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Betty E. Lau
 Kyoto University of Education
 bgf88222[at]ymail[dot]ne[dot]jp



Cultivating Learning Potential and Teacher Development

Drawing on my learning journeys, I would like to reflect on my practice in traditional Japanese arts, such as tea ceremony, to illustrate how I have found personal growth leading to positive development in my teaching approaches. My experiences have shown me that mental training and self-discipline benefit learning, suggesting that teachers who are better learners can utilize their firsthand experiences to deliver more effective, learner-centered methodologies. Although academic frameworks offer valuable foundations for teaching, their limitations can be challenged and corrected by a grounded, experiential perspective.

PRACTICING TRADITIONAL ARTS AS A MEANS OF MENTAL DISCIPLINE

While learning the Japanese language, I became interested in Japanese traditional arts such as tea ceremony, *kyudo*, *kendo*, and *zen* as forms of mental training and cultivating inner mindfulness. Many of these practices require learners to adhere to a strict regimen of precise procedures and physical movements. This is exemplified in the step-by-step instructions for entering the Tea Room:

With the hand closest to the door handle, first open the door about 1cm. Then move your hand down the door frame at about 20 cm from the floor and open it halfway. Change hands and gently open the remaining one-half of the door. Bow lightly (45 degrees angle) with your back straightened...enter with your right foot... sit about 5cm below the edge of the tatami mat (N. Tanaka, personal communication, Feb 24, 2024)

A common reaction to these rigid guidelines might be, “Why can’t I enter with my left foot instead?” However, the rationale behind which foot is used is ultimately beside the point. These meticulous practices, I believe, serve as a *training ground* for practitioners to develop self-discipline—learning to control their body and mind in every move they make, physically or mentally. Each step is imbued with deeper meaning and significance beyond just the bodily actions, as a result, cultivating self-mastery in the process.

In this way, the mental training I underwent, along with practicing *Zen* meditation gradually sharpened my mental focus and control, and I became less easily distracted or affected by external stimuli. Not only was I able to focus intently on tasks for hours on end, but an improved mental clarity has enabled me to become more observant, detail-oriented, and receptive to instruction. As my cognitive processing grew more effective, a noticeable improvement in my overall learning capacity followed. I have become calmer, less vulnerable to negative emotions (Siegel, 2016) like fear of failure and anxiety due to peer pressure, and less prone to giving in to temptations, a testament to the strengthening of character.

Some might argue that the efficacy of such disciplined training is overstated. However, my personal experience has convinced me that enhanced mental strength (Peterson et al., 2004) and a disciplined mind-body connection can indeed transform an individual, significantly benefiting one’s overall learning development. In the long and strenuous quest of learning, intellectual or not, mental

resilience provides the necessary *muscles* to scale any mountain. These two variables - mental strength and learning capacity - are positively correlated. As Sheerin noted, learner development can be compared to the planting of seeds: “to know what seeds might grow we first have to know the soil” (1989, p. 34). I would add, “before seeds are planted, first prepare and cultivate the soil.”

REFLECTIONS ON POSITIVE ENHANCEMENTS IN TEACHERS’ DEVELOPMENT

The seemingly arbitrary rules of traditional Japanese arts, then, are actually means to a transformative end—cultivating self-discipline, focus, and emotional control. Based on my firsthand experience as a learner, it is undeniable that mental fortitude is the key that unlocks transformative learning. I strongly believe that mental strength should be the foundation for all forms of learning, as it is vital for profound growth and development.

This heightened self-awareness and personal understanding of my own learning process is invaluable for enhancing teaching effectiveness. By deeply reflecting on my learning journey, I can develop a more empathetic, learner-centered approach that is tailored to meet the unique needs of my students. What better way to understand the needs and challenges faced by learners than to draw on my firsthand experience as an engaged, self-directed learner?

For instance, in my experience learning foreign languages, I have applied many SLA research-backed strategies, so I can attest to their validity and effectiveness. By combining established pedagogical frameworks with my personal insights of foreign language learning, I can develop teaching approaches that are tailored to deliver the best possible outcomes for my students in their language acquisition. This dual-faceted approach has been pivotal and highly beneficial in enhancing my effectiveness as a language instructor. The methodologies I feel are the most effective include:

- Maximizing input exposure (auditory and visual) and encouraging extensive reading of authentic, contextually rich materials. Vocabulary should be taught in context with repetition and drilling to reinforce memory retention and solidify understanding
- Instead of relying on rote memorization, adopt a communicative approach that provides students with ample opportunities to actively produce the target language and interact with others through speaking and writing. I aim to minimize explicit grammar instruction, focusing instead on the process of scaffolding and transferring input to output skills. Also, I am cautious of excessive error correction, as it may demotivate learners.
- To nurture learners’ motivation, it is essential to create a supportive, low-anxiety classroom environment. Positive reinforcement like compliments and rewards proves highly effective in boosting learners’ self-confidence. I also try to encourage students to become conscious, autonomous learners which can further enrich their learning experience.

LIMITATIONS OF PEDAGOGICAL THEORIES: ACCOUNTING FOR INDIVIDUAL LEARNER CHARACTERISTICS

Over the years, I have employed these methodologies in the language classroom. While I believe these strategies are among the best available, their effectiveness is not guaranteed and is often affected by individual student characteristics.

To illustrate this point, at the end of a one-year English Communication course, I asked some freshmen if they had become more comfortable speaking in English. The Science majors reported that although their anxiety levels had decreased and their English skills improved, their willingness to actively communicate in English remained relatively low. They practiced speaking because it was required, not out of intrinsic motivation. In contrast, several Physical Education majors had a very different experience. Despite scoring lower on the university entrance exam than the Science students, their level of self-confidence had significantly improved after one year of consistent output practice. They attributed their positive attitude to having a part-time job that allowed them to regularly interact with

foreign customers. They all agreed that the communication skills they gained in class were useful and practical, and the success they achieved at work had greatly boosted their motivation to speak English. Enthusiastically, the Physical Education majors told me they would no longer hesitate to speak with foreigners the next time they walked down the streets of Kyoto.

Despite using similar teaching strategies that emphasized output practice and supportive learning environments, the contrasting outcomes between the two groups showed me how individual learner characteristics can profoundly impact the effectiveness of language learning methodologies that include:

- Personality and psychological disposition (e.g. willingness to communicate)
- Prior English learning experiences and performance
- Opportunities for real-world interaction and application (part-time job)
- Intrinsic motivation and perception of relevance

Clearly, different students will react differently to the same instructional approach. There is no one-size-fits-all formula that can optimize learning effectiveness for every individual in a given class. While academic theories provide a valuable foundation, relying solely on them has limitations. Factors like learning styles, attitudes, anxiety levels, and exposure to the target language outside the classroom likely play a significant role in moderating the impact of instructional methods. I believe that a more nuanced, learner-centered model of classroom dynamics that accounts for these individual differences could help teachers fine-tune their approaches and address the unique needs of diverse students. By exploring these issues through research and practical experience, we can gain valuable insights to inform more effective and personalized instruction. Could it be that one way of understanding individual differences in our students can be achieved through experiencing different types of learning ourselves as educators?

EMBRACING LIFELONG LEARNING FOR EFFECTIVE TEACHING

As an educator, maintaining a lifelong learner's mindset is crucial. In my opinion, while linguistic models provide valuable guidance, teachers must go beyond just theory and gain firsthand experience in learning and teaching. Although teachers possess a competitive advantage with their pedagogical knowledge and expertise, they must continually learn and evolve to become better educators.

By engaging in hands-on learning, like tea ceremony, a foreign language, sports, music, or cooking, teachers can observe, experiment, and refine their learning processes. This heightened self-awareness of their learning enables teachers to better empathize with the unique needs and perspectives of their diverse students. In turn, this empowers them to integrate novel, learner-centered ideas into their teaching methodologies. Ultimately this enhances the teacher's professional development and allows them to share more authentic learning experiences with their students.

In essence, I think teacher development is an ongoing process of self-learning and growth. The teacher's role is to facilitate learning by creating a positive environment for students to develop intellectually, mentally, and personally. True learning requires both theoretical understanding and practical application—the ability to learn how to learn. As Aristotle advocated, education should transcend mere knowledge acquisition, aiming instead for the holistic development of the individual. Whether student or teacher, the pursuit of self-fulfillment and growth is the essential purpose of education.

My key beliefs are:

1. *Teachers as Conscious, Disciplined, and Effective Learners*: educators must embody the qualities of conscious, engaged learners themselves to model effective learning strategies and provide more meaningful guidance to our students.
2. *Balancing Theory and Practice*: integrating educational theories and firsthand experience is crucial for continually refining teaching approaches.

3. *Teacher Development as Self-Learning*: maintaining an adaptive, growth mindset throughout one's career is essential for educator development.
4. *The Teacher as Facilitator of Holistic Growth*: the teacher's role is to facilitate intellectual, mental, and personal development, and this holistic approach is essential for empowering students to achieve self-fulfillment.

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