New Perspectives in ESOL Classrooms

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Abstract: There have been no major studies that have compared or studied classroom dynamics within the range of ESOL programs, nationwide. This study attempts to develop an in-depth understanding of the ESOL experience from a variety of perspectives, using class observations, and a qualitative approach to analysis.

Kelly Hall and Stoops Verplaetse (2000) assert that research in this field has "..been based on a traditional psycholinguistic perspective of language and learning." Language acquisition has been looked at from the perspective of discrete linguistic skills and learning as the process by which these skills, foreign to learners, are assimilated into their "preexistent mental structures." Some key approaches to teaching include Asher's TPR, Audiolingualism based on Skinner's methods, Grammar Translation, Cognitive-Code, the Direct or Berlitz Method, amongst others. The lifespan of these philosophies has varied, as with ALM, where Strasheim's reflection (1976) proved to be the epitaph, when he said, "our 'one true way' had had a life of under ten years". Other philosophies continue depending on the dictates of the specific programs or training received by teachers. Given the variations in the field, questions concerning the quality of classroom interaction, teacher training, philosophy, curriculum and learner's experience arose. Our project attempted to get a macro-perspective of the diaspora, which characterizes adult ESOL.

Methodology

We observed 31 classes, in eleven states. Most were in the northeast part of the country. We spent time in all levels of ESOL classes (beginners through advanced), EFF, bilingual and in family literacy programs. Our data collection procedures consisted of a preliminary observation (about 90 minutes minimum), followed by a teacher interview to clarify and understand exactly what was being taught in the observed session as well as to get an idea of their philosophy of adult education. This was continued by a second observation in the classroom, on a different day, after which if possible, we interviewed learners to get their side of the learning experience. Interviews were qualitative and open-ended with grounded theory informing our analysis.

Findings

Classes were large, had an unpredictable lifespan, were developed by teachers and had a traditional lesson as the centerpiece. The physical arrangement and appearance, which included desks or long tables, charts on the walls, K-12 arrangements, with desks facing the teacher and a

blackboard, were almost identical. Worksheets, dyads and very traditional looking rooms made the programs seem similar in appearance.

The key feature, of ESOL classes, is the implicit and direct teaching of American culture. English is taught in the form of grammar lessons, couched in vocabulary, all of which are linked using the common thread of American culture. Safe topics such as health, social security, food, holidays and indigenous culture are vehicles for learning vocabulary and argot.

A second unique feature of ESOL classes is that regardless of the subject at hand and the style of teaching, learners participate and leave classes with more than what they came in with.

Teachers used commercially published materials almost across the board, almost always augmented with dictionaries and authentic materials either developed by learners or themselves. Techniques used by teachers included choral repetition, dialogue dyads, round robin reading, role-play, small groups, modeling and occasionally, Cuisenaire rods. Some developed journals and almost all gave out homework, despite low expectations on returns. Learners and teachers cited lifestyle issues, fear of independent work as reasons for not finishing homework, but also mentioned that it was important for reinforcement of in-class learning.

Classroom participation ranged from animated discussions to traditional Q & A, to asking for help or translation. The kinds of interactions depended largely on literacy levels of learners, topics, and teacher's creativity. Grouping strategies were used by teachers to encourage conversation by actively trying to mix linguistic groups.

All classes were developed around a teacher-directed lesson, which had no clear-cut segues from one topic to another. Classes jumped from topic to topic, and from skill to skill. Teaching was followed by review, but there was no intervening practice. Similarly, there were no clear-cut goals set for classes, except as were dictated by the administration.

All teachers stated being learner-centered in their approach was important to them, yet the definition of this term was different from it's original inception. Teachers interpreted learner-centered to mean learner focused and the amount of time spent out of class, helping learners with everyday tasks and chores such as writing letters, calling doctors, negotiating bureaucratic mazes. There was no evidence of systematic needs assessment, but all curricula were based on teachers' perceptions of what they thought learners might need to adapt to living in the USA. Learners did not contribute to syllabus development or to lesson planning. Learners were on the whole satisfied with how classes were conducted, which raises the issue of socialization.

Learners see ESOL classes as vital to their insertion and adaptation into American society. Teachers are perceived as cultural ambassadors, a factor which is an integral part of the learning experience. Very little dissatisfaction if any, was expressed by teachers or learners, except with issues over which the former had little control, such as funding and enrolment turbulence.

References

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