

A STRESS-FREE APPROACH TO TEFL

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ABSTRACT

The teaching of English in Indonesia has been marked with the frequent changes in the curriculum. However, those changes do not imply whatsoever any changes in the way teachers deliver lessons in a moment-to-moment classroom teaching. We seem to be too much preoccupied with new concepts and perhaps approach to teaching English but fail to formulate how a certain concept can be translated into classroom methods and techniques. This paper seeks to shed a light on how a synthesis of various approaches in language learning can be achieved to provide favorable learning atmosphere for students and more importantly how different theories on language learning can be transformed into an operational method and techniques in the classroom.

Key words: *Second language hypotheses, stress-free approach, English teaching, teaching methods*

1. Introduction

The teaching of English in formal schools in Indonesia has been thought of as dull and frustrating. It is generally done in the conventional grammar-focused class in which students sit and listen to their teacher explaining about a particular grammatical structure at great length using a set of grammatical rules and labels students have to memorize. A particular structure is usually taught without the presence of a meaningful context in which it is used. As a result, the teaching of English in Indonesia has been successful in making students have their mind fully stuffed with all kinds of grammatical labels but without the competence to recognize their functions and let alone use them in different discourses (whether written or spoken). There is then a big discrepancy between what has been taught and what level of competence is supposed to be achieved. The evi-

dence of such flaw is apparent in the so many university graduates who score very poorly on TOEFL as well as a huge number of high school students who have to go to English courses to improve their English as they feel they do not make progress at schools.

Although there has been a shift toward the need to teach English in a more communicative way, teachers generally lack the practical knowledge of how this can be done in the classroom. Until recently, those concerned with education in Indonesia enthusiastically welcome the introduction of the so called 'competency based curriculum'. As suggested by its name, this curriculum is aimed to create a learning process which enables students to build their academic competence through reasoning while at the same exercise their social and emotional skills. Its ultimate goal is to equip students with life skills necessary for their fu-

ture success. This clearly suggests that the teaching of English must enable students to use English in various real-life situations. The idea has spurred extensive discussion everywhere in the papers, seminars, and schools. However, as far as the teaching of English is concerned, there has not been a significant change in the way English is taught in schools. Once again, we seem to be too much preoccupied with what look like a brilliant concept but fail to see how it is translated into moment-to-moment activities in the classroom. The only apparent change is perhaps the curriculum itself which puts more emphasis (in theory) on the learning process to develop more reasoning and multi dimensional skills as well as the language input which involves more 'transactional' languages. However, these two changes tell little about how a teacher can teach in the classroom in the most efficient and interesting way.

In general, the teaching of English in formal schools in Indonesia can be characterized as follows:

- (a) A heavy emphasis on grammatical labels
- (b) A teacher-centered class
- (c) Mechanical rather than meaningful

This paper tries to offer a breakthrough to the recurrent problems of how to bridge teaching of English at a conceptual level with a real day-to-day classroom approach and method. Similarly, how different views and theories on language learning and acquisition can be synthesized into workable instructional programs in the classroom.

2. Review of Related Literature

The debate over language learning theories which would best facilitate acquisition and learning in classrooms has traditionally centered on two major premises : behaviorism and cognitive/nativist approach. It dated back in 1957 when the principles of behavior and reinforcement became the basis for a new theory of the nature of language. It was B.F. Skinner, an

eminent scientist of human behavior, who had created a breeding field for the contemporary thought on the teaching . His book *Verbal Behavior* opened up to new classroom methods (Richards, 1986) such as Situational Language Teaching which put emphasis on specific word lists, pronunciation as well as grammar. Another method, known as Audiolingualism (Stephen Krashen, 1981) soon developed. This method approaches teaching by introducing a dialogue which contains the grammar and vocabulary to be focused on in the lesson. It involves repetition, substitution, transformation, and translation.

Audiolingualism spurred the Direct Method or Army Method, a teacher dominated, oral-based method highlighted by pattern practice and drill. The teacher uses examples of language in order to inductively teach grammar. Students are to try to guess the rules of the language by the examples provided. Teachers interact with students a lot in the target language, asking them questions about relevant topics and trying to use the grammatical structure of the day in the conversation. Accuracy is sought and errors are corrected. This method provides more comprehensible input but it still focuses too much on grammar.

The theory, however, soon came under critical scrutiny by Chomsky (Universal Grammar) who, along with Krashen (Monitor Theory) put forward the idea that an internal biological language-specific aptitudes makes language learning possible. These theories suggest an innate knowledge of grammatical categories such as noun, verb, subject, and object, pronunciation and other cognitive design that would assist with the development of grammatical principles that allow language learning to take place within two independent means, acquisition and learning.

Chomsky's criticism (Chomsky, 1959) against BF Skinner's *Verbal Behavior* , opened the door to various new theories of language and associated language learning theories

(Richards, 1986). Methods like Communicative Language Teaching, Total Physical Response, The Silent Way, Community Language Learning, The Natural Approach, and Suggestopedia, all developed after the Chomsky rebuttal.

I would only cite the last two theories, The Natural Approach and Suggestopedia as they contribute to the method and technique I propose here. In the Natural Approach the teacher speaks only the target language and class time is committed to providing input for acquisition. Students may use either the language being taught or their first language. Errors in speech are not corrected, however homework may include grammar exercises that will be corrected. The goal for the class is to 'talk about ideas, perform tasks, and solve problems' whereas Suggestopedia classes are small and intensive and focus on providing a very low-stress, attractive environment in which acquisition can occur. Some of the students' first language is used at the beginning but most in the target language. The role of the teacher is very important in creating the right atmosphere and in acting out the dialogues that form the core of the content.

Of great importance to note here are some hypotheses about second language acquisition. There are five hypotheses about second language acquisition (Krashen, 1981).

2.1 The acquisition-learning distinction

Adults have two different ways to develop competence in a language: language acquisition and language learning. Language acquisition is a subconscious process similar to the way a child learns language. Language acquirers are not consciously aware of the grammatical rules but rather develop a 'feel' for correctness. Language learning on the other hand refers to the "conscious knowledge of a second language". Thus language learning can be compared to learning about a language.

2.2 The Natural Order Hypothesis

This hypothesis states that "the acquisition of grammatical structures proceeds in a predictable order." For a given language, some grammatical structures tend to be acquired early, others late, regardless of the first language of a speaker.

2.3 The Monitor Hypothesis

The language that one has subconsciously acquired "initiates our utterances in a second language and is responsible for our fluency," whereas the second language that we have consciously learned acts as an editor in situations where the learner has enough time to edit, is focused on form, and knows the rule, such as on a grammar test in a language classroom or when carefully writing a composition. This conscious editor is called the Monitor. Teachers then should aim to produce Optimal Monitor users, who use the Monitor when it is appropriate and when it does not interfere with communication.

2.4 The Input Hypothesis

This hypothesis answers the question of how a language acquirer develops competency overtime. It states that a language acquirer who is at "level I" must receive comprehensible input that is at "level i+1." "We acquire, in other words, only when we understand language that contains structure that is 'a little beyond' where we are now." However, instead of aiming to receive input that is exactly at our i+1 level, we should just focus on communication that is understandable. If we do this, and if we get enough of that kind of input, then we will in effect be receiving and thus acquiring out I+1. "Production ability emerges. It is not taught directly."

2.5 The Affective Filter Hypothesis

This hypothesis states that motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety all affect language acquisition, in effect raising or lowering the

“stickiness” or “penetration” of any comprehensible input that is received.

The abundant number of theories on language learning has suggested that no single approach and method in teaching a language can basically bring about satisfactory results with regard to language learning and acquisition. This paper, seeks to bridge some philosophical differences in the theories of language learning by incorporating those differences (though not 100 %) into workable classroom methods and techniques which would best benefit students in learning a language. Similarly, the procedure level, with its direct impact on the classroom might just be where the proponents of various theories and hypothesis on language learning could find merit in each other’s views.

Below is the elaboration of the classroom method and technique which the writer has formulated. Throughout the method and techniques, we will see how those theories and views on language learning are synthesized. It is then up to us at which point and part of the method and technique those various language theories manifest themselves.

3. A Stress-free Approach to Teaching

It is generally accepted that motivation plays an important role in learning English. In classroom teaching, motivation may be created through a set of interesting activities in the classroom. Therefore, every single classroom activity must be well thought of so as to foster students’ motivation and in turn build their positive attitude towards learning English.

The problem is how to formulate a systematic method consisting of stages and techniques in teaching which in itself can create a favorable learning atmosphere for students as well as offer the most practical and easiest way for students to understand and use English.

Below is the elaboration of the Method in question. It starts with Presentation, Checking Vocabulary, Elicitation, Standardization, Drill, Board Stage, and Speaking Practice.

3.1 Presentation

Presenting a new structure is a crucial stage in teaching. It is where the understanding of any given lesson is initially shaped. A presentation which is done improperly will likely lead to confusion and even frustration on the part of students. Therefore, it has to be dealt out with such care so as to consider not only some linguistic aspects but also human psychology. For example, it is surprising how such a seemingly trivial matter as correcting students mistake can have considerable impact on their motivation similarly presenting a new structure through inappropriate context would make understanding even more difficult. Presentation consists of:

- a. **Pre teach/check vocabulary:** before starting making a presentation it is very important to check any vocabulary which might be unknown to students. Here are some techniques to check vocabulary
 - 1) Use pictures to check or elicit vocabulary from students/ pictures can be readily obtained from magazines, books or any other publication. Cut out the pictures and make them into flashcards.
 - 2) Draw on the board and let students guess. This can be slightly awkward especially if you are bad at drawing
 - 3) Mime the word and let students guess.
 - 4) Bring in real objects especially of small sizes into the classroom such as pencil, lighter, matches etc.
 - 5) Bring in a miniature of an object and let students guess the word you want to teach

A question might be posed as to why we bother to check or go at great length explaining what a word means and why we don’t just give it away instead. Well there are four reasons :

- (a) to check your students’ previous knowledge. One or two of your students might

have known the word you want to elicit and by checking, you allow this particular student to show off to the rest of the class and this will help build his/her self-confidence

- (b) to maintain the flow of your presentation. You don't expect one of your students to raise a hand to ask you about an unknown word while you are in the middle of presentation. In addition, you are not testing any vocabulary to them so it is only fair that they know before hand any words you use during presentation as they have to concentrate on the form concept and function
- (c) to arouse their interest. It is surprising that most students would love to see their teacher drawing or miming something in front of them. They would become more enthusiastic once they can get the word right
- (d) to form some ideas about what you are going to teach and gradually to make them curious about what comes next

Those techniques are basically designed to let students pick up the language themselves during the lesson. By doing so, you allow from the very beginning to take an active role in the learning process. The more your teaching has an indirect nature (that is you don't directly tell them) , the more interesting your lesson would likely be.

b. Building Context

Once you have checked the vocabulary, you can start building the context. A context is any situation in which a particular language expression is naturally used. A context must be :

- 1) realistic: that is to the extent of the students 's experience and knowledge to understand
- 2) meaningful: that is it has sufficient and realistic features for a language expression to be logically discerned by students.

There are different ways to establish context :

- 1) drawing: e.g. drawing a situation in the dining room to teach present activities such as 'he is having dinner'
- 2) miming: you can mime different facial expressions. For example, when you want to teach past participle 'ed' you can mime "he looks shocked" or "he seems disappointed"
- 3) verbal situation: this is most possible with students who have acquired a large number of vocabulary. With complete beginner, it could be difficult as their vocabulary is limited. you can use words to describe but make sure students are familiar with the words you use. For example, when teaching 'recent activities' you can elicit a sentence like 'she has been working hard all day" by saying " Sally is now sitting back, her eyes half-closed, she looks very tired, there is some paper work on her desk. It is now 6 pm. What can you say about Sally?"
- 4) Pictures: if you are not comfortable with the above techniques, you can cut out a picture from a magazine and blow it up. For example, you can easily find a picture of people in full color. Cut them out and bring it into the classroom to teach students about how to describe people, e.g. he is tall with short curly hair'

3.2 Elicitation

This is the stage when you try to get students produce the target language you are teaching. Since it is very likely that during the process your students might not be able to come up with the right target language, you need to deal with errors very carefully so as not to discourage them from speaking (in the meantime, let us agree here that an error means a mistake made by students out of their ignorance) Here are some techniques to correct or show to your students that they have just made a mistake:

a. Finger Correction

You can use your finger to locate the mistake. So a thumb represents the first word, a pointer the second word and so on. Hold up your hand with the palm facing you and repeatedly point to the finger where the mistake is. For example if your student comes up with “Who were you go with yesterday?” you can show that the word ‘were’ is the mistake by repeatedly wiggle your pointer. Similarly, if your students can produce sentence correctly, don’t forget to compliment her /him by saying ‘great’ ‘excellent’ ‘very good’ etc

b. Paraphrasing.

It is very important that you avoid using the word ‘no’ or even ‘wrong’ when students make a mistake. Instead you can use phrases like ‘well yes...but...’ or ‘well not really’. To show the mistake you can paraphrase the sentence. For example, if your students say “How about go to the cinema?”, you can say “well...yes but... say it again ..how about _____ to the cinema?” In this case, you skip the word ‘going’ and say ‘em’ instead to denote that ‘go’ is the wrong one.

c. Peer Correction .

This is a good technique to once again allow a brighter student to show off and can be done especially when the finger correction and paraphrasing would not work. Ask another student to correct the sentence and then compliment her/him on giving you the right sentence. Then you can ask the student who has made an earlier mistake to repeat it.

3.3 Standardization

Standardization is essential to make sure that every student can produce the sentence correctly with the right pronunciation and intonation. This can be done in two different ways:

a. Individual.

The teacher asks some students individu-

ally to produce the target sentence. For example, once you can elicit the right sentence from your students, you can standardize it by asking the other four or five students to repeat it

b. Classical

The teacher asks the whole class to repeat the sentence. Sometimes it is a good idea to combine the two. For example, after standardizing the sentence to two or three students, you can ask the whole class to repeat the sentence.

3.4 Drill

A drill is mostly mechanical, so the main purpose of giving a drill to your students is to simply let some time for any given lesson set in their minds. It is often not a question of how meaningful this activity is in the whole lesson. Your concern is to help students establish understanding more firmly while doing it in the most interesting way possible.

Which part of the sentence can be drilled? Depending on how much variety you expect, a drill can involve the following :

- (a) Change of subject . For example, if you teach “Have you been to Malaysia?” you can ask your students to substitute the subject “you” with third person “he” which involves the change in the auxiliary ‘have’
- (b) Question and Answer. Using prompts on the board (or any other prompts) you can get your students to ask and answer in the target language. For example, draw different faces showing like and dislike. Students have to ask and answer based on the face you are pointing to
- (c) Positive-Negative-Yes/no Question-WH question . You can ask students to make a yes /no question from a statement. For example “she usually goes to school by car” is changed into “Does she usually go to school by car?”

To make the drill more interesting, turn it into a competition. For example, you can divide the class into three groups and assign one student to give a score to the group who can answer your question first.

3.5 Board Stage

This is the stage when the teacher writes up all of the target sentences elicited and standardized during presentation. Why should there be a board stage? Why not giving your students a nicely printed handout containing the target sentences you have taught?

Board stage serves two purposes:

- (a) While your students are copying, there is an internal process of re-establishing understanding
- (b) It helps students memorize the forms by actually writing word by word

It is a good idea that while you are writing on the board, ask your students to reproduce the sentence one by one and if necessary get them to spell and pronounce correctly. Apart from making sure they pronounce correctly, this technique will also keep your students focused on your lesson and allow no space for unexpected mischief.

3.6 Speaking Practice

Speaking activities must be designed to incorporate the following principles

- (a) **Meaningful** : They allow students to communicate in English out of the need inherent in the activity
- (b) **Realistic** : They must be within students' perceived experience and knowledge to discern what they are asked to do
- (c) **Purposeful** : They must give students a purpose why they are doing the activity so that they feel it is relevant to their needs.

Speaking activities must also enable students to engage in variety of activities and at

the same time exercise and develop their skills essential for social life. In terms of the type of interaction, speaking activities must vary as follows:

- (a) **Pair work**: Students work in pairs
- (b) **Group work**: Students work in a group of three or four
- (c) **Class work**: Students mingle as a whole class

Speaking activities can be designed based on the following principles:

- (a) **Info Gap**: Creating an info gap among students. This will give a reason to exchange information
- (b) **Personalized**: Getting students to ask and answer questions/topics related to their individual experience
- (c) **Task Based**: Assigning students a task to complete

4. Conclusion

Teaching English might be best approached through multi-point of views involving a synthesis of different approaches and theories on language learning. This is due to the fact that any given method of teaching cannot claim its superiority over the other methods with regard to the learning outcome. What can be assured though, is how we can maximize every approach to make the learning process as enjoyable as possible. Through this paper, I have tried to present an operational –real classroom method and techniques of teaching which incorporate some major approaches and hypotheses on language learning. This paper hopefully would contribute significantly to the teaching of English in formal schools in Indonesia which has traditionally stopped at a conceptual level but fail to shed light on how teachers can teach in everyday classroom activities.

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