dependent, holistic, synthetic, and top-down processing, but to me, a reflective teacher (Richards & Lockhart, 1994) needs to step back from time to time and look at the larger landscape, and that is why the three topics I have chosen here deal with the broad and general and not with the narrow and specific.

As a final introductory observation, I would like to acknowledge that both culturally and rhetorically, teachers in North America seem to prefer a dualistic approach to issues. However, I firmly believe that popular dichotomies such as the one I have already drawn (what teachers choose to teach versus what students need to learn) only superficially deal with the complexity of "what goes on inside and between people," to use Stevick's succinct summation of classroom interactions (Stevick, 1998, p. xii). Just as the perception of whether a speaker said *wheel* or *eel* depends on a wide variety of contextual and schematic factors, so too is the relationship between teaching and learning enmeshed within a web of complicated variables. In brief, students and teachers share much more in common than they realize, and there are many continua, not dichotomies, that characterize our daily encounters with our students.

Contrastive rhetoric and the teaching of academic writing

Kaplan (1966) originally speculated that just as the linguistic structures of an English learner's mother tongue contrast and thus interfere with the acquisition of English, so too might learners' expectations about writing and composition in their mother tongue interfere with their learning how to compose in English (for instance, how to organize a personal letter or an essay). Contrastive rhetoric has evolved considerably from early simplistic and speculative generalizations about presumed cultural differences (for example, Chinese are circular in their rhetorical style whereas Americans get straight to the point) and now embraces a range of diverse variables, including contrasts among different genres within a single language (Connor, 2002).

For those of us who teach ESL composition classes in academic settings, I think it is important not to fall back into that initial and comfortable belief that most, if not all, of our ESL students' problems are a result of the contrast between their mother tongue writing style and the way we write in English or, much more accurately, the way we are expected to write in American academia. I am not trying to argue that intercultural factors are irrelevant when teaching ESL composition students. However, by and large, just as second language acquisition research revealed decades ago about the etiology of ESL grammatical errors, intralinguistic (or intracultural) variables play a more prominent role than intercultural factors do in shaping student learning. These same intralinguistic

or intracultural variables also affect the way ESL students learn to write and compose. Beginning with this premise then, here are two ideas I believe illustrate the value of focusing less on what teachers may believe to be important and more on what students probably need.

The first example deals with choice of prompts for compositions, especially for essays used to assess students' writing abilities or to place students into multi-level academic writing programs. The topics chosen usually reflect the interests and concerns of ESL teachers, who tend to be educated in the humanities, very often in English literature. ESL students in North American universities, almost without exception, major in disciplines outside the humanities: accounting, business, computer science, engineering, pre-nursing, etc. In the two decades which I have taught an ESL grammar for writing class at my own university, I can recall only one instance of an ESL student in my class whose major was in the College of Humanities, and she happened to major in her mother tongue, Japanese.

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Given this contrast then, it is astounding that the vast preponderance of topics chosen for writing prompts are based not on fields about which ESL students might harbor some academic knowledge, but are topics far beyond their ken. Students are asked to demonstrate mastery of writing, the most difficult linguistic skill in their second or even third language, on a topic for which they have virtually no schematic knowledge. One of the starkest illustrations of this mismatch comes from my own department a few years ago when the English language ability of foreign graduate students was assessed by their ability to respond to a prompt that went into great detail, some of it inaccurate, about a problem in selecting science textbooks for a hypothetical high school district in California. Just imagine! These non-native speakers, who had just come to the United States, were asked to argue cogently for one solution over another on a topic about which they knew almost nothing. Incidents like this are a classic illustration of teacher-centered, not student-centered assessment.

The second example is subtler and perhaps more open to honest debate. Again, it illustrates the impact of contrastive rhetoric in its more contemporary and eclectic meaning. This problem is not confined solely to ESL composition classes but is also frequently an issue in the teaching of writing to native speakers, especially in elementary and even high school classes. Invariably, composition teachers emphasize subordination (hypotaxis) over coordination (parataxis). In academic writing, the former is lauded as mature and engaging, and the latter is condemned as immature and boring. I am not arguing that ESL students should never be taught how to combine clauses through subordination, but I think that subordination could be introduced more slowly and certainly more reflectively.

Coordination certainly predominates in speech, and for ESL students and especially younger native speakers, it is obvious that the ample use of parataxis in writing stems from the fact that beginning academic writers write the way they speak. But is this necessarily bad, especially if we consider that academic compositions are only one genre of writing and that subordination does not predominate in all genres? Further, adopting the process approach, shouldn't ESL students first be encouraged to get their thoughts out into print and then fine tune them into a style more appropriate for academic discourse? The message that parataxis is unattractive, whether voiced explicitly or implicitly to the class by their ESL teacher conveys the criticism that the students' initial attempts to write are not appropriate, irrespective of the content or organization. Again, a major reason why subordination receives such a strong emphasis in academic writing classes is because it's easy for the native speaker ESL teacher (usually an experienced academic writer) to teach, and it's very easy to assess since it is so difficult for non-native speakers to master! I would challenge ESL writing teachers to reflect on ways they could de-emphasize the teaching of subordinate structures, especially in beginning composition classes and thus help encourage their students through the very challenging process of learning to compose academic discourse in a foreign language.

Grammatical triage

Asking teachers to practice grammatical triage may seem doubly startling. At first blush, it might

appear imprudent to adopt a term from emergency medical care to describe pedagogical practice, but I have intentionally chosen this term to evoke a strong metaphor of students' linguistic needs. The acquisition of a new language is always demanding, but the complex morpho–syntactic structures of English, especially in contrast to most East and Southeast Asian languages, which have very few noun or verb inflections, puts an inordinate learning burden on the majority of our ESL students. Rather than adopt the view found in virtually all grammar books and espoused, at least implicitly, by most ESL teachers that all ESL students need to master all the grammar of English, at least eventually, the metaphor of a hospital emergency room and the notion of triage stands as a stark alternative.

Here, I hasten to point out the selection is not among the student "patients" but among the structures to be taught—which grammar points should be given immediate and high priority and which might not even be taught at all? The less obvious way in which the notion of grammatical triage might prove surprising is the focus on grammar, which is sometimes viewed as either irrelevant or perhaps even antithetical to the goal of communicative competence. But as Canale and Swain (1980) were wise to emphasize in their original paper on this subject, structural or grammatical competence is an integral part of any communicative approach. The key point to stress, of course, is that other competencies are equally important (for example, pragmatic or sociocultural competence). In the past twenty-five years, many TESOL authorities have argued for the role of focus on form in communicative classrooms. So, to return to the idea of triage, it is indeed necessary to ensure that students learn grammatical structures, but, I would argue, teach the most relevant grammatical forms first and some not at all.

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How then do teachers decide which structures demand immediate priority and which can be introduced later? Even more vexing, how can they identify which forms merit no attention at all and need never be introduced? Until fairly recently, if these decisions were made at all, they were based on the individual teacher's intuitions about language usage, a fragile yardstick, even if the teacher was a native speaker. Now, however, thanks to corpus linguistics and discourse analysis, there are many references from which to make informed decisions about which grammatical structures are used in various types of discourse. Granted, there is a danger in relying exclusively on this data, something authorities like Widdowson (2003) have been quick to criticize. If teachers are prudent about applying this information to the particular needs of their own individual classes, I believe grammatical triage can be employed in a way that helps students acquire what is important to learn rather than what is easy to teach or to test.

Let me illustrate with one pedagogical practice I have adopted for my lower level grammar for writing class at San Francisco State University which, I assume, is similar to most initial academic writing courses in ESL programs in North America. Like many university ESL classes on the West Coast, the large majority of my students are Chinese (mostly Cantonese and Taiwanese speakers) with speakers of other East and Southeast Asian languages represented among the remaining members of the class. Although these languages are radically different from each other in many ways, the Chinese languages, Japanese, Vietnamese, etc. are all unlike English in having very few syntactic inflections. Take verb phrases as one example. Virtually every one of my students has trouble learning how to mark English tense and aspect in both their speaking and writing.

As mentioned above, the typical grammatical syllabus teaches all the tenses of English as if they were all equally important and equally used (Azar, 2000), a process my poor students have already suffered through several times in their EFL education in their home country. But unlike speakers of Spanish or other languages more similar to English, these students come with a worldview that verbs are largely unmarked, so they have been constantly struggling with a panoply of tense forms. Even the supposedly simple past is difficult for them, irrespective of the distinction between regular and irregular verbs. Why mark every verb with a suffix reminding the reader that the event took place in the past when time words and/or context clearly specify the time?

Knowing that my students approach the English tense system with this question, and based on corpus

data indicating that native speakers rarely use the past perfect (Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, and Finegan, 1999), for my ESL class, I forbid the use of the past perfect; that is, not only do I not teach it, but students cannot use it in any of their work (e.g., I cross out the "had" in their writing so that the past participle of their past perfect verb becomes a past tense). Besides helping to focus their attention on a single past form in their writing and speaking in class, this practice also helps reduce the overuse of the past perfect, a tendency I have noticed especially among my Japanese and Korean students (for example, when asked "Have you ever climbed Mt. Hallasan?" the answer is "*Yes, I had climbed it when I was in high school.").

My goal is to help students allocate their limited time with me to perfecting the use of the past tense, and then we move on to using the present perfect, another common way of marking past time. Even if they never learn to use the past perfect effectively in later classes, they will not differ significantly from native speakers in their tense usage. However, if their inconsistent use of the past tense goes untreated, so to speak, and if I persist in teaching them all of the tense forms equally, there is the strong possibility that my students will emerge from my one semester class overwhelmed with the same grammatical problems they had when they entered.

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Learning grammar by listening

We are blessed to live in a world where the majority of people are at least functionally literate and where all of the developed nations are served by an educated and literate citizenry. When I was born in China, the vast majority of people there could neither read nor write, and literate Chinese were the rare exception. Now, the situation is reversed, so much so that hundreds of millions of Chinese are learning to become literate in a second language–English. As ESL teachers, we are naturally committed to promoting literacy, and many of us teach courses specifically devoted to reading and writing.

Literacy is so ubiquitous in our educational culture and social milieu that we often forget that its counterpart, what we might call oralcy, is frequently neglected, especially in academic ESL classes (Wilkinson, 1999, uses a similar term, "oracy" but with a slightly more restricted meaning). Again, it is so easy and comfortable to teach and test skills like spelling or punctuation that we completely forget that humans are biologically designed to acquire language via speaking and listening, and that all of us first learned our mother tongues by mouth and ear and not by hand and eye.

Again, I do not want to support the dualistic notion that ESL teachers must choose between promoting either written or oral skills, but I do think that it is healthy to consider whether the former are too heavily emphasized, especially as the major medium for learning vocabulary and grammar. To put it tersely, are we pedagogically imprisoned by our own literacy? Or, as I like to challenge my graduate students who are learning to become ESL teachers, why is it that little children, who have not yet learned to read and write and are cognitively immature, pick up the difference in pronoun movements between two-word verbs like *turn it off* and *think about it* but my ESL college students who are smart enough to major in mechanical engineering still come up with expressions like **think it about* or even **turn off it*?

The contrast between child first language and adult second language acquisition is a complex issue, of course (Scovel, 2000), but one way we can help our ESL students is to help them acquire English by ear as well as by eye. This, quite naturally, is the strategy that illiterate little children rely on when acquiring two-word verbs: they intuitively attend to which word is stressed in the two-word phrase and pick up the rule that if the first word is stressed (the verb), then it's like any other verb and the pronoun must follow (*think about it*), but if the second word (the preposition or particle) is stressed (*turn it off*), then it sounds better if the pronoun comes between the verb and the preposition. Of course this process of implicit learning evolves over time and depends on massive amounts of comprehensible input, etc.

The point I wish to emphasize here is that children rely on what they hear, and especially in an ESL setting, our students have easy access to spoken English and opportunities to hear these spoken

patterns. Adult ESL learners (and their teachers) have been conditioned to learn (or to teach) the rules of English by relying almost completely on their eyes. In doing so, they miss many opportunities to pick up important mor–phosyntactic patterns which depend largely on how words are pronounced. Focusing on these spoken contrasts often involves more study and attention on the part of the teacher, and they are also more challenging to assess. As I think the illustration I just cited indicates that patterns like these are extremely useful for students to acquire, so they are more important for students to learn than other things that are simply easy for teachers to teach and test.

Let me share one more illustration of the benefits of learning English grammar by ear. Among the most difficult patterns for teachers to teach and the most frustrating for students to learn are those which apparently allow two different ways of saying the same thing. Almost invariably, students will mix one pattern with the other or have trouble learning the precise difference between the two. Such is the case with dative alternation in English (Yule, 1998) where students are confronted with a seemingly random word order alternation as in the following sentence pair, and overgeneralize to create a typical ESL error as in the third sentence:

1. Susan gave the package to Robert.
2. Susan gave Robert the package.
3. *Susan gave to Robert the package.

The historical explanations for dative alternation in modern English are not relevant here, but it should be noted that its use is confined to a relatively small set of verbs, like *give*, and most of the verbs follow the pattern illustrated in the first sentence as in example (4):

4. She delivered the package to him and reported this to her boss.

Let us return then to the question of how little children quickly pick up the two different ways of marking dative for verbs like *give* in (1) and (2) without incorrectly overgeneralizing patterns like (3), and yet, at the same time, how they learn not to apply dative alternation to other verbs they hear in English, as in the examples in (4). It is a bit more complicated than simply stating that monosyllabic verbs take dative alternation but multisyllabic verbs do not, because (5) and (6) are an obvious exception to this:

5. Susan offered another glass of milk to her daughter.
6. Susan offered her daughter another glass of milk.

Once again, listening for stress is important in picking up this pattern. Of course one syllable verbs take dative alternation, but if the verb has two syllables, if it is Anglicized, so to speak, and is stressed on the first syllable, then it follows the same pattern as one syllable verbs. That is why *offer* is similar to *give* and why the verbs in (4) are not. This rule also explains the patterning of even new words in English; notice how *fax* and *email* both take dative alternation and are thus similar to *give* and *offer*. There are exceptions and complications to the neat explanation just given (see Yule, 1998), but my basic argument still holds: complicated grammatical structures which are very difficult for ESL students to learn can be made much easier to acquire if teachers help students rely on their ears.

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This approach is especially amenable in an ESL environment where students can be encouraged to seek and enjoy opportunities for listening to comprehensible input outside of the class–room. Because two word verbs and the dative are used so frequently in both spoken and written English, these structures are also important for students to acquire and to automatize. In this way, they can move on to focus on more important things than structural accuracy, which, after all, is only the first step toward genuine communicative competence (Canale & Swain, 1980).

Conclusion

In a thoughtful book which deals with a wide range of social and political classroom issues but which focuses primarily on systematic change, Clarke (2003), has a chapter on coherence, which he believes is central to teaching and defines in the following manner:

> I posit "coherence" as the ideal to strive for, the situation that exists when our actions are perfectly aligned with our

> intentions. ... This implies that we must constantly examine our own behavior to make certain that we are being true to our ideals, and it requires us to study the individuals for whom the messages are intended so that we can adjust our efforts for better communication. In this conceptualization of teaching, it is the teacher who does the most of the changing. (p. 129)

I would be the first to admit that my actions, even limited only to those that transpire in the classroom, are not always in alignment with my intentions, and rarely perfectly so, but I like the goal that Clarke has challenged us to achieve. Furthermore, I trust that the intent of my ideas here is aptly captured in the second part of this quotation. If we study our students, the individuals for whom our messages are intended, and adjust our pedagogical efforts in order to better communicate with them, then I am confident that the gap between what we are trying to teach and what our students are attempting to learn can indeed be narrowed. Hopefully, our students will be changed because of these efforts, and just as hopefully, we will be transformed as well.

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