Multi-Dimensional Methodology in Montenegro

This is an attempt, in the spirit of Dewey, to systematically organize my experiences of the past year and share them with a larger audience. I realized through a dramatic example this past year that methodology constitutes translating the lesson objectives into the lesson plan, the options available to a teacher for that. Two student teachers had stated as their overall lesson objective getting the students to speak freely. The lesson plan had no group work and basically consisted of students reading out the text, explanation of new vocabulary and doing the exercises with the pupils. When I asked the trainees what happened to the lesson objective they said they had to leave it out in order to keep up with the schedule, i.e. they had a plan to catch.

The aims and objectives of the classroom might be of various sorts: those based on principles of language learning, pedagogical principles, the socio-economic and political background, and group dynamics. It is this, which I will refer to as multi-dimensional methodology.

The question arises as to objectives that are then restricted to language learning, and ESL or EFL in particular. An example of this type of objective, relevant for the student teachers cited above and particularly relevant to the current context for English Language Teaching in Montenegro would be the following:

> "Unless learners are given a specific purpose for reading, they tend to see the text as a learning device and read one word at a time. When they come to a word they don't know, they stop to think about it or look it up. Often learners sub-vocalize, i.e. read the words in their heads. This gives them time to think about the phrasing and pronunciation, but means they read very slowly, and often fail to interpret the whole meaning."

> "Teachers sometimes read out loud while learners follow the words in their books. This may help learners initially with relating sound to symbols, and phrasing and chunking, but in the long run, it may encourage inefficient reading habits. Silent reading for a specific purpose is far faster, more selective--there is no need to read every line or paragraph--and gives learners practice in recognizing meaning units for themselves. " Willis (1996), p. 72.

But objectives for the EFL/ESL classroom will also be based on the role of language learning, per se, i.e. not restricted to second language learning. Here's a quote from an educator thirty years ago arguing for a revitalization of the primary school language teaching, here with regard to writing:

"One change which is going on at this moment is a further example [sounder knowledge of what helps children grown in skill and knowledge and understanding and health] viz. language teaching in the lower forms. We are beginning to realize that it is quite useless to expect clear and fluent expression in *writing*, no matter how good our lessons in composition may be, if at the same time we shut out all chance of a child's learning to express himself in *speech.* The silent classroom is the worst possible training for written expression. But children who are encouraged to talk freely in class about things that interest them, to tell stories, to describe, and discuss, soon come to *write* with greater ease and aptness and style, as well as to *think* more clearly and accurately. And enterprising schools are beginning to accept this fundamental truth, and to find ways of encouraging speech and using it constructively." Issacs (1973), p. 180

In addition to objectives that derive from what we know about language and language learning, much of our methodology is based on broader pedagogical objectives. I think it is worth stressing this point, i.e. that certain pedagogical goals underlie the work that educators engage in, regardless of the specific subject matter. Some of the most important that come to mind, and which we are for the most part familiar with also from methodological texts for foreign language teaching are fostering:

- Learner autonomy;
- Opportunities for the pupils to engage in problem-solving activities;
- Self-expression;
- The ability to find, sort and evaluate information;
- Attitudes such as tolerance and having an open mind;
- Cooperative and collaborative social skills.

These principles have been around for quite a while. They form the pedagogical framework with which we approach to classroom. Here is another quote from the 1973 publication cited above about the first principle:

"Advocates of informal education agree that the major purpose of education should be to educate educators, which is to say, to turn out men and women who are able to educate themselves--men and women who have the desire and capacity to take responsibility for their own education, and who are likely, therefore, to be life-long, self-directed learners." Silberman (1973), p. xix.

These are goals that are independent of the language-learning classroom--i.e. they should be goals in any classroom. Nonetheless some of these objectives are accommodated particularly well in the language-learning classroom. For example, equipping our students to locate and evaluate information is obviously connected with their language skills and specifically, when we think of the

Internet and computer technology, with English skills. With regard to second language reading skills, scanning is of particular importance, as it is also related to the goal of training autonomous learners. Many people seem surprised that I consult a local paper daily. My response is basically that with enough time and a dictionary, one could read anything. But of course the time constraint would impede any genuine information gathering in this example. However, with more developed scanning skills, I can browse the headlines and then use a dictionary intensively with the article or two I choose to read.

Yugoslavia has been hard hit by the international isolation and economic hardships accompanying the breakup of former Yugoslavia. This necessarily forms the backdrop to teacher training here. At the same time, educational reforms are being initiated in Montenegro. New course books were introduced last year into the EFL school curriculum, in primary and secondary schools. In another reform, the number of subjects will be reduced. At present, the overall structure of the school system is very much exam oriented, with a large number of subjects the pupils have to master. This same exam orientation is also apparent at the university level. There have been other changes this past year. An Internet Service Provider started up last October and has now spread to a number of cities in Montenegro, the America Center in Podgorica has opened up for regular hours for the first time in many years and has 6 computer workstations with Internet access, including a private e-mail account.

One of the lessons I have learned for myself here is the need to keep the vision of youth burning. The poet William Wordsworth put it this way:

"The youth, by his vision splendid, is on his way attended."

Students in my classes had lived a significant percentage of their lives under very difficult circumstances. A common theme of discussion was the recognition that society here, as everywhere, is (or will be) rapidly changing and that no one can predict exactly what tomorrow will look like. But whatever it looks like, they, i.e. the youth of today, need to have the skills that will be required then.

Another lesson was the need to make certain that I was not perceived as having a hidden agenda. In Yugoslavia one has to handle political topics gingerly. It happened to me that there was brief discussion about the war in a class with economics students that pitted two refugees against the others. This almost damaged more than a semester's worth of building group dynamics.

Teacher training is a multi-faceted issue involving pre-service and in-service teacher training. My broad goal in doing teacher training in Montenegro is to take teachers from wherever they are, let's say point x, to a step further, x+1. It suggests that technique is delivered with framework, that the pedagogical and language learning goals are independent of any particular system. This is the approach that we take into the classroom, into any classroom.

It also suggests that technique is meaningless without the framework to put it in. Let me illustrate this with an example from in-service training. The realization that simply providing a range of activities for the teachers would not meet the goals of enabling them to feel comfortable with the new textbook came in an early session with a group of about 15 primary and secondary school teachers. We were meeting for a three-month course 'language improvement and methodology refresher'. In this particular class, we looked at an excerpt from a student essay about her lack of opportunity for free expression. For me the power of the essay was in the student expression rather than the content. I had used it with all three groups of my 3rd year teacher-training students to trigger a lively discussion about the nature of communication in the classroom. The students were both critical and supportive of the essay. Though there was a general view that the writer had exaggerated and was too passive, nonetheless the essay spoke to them. The practicing school teachers, however, reacted with hostility to the piece, using phrases like 'deeply disappointed in the student'. Here's an excerpt:

> School is the place where they spend a big part of their life. So shouldn't it be concentrated on them, on young people? Doesn't it exist for them? Yes, but just formally! In fact, it doesn't do anything for them. Well, that is the reason why they don't like school and why they can't suffer their teachers and their books and the 'philosophy' of school. They don't want to be the clockwork dolls; they want to be persons as they are.

> For what, or maybe it is better to say, for whom does school exist? In the same way it forces us to forget our personality, it makes us not respect ourselves. Why do we learn and why do we know by word many books when we get nothing for that? Nobody even asked us ever if we like those books and if we think that some of them are useful for our life. In one word, they teach us everything but not how to be a person, how to be happy, how to communicate with people and open our heart to them. They don't teach us how to love each other and how to respect people and in the first place how to respect ourselves. We feel so useless and so powerless. We know just one thing: that we can do nothing to arrange our life and be happy. The school simply forces us to think that. Is that the way of motivating young people? Is that the way of preparing for life?

But let me analyze the same essay from the multi-dimensional framework sketched in this talk.

> "The result of teaching small parts of a large number of subjects is the passive reception of disconnected ideas, not illumined with any spark of vitality. Let the main ideas which are introduced into a child's education be few and important, and let them be thrown into every combination possible. The child should make them his

own and should understand their application here and now in the circumstances of his own life." Whitehead (1973), p. 116.

   Alfred Whitehead, the great British philosopher made these comments in 1916. The student essay might also be seen as an explication of this very point, some eighty years later, from the perspective of the pupil. So this is the overall framework or approach that we need to apply to understand what our classroom objectives are and how they then translate into practice through techniques.

References:

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