

FL TEACHERS VS FL LEARNERS
AT THE UNIVERSITY LEVEL:
A PRESENTATION OF STUDENT VIEWS

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1. Introduction.

Principles of Communicative Language Teaching have definitely changed the position and role of the teacher in the whole teaching — learning process. Traditional pedagogic procedures involving the introduction of selected portions of language material followed by practice and control, might not supply the learners with the necessary data concerning their global language behaviour undertaken for communicative purposes (cf. Ellis 1982).

The priority of communicative interaction in the classroom has given learners more opportunity for individual and spontaneous expression in a FL, and, has at the same time moved teachers from the position of “knowers” to one of “partners” or “co-communicators” (Ellis 1982, Littlewood 1983), putting both sides on an equal footing.

Traditional error-correction procedures have also become of limited value since language errors and mistakes are considered as a physiological phenomenon in the course of the development of students' communicative abilities.

There are no direct hints, however, that would suggest concrete and strictly determined changes in teachers' behaviour optimal within the frames of particular language courses and the particular units taught.

It has been assumed, therefore, that students themselves (who function as the centre of the process of learning) may appear the source of necessary information for the teachers. Data presented below come from a questionnaire given in June 1986 to 56 students of English at the end of their fourth year of university education. The value of their answers referring to the FL teaching — learning process, in which they are students, is supported by the fact that, having completed a course of FL teaching methodology, they possess considerable theoretical knowledge concerning the ideas of Communicative Language Teaching.

2. The role of the teacher in the FL teaching-learning process.

Practical English classes taught at the university level with such advanced learners create a great number of possibilities for the practical realization of the principles of Communicative Language Teaching. We might, therefore, expect from this group of questioned students that they would be able to establish with a fairly high degree of precision the characteristic features of their FL teachers.

2.1. The indispensability of the teacher during the FL teaching — learning process.

The first question of a general nature asked the students whether they needed a teacher at all. Out of 56 answers, 47 pointed to the absolute indispensability of the teacher during the FL teaching — learning process. First of all, students need a teacher as a “knower,” but not as a person who “knows everything better” and wants to impose his opinions on the others. They need a knower who can correct and discuss their errors and mistakes, informing and instructing them at the same time as to which learning strategies to choose in order to avoid making future mistakes (32 answers). Teachers are also considered to be the source of knowledge about language and language use, people with whom students’ observations about the functioning of language can be discussed (10 answers). Teachers are those who organize and maintain the whole teaching — learning process, select and grade language material, and inform the students about the progress made (22 answers). In addition, students need teachers as partners, and they distinguish two aspects of this term here: a teacher is a partner for conversation, and, on the other hand, a teacher’s personality must exert a specific influence on the learners so that they feel encouraged in their own work and become conscious of the results of this work.

Nine students, for whom the presence of the teacher is not necessary write that any grown-up person having good handbooks at his disposal can understand FL rules. Besides, one must work out one’s own way of communication living in a TL country. Obviously, these opinions do not sound convincing since their authors do not realize the complex character of language behaviour and language use.

2.2. The characteristic features of a good/bad teacher.

Students were also asked to present the characteristic features which would qualify teachers either positively or negatively. First of all, teachers are appreciated for their knowledge of the language itself and their interest in the

culture of the TL country (29 answers). Good teachers must also know pedagogic procedures in general, and be well acquainted with current trends in FL teaching methodology (18 answers). Other features of a good teacher that the students point to are connected with personality. Students want to trust their teachers and to appreciate the individual characters of their teachers and the knowledge they represent. They also want to be treated as partners, and this implies that teachers should:

- require work from themselves and their students
- be able to admit their own mistakes
- understand that learners might make mistakes
- be tolerant, objective, and even represent a certain sense of humour
- have time for students, listen to what they have to say, and not interrupt.

Consequently, teachers who do not possess enough knowledge of the language and who do not know much about FL teaching are disqualified in the eyes of their learners (27 answers). Other features of bad teachers are strictly connected with their personalities as well as attitudes to the teaching — learning process. It is interesting to observe how students intuitively feel which teachers are not teachers by vocation, neglecting their work as well as their learners. The negative features of teachers which most frequently appear in student questionnaires are as follows:

- introducing an atmosphere of stress and tension during classes
- introducing dishonest criteria for the evaluation of student progress
- praising “favourites” (for example, those who have visited the UK or the US) and disregarding less capable and/or shy learners
- assuming in advance that students will never learn the language
- being impatient, envious, and quick to take revenge on students
- showing off their own knowledge of the language and being unable to admit their own errors or mistakes.

The way in which students understand the notion of partnership can be seen from the above opinions. Moreover, it is also clear what teachers must do to make students feel secure with the FL, and, at the same time, to create optimal conditions for spontaneous communication.

2.3. Student evaluation of teachers’ behaviour during classes.

The detailed data presented below and throughout the whole paper are based on student evaluations of conversation and composition classes that were taught during the four years of their university education within the block of classes defined as Practical English. Student answers received for both types of classes will be analysed respectively below.

2.3.1. Conversation classes.

Teaching procedures most frequently utilized by the teachers during conversation classes were: discussions for and against (30 answers), role playing (30 answers), group work (20 answers), and the presentation of spoken texts that the students had prepared earlier (18 answers). This does not confirm with student preferences as far as their favourite element of conversation classes is concerned. Twenty students (less than 50%) chose discussion as their favourite; according to fifteen, it was FL speaking in itself. Other statements suggest the lack of students' established opinion on this subject.

Student dislikes regarding conversation classes were much more clearly stated. Eighteen students do not like discussions on topics in which they were not interested. Other elements of classes evaluated by the learners in a negative way are strictly connected with the behaviour of their teachers, such as:

- asking students by names to express opinions when they do not feel like speaking (16 answers)
- discussions including too many moments of "awkward silence" (15 answers).

Forty four students expect their conversation teachers to open the discussion and maintain it by asking necessary questions and/or giving comments. In addition, 33 students think it necessary for the teachers to encourage all the learners to speak, even those who consider themselves shy and/or psychologically inhibited (17 students admit it to be their characteristic feature).

Forty three students write that their errors and mistakes are corrected by the teachers immediately after they were made, in the course of the production of their spoken texts. This agrees with the preferences of 33 learners; however, 21 would expect teachers' comments to be made later (i.e. they do not like being interrupted).

The majority of students (37) do not approve of regular home assignments. According to them, the spontaneous character of communication in a FL is something that can be acquired during classes when one has direct contact with the teacher. Seventeen students feel as if they are being forced or pressured to work on the language when they are given regular homework. The most suitable home assignment for them is listening to FL radio broadcasts and/or work on FL vocabulary (preparing, for example, specific terminology for a discussion announced earlier by teachers).

2.3.2. Composition classes.

What the students like best during their composition classes is writing different types of essays and compositions (29 answers). What they do not like is writing summaries of texts (18 answers). It must be pointed out here that composition class is not particularly favoured by the students (Wysocka 1986).

Several of them admit that they hate the very fact that they are supposed to write anything at all.

The vast majority of questioned students (48) agree on the indispensability of theoretical remarks concerning the construction of written texts. The answers concerning ways in which such knowledge should be presented to students are rather vague. Students offer here statements of a general nature, such as "different explanations from teachers" or "on the basis of the analysis of different texts".

According to 32 students their composition teachers do not prepare them for their future MA thesis writing. Those who give affirmative answers to this question are not able to explain the ways in which their teachers prepared them.

Errors and mistakes made by 31 questioned students in their written texts were underlined by the teachers, and the correct version was supplied. Seventeen students write that their mistakes have only been underlined. The former way of correcting student errors suited their needs (as was stated by 31 individuals). However, 16 other persons expected detailed comments from their teachers following their texts.

Thirty nine students admit that their errors are not discussed by the teachers at all. For 47 persons, this procedure is considered indispensable since such a discussion explains to the students the nature of their errors, and allows them to avoid making the same errors in future. They can also learn something from the errors of others.

Students do expect regular homework assignments from their teachers and 35 of them think that writing an essay is the most suitable type of assignment.

2.4. Student wishes and expectations.

In addition to detailed questions concerning the course of conversation and composition classes, students were also asked to state what they would expect from their teachers, apart from offering opportunities for creating spoken and written texts during classes and correcting mistakes.

As far as conversation classes are concerned, student wishes can be divided into two main categories:

- work with language material
- general teaching procedures.

Almost 50% of the students (25) would expect special exercises devoted to developing their knowledge of the use of words and word combinations. There are also opinions emphasizing the value of information data concerning "at least the use of formal and informal style". In addition, 12 students would appreciate information about behaviour during discourse, so as to avoid awkward and/or embarrassing situations.

As far as teaching procedures are concerned, teachers are expected to find attractive topics for discussions and not to create an atmosphere of stress, so that students will feel safe and express their opinions more spontaneously. Teachers should also encourage shy students to take part in discussions. Thirty three students questioned expect from their composition teachers the reliable correction of their mistakes and an explanation of their nature, both in front of the whole group and individually. A smaller group of students (12) asks for specific explanations concerning the difference between spoken and written language. Apart from the wishes that deal with concrete teaching procedures, students would be grateful simply for some encouragement confirming that writing in a FL is something in which they could make visible progress. Any progress would encourage them to further effort which, in combination with some necessary changes in the teaching — learning process might possibly change for the better students' attitudes to composition classes.

2.5. Student evaluation of classes taught by Poles and native speakers.

Since both conversation and composition classes are taught by Poles and British and American native speakers, students were asked to indicate the advantages and disadvantages of classes taught by each group of teachers. Such a comparison could well supply material for discussion and/or the optimization of the Practical English teaching process.

Conversation classes taught by Poles are considered by the questioned students to be greatly superior from the pedagogical and methodological point of view. These classes are better organized, and more attention is paid to the use of different structures and vocabulary by the students. Polish teachers systematize students' knowledge, are better prepared for their classes and are more careful and demanding as far as the correction of student errors is concerned. Since they are learners of English themselves, and possess much greater experience than the students, they know in advance what problems a Polish learner of English might encounter. Therefore, they understand the errors characteristic of Polish — English interlanguage, and are able to point out their features. The fact that the teachers are Polish allows the students to use Polish as a reference system when learning to use English lexical items properly. Polish teachers are also able to equip the students with precise English equivalents of Polish words and phrases, and to explain the differences in the two systems. Their English explanations of words and phrases unknown to the learners allow the latter to choose the correct Polish equivalents.

As far as the disadvantages of conversation classes taught by Polish teachers are concerned, students point out the fact that they know their teachers are non-natives, and so they do not feel they can trust their teachers'

knowledge completely (22 answers). Polish teachers organize their classes according to one scheme, which is sometimes boring for the students, and they pay too much attention to syntactic errors and mistakes. They do not supply the students with knowledge of styles and registers. Their knowledge of British and American Life and Institutions is also questioned by the learners.

The fact that no possibility of using Polish exists during conversation classes taught by native speakers is one of the main advantages of such classes (27 answers). In general, these classes are less formal, students feel safer, more relaxed, and are encouraged to produce in the FL. They also feel forced to think in a FL and they appreciate the additional advantage of developing their listening comprehension as a component of the speaking skill. They also point out that they have opportunities of observing nonverbal means of communication as demonstrated unconsciously by their native teachers.

On the other hand, native speakers are considered to be too lenient as far as the correction of student errors is concerned (24 answers). Consequently, they are not able to evaluate the regular progress of the students. Since they do not know what the needs of Polish learners are, their classes are not always well prepared and well organized; this makes their students feel lost during the classes. Students' vocabulary is not developed as purposefully as they would wish it to be. Students also think that native speakers are not able to explain the meanings of unknown words very precisely so that it is difficult to find the right Polish equivalents.

The organization of composition classes taught by Polish teachers is also considered to be better than that of native speakers' classes. Twenty students point out that Polish teachers know better how to run the teaching — learning process both theoretically and practically and again, since they are Polish themselves, they understand students' needs better, and also the nature of their interlinguistic mistakes. However, almost all the students often mistrust the ways in which their mistakes are being corrected by Polish teachers, just because of the fact that they are non-natives.

Native speakers, on the other hand, supply the students with more information concerning the organization of English written texts (19 answers). Almost all the students (52) stress the fact that they trust the native speakers' intuition and believe their language errors and mistakes are corrected properly.

As far as the disadvantages of these classes are concerned, students point out, first of all, (35 answers) the improper evaluation of their progress that native teachers make. They feel that the grades they are given are too high for them and sometimes their mistakes are probably left uncorrected. Students would also appreciate more detailed discussion of their errors. Several of them (12) also question the topics of their essays, stating that they do not always conform to their interests and preferences. Certain kinds of explanations given to students are not always clear either.

On the whole, it can be concluded that both the theoretical and practical qualifications of Polish teachers were estimated to be higher by the group of questioned students.

3. Self appreciation of student progress.

Finally, the students were asked to evaluate their own progress, i.e. to state what aspects of their knowledge were improved, and which of them still needed more work. The questions concerned students' ability to construct spoken and written texts respectively.

Twenty nine students (50%) declare that it is fluency in speaking in which they feel they have improved most during the four years of their university education. They feel freer and more secure when speaking and they have lost the fear of making mistakes. Thirty eight students, on the other hand, write that lack of English vocabulary is still their greatest problem. They specify the problem writing that they did not enrich their vocabulary. They use stereotyped words and phrases and, consequently, they can not call on specific terminology when they need to use it. Nor are they able to use particular words and word combinations appropriate to context. The organization of written texts is, according to 30 students, what they have developed best. This refers both to the construction of a paragraph and that of an essay. As in the case of spoken texts, the proper use of English words and phrases is considered by 27 students (50%) to be the greatest gap in their knowledge. Eight students in all write that they are unable to evaluate their progress (this concerns three persons regarding conversation and five persons regarding composition).

4. Conclusions.

The character of the data presented here allows us to draw conclusions that refer both to the personalities of the teachers themselves and to the nature of the FL teaching — learning process.

4.1. Teachers' personalities.

In general, the role of teachers in the FL teaching — learning process has been established by the group of questioned students in a quite traditional way. Students need the presence of a person who can organize and maintain the whole process, correct their mistakes, and mark their progress. The notion of a teacher — student partnership requires a more detailed discussion here. Students do not want their teachers to function from a distance, i.e. to impose their will upon them and to require absolute obedience. The teachers should rather share their knowledge and experience with their students. What is

equally important is the possibility of teacher — student discussion. It seems indispensable for teachers to make their students conscious of the fact that they can always come to them and discuss with them not only their language errors but also other language problems, and ask them what sort of individual learning procedures could be optimal. Teachers who are honest enough to admit that they may also have doubts and/or make mistakes do not lose any of their authority in the eyes of their students, when the latter notice that their teachers are FL learners themselves and that they are constantly trying to improve their knowledge too.

The above statements prove that students intuitively define themselves as autonomous learners and ascribe, at the same time, the position of "helpers" to their teachers (Gremmo and Abe 1985).

The emphasis put by the teachers on their superiority to the students makes the former create an atmosphere of stress and tension during particular units. This undoubtedly reinforces all kinds of psychological inhibitions existing in the learners and will give a negative effect on the students' freedom of communication in the FL. Teachers who are able both to inform and convince their students that they are expected to make language errors, since error-making is a normal physiological phenomenon, will establish relation between themselves and their students in such a way that a good basis may be formed for functioning as true partners in communication.

These remarks seem to be of greater relevance for Polish teachers, with whom students feel more inhibited, than for their British or American colleagues.

4.2. Modification of teaching procedures.

Concept learning, principle learning, and problem solving are the types of learning predominantly applied by advanced learners. (Brown 1980 : 80—83). Moreover, the tendency toward autonomous learning increases with the students' progress. These facts imply the indispensability of regular training that would "take the students to the greatest degree of independence" (Abe and Henner—Stanchina 1985 : 272—273). Such training should be introduced before the first-year students start their regular Practical English classes. A separate training course for teachers could be worked out, too, where their activities as "helpers" would be specified and discussed.

Other conclusions drawn directly from student answers point, first of all, to the fact that there exists an absolute necessity of introducing specific explanations and exercises devoted to the development of student vocabulary and the ability to use particular lexical items properly. Such sets of exercises could, and should, in fact, include differences between formal and informal styles and specific information concerning behaviour during discourse. As far as the con-

struction of written texts is concerned, these exercises could deal with the differences between spoken and written language. Third, fourth, and fifth-year students could also be taught differences in style with regard to their future MA thesis writing.

A short comment must also be made about the ways in which student errors and mistakes are corrected. I think that learners could be asked about their preferences regarding error correction. It does matter to an individual whether or not he is constantly interrupted when speaking (21 students, which is close to 50%, did not want any interruptions). When the ways of correcting mistakes are established individually, prior to student production of both spoken and written texts, the students will also feel more secure with the FL and will appreciate their teacher who, as an honest partner, takes into consideration their personal needs.

The fact that 39 students claimed that their teachers had not discussed their errors must be treated as a phenomenon of a negative character. They indicated how much they needed discussions like this. The decisions as to whether typical mistakes should be presented in front of the whole group, or during individual talks, could also be established earlier by both sides.

The character of the student evaluation of classes taught by native speakers probably results from the very nature of language contacts between native speakers and foreigners (Guthrie 1984 : 37—39). If we took into account the character of these contacts when preparing syllabuses for conversation and composition classes, and established different aims for the classes taught by Poles and native speakers, both types of classes might offer more profit for the students.

On the whole, it must be pointed out that advanced learners are able to establish quite well what they require from their FL teachers. Their observations may also be helpful to other teachers working with less advanced learners in different types of language courses. These teachers could form their own general attitudes to their students at any stage of the process of Communicative Language Teaching.

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