

## DEVELOPING EMPATHY THROUGH ROLE REVERSAL: A PERSONAL CASE STUDY

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### Introduction

After a decade of working in translator training in Israel and another of teaching English majors, two years ago I accepted a position teaching English for Academic Purposes (EAP) at a teacher-training college in Jerusalem. I walked into the EAP classroom confident that teaching EAP to future teachers would have a great deal in common with teaching Hebrew-English translation or academic writing. I walked out of my first lesson completely flummoxed. Despite my advanced degrees and considerable teaching experience, I was totally unprepared for the challenges of teaching EAP.

Here I discuss a personal case study in role reversal. I had no prior experience in dance when I signed up for a weekly class in Broadway Jazz and I am only marginally better at dance now than I was when I began. However, my lack of progress in Broadway Jazz has been in inverse proportion to my success in understanding my EAP students.

This paper begins with a discussion of EAP, including issues of language anxiety and motivation. The focus then moves to the literature on role reversal, specifically the language teacher as language student. Against this background, I introduce my experiment in role reversal and present the parallels between my experience learning dance and my students' experience in the EAP classroom. The paper closes with the argument that all teachers – regardless of whether they teach first graders or graduate students – would be well advised to study something that does not come naturally to them.

### Teaching EAP

Teaching English in an English-speaking country is fundamentally different from teaching English in a non-English-speaking country such as Israel. Students who live in Canada or Australia presumably have more exposure to English and more motivation to learn the language than do students in Israel. In addition, English is a third language for many students in Israel. The vast majority of Arab students speak Arabic as their mother tongue, with either Hebrew as L2 and English as L3 or the reverse. Although most of the

Jewish students come from Hebrew-speaking homes, some have French or Russian as their mother tongue, with Hebrew as L2 and English as L3.

Teaching EAP is not the same as teaching English composition or EFL. Sharpling (2002) maintains that 'the EAP practitioner's role is a highly complex one, for which no preparation seems to be wholly adequate' (82). The EAP teachers interviewed by Krzanowski (2001) recall feelings of frustration and inadequacy – 'I would spend hours preparing a lesson for my EAP students, but they would not respond to it or appreciate it' – as well as dismay at their students' low level of English.

In the staff room at my college, the EAP instructors voice these sentiments time and again. In fact, we spend so much time discussing the difficulties of the job that there is little time left for debating how much emphasis should be placed on grammar or whether our students need to understand the finer points of English tenses. Why do the students come unprepared to class? What can we do to lower their anxiety level? How can we motivate students who view our courses as a burden?

### Language anxiety and motivation

The EAP curriculum at my institution has a double agenda: (a) to prepare the students to take and pass the final exam of the course, and later the exemption exam, and (b) to improve the students' command of English. In the students' eyes, these are two discrete objectives. Although they are eager to pass the exemption exam, our students have little ambition to actually master the language.

Most of our students enjoyed little success in their high-school English classes, and students who consider themselves weak in the foreign language are prime candidates for language anxiety (Young 1991: 427). People who suffer from language anxiety will find the process of learning a second or foreign language to be 'psychologically unsettling' (Wong 2102: 65). Crucially, language

anxiety negatively affects achievement (Doğan and Tuncer 2016).

Hand-in-hand with their high level of anxiety, our students have a low level of motivation. This is unfortunate, since motivation is an essential ingredient in the process of learning a second or foreign language (Dornyei 1994: 273). The factors that contribute to a student's level of motivation include (a) whether the student expects to succeed or fail, and (b) whether the student believes that there are tangible benefits to learning the language (Oxford and Shearin 1994: 19).

Based on their lack of success in high school, our students are convinced that learning English is a herculean undertaking and that they will not be equal to the challenge. Students who enter the college with weak English – as most do – must take four EAP courses before they are ready to take the exemption exam, and there is no guarantee that they will pass the exam the first time they take it. The second demotivating factor is the students' view that English is irrelevant to their professional futures, given that they are headed for careers as preschool teachers, special-ed teachers, science teachers, and so on.

The presence of language anxiety and the absence of motivation can be a recipe for failure: *language anxiety* → *low motivation* → *low achievement* → *increased anxiety*. We can break this cycle if we are able to find a way to lower the student's level of language anxiety.

### Professional development and role reversal

Many in the field of education believe that professional development makes good teachers into better teachers. Yoon et al. (2007) characterize professional development as 'a key mechanism for improving classroom instruction and student achievement' (1). The authors posit a causal relationship between professional development and student achievement: 'First, professional development enhances teacher knowledge and skills. Second, better knowledge and skills improve classroom teaching. Third, improved teaching raises student achievement' (4). In other words: *professional development* → *better knowledge and skills* → *better teaching* → *higher student achievement*.

An unusually effective type of professional development for language teachers is role reversal: the language teacher becomes a language student. 'One semester of Modern Greek taught me more about teaching language than it did about speaking Greek, and it taught me more than I had learned in several years of attending conferences and

sifting through journal articles' (Ransdell 1993: 45).

Although each of the authors presented below has his or her own tale to tell, they share the view that their stint as language learners gave them a new perspective on their work as language teachers.

In 1984-5, the Teachers' Centre at International House, London, offered a part-time course in Mandarin Chinese for teachers of English, designed to give them 'a chance to renew their connection with language learning, and thereby to become more sensitive to the problems and processes confronting their learners' (Lowe 1987: 96). The participants' journal entries explore matters such as teaching methods and learning strategies; motivation and anxiety; and the need to reevaluate certain of their preconceptions.

Suleiman (1992), a teacher of Arabic as a foreign language, set out to study German as a means of professional development. His diary entries touch upon the themes of anxiety, the atmosphere of the class, and the teacher's methodologies and styles.

Ransdell (1993), an English teacher who studied Greek, reports: 'my first-hand exposure to new techniques introduced immediate and innovative changes in my teaching' (45); in other words, he applied his new knowledge and skills in the classroom, which Yoon et al. (2007) deem a *sine qua non* for improved student achievement.

The activities McDonough (2002) especially liked as a learner, such as dictation and translation, 'seemed to self-select as those most divergent from my teaching preferences' (405). McDonough underscores the disconnect between her experience as a language teacher and as a student of modern Greek.

This is true as well of Burden (2007): 'I became aware that I enjoyed and valued activities that as a "communicative" language teacher I had been discouraging in my own "conversation" classroom. This dissonance led me to question my own teaching practice' (157). Here, again, professional development enhances teacher knowledge and skills, which improves classroom teaching and hopefully leads to higher achievement.

When language teachers sit in the foreign-language classroom, they have an opportunity to observe the instructor's particular style and decide what elements to adopt in their own teaching. Equally if not more important, role reversal can engender empathy and what Sharpling (2002)

terms ‘an appropriate professional disposition’ (p. 83) – and thus a more supportive class climate.

Empathy has been shown to play a pivotal role in the classroom. Empathetic teachers are better at communicating with and motivating their students (Goroshit and Hen 2016: 805). Empathy has the potential to promote the development of trust (Jennings 2011: 135), and trust can lead to improved learning (Cooper 2010: 90). The empathetic teacher is apt to establish a positive classroom climate, which can be capable of ‘fostering student motivation and participation, appropriate kinds of mediation and the development of skills and knowledge’ (Guzmán 2009: 331).

Much of what I experienced from my experiment in role reversal dovetails with the literature. Below I argue that studying something new and difficult can help new and veteran teachers alike become more empathetic to their students and more responsive to their needs and desires.

#### **Role reversal: EAP instructor as dance student**

I signed up for a class in Broadway Jazz on a lark. Since I had never considered myself particularly coordinated, I was neither surprised nor disappointed when it quickly became apparent that I would never master even the basics of jazz dancing. I was astounded, though, by how closely my experience in the dance studio mirrored my students’ experience in the EAP classroom, with two vital differences. First, the EAP students are enrolled in a required course while I signed up for Broadway Jazz of my own volition; second, all semester the EAP students fret about the final exam, while Broadway Jazz is held in a dance studio which justifiably prides itself on its non-competitive, non-judgmental atmosphere.

Dance, a complex art form, challenges the mind and the body. Just as my EAP students find it difficult to produce a grammatical English sentence, I find it impossible to remember the steps in a simple combination. My EAP students believe that they will never know English; I am certain that I will never be able to dance. Like the language teachers/learners, I saw an unmistakable disconnect between what I said and believed as a teacher and what I felt and did as a student. Below I present five areas where my strategy as a teacher was at odds with my experience as a student and discuss how role reversal affected my style of teaching.

#### **Changing seats**

As a teacher: I regularly request that my students change seats, asking those who customarily sit in the front row to move back, asking those who like the seat near the door to move to the windows, and so on. I was taught that having the students change seats contributes to better classroom dynamics. Because I teach in Israel, I also see this as an opportunity to encourage my Jewish and Arab students to sit side by side, when their natural preference seems to be to sit on opposite sides of the classroom.

As a student: I gravitate to the second row on the left.

Post role reversal: The students sit wherever they like, and generally spend the semester in the seat they chose on day one. I do, however, find an opportunity in almost every lesson for group work, which generally involves new sitting arrangements and also helps decrease the anxiety level in the classroom (Davis 1997: 268).

#### **Doing homework**

As a teacher: Many English teachers are convinced there is a relationship between the size of the students’ vocabulary and their ability to read and understand an English text. I tell my students that they are certainly capable of learning 20 new vocabulary words per week: ‘Just go into the quizlet app when you are on the bus or standing in line at the supermarket. This really shouldn’t be a problem.’ I am irked when the students maintain that they simply do not have time for studying vocabulary.

As a student: Our teacher, Michelle, graciously sent all the students a video clip of our three-minute combination, so we can practice at home. I have never found the time to open the file.

Post role reversal: I am far more sympathetic to my students’ time constraints: ‘Make sure to find the time to go into quizlet to study the new vocabulary. If you learn these words, it will be so much easier for you to read next week’s text.’

#### **The pace of the lesson**

As a teacher: I want to teach as much as I can in each 90-minute session. Typically, I will explain a certain principle, offer four or five examples, and then expect the students to be able to apply it themselves.

As a student: I am most relaxed when Michelle demonstrates a movement several times without music and then several times with music, before she asks us to try it ourselves.

Post role reversal: I will explain an idea, explain it again in different words, and if the students look

puzzled, explain it a third time or even a fourth. I try to convey the feeling that I am not in a rush and will not move on to another subject until the students are comfortable with this one.

This insight accords with a remark made by one of the English teachers who studied Mandarin Chinese:

I used to think, when there was a pause in my teaching, ‘Oh Lord, they’re not getting their money’s worth. They’re getting bored.’ But I noticed in the Chinese class that when we did have a pause, when, say, Martin was handing out things for a game, I was very relieved to have a little break, and didn’t feel that time was being wasted. If I hadn’t noticed that, I would have carried on worrying about pauses in my own teaching. (Lowe 1987: 93-4)

### **Freedom to make mistakes**

As a teacher: I try to convey the sense that I am in control of the class and of the material.

As a student: On the rare occasions that Michelle stops the dance for a moment so that she can reconstruct the steps, we students can appreciate that dance is difficult, and not only for us novices. This gives us a modicum of self-confidence, even if it does not necessarily make us better dancers.

Post role reversal: When my students’ frustration level is rising to the point that they can no longer focus on the task at hand, I inject a note of levity by confessing that I am the clumsiest dancer in my Broadway Jazz class. If I can acknowledge my strengths and weaknesses, by extension the students can too.

The literature supports this approach. Young (1991) sees evidence that ‘instructors can reduce language anxiety by adopting an attitude that mistakes are part of the language learning process and that mistakes will be made by everyone’ (432). Students should be made aware that mistakes are par for the course, and that their teachers also make mistakes when they use their L2s or L3s (Dornyei 1994: 281). Students who allow themselves to make mistakes are more prone to take risks, and successful language learners are risk takers (Suleiman 1992: 33).

### **To correct the student or not?**

As a teacher: I hesitate before correcting my students, particularly in front of the class, out of concern that they might find the feedback demoralizing or embarrassing.

As a student: Because the atmosphere in the studio is relaxed and lighthearted, I am not demoralized by Michelle’s corrections; to the

contrary, I am pleased that Michelle thinks it is worth her time to give me feedback. Michelle’s corrections make me feel that I am important to her and a valued member of the group.

Post role reversal: I am less stinting with my feedback. In addition, I try to find an opportunity during each lesson to have a quiet word with every student, whether about the material or not. The students appreciate the personal attention. This accords with Guzmán’s (2009) finding that ‘students placed extremely high value on the teacher knowing all the students’ names and addressing them individually, taking care to ensure comprehension or identify any lingering doubts’ (331).

Mousavi (2007) defines the mandate of the EFL teacher as follows: ‘EFL teachers are expected to empathize with learners, try to motivate them and encourage them to participate in classroom activities, and generally speaking, to help facilitate learning’ (33). This description holds true for all language teachers, not only those who work in EFL. Role reversal, whatever the venue, can give the teacher the tools to empathize with, motivate, and encourage their students.

### **Discussion**

According to Borko (2004), ‘learning occurs in many different aspects of practice, including [teachers’] classrooms, their school communities, and professional development courses or workshops. It can occur in a brief hallway conversation with a colleague, or after school when counselling a troubled child’ (4). In a similar vein, there are many different options for role reversal, including – but certainly not limited to – foreign-language classes. It is important, however, that teachers opt to learn something that they will find challenging.

Many teachers, and in particular those who work at the tertiary level, were strong students from day one. In elementary school, high school and beyond, they rarely experienced feelings of frustration and failure, rarely believed that a certain task was beyond them. To fully empathize with all of our students, including those who are struggling with English, we need to learn something that does not come naturally to us. A language teacher who is a gifted artist should not take a drawing class if he or she is to gain a real understanding of what weaker students experience on a daily basis. We should put ourselves in a position where our progress is incremental and we are likely to make mistakes, again and again.

I would suggest two other criteria for this form of professional development. First, role reversal should involve a group of students and a teacher who serves as an authority figure and role model. Self-study and on-line learning, which have little in common with the language classroom, would not be appropriate choices. Second, the course should meet regularly for six months if not more.

There is a growing body of literature on the benefits of mindfulness practice for teachers, school children, and future medical professionals. Since both role reversal and mindfulness work to foster empathy and reduce anxiety, teachers on sabbatical might consider the option of combining role reversal with a course in mindfulness.

### Broader implications and future directions

Given that 'EAP teaching is geared specifically to the learning needs of particular students within an institution' (Sharpling 2002: 86), can the findings of one case study apply to EAP in general?

The interrelationship between language anxiety, motivation, and achievement is not unique to EAP students at one particular institution or even to EAP as a whole. Doğan and Tuncer's (2016) analysis of 683 people enrolled in English classes in Turkey, for example, shows 'a statistically significant negative correlation between the students' foreign language classroom anxiety and their achievement in foreign language' (24). According to Young (1991), 'One of the current challenges in second and foreign language teaching is to provide students with a learner-centered, low-anxiety classroom environment' (426). In a relaxed environment, students can escape the negative correlation between language anxiety and achievement. The teacher can instead establish a new, positive dynamic: *decreased anxiety* → *higher motivation* → *higher achievement* → *decreased anxiety*.

Based on the literature and my own experience, I would maintain that all language teachers – perhaps even all teachers – can benefit from role reversal. The question that remains is whether role reversal has a positive effect on achievement. If there is a causal relationship between professional development and student achievement, as proposed by Yoon et al. (2007), role reversal should lead to better academic performance. Suleiman (1992), McDonough (2002), and the other teacher/learners whose papers on role-reversal are discussed above analyze how role reversal affected them as teachers, but not how their experience in the foreign-language classroom affected their students. While I believe that role reversal has made me a more successful teacher,

there is no empirical data to support this claim. The impact of role reversal on the student, and specifically on student achievement, is a subject for future study.

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