

Transcripts for Reflective Teaching

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*This paper reports some of the observations of a group of tertiary language and content teachers who met regularly to reflect on short transcripts from their classes. The transcripts were a springboard for discussion on classroom techniques, class dynamics and student learning. As a starting point, they used *Contrasting Conversations* (Fanselow, 1992), which advocates a non-judgmental approach through which ordinary things are seen with new eyes.*

INTRODUCTION

Contrasting Conversations aims to be a kaleidoscope, rearranging teacher perceptions of classroom experiences into fresh patterns. These are the sorts of mental realignments experienced, in another context, through reading *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain* (Edwards, 1993). After two chapters, I was able to draw. In those chapters I learned that people cannot draw because they do not really see. I learned techniques for freeing the mind from false preconceptions of how things look. Mental images of trees, for example, can prevent us from seeing the particular characteristics of an actual tree. The solution is to draw the empty space around the tree. We are able to see this as it really is, to draw it, and by extension, to draw the tree. I was enabled to see, and therefore to draw. Similarly, unhelpful preconceptions about teaching might cloud our perspectives. If we are freed from these preconceptions, we are enabled to see, and therefore to teach in new ways.

I was part of a small group of language teachers that met regularly over the course of a year to consider short class transcripts through the lenses offered in *Contrasting Conversations*, and under the guidance of its author. Following this, some of us became facilitators, encouraging other small groups of staff to try the procedure. I had collaborated over the years, with subject specialist teachers in writing and teaching content-based college papers, and was therefore interested in finding a mutually comprehensible meta-language for discussing classroom interactions. As an educator of ESOL teachers in Certificate, Diploma and degree programmes, I was also interested in trying these techniques in observation follow-up discussions. If teacher trainees are equipped with a 'toolkit' that includes reflectivity, they can continue to learn from their experience (Gray, 2000), to ask why things are done as well as how to do them, and to engage with the '... knowledge, beliefs, attitudes and thinking that inform ... practice,' (Richards, 1998:xiv).

PROCEDURE

Tapes and transcripts

Our procedure was to tape our classes, transcribe one- or two-minute segments of interactions, and meet with our peers to consider this data. Memory cannot capture the rich and sometimes hectic classroom panorama. As illustrated in the tale of *Rashomon*, in which four independent witnesses give differing versions of a murder, we need the primary data of the transcript (Fanselow, 1977:17).

The process took less time than more ambitious methods such as observing or viewing videos of whole classes. A startling number of interactions can occur in a short time. As one teacher put it, '...you can get a truckload out of two minutes'. Some other teachers, unable to find value in a micro approach, preferred to observe or video whole lessons. As one said, 'I need to see the whole lesson – how it is introduced, how one thing leads to another, how the objectives are met, how it concludes, how it all hangs together'.

In hindsight, some pre-teaching on the sorts of insights that can be gained from short transcripts might have been useful. For example, merely by considering teacher talk, we can learn a great deal about how teachers manage their classes, involve students in tasks, group students, ask display or referential questions, allow wait time, respond to students, orient students to lessons, check understanding, solicit information, provide direct instruction, correct errors, provide feedback, and carry out elicitation (Nunan & Lamb, 1996). Small group transcripts can illustrate how students negotiate meaning, or how they co-construct learning. Supplementary observation tasks (for example, Richards & Lockhart, 1994; Wajnryb, 1992) could provide a targeted and accessible framework, '...“a way in” to discovering the classroom...' (Wajnryb, 1992:8-9). An accessible introduction to action research using transcripts, could also be of benefit (for example, Tsui, 1995).

The discussions

Our discussions had three stages: classification of data into two opposite categories, re-classification, and consideration of different approaches to the situation shown by the transcript. For example, when considering how to encourage students to speak more in class, we listed data under the headings, 'encouraging' and 'discouraging'. We then looked at the encouraging items to see how they could be interpreted as discouraging, and vice versa. Where calling on a particular student by name had been classified as encouraging, we now reclassified this act as discouraging, because it might have increased the student's anxiety. Finally, the person who had provided the transcript decided on action - to stop the practice for a week and observe any changes. Participants had control over the data that they presented, the decisions they made, and were responsible for how much or how little they put into the process.

The particular discussion above took place when we were still becoming accustomed to the process. On the corner of my notes I have scrawled my apparently dawning enlightenment, 'If I'm already encouraging students, surely I shouldn't try the opposite - to be discouraging? Being encouraging is one of the things I do best - if anything I'm too encouraging. Oops. Maybe I could try being silent'.

As we were sometimes jolted out of ritualistic behaviours, we did question who needed this treatment and how often. For example, surely young teachers had not yet developed harmful rituals. But, ironically, observation and conferencing revealed that many had done so. Especially if they had experienced very teacher-centred classrooms, they took teacher-centredness as a given. During our reflections, most of us went through phases when we were more open to change than during others. The best advice was probably given in the introduction to our text, that *Contrasting Conversations* was to be considered a 'cookbook', to be dipped into as required (p. 8).

Overcoming barriers

The first reaction of participants to their tapes was often to be self-critical. One experienced teacher, considered proficient by her colleagues, spoke of the first time she saw a video of herself teaching, 'I was devastated', she said, 'I was forced to confront so many aspects of my teaching, and more, of myself. I never wanted to put myself through that again'. However, because there were no judgements and no plaudits in our group, there was no need to be anxious or to posture. We were able to avoid falling into the trap of turning a reflective practice group into a showcase where 'success is worn like an armour' (Graves, 2002:19).

Meeting with peers rather than supervisors can have advantages. Peer mentoring can 'connect with teachers' ZPDs', allowing teachers to adjust incrementally, as much as they are ready for, rather than being blown away by 'perfect' models (Murphey, 2000). Supportive peers can create a safe environment. The facilitator must be the first to become vulnerable. For example, in an early meeting, I presented a transcript showing how I tried unsuccessfully to draw a student into conversation in English. This may have encouraged a member of the group to bring to the next session, a transcript that illustrated a similar situation even more vividly.

Transcript 1:

Teacher: Can you give me an example?
Student: Eh?
Teacher: Can you please give me an example?
Student: (Talks in Japanese)
Teacher: I would like the answer in English please.
Student: Ah - sorry. ///
Teacher: You mean s-o-r-r-y
Student: Eh?
Lecturer: The word is 'sorry'.
Student: Ah... (Continues in Japanese)
Lecturer: No - I'd like the answer in English please.
Student: Sorry. ///
Teacher: Noooooo! (Both laugh).

SOME OBSERVATIONS

A sampling of the discussions in our groups included the following.

Strategic competency and fluency

Most of us used tape rather than video for pragmatic reasons, and therefore could not observe body language. However, when we considered how this lack might be an advantage, we realised that listening to voices isolated from the larger picture of communication, in itself actually produced insights. Several teachers commented that they were shocked when they realised how little their students actually said. The students, it seemed, had developed strategic competence, which led to a false impression of fluency.

The difficulty of practising target forms in 'authentic' ways

We often noticed that things did not turn out according to expectations. Some observations showed how difficult it was to construct 'authentic' speaking tasks that would elicit target forms. In one class, students completed a unit on the use of the past simple and past continuous. They listened to a model in which someone described what they were doing when they met their best friend. The model contained sentences such as, 'I was travelling when I first saw her'; 'I was working in a factory when we met'. But the practice speaking activity produced few of the targeted forms, even when the teacher intervened to ask questions that might have been expected to do so (Transcript 2). This realisation led to an interest in task design and a re-thinking of expectations regarding authentic dialogue. Would native speakers have produced the target forms?

Transcript 2:

Student A: I will talk about my friend in Japan.
Teacher: Is she living in Japan now?
Student A: Mmm
Teacher: Sentence (rising intonation)....
What were you doing when you met?
Student A: We were students.
Teacher: You were studying?
Student A: Mmm
Teacher: What was she doing when you first saw her?
Student A: She was my friend's friend.

When it is better to be wrong

Another example of thwarted expectations involved a study of the transcripts of students working together in small groups to solve problems. Sometimes these illustrated how students aim to co-construct meaning according to ideal interactionist or socio-cultural conceptualisations. But at other times, we saw how there were advantages to being wrong. It avoided the loss of face, maintained classroom harmony, and avoided transgressing against senior students or male students. In the example below, learners are editing a passage, and after some hesitation, accept a suggested correction even though they seem to know it is wrong.

Transcript 3:

Student A: And the next mistake, in line 15 '...had **controlled** Cuba's paper industry'. (reading)
Student B: Fourth mistake is, 'Saralegui had never **watching**' (reading) '... had never **watched**...'
Student A: mmm hmmm.
Student C: 'She **had** been working...' (reading)
Student A: Not yet - **major, major**', first. WRONG
Student B: hmmm? **major**?
Student C: **major**?
Student A: **majored ...had majored**
Student B: hmmm... had **majored**...OK.
Student A: The next one...(pause) She **had** been working...

CONCLUSION

There are many natural barriers to reflective practice, including anxiety about being judged and the difficulty of focusing on long-term professional development in the face of short-term goals. In today's economic climate, there are also institutional barriers including time pressures, short-term contracts, the part-time nature of much ESOL teaching, and the rise and demise of language institutes. Teachers may need to be convinced that they should willingly embrace a practice that might lead to even more uncertainty and change. Yet, sticking with the process of reflection long enough to perceive its richness, will better enable us to make decisions that are thoughtful and principled. From time to time allowing our practices to be 'respectfully' challenged through a process like that in *Contrasting Conversations*, will help to keep our teaching fresh and our vision clear.

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