How to Live in Harmony in the Language Classroom

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1. Introduction

"Learners are interesting, at least as interesting as teachers" (Allwright, 1980:165). Twenty-seven years ago, this statement might have been considered a controversial remark because everybody seemed to be interested in teachers. Since then, important changes have taken place in the ELT context. With the shift from product to process syllabus, teachers and researchers started conducting needs-analysis studies to better understand learners' language needs and find the best approaches to address them. These attempts all served to empower the learners. In this respect, promoting "learner autonomy" has become one of the aims of teachers. However, when working towards this aim, have we, as teachers, ever considered that despite our good intentions, we sometimes may not hear learners' voices? Accordingly, this paper attempts to show how misunderstanding may occur between teachers and learners on an everyday level in a language classroom and how thoughts and attitudes of teacher's and learners' could be misjudged and misinterpreted by both parties.

2. Context and the Implementation of the Study

The study took place at ITU, School of Foreign Languages and involved two language instructors and 74 intermediate level learners. The researcher and two participant teachers conducted an Exploratory Practice (EP) study[1] aiming to find out learners' writing difficulties. The experience took about six months. During this time, the researcher and the participant teachers went through all the EP stages by having bi-weekly meetings. They started the process by identifying their puzzle question as "Why cannot/do not students write?" Then, they reflected upon their puzzle and monitored their classes for a while. Next, they collected data through a questionnaire and structured interviews with learners. Then they analyzed their data, finalized the outcomes and generated ideas to improve their learners' writing skills and better the classroom environment.

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[1] A kind of teacher (and ideally learner-led) research that is more action-oriented than the Reflective Approach and more understanding-oriented than Action Research.

At the end of the experience, when teachers were asked how they felt about the process, they stated that they improved their understanding about learners' writing difficulties and found some practical solutions suitable for their own teaching context. However, according to them, the most valuable part of the experience was to be able to realize the social complexity of classroom life.

During the EP experience, the researcher asked the participant teachers and the learners to keep diaries to reflect their thoughts about the puzzle question being investigated. When the researcher analyzed these diaries, it became apparent that despite the good intentions of both the teachers and the learners, there was a misunderstanding between them. To illustrate, some diary entries of participant teachers and learners have been included below.

3. Findings and Evaluation

At the end of the study, the researcher analyzed the diary entries of the participant teachers and learners using the following categories: Content of Learners' Writings, Learners' Responses to Error Correction, Use of Language in Learners' Writings, and Studying Languages.

3.1 Content of Learners' Writings

Teacher's Extract

> *... One of the reasons why they cannot write is that they don't have anything to say about writing topics. They don't read in Turkish as well, so they don't have ideas of their own ...*

According to the participant teacher, the content of learners' writings is weak because of failing to find ideas about the assigned writing topics and the main reason for this is lack of reading in both English and in Turkish.

Learner's Extract

> *...I have many things to say about the writing topics. I just cannot organize my ideas. My English isn't enough to express my ideas. She says try using simple sentences, then I write like a primary school child...*

As seen above, the learner reports that he has many ideas about the writing topics, but he is not able to organize those ideas in a logical way. Besides, by saying 'My English is not enough to express my ideas", he highlights his difficulties in writing because of linguistic incompetence rather than lack of ideas. Moreover, his diary entry makes it clear that he is not satisfied with the teacher's suggestion to use simple sentences, as then he regards himself as simple or shallow.

3.2 Learners' Responses to Error Correction

Teacher's Extract

> *…I spent hours correcting their essays. Today when I handed them back,*
> *they put them away. I guess they don't mind or they are being lazy…*

As seen above, the teacher complains about spending hours checking learners' essays and seems disappointed because learners do not check their mistakes. Therefore, she believes they are not enthusiastic about learning English.

Learner's Extract

> *…I spent hours on writing my essay. Today she gave them back. I had*
> *many mistakes so didn't want to look at it. I'm upset…*

Like the teacher, the learner complains as well because he has spent hours to write an essay and he seems disappointed because he has made many mistakes; therefore, does not want to check his paper.

Here we realize that both the teacher and the learner think they worked hard and showed a lot of effort, but at the end neither of them could reach the desired outcome. The teacher feels she wasted her time correcting those papers because it was not appreciated. On the other hand, the learner also feels discouraged as he realized although he tried hard to write an essay, he was not successful.

3.3 Use of Language in Learners' Writing

Teacher's Extract

> *…We have been practicing connectors, transition signals for so long. I*
> *cannot understand why they do not use them although I tell them*

connectors, transition signals are necessary both for accuracy and
fluency...

In this example, the teacher states that she believes learners have been given enough time and opportunity to practice certain grammatical structures. Also, although they have been advised to use them in their writing, learners do not follow this advice.

Learner's Extract

> *...I know the meaning of those connectors, transition signals, but I*
> *can't use them in essays. I'm struggling so hard to produce a correct*
> *sentence and it takes so much time. But she does not understand. She*
> *thinks I am lazy...*

Here, again we see that the teacher and the learner have conflicting opinions. The learner believes that he has not been given enough practice about those grammatical structures because he is not able to use them in his writing. Moreover, he seems upset as he thinks his hard work is not noticed or appreciated: "I am struggling so hard to produce a correct sentence and it takes so much time".

3.4 Studying Languages
Teacher's Extract

> *.....................They have been asking me how to study English. I really*
> *don't know. I think everyone has his own way...............................*

Here we may see that the teacher is faced with a difficult question and she admits herself that she does not know the answer.

Learner's Extract

> *.................I don't know how to study English. Today I asked her*
> *again. She says everyone has his own way. I wouldn't ask her if I knew*
> *my own way, would I?..*

However, here we may understand that learner is not satisfied with the teacher's reply that "everyone has his own way". As we read his words, "Today I asked her again" we may

realize that he is desperate to get an answer to his question. Besides, we may conclude that as he has not been able to get a satisfactory answer, he feels annoyed as his last words are "I would not ask her if I knew my own way, would I?"

4. Suggestions and Further Discussion

Examples from the teachers' and the learners' diary entries given in the previous section made both the researcher and the participant teachers think about the quality of life in the language classrooms because it was obvious that there was a misunderstanding between them. On the one hand, teachers considered themselves to be hardworking, dedicated professionals and they felt upset as they believed their effort was not appreciated by the learners. On the other hand, learners were trying hard to learn a new language, but they supposed they were not provided with enough support and encouragement. In addition, they seemed disappointed as they thought they were not taken seriously by their teachers. Instead of being appreciated, they assumed they were seen as lazy. However, with the assistance of the EP study, learners were able to express themselves to their teachers.

Moreover, EP also helped the researcher and the teachers think about the quality of life in the classroom, enabled them to investigate Dick Allwright's four propositions about language learners and; thus, consider their applicability in practice (Allwright, 2007). These propositions are as follows:

1. Learners are capable of taking learning seriously

Although terms such as "learner development", "learner autonomy" have been widely used in the ELT literature, still there is little space for learners to make independent decisions about their own learning. Because we, as teachers and educators, make most of the decisions for them, like what sort of syllabi to follow or which course books to use, we may sometimes forget that they are capable of taking learning seriously. However, as reported above, the EP study conducted at ITU showed that they are capable of taking learning seriously.

2. Learners are capable of independent decision making

If we accept the fact that learners are capable of taking learning seriously, then we should accept the fact that they are also capable of independent decision making. As the EP study showed, in addition to taking learning seriously, learners are also willing to be taken seriously by their teachers and contribute to the language classroom.

3. Learners will learn best in their own unique ways as individuals

Although learners in our classes may have things in common, we all know that each lesson is a different lesson for every learner. However, during our daily teaching routine we might sometimes forget this fact. Therefore, as Allwright (2007) suggests, it makes sense to at least try to treat learners in accordance with the idea that learners will learn best in their unique ways as individuals.

4. Learners are capable of developing as practitioners of learning

Sometimes, we teachers complain that we are tired of spoon-feeding our learners, but we continue spoon-feeding them as we often feel they are not mature enough to make decisions for themselves. Besides, our classroom experience usually supports our views about the level of our learners' maturity because most of the time, when learners get together in the classroom, they seem to be neither mature nor developed as learners. However, if we accept the promising outcomes of learner development in education, then perhaps we should begin by trusting our learners' ability to take their own learning seriously and take independent decisions about it.

5. Conclusion

We teachers work hard and try to do our best to guide learners in the language teaching and learning process. However, despite our enthusiasm and effort, we might sometimes be misunderstood by our learners. In addition, we may also misjudge them. Considering these points, this article reported an EP study that assisted the researcher and the participant teachers in the realization of the potential for misunderstanding in the language classrooms, and allowed them to consider the quality of life there. Besides, it helped them break through the social barriers between their learners by listening to their voices.

REFERENCES

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