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What My EFL Students Taught Me*

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Abstract

This article reports on a research project in which I kept a teaching journal for an academic year as I taught four lower-intermediate EFL classes at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. The classes focused on learning strategies, listening and speaking. In a number of surprising ways, working with these EFL learners influenced my teaching of graduate students (who intend to be language teachers), not just in terms of content but also in terms of the procedures I use. In this paper the findings from the teaching diary are related to scaffolding, schema theory, learning styles, and teacher development.

This article is about professional development, which is one of the main purposes for attending conferences or reading journals like this new *PAC Journal*. As teachers, we wish to learn new things, to be inspired and informed. In this paper I want to share with you some experiences I had recently which led to professional development opportunities in my life. Specifically, I want to tell you about what my EFL students taught me.

I usually work at the Monterey Institute of International Studies (MIIS), a graduate school in Monterey, California, where the entire curriculum revolves around language and culture. At MIIS we train teachers of EFL and ESL as well as teachers of other modern languages. We also train translators and interpreters, and have degree programs in international management, commercial diplomacy, international environmental policy, international public administration, and so on. My regular job involves administration and teacher education. I usually teach graduate courses in statistics, research methods, language assessment, classroom observation, and so on, to future language teachers. When I get to teach English, it is normally English for Academic Purposes for graduate students in these various programs. These students have TOEFL scores higher than 550.

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The Context

In 1996-97, I was fortunate to spend a sabbatical year at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, where I taught EFL to college freshmen. In this article I will use data I collected during that year to illustrate what my EFL students taught me about language teaching and learning.

I will use qualitative data about one teacher's struggles (my own) as a case study, specifically a diary study, which will serve as a point of departure in this discussion of teacher learning. I will also share with you the results of a quantitative study that sought significant differences in both the students' listening comprehension and their attitudes about the perceived difficulty of the course objectives, before and after the fifteen-week semester. Let me start with some background information about the context.

In 1963 the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) was incorporated in the northeast corner of the New Territories to establish a university in which the principal language of instruction was Chinese (in this case, Cantonese). Today, CUHK courses are offered in both Cantonese and English, at the discretion of the faculty members.

Although English is not a compulsory subject in the CUHK curriculum, it is a requirement for university admission. University freshmen will typically have had up to sixteen years of prior English instruction, although historically secondary schools have emphasized reading and writing rather than listening and speaking. Secondary school EFL teachers are frequently university graduates with little or no pedagogical training, and they themselves are sometimes not very confident of their own English abilities. In many cases, the CUHK EFL classes may be the students' first exposure to proficient or native-speaking teachers, and to expectations that they will actually talk during English lessons.

The specific course I taught was called "English Language Improvement Strategies I", which is described in the Student Handbook as follows:

> This course is designed for students who want to improve their general abilities in listening and speaking in English. Specifically, it focuses on strategies aimed at solving language problems as well as encouraging students to be responsible for managing their own language learning. The course is particularly suitable for students in their first year of attendance.

The course emphasized speaking and listening as well as learner training and the development of strategies for the students' ongoing improvement outside of class. (There were two required textbooks: H. Douglas Brown's [1996], *A Practical Guide to Language Learning: A Fifteen-week Program of Strategies for Success,* and Ellis and Sinclair' s [1989] *Learning to Learn English.*) In addition, students were expected to use the Independent Learning Center, a well-equipped self-access center on campus, for at least one hour per week.

The class met three hours each week. The maximum enrollment was 22 students per section. I taught two sections of the course in the fall semester of 1996 and two the following spring semester, with a total of 86 students in the four sections over the course of the year. I would characterize the students' proficiency as roughly lower intermediate with some learners at the intermediate level. (For most, normal paced English conversation with a non-Chinese was difficult if not demoralizing.)

For those accustomed to teaching EFL, this context may sound familiar, but for me it was a new situation, which provided many interesting challenges (see Bailey, 1998). As I began teaching at CUHK, I was reminded of Jerry Gebhardt's comment that "student teachers seem to have opportunities to change their teaching behavior when ... [they] are given a break from their usual teaching setting and a chance to teach in a new setting" (1990, p. 124). Likewise, in my own research (Bailey, 1992), a portion of those teachers who responded to my questions about why they changed their teaching replied that something about their job context had changed, which either gave them opportunities for professional development or demanded that they change their teaching. In a broad sense, the current study also relates to the literature on teacher learning and how teachers change.

The Data Base

Methodologically speaking, this article reports on some classroom research I conducted about my own learning, my students learning, and the interaction among us. Classroom research is "research in a contextually defined setting" (van Lier, 1988, p.1). It is defined as research which "treats the classroom not just at the setting for investigation but, more importantly, as the object of investigation" (Allwright, 1983, p.191). All or part of the data "are derived from the observation or measurement of the classroom performances of teachers and students" (Long, 1980, p. 3).

Classroom research often utilizes both quantitative and qualitative data, and that is the case here. However, Allwright and Bailey (1991) have noted that these terms are a bit over-simplified. What we really need to ask in any given study is how the data were collected (quantitatively or qualitatively) and how they were analyzed (again, either quantitatively or qualitatively). In this article the quantitative data provide a backdrop against which to interpret the qualitative data.

Quantitative Data

During my year at CUHK, I was fortunate to be able to conduct some research (Bailey and Saunders, 1998; Saunders and Bailey, 1998) with my colleague, Sonya Saunders, who taught the same EFL course I did. Since the class emphasized listening, she and I wanted to know whether there were significant differences in our students' listening comprehension skills at the beginning and end of the fifteen-week semester, as measured by a video-based standardized test produced by the BBC and the British Council. We also wanted to know whether the students' perceptions of difficulty changed, so we created a self-assessment questionnaire, using the familiar five-point Likert scale format, based on the pre-established course objectives. This questionnaire and the BBC-British Council test of listening comprehension were administered at the beginning and end of the semester to a total of 130 EFL students. The students' mean test scores, their self-assessment ratings, and the statistical analyses thereof provided the data in that study. In other words, these data were both collected and analyzed quantitatively.

Qualitative Data

I also kept a written diary of my teaching experience. The final teaching journal consisted of 52 word-processed, single-spaced pages for fall semester and 58 pages for spring semester, not counting the attached lesson plans and teaching materials. It is through excerpts taken from this teaching journal that I wish to illustrate issues related to teacher learning. The database provided by the teaching journal entries were qualitatively collected and qualitatively analyzed.

The teaching documented in the journal took place within a course framework that was more clearly defined for me (in a sense, more prescribed) than any I had worked in for over twenty years. The textbooks had been selected, many additional teaching materials prepared, and the course objectives set before I ever arrived in Hong Kong. Major assignments (such as the students' weekly entries in their dialogue journals and their final oral presentations) had already been determined. The evaluative mechanisms were in place and the required university-wide grading system was norm-referenced and highly codified.

I will cite selected excerpts from my teaching journal, but not because they depict brilliant teaching. On the contrary, they portray an experienced teacher (me) in a new context, struggling with circumstances quite different from those to which I was accustomed. The program, my colleagues, the university bureaucracy, the surrounding culture, the students (their age group, their first language and their professional goals) — all these elements of a new job in a new environment — made me rethink my teaching. After many years of teacher education and ESL teaching, I needed to relearn to teach EFL. This is not surprising. What is surprising, to me at least, is how the experience has transferred to my usual work as a teacher educator in California.

The Research Framework

The primary data collection and analysis procedure I used in this instance was the diary study. The data consisted of entries in my teaching journal, and the overarching tradition in which I was working was that of reflective teaching (Kwo, 1994; Richards and Lockhart, 1994). Before I tell you about the experiences I had, let me say a few words about diary studies and reflective teaching – the methodological frameworks I have used in analyzing my data – and about scaffolding – the theoretical framework I used in interpreting the data.

Diary Studies

In a sense, a diary study is a kind of case study. According to Bailey and Oschner (1983, p. 189),

> A diary study in second language learning, acquisition or teaching is an account of a second language experience as recorded in a first-person journal. The diarist may be a language teacher or a language learner – but the central characteristic of the diary studies is that they are introspective: The diarist studies his own teaching or learning. Thus he can report on affective factors, language learning [or teaching] strategies, and his own perceptions – facets of the language learning [or teaching] experience which are normally hidden or largely inaccessible to an external observer

In conducting a diary study, the teacher or learner (or, in some cases, another researcher) sifts through the diary entries looking for patterns, puzzles, salient events, and so on.

Teachers can keep journals for research (for instance, as part of the data collection in an action research project), or for professional development purposes (see Bailey, Curtis and Nunan, 2001). In this case I was not conducting action research, though I was systematically collecting data. I was simply keeping a close watch on my own teaching, to see what I could learn and how I could improve.

Analyzing journal entries, fieldnotes or other non-quantified data is often a recursive process of noticing trends or patterns and then looking more closely at the data to see how stable, frequent or striking those patterns are. In this case, I kept the teaching journal for the entire academic year I spent in Hong Kong. But then, when I returned to California I noticed some differences in my graduate teaching. This realization made me wonder how those developments had occurred. I then read through the entire CUHK teaching journal for indications that those changes might have begun in my EFL classes. Shortly thereafter I began reading about scaffolding, and that framework sent me back to the original journal entries once more.

Reflective Teaching

This iterative, analytic process of sifting through the diary data is not unlike reflective teaching. What is reflective teaching? According to Richards and Lockhart (1994, p. 1),

> A reflective approach to teaching is one in which teachers and student teachers collect data about teaching, examine their attitudes, beliefs, assumptions, and teaching practices, and use the information obtained as a basis for critical reflection about teaching.

Richards and Lockhart also make five assumptions about teaching (ibid.)

1. An informed teacher has an extensive knowledge base about teaching.
2. Much can be learned about teaching through self-inquiry.
3. Much of what happens in teaching is unknown to the teacher.
4. Experience is insufficient as a basis for development.
5. Critical reflection can trigger a deeper understanding of teaching.

We will return to these points at the conclusion of this article, to see how data from my teaching journal relate to these ideas.

Scaffolding

Before we examine the data, however, one more theoretical framework must be considered. That is the concept of scaffolding, which will be used to discuss the journal entries.

In the past few years, ideas about scaffolding from first-language learning theory have begun to influence second language teachers and researchers. The concept is really a metaphor about how people learn. Think of a scaffold on the outside of a building – either a new building being erected or an old building under repair. A scaffold is a structure of planks, pipes or bamboo (in Hong Kong) which the workmen stand on to make changes to the structure they are creating or improving. One of the central characteristics of scaffolding is that it is temporary by design: From the outset of the construction project, it is intended that the scaffold will be removed as soon as it is no longer needed.

According to Bruner (1983, p. 60), scaffolding is “a process of ‘setting up’ the situation to make the child’s entry easy and successful and then gradually pulling back and handing the role to the child as he becomes skilled enough to manage it.” Based on his research on parents and children interacting in the peek-a-boo game, Bruner says,

> One sets the game, provides a scaffold to assure that the child's ineptitudes can be rescued or rectified by appropriate intervention, and then removes the scaffold part by part as the reciprocal structure can stand on its own (ibid.).

A teacher or another learner may offer scaffolded help by actively participating in the following: (1) recruiting interest in the learning tasks, (2) simplifying the tasks, (3) maintaining pursuit of the learning goals, (4) marking critical features and discrepancies between what has been produced and the ideal solution, (5) controlling frustration during the problem solving, and (6) demonstrating an idealized version of the act to be performed (Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1976). So these types of activities can help learners develop motivation, acquire knowledge, and practice skills.

According to Richard Donato, the concept of scaffolding in language learning is founded on the idea that "a knowledgeable participant can create, by means of speech, supportive conditions in which the novice can participate in, and extend current skills and knowledge to higher levels of competence" (Donato, 1994, p. 40). These supportive conditions do not necessarily have to be created by a native speaker, or even by a teacher. Scaffolding can be jointly accomplished by students as well.

Donato's work focused on what I will call *linguistic scaffolding*. He analyzed the speech of three learners in a French class as they jointly wrote a dialogue. Here is just one bit of his data to illustrate what I mean by linguistic scaffolding (Donato, 1994, p. 44):

Speaker 1: …and then I'll say…*tu as souvenu notre anniversaire de marriage*…or should I say *mon anniversaire*?
Speaker 2: *Tu as…*
Speaker 3: *Tu as…*
Speaker 1: *Tu as souvenu…* you remembered?
Speaker 3: Yeah, but isn't that reflexive? *Tu t'as…*
Speaker 1: Ah, *tu t'as souvenu.*
Speaker 2: Oh, it's *tu es.*
Speaker 1: *Tu es.*
Speaker 3: *Tu es, tu es, tu…*
Speaker 1: *T'es, tu t'es*
Speaker 3: *Tu t'es*
Speaker 1: *Tu t'es souvenu.*

This transcript shows how the students collaboratively select the correct pronoun for the subject, choose between *etre* and *avoir* for the auxiliary, select a reflexive pronoun and make it agree with the subject, and find the correct form of the past participle. Donato's analysis (ibid., p. 45) shows how the three learners, working together, provided one another with scaffolded help for generating the phrase "you remembered" in French.

Leo van Lier (1996, p. 195) describes activities that are examples of *pedagogical scaffolding*. He lists six principles that underlie pedagogical scaffolding, whether we are interacting with children learning L1 skills and behavior (as in Bruner' s work), or with learners of a second or foreign language (as in Donato's research). Here is a brief summary of van Lier' s six principles:

1. **The Continuity Principle**: There are repeated occurrences, often over a protracted period of time, of a complex series of actions, characterized by a mixture of ritual repetition and variations.
2. **The Contextual Support Principle**: The activity is structured so as to create a safe but somewhat challenging environment within which the participation of the child [or learner] is encouraged without being forced, and within which errors are tolerated if not expected.
3. **The Principle of Intersubjectivity**: Throughout the activity the emphasis is on mutual engagement and intersubjectivity of attention.
4. **The Contingency Principle**: Elements in the activity event can be changed, deleted or repeated, depending on actions and reactions of each of the participants; in other words, all actions are contingent, as opposed to pre-determined or scripted.
5. **The Handover Principle**: The child [or learner] is observed closely as the parent or teacher watches for opportunities to hand over parts of the action as soon as the child [or learner] shows signs of being ready for them.
6. **The Principle of Flow**: Actions of the participants are jointly orchestrated, or synchronized, in rhythmic terms, so that the interaction flows in a natural way.

It is here that I wish to focus the rest of this discussion, because what my EFL learners taught me had to do with providing appropriate pedagogical scaffolding for our lessons. In fact, we will see that several of van Lier' s principles are exemplified in the following diary entries.

Scaffolding Data from the Diary

When I returned to my regular job at the Monterey Institute, I kept noticing things that had changed in my graduate teaching, apparently as a result of my year in Hong Kong. I found that I had unknowingly incorporated new techniques in my teaching – or enhanced the use of procedures I had been aware of but had not fully exploited before. So I asked myself the question, "What was it exactly that my EFL students taught me?" Answering that question has led me indirectly to an awareness, and eventually an understanding, of scaffolding. Specifically, in my work as a teacher educator, I have now actively begun to use five pedagogical scaffolding strategies, which I will discuss here. I have labeled these scaffolding strategies with the verb phrases that depict the central action involved in each: (1) use multiple channels, (2) feed me back the task, (3) compare with a classmate, (4) build in the recognition step, and (5) use schema activators.

These strategies are not revolutionary. You may have used some or all of them for years. They are simply important additions to my teaching, and I share them with you as examples of teacher learning, documented in the qualitative data provided by the teaching journal.

Use Multiple Channels

The first scaffolding strategy which has developed in my repertoire is the use of multiple channels for presenting information or instructions. Recent research on learning styles and strategies, as well as on brainbased learning, convincingly demonstrates that different learners acquire knowledge and skills through different channels. I am quite familiar with this literature, and have even taught courses on these topics. It took my Hong Kong students, however, to teach me the importance of teaching through multiple channels of input – particularly in an EFL context, where the surrounding environment does not usually provide frequent opportunities for the students to use their developing language skills outside the classroom.

The teaching journal documents a number of shaky lessons at the beginning of the term, and then a gradually emerging awareness of the value of using multiple channels – written, oral, pictorial, nonverbal, and so on – to convey information. The journal entry for September 11th states,

> After the break [in the morning class], I had them sit in pairs or threes, whichever was physically most comfortable, and try to come up with three to five challenging words or phrases from either the … reading homework or my diary handout…. However, I think my instructions may not have been clear to them, because I didn't give them this assignment before they did the reading. So some of them started rereading the … assignment to try to find such words/phrases. Before my afternoon class I will produce a little sheet that they can write on, which should structure the activity more. They may have been unclear about the word-hunt task, since I gave the instructions only orally — perhaps something in writing will help.

On November 13th, my colleague Andy Curtis observed my morning class for me. A number of things went wrong during this lesson, in which I was supposed to introduce the Robert Frost poem, “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” as well as the International Phonetic Alphabet – the IPA. The journal entry states,

> Andy and I took some time after the first class and discussed how the lesson had gotten side-tracked and how I could alter it a bit in the afternoon. He made a suggestion for a “gimmick” that did the trick for me…. Andy said that for him what had worked one time was that his students could figure out a rhyme pattern, and therefore could figure out the IPA symbols. So I made a color-coded overlay for the overhead transparency of the poem, with the final word of each line written in IPA [symbols]. Then I covered the final word of the line so that the students could only see the IPA completion. In the second class, the lesson was very similar to the first . . . but when I got to introducing the IPA [symbols], . . . I read the poem aloud but stopped and they supplied the last word of each line from memory. From there I asked the students to look at the IPA symbols and figure out what they stood for by color (i.e., rhyme) groupings. They did so, and I passed out both the large placemat-sized IPA chart and the copies of the dictionary page. The page alone had not been very helpful to the morning students because the print was so fine they couldn’t see the minor but important distinctions among some of the symbols.

Andy’s simple suggestion illustrates how useful a peer observer’s perspective can be in helping us acquire new teaching techniques.

The lesson plan of November 18th involved question formation with *do* support. Again the use of multiple channels arises as a way of scaffolding the learners’ task. The journal entry for that day states,

> People often use “gimmick” as a disparaging term for techniques that teachers use, but I find the “gimmick” is often the clever [and memorable] procedure which frees me up to teach something right. Just before class I decided to type up the patterns that I had planned to put on the whiteboard (patterns for forming questions with *do* — a review from last time — and with *be*). I decided to do this because the students seem to benefit from and take seriously that which I put on handouts. (For instance, in their journals some students insert the class handouts and they are marked on as if they have been studied.)….I assume the learners process written examples that don’t fly away as they are spoken better than those that do. I also wrote out the task, which reinforced both the connection to what we had done previously and the nature of what we were going to do today.

Up to this point, each time variations in delivery channels are mentioned in the teaching journal, the entry shows me that (1) I've realized my lesson could be improved upon, and (2) using additional channels to convey information would provide the students with better scaffolding. After November 18th the journal entries refer to the use of multiple channels but no longer as an issue or a struggle.

Feed Me Back the Task

The second pedagogical scaffolding strategy my EFL students taught me is what I call "feed me back the task." Some tasks went less well than I'd hoped, or started slowly because they were new to the students or the instructions were unclear (or both). In addition to using multiple channels for input, I began to ask the students to restate the task for their classmates before we began. At first glance this appears to be a very mechanical sort of interaction based entirely on the display question, "What did I just say?" But in fact its scaffolding power rests on the meaning of the referential question, "What did you understand of what I just said?" The journal entry for November 13th states:

> The morning class went well for the most part, with the first half being devoted to the students developing questions for [my colleague] Andy, [who would be visiting our class]. Each group of three students (two in a few instances) had to write 6 questions (beginning with *who, what, where, when, why,* and *how*) to ask Andy. They seemed enthusiastic about this task. I set it up as a contest and told them they had to listen carefully to the questions posed by their classmates, because they wouldn't get a point for repeating questions that had already been asked. I also told them the questions had to be grammatically accurate as well as polite and appropriate. There was a great deal of laughter, the students enjoyed Andy, I think they understood him (they appeared to), they did listen to one another's questions, and they were eager to ask their questions….
> After I had given the instructions, I had a student repeat his understanding of the game (in the afternoon class as well). I think this simple addition allows me to (1) check on whether or not at least one person has understood, (2) convey to them that they need to listen to the instructions, and (3) turn over still more of the talk-time to the students. I would like to do this more actively and earlier in the term next semester.

The repetition also allows the other students to hear the instructions a second time and may lead to confirmation or clarification. As I incorporated this scaffolding technique on a regular basis, I was surprised to find how often my spoken instructions had not been entirely clear to the learners.

Compare with a Classmate

The third pedagogical scaffolding strategy my EFL students taught me is a simple step that I call "compare with a classmate." The widely held belief that Hong Kong EFL students are reticent to speak in class has been documented elsewhere (see, e.g., Bailey, Curtis and Nunan 2001; Tsui, 1996). It seems to me that I gradually became aware that some of the students would hurriedly compare their answers in whispered conversations with their classmates before responding to a general solicit. It dawned on me that rather than being examples of "cheating" or of the class getting out of control, these moments of comparison with a classmate actually gave the students confidence to share their ideas in front of the larger group but minimized the risk of loss of face if the classmate agreed with the student's ideas. The journal entry for November 13th states:

> Andy read the minimal pairs list [provided by the team leader for the course] and the minimal pairs in context list that I had devised, so the students could hear a British accent. They seemed to like this (even though I find it terribly decontextualized). After he'd read each item once I had the students compare what they had circled with their neighbors and then request re-reads if they wanted to. They requested a few in each set. Then I put up the key, they self-corrected and we discussed some of the interesting ones. For example the words that I hear and pronounce as *where* (W-H-E-R-E) and *wear* (W-E-A-R) are identical in Andy's dialect.

A week later, the journal entry for November 20th states,

> The course syllabus included work on pronunciation and decoding, including discriminating between minimal pairs and learning the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). Students were supposed to be able to select which word the teacher had modeled from a list of decontextualized minimal pairs. I hated the prescribed activity. How could I make the students do this task, which I thought was ridiculous?
>
> I decided to do the departmentally required activity as prescribed first, even though I objected to it as decontextualized, discrete-point and deadly dull. So I read aloud one word of each of the minimal pair sets, while the students circled on their worksheets the word they thought I had said. When they had finished, they compared their answers with their neighbors', noting those items where their perceptions had differed. Then I posted the answer key on the overhead projector. The key was met with gasps, groans and laughter from the students

In a linguistic sense, comparing with their classmates gave the learners an opportunity to confirm or reject their hypotheses about the language elements under discussion before going public. If the learners used English to compare their ideas, these hushed conversations also gave them more practice opportunities in the target language.

Build in the Recognition Step

A number of cumulative experiences led me to the practice of adding extra increments to activities. One such scaffolding strategy my EFL students taught me was to build in the recognition step. This involved a process whereby students could indicate recognition or receptive knowledge before I asked them to demonstrate their productive knowledge. This may seem like an obvious pedagogical move, and I'm sure it's something I've advised student teachers to do. But I had to learn it again, in the Asian context, driven by the thundering silence in my classroom and the blank looks on my Chinese students' faces whenever I moved too fast to the production stages of an activity. The following excerpts from the teaching journal illustrate this learning.

> **September 17:** I had the students do the matching task (i.e., connecting the vocabulary they'd selected from … Chapter 3 to the definitions I'd written) in pairs or threes, but they seem to prefer to work silently as individuals first and then as pairs. I went around and coached them, giving examples as needed and asking them which ones they were stuck on. I was aware of trying to set an interactive tone throughout, but feeling perhaps I had not prepared them well enough.
>
> I had not planned on it, but my intuition suggested that they needed more practice with the vocabulary before we left it, so I added an activity where they simply raised their hands when they heard me use a vocabulary item from the list as I spoke. I tried to contextualize the vocabulary list in such a way that the meanings of each item would be apparent from its use in the context of my extemporaneous speech. I was surprised at how involved they seem to get — there were several smiles in fact as they recognized words and raised their hands.
>
> **October 9:** When we had done a quick run over the Ellis and Sinclair table, I handed out the [numbered] list I'd made of convenient strategies for dealing with vocabulary gaps that are nouns. The students read over this and then we did three examples where I described something and they had to put up the number of fingers representing the number of the particular strategy I was using. First I described nail polish, then a correcting pen, and then a fine-edge cutter. They got the idea very quickly and I tried to use all the strategies in my demonstration. As an

> aside, I think building in this step — i.e., them recognizing the item before using it — is a good way for me to check their understanding and for them to gain confidence before we go on to the next level of the activity.

The next term, I seemed to incorporate this strategy more naturally. The journal entry for January 29th states,

> I gave out my handout and asked them to read it. After they had done that I described two things I didn't know the names of — the correction pens (which turns out to be the name) and that straight-edge cutter someone left in my desk. They were surprised that we didn't have correction pens in the U.S. As I described these two items I asked the students to indicate with their fingers which of the six strategies on the handout I was using. I redeployed this idea from the same lesson last term, when I think I just stumbled on it. I like building in this indication-of-understanding step with my EFL students because they seem to lack confidence so much that building in a nonverbal step where they can easily succeed seems to oil the wheels a bit for the subsequent verbal [production] step.

Building in the recognition step, like comparing with a classmate, allows students to test hypotheses while still saving face. It limits the required performance to raising a hand or signaling understanding rather than the complex psychomotor processing involved in production.

Use Schema Activators

One area of second language research which fits very well with the concept of scaffolding is the recent research on schema theory in the areas of listening comprehension and reading comprehension. Schema theory, in brief, states that we process incoming messages and learn new information on the basis of our existing knowledge structures, which are called "schemata." According to Carrell (1987, p.461), such knowledge structures are of two basic types. When we refer to a *content schema* we mean "knowledge relative to the content domain of the text." (So, for instance, your experience with and understanding of my topic in this article helps you process the information – you know this is not an article about mechanical engineering.) A *formal schema*, on the other hand, is "knowledge relative to the formal, rhetorical organizational structures of different types of text" (ibid.). (Your formal schemata help you recognize that this is a journal article, as opposed to a sonnet, a haiku, an editorial, or a love letter.)

I have been giving workshops on the practical implications of schema theory for years, yet I had to learn again to use schema activators in my EFL classes. The following diary entries portray a teacher slowly making connections between her theoretical knowledge and her classroom realities.

> **November 11:** I asked the students to listen and read along while I read the Robert Frost poem, "Stopping by Woods", aloud to them. My intent is to do something more with this poem, and today it was on my lesson plan to have them underline the stressed words. But I made a crucial error, in addition to not anticipating how much time all this stuff would take. I forgot the message I preach about schema activators. None of these kids … had ever been in snow, and they had no concept of driving a horse and a sleigh. The predictable vocabulary questions were raised (for example, what's a "downy flake"?) but the entire scene was detached and unreal for them, I'm sure — just another poem read in an English class. Afterwards I wondered to myself if I ever would have selected this poem if it had not been prepared for me as part of the course materials, and if I had, would I have been more sensitive about preparing them to read it (for instance, with appropriate schema activators)? I need to think about this more.

The journal entry for November 13th, the next class meeting states,

> …In the second half of class my concern was how to keep the momentum and positive energy going while we began to study the [International Phonetics Alphabet] IPA. Andy read the poem, "Stopping by Woods" for them so they could hear it read with a British accent. Afterwards Chow asked for some further interpretation of the poem. I was glad he spoke up — he seemed to be really thinking about it. Unfortunately, after that I got really bogged down in the IPA stuff by assuming that the students would readily understand the page photocopied from the dictionary, which shows how to pronounce words by giving three columns: (1) the phonetic symbol, (2) a key word, and (3) common alternative spellings of the same sound. I asked the students to figure out how to write their own name in IPA but was surprised that many of them had lots of trouble with this. Two excellent students, Agatha and Michael, for instance, were floored. Michael was seated by himself and got kind of bogged down in the task. Agatha's friends tried to help her, but I'm afraid I made both of them (as well as a few others perhaps) feel stupid, when my intent was to interest them in the system. In this case I assumed too much about the students' formal schemata.

A week later, however, it appears that I was more consistently employing the concept of schema activation. The journal entry for November 20th describes the day my colleague Neera Sharma came to class as my mystery guest. We had arranged in advance that she would come fifteen minutes after the start of each class, so that I could get the students focussed and prepared to ask her questions.

> Before Neera came I put her name on the board and asked them to guess from her name what country she is from. At first they said they didn't know, or were quiet. I asked them, "Is it a Chinese name?" Of course not, they said. I asked if it was a British name and again they said no. Then someone in [the morning class] guessed Indian, and I said yes and wrote *India* on the board. In the [afternoon class] someone asked for a hint. I told them that when she came in they could tell immediately from her clothes where she was from. It seems to me that two people on opposite sides of the room then murmured "India" at the same time, rather quietly and privately. I said yes and wrote it on the board and praised them for their guess.

During the second semester, Neera again agreed to be interviewed by my students. The journal entry of March 3rd states,

> In their groups of three they were to think of at least six questions (beginning with *who, what, where, when, why,* and *how*) to ask Neera about India. I think part of the quiet time was just them thinking about what to ask her, which was somewhat constrained by the syntactic structure requirement of the task as I had set it up. Something that might help next time would be to do a cognitive map on the board of topics related to India. That is, with five minutes of public brain-storming, recorded on a cognitive map in plain view of all the students, I could have gotten them to generate a lot of ideas about which they could then pose questions. Then I would give them the handout and they could plug the topics into the syntactic structure, instead of having the question word structure constrain their ideas.

So here we see a teacher increasing the use of schema activation to improve upon her lessons. The journal entry for January 13th also refers to schema activation:

> Next time we're doing the lesson re: self-access centres, so I will try to think of a way to get more talking going. Perhaps I could have them complete Pierre's sentences about the bicycle in pairs BEFORE listening to the Ellis and Sinclair tape. That kind of prediction activity should be useful, in terms of schema theory, and if I can treat it as a puzzle, they may get some speaking practice out of it as well.

The journal entry for January 15th reflects an explicit contrast with the previous semester' s lesson on the same topic:

> We did the activity about Pierre's visit to the self-access centre differently too. This time I had told the students in advance that we would do the activity in class, so part of their homework was to prepare by reading the pages. Then I put them in pairs or trios and asked them to predict what Pierre would say when we heard the tape. I read aloud the reprinted portion of Pierre's speech to them, so they would have the experience of hearing it first in a familiar voice and accent. They then predicted with their partner what Pierre would say in completing these utterances. Then I built in a step where I changed one person's seat in each group and had them compare what they and their first partners had predicted with what their new partners had predicted. So they got two different possibilities (or perhaps confirmation of what they'd thought), and then finally we listened to the tape. I think they found this listening easier than the earlier Ellis and Sinclair listening activity because (1) the partial text was printed, (2) they'd heard me read parts of it first, and (3) the predicting activity probably got their schemata going as an advance organizer.

The above entry is also connected to the scaffolding techniques called "use of multiple channels" and "compare with a classmate."

Later entries show me proactively using prediction as a regular practice. The journal entry for January 20th again refers to schema activation:

> [I]n each class I went over the notion (from Ellis and Sinclair) that we listen for different purposes (e.g., gist vs. specific information), that information is often contained in short texts with numbers (e.g., addresses, prices, times, etc.), and that English is stressed timed, with the function words often being slurred and collapsed. Then we did the brief listening bit from Ellis and Sinclair based on a film ad in the newspaper. I had the students predict, based on the place names in the ad (on the overhead projector) what kind of accent we would hear when we "called" the theatre to listen to the recorded announcement (and they correctly guessed a British accent). Then I had them listen for the times of the film on Sunday and the adult admission price. This was interesting because the recording gave lots of numbers, but the information they were looking for didn't come until the very end of the announcement.

The journal entry for February 17th reveals both more regular use of schema activation as a scaffolding strategy, and an emerging awareness of a change in my teaching.

> ... I put up the title of the Robert Frost poem, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" and asked them, with a friend sitting nearby, to predict

> two ideas, themes or concepts that might be found in the poem. This is a step I think I've just recently actively incorporated in my teaching — I'll have to read back through these journal entries and see if this is the case: I am trying more often to have the students predict (or do other conceptual tasks) in pairs or threesomes before we do the task as a group, so that they will do more of the mental processing.

The continuing journal entry for February 17th documents the use of schema activators, but also the use of multiple channels and the compare with a classmate step:

> I had the students listen to the poem as I read it, without them having the text in front of them, to see if their predictions were correct. (Some predicted that someone would die, for instance.) Then I gave out the poem with the rhyming words at the ends of lines blanked out and asked them just to write the missing word. I told them spelling wouldn't count — to try to get the sound of the rhyme scheme as the main thing. Then I had them compare with their neighbors, and finally I revealed the [written] text.

The same topic was covered in the following lesson. The journal entry for February 19th states,

> Today we finished working on the Robert Frost poem, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening." I asked the students to turn to their friends and see if there were any words they didn't know which they could help each other to learn. After about three minutes of this [activity] I asked them if there were any words for which they wanted further explanation. The predictable words appeared: *harness, flake, downy, woods, sweep,* and *queer.* We talked about the vocabulary a bit and I tried to give them a feeling for the scene. None of these students has ever been in snow, and even after I'd drawn a sleigh and explained what a harness is, John thought that the author was driving his car. Interesting.

These journal entries for the beginning of the second semester reveal a teacher who is actively trying to improve her teaching, based on reflections of her previous experience. One extended journal entry will illustrate this point. The journal entry for January 6th states,

> I am happy with the way the lesson plan worked in each class, because I was aware of the ways I could improve on my teaching by thinking about the things I liked and disliked last semester. For example, [the afternoon class] seemed to come alive for me last term on the day that

> Andy visited and we had a group competition to ask him questions. So today when I was planning my lesson, I decided to start the course with a competitive activity….I had the students get into groups of three or four and write six questions for me. We went around the circle once with each group asking a question. The questioner had to say his/her name before speaking and they were supposed to have learned the names of everyone in their group…. During the second round I called on the person whose hand I saw go up first — trying to promote a bit of competition (on behalf of one's team) and to set the stage for the ongoing expectation that everyone will talk every day. Each team got a point if they asked an original and appropriate question. (It was interesting that in each section someone asked what my salary is and what kind of man I like.) ...

This last entry reveals a teacher who has become aware of the negative impact of overhelping the learners. In other words, I was learning to sort out appropriate scaffolding from inappropriate scaffolding, and to use various scaffolding techniques in a given lesson.

Retrospective

The sabbatical year in Hong Kong passed quickly. My teaching was not without its struggles, but it certainly involved many rewards. These included my student's growth as well as my own.

In addition to the teacher learning I have described here, using the original journal entries with commentary, I want to briefly discuss the results of the quantitative study I conducted with my colleague, Sonya Saunders. You will recall that we addressed two research questions.

The first asked if there were statistically significant differences between the students' scores on a standardized test of listening comprehension before and after the fifteen-week semester. Indeed there were. The students' mean test scores revealed significantly greater listening comprehension at the end of the term (as determined by a t-test for dependent samples).

The second research question asked if there were statistically significant differences in the students' perceptions of difficulty of the twenty course objectives. Again, dependent sample t-tests were used to analyze the data, and again, the answer is yes: Every single item on the post-course attitude questionnaires revealed significant differences from the pre-course questionnaire – in the right direction. That is, at the end of the term the students as a group perceived the course objectives to be significantly less difficult than they had at the beginning.

A word of caution is in order here. There are three weaknesses in this study that prohibit us from making any strong causal claims about the EFL course itself having led to these changes.

First, although we had a reasonable number of students in the study (n = 130), this was a very simple one-group pretest-posttest design. There was no control group with which to compare the results of those students who participated in our course.

Second, because we were using the same instruments (the BBC-British Council videobased test of listening comprehension and the Likert scale questionnaire) at the beginning and end of the semester, the findings are susceptible to what is called a “testing threat” in experimental research. That is, the students’ may have recalled and/or learned something from the pretest use of these instruments that influenced the posttest measurements. However, we tried to safeguard against this possibility by not telling the learners at the beginning of the term that they would be tested again or that they would complete the questionnaire again at the end of the semester.

Third, the students had not been truly randomly assigned to these classes. This is something of a moot point, since there was not a control group. Still we must point out that the students enrolled in this course as an elective. They may be quite different in some unknown way (e.g., less confident? less proficient? more motivated?) than those CUHK students who didn’t enroll in this course. Nevertheless, it appears that the students learned something and felt they had made progress. Both quantitative measures indicate progress.

In terms of the focus of this paper, there is also evidence of teacher learning, based on the story told in the journal entries. Freema Elbaz (1992, p. 423), writing in L1 research on teacher learning, points out that

> Initially, a ‘story’ seems to be a very personal matter: There is concern for the individual narrative of a teacher and what the teacher herself and what [others] as privileged eavesdroppers, might learn from it. In the course of engaging with stories, however, we are beginning to discover that the process is a social one: The story may be told for personal reasons but it has an impact on its audience which reverberates out in many directions as once.

Elbaz has influenced Donald Freeman, who conducts research on language teachers’ learning. Freeman wrote,

> Knowing the story of teaching involves more than is usually considered. Knowing how to teach does not simply entail behavioral knowledge of how to do particular things in the classroom; it involves a cognitive dimension that links thought with activity, centering on the context-embedded,

> interpretive process of knowing what to do. This contextual know-how is learned over time; its interpretations shape truly effective classroom practice. Knowing the story of teaching involves all these elements. For this reason, telling the story is more complicated than simply reporting on how things are done in classrooms, or even providing the reasoning – theoretical, personal or otherwise – for those ways of acting. If teaching involves the continual interplay of interpretation and environment, then its story is complex and subtle, and it is quite complicated to tell...
> *(1996, p. 99).*

The teaching journal entries quoted above support Freeman's claim that "contextual know-how is learned over time." In fact these journal data show that "the behavioral knowledge of how to do particular things in the classroom" alone was not sufficient for an experienced teacher (at least this teacher) to make changes in her practice. Reflection on that practice was also needed.

When I was documenting my learning as a teacher in Hong Kong, was I using "truly effective classroom practice," to echo Donald Freeman's words? I don't know. Perhaps I was, perhaps not. I do know that I was trying to improve, and that what my EFL students taught me about strategies for pedagogical scaffolding has stayed with me now that I have returned to my usual work in teacher education. I often find myself, in both planned and unplanned contexts, getting the graduate students in my courses to feed me back the task. In teaching statistics, I now frequently build in the recognition steps and the use of schema activators. I try to use multiple channels of delivery and have students compare their ideas with their classmates before answering in all my classes now.

I have been teaching ESL/EFL for over twenty-five years, and working as a teacher educator for over twenty years. An obvious question arises about the story of what my EFL students taught me, and there are two ways to frame the question – a more negative or critical way, and a more positive or generous way:

1. Why did it take me so long to learn these things?
2. Why did I learn these things at this time?

Let me return to the concept of reflective teaching from the introduction of this article and revisit Richard's and Lockhart's (1994) five assumptions about teaching. These five ideas are printed in boldface type below and interspersed with my comments.

1. An informed teacher has an extensive knowledge base about teaching.

All right, I believe I have an extensive knowledge base. I have had good training, I have a great deal of experience, and I have actively pursued professional development opportunities over the years. I consider myself to be an informed teacher, but—

2. Much can be learned about teaching through self-inquiry.

Well, yes. By writing entries in my teaching journal, reading over them – both at the time and later — and seeking patterns, I was able to pose questions for myself and learn things about my teaching that had not been obvious to me before.

3. Much of what happens in teaching is unknown to the teacher.

Hmm. My years of classroom research has shown me how true this statement is. Yet it took my EFL students in Hong Kong and the data in my journal to show me how true it is of my own teaching.

4. Experience is insufficient as a basis for development.

As mentioned above, I have a great deal of experience, both as a teacher and a teacher educator. In addition, I gained a new type of experience by working with these lower-intermediate EFL learners. But it was examining the experience which led to new awareness – and other teacher educators (e.g., Freeman, 1989, and Larsen-Freeman, 1990) have argued that awareness is the first step to teacher development.

5. Critical reflection can trigger a deeper understanding of teaching.

I now understand this sentence much better than I did some years ago when I first read it and cited it in an article (Bailey, 1997). There is a difference between *knowing* and *understanding*. I have known, intellectually, about all of these techniques or scaffolding strategies for many years. I'm sure I've discussed them with student teachers. Until I worked with my EFL students I didn't actively incorporate them on a consistent basis in my teaching. And it was not until I found my teaching had changed, and then revisited the journal, that I understood their power as pedagogical scaffolding devices.

Donald Freeman states that "teaching involves the continual interplay of interpretation and environment" (1996, p. 99). And, as noted at the beginning of this article, Jerry Gebhard has said that "student teachers seem to have opportunities to change their teaching behavior when ... [they] are given a break from their usual teaching setting and a chance to teach in a new setting" (1990, p. 124). To return to the theme of the PAC2 conference, for me, teaching EFL in the Asian context forced me to grapple with different realities, which led to the reinterpretation of old knowledge and the development of new awarenesses.

Ironically, as my EFL students were teaching me about scaffolding, I was in a scaffolded situation myself. Let us return to van Lier' s (1996) six principles of pedagogical scaffolding and examine each one in terms of this teacher-learning context:

1. **The Continuity Principle**: Teaching two sections of this EFL course each term, and for two semesters in a row, provided me with "repeated occurrences…over a protracted period of time" (ibid., p.195) to develop my teaching skills in this context.
2. **The Contextual Support Principle**: I was in a "safe but somewhat challenging environment" (ibid.).
3. **The Principle of Intersubjectivity**: The emphasis in this teaching-learning context was indeed on "mutual engagement and intersubjectivity of attention" (ibid.).
4. **The Contigency Principle**: As I was able to reteach the same lessons, both within and across semesters, activities could be "changed, deleted, or repeated, depending on the actions and reactions" of the learners (ibid.).
5. **The Handover Principle**: This idea doesn't fit as well as it might in the case of a student teacher in a preservice education context. However, I was supported by my colleagues, my peer observers, and classroom visitors who shared with me their ideas about teaching this course.
6. **The Principle of Flow**: Through the willingness of my EFL students the interaction in our classes flowed "in a natural way" (ibid.), although not always smoothly or at the rate I'd planned.

In fact, van Lier has pointed out (personal communication) that an offshoot of the Handover Principle is what he calls "take over" – that is, when a learner is ready to advance to the next level of performance, he or she will take over activity that has previously been scaffolded by those in the supporting role. In this sense, autonomous teacher development can be viewed as taking responsibility for acquiring new skills or knowledge.

As teachers, all of us have a choice: Do we continue to do what we've always done in the past, or do we grow and change? I submit that by reflecting on our teaching (whether by keeping a journal or by other means), we take the first steps toward professional growth. Our students have a great deal to teach us, if we chose to learn.

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