It's Never Too Late to Learn: Serving the Community Through English Language Education for Adults

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Abstract

For professional English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instructors wanting to share their knowledge and expertise beyond the confines of a traditional academic setting, community service offers an exceptional way to step out of the everyday classroom environment to experience a different side of English language teaching in Japan. By making their services available to members of the local community, EFL instructors are provided with a unique opportunity to represent their home institution off-campus; while at the same time, enhancing their teaching skills and gaining valuable learning experiences by serving the language needs and interests of adult learners of English.

Keywords: EFL, community, service, adult education, professional development

According to Palmer (2007, p. 118):

"Community, or connectedness, is the principle behind good teaching."

Based on Palmer's (2007) statement, we are provided with a telling glimpse of the importance that he attaches to classroom dynamics and the ensuing pedagogical process that is set into motion as a result of the interactions and communicative exchanges that occur between all members of a class. Based on this current author's experience and observations, this is undeniably a transformative process capable of creating an egalitarian and well-integrated classroom in which everyone is a student, and everyone is a teacher. This type of class dynamic becomes especially attainable when those in attendance are highly motivated adult learners of English, as many will come to class already equipped with a wealth of experience and knowledge in all things of life, family, work, travel, and language learning. And when these shared human experiences become interwoven with the subject matter at the heart of a lesson, something extraordinary begins to happen as a tangible sense of excitement and connectedness among class members transforms and elevates the learning space into "... a classroom in which teacher and students alike are focused on a great thing" (Palmer, p. 119).
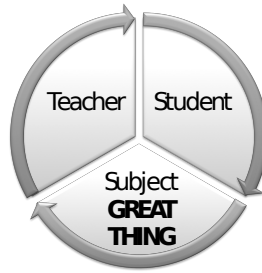
T + Std + Subject (GREAT THING) = Community

Overview

Inspired by the humanistic and community-centered work of renowned teacher-educator and author, Parker J. Palmer (*The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*, 2007), this paper will introduce the results of this current author's experience that saw him teaching an English communication course to a highly passionate group of thirty Japanese adult learners aged thirty to seventy years of age respectively. Held at a centrally located venue dedicated to community learning and development, these classes, part of a one-year or two-semester program, were conducted at a rate of one 90-minute lesson per week (evenings 19:00-20:30) during the 2015-2016 academic year.

Divided into four sections, the first section of this paper titled *Service and Community* will define both terms as they relate to the EFL classroom. Section Two titled *Challenges and Rewards* will introduce specific examples where a

teacher's social and organizational skills may be put to the test. Dealt with tactfully however, hard-earned lessons acquired away from the familiarity of the home institution can, on the other hand, provide language educators with invaluable opportunities to critically self-reflect, effect change, and experience growth at the professional and personal level. Section Three titled *Classroom Activity* introduces a model of a student-centered activity used effectively with the multi-level and multi-generational group of learners featured in this paper. The fourth and final section titled *Future Implications*, presents a commentary regarding potential teaching and learning implications as a consequence of serving the local community through the medium of English language education for adults.

I.   Service and Community

The Oxford Dictionary defines *service* as *an act of assistance* and *community* as *the condition of sharing or having certain attitudes and interests in common*. In relation to the language instructor and his/her role in an EFL classroom catering specifically to adult learners of English, the instructor can no longer be limited to a traditional top-down, front to back, teacher-centered approach and methodology. To further reiterate this point, Bergeron (2016) states that:

> At a time when new language-teaching trends encourage the use of interactive methods to motivate and maintain student interest, the persistent tendency to retain a teacher-centered approach in teaching ... is counterproductive. (pp. 17)

With an increased emphasis on more communicative and interactive forms of English language teaching, the teacher's role must be expanded to that of a facilitator, guide, and partner. In other words, a more active and involved educator with the capacity to correctly identify the needs and interests that the *community of learners* (Palmer, p. 79) share in common. Once these features have been identified, the instructor responds appropriately by providing assistance in the form of guidance, support, and encouragement.

Encouraging adult learners and demonstrating that the instructor cares about their progress will help to maintain a high level of motivation. In addition, creating a safe and supportive learning environment, where students are not afraid to express themselves despite the risk of making mistakes in front of their peers, reinforces the sense of connection and community alluded to earlier. Afterall, the willingness to communicate and connect with others

openly, freely, and without apprehension in the second language (L2) is truly a gift for the student and for everyone else with whom he/she will have the occasion to interact and converse with moving forward. In support of this statement, Korthagen, Kim & Greene (2013) assert that:

> Only by making contact with the rich potential that is waiting inside us and others, the potential that is inherent to our humanness, and the wish for genuine connection, can we hope to find new directions in this world. (pp. 199)

II.   Challenges & Rewards

1. Challenges

Before committing themselves, EFL instructors should be aware of some of the challenges associated with teaching community-based classes. In this section, three of the most common issues will be presented along with a brief commentary offering possible solutions for each point of concern mentioned below.

1) Multi-level cohorts
2) Multi-generational cohorts
3) Technology in the classroom

1) Multi-level cohorts

Prior to the start of classes, course organizers will publicly announce their list of available courses via their organization's website, community noticeboards, and local newspapers. Although course descriptions provide information that include maximum student enrolment numbers (e.g., maximum 30 students) and the level for which the course is intended (e.g., intermediate-level), it is not uncommon for students of other levels of ability - higher and lower - to become part of the class. This presents a double challenge as large classes make it less possible for teachers to provide individual attention to students, and it becomes more challenging to select or design level-appropriate content and material.

2) Multi-generational cohorts

As community-based courses for adult learners are open to the general public, along with a variety of levels, there is also diversity in the age groups of adult learners choosing to participate in these types of classes. The challenge for the instructor will be to strike a balance in respect to his/her pedagogical approach, methodology, and the selection of age-appropriate content and material.

3) Using technology in the classroom

Bergeron (2015) found that as students are continuously exposed to technology every day, it is no longer possible to

think about technology and the integration of online resources as something that does not belong in the classroom. However, for language educators who wish to use technology to support and supplement class material, this may be problematic in venues where audiovisual equipment, Internet and Wi-Fi access may not be readily available. This becomes particularly challenging if a course textbook requires the use of CDs, DVDs, downloadable audio files via a publisher's website, and access to other online resources intended for students and teachers.

Possible solutions

In regard to the issue of multi-level and multi-generational cohorts, the need for good classroom management is key. By placing students into smaller groups and using a learner-centered approach, large classes become easier to manage and students become less dependent on the teacher. Encouraging higher level students to help lower level students by providing assistance when needed, is an effective way to promote a more autonomous style of learning for students. By responding with diplomacy, flexibility, and creativity, teachers can, regardless of differences in age groups and levels of ability, the instructor can encourage students to teach and learn from one another. According to Weimer (2013), a learner-centered approach in relation to group cohesion emphasizes that:

> It is teaching that encourages collaboration, acknowledging the classroom (be it virtual or real) as a community where everyone shares the learning agenda. (pp. 15).

Finally, for teachers who may wish to use technology in venues that are not suited for this type of instruction method, teachers may need to bring their own equipment. This suggestion may, however, require that the instructor invest in the purchase of a small-sized projector and a portable wireless router to obtain access to an Internet connection in classrooms where this may otherwise not be possible. Although the idea of having to bring your own equipment to class may appear troublesome, the integration of technology within an EFL lesson has been proven to motivate, educate, and maintain students' attention. This positive learning outcome occurs according to Brinton (2001), "By bringing a slice of the real world into the classroom" (p. 461).

2. Rewards

1) Opportunity to serve the community
2) Opportunity to build bridges
3) Opportunity to improve skills and self

For EFL instructors considering teaching community-based classes to adult learners, the rewards are many. Among those, two will be mentioned. The first one is bridge building. According to Palmer (2007), "... teaching is perhaps the most privatized of all the public professions" (p. 146). And so, by choosing to step out and away from their usual teaching context to share their know-how with adult learners, teachers are presented with a unique opportunity for establishing a valuable connection between themselves, their school, and the greater community. The other reward refers to the opportunities for professional and personal development that occur as a result of the weekly interactions that teachers have with the community of adult learners.

In reference to professional and personal development, Richards and Farrell describe these as that which "facilitate growth of teachers' understanding of teaching and of themselves as teachers" (Richards & Farrell, 2005, p. 4). Again, as a result of the interaction and exchanges mentioned earlier, students' responses to a teacher's approach, method, and choice of materials and activities, act like a clear mirror that reflects back to the teacher that, which from the students' viewpoint, was accomplished effectively and that which was not. It is this type of mirroring back that creates an opportunity for teachers to

critically reflect on the lesson that was and bring about the necessary changes. To lend support to these types of classroom dynamics, Farrell (2015) affirms that:

> … the teacher, the curricula, the school, and the community have an important influence on the moral growth of teachers and students and indeed, students in turn can influence teacher's moral growth as well. (pp. 98)

When put into practice with awareness and a sincere desire for change and improvement, teachers can gain new perspectives in regard to "the problems, dilemmas, possibilities, and opportunities in [their] teaching contexts" (Burns, 2010, p. 144). Critical self-reflection can also lead to the discovery of new skills and methods that teachers can transfer and put into practice in their usual classroom environment.

III. Classroom Activity

According to Palmer (2007), "Perhaps the classroom should be neither teacher-centered nor student-centered but subject-centered" (p. 119).

According to Palmer (2007), to adopt a "subject-centered" approach as opposed to a teacher or student-centered

approach allows the subject matter to take a life and momentum of its own. Fueled by the students' interest, passion, and relived experiences, it is this high level of enthusiasm for the subject matter that leads to the creation of that "great thing" mentioned by Palmer in the introductory section of the paper. The following material (see Appendices A and B), which was selected and designed for the large, multi-generational, and multi-level class mentioned earlier, provides a clear example of how and why this "great thing" was realized during the course of a lesson.

Based on a unit of work of two separate yet integrated lessons, the students were introduced to a unit from their course textbook, which at the time of the lesson, happened to feature an introduction to Vietnam. Unlike other units from the textbook covered in earlier lessons, the unit on Vietnam became a much more animated, active, and involved subject matter as many of the older students vividly shared their memories of the Vietnam War years (as viewed from Japan) and the anti-war songs that became synonymous with that era.

As it was more difficult for the younger students to contribute to the group discussion, it was decided that one of the anti-war songs mentioned during the conversation; namely, Bob Dylan's *Blow'in in the Wind*, a song known to

all generations - including today's Japanese junior high school students, who often are introduced to this song in their English conversation lessons – would be studied, played, and sung in class to clarify, support, and supplement the following week's lesson.

As the second lesson began and Dylan's song became intertwined with the lesson's main topic, the universality and timelessness of the language of song and music raised the level of enthusiasm and interest for the subject matter to a point where all students regardless of age and level of ability were able to experience a sense of oneness and community with their peers; a "great thing" had indeed been jointly realized. Lending support to this experience and its outcome, Crystal (1997) asserts that:

> … popular music in the English language has had a profound and positive impact on the nature of modern popular culture in general. As the lyrics of Bob Dylan … spread around the world during the 1960s and 1970s, English for the younger generation in many countries became a symbol of freedom, rebellion and modernism. (pp. 95)

1) Procedure

Part I: Song activity

1. T* introduces song activity (Bob Dylan, *Blow'in in the Wind*) (see Appendix B)
   linking it w/ textbook task in *World Adventures*, Unit 4 *Vietnam*. (see Appendix A)
2. Begin with "Word Box." Introduce vocabulary. Practice pronunciation
3. Ss* complete matching task & identify extra mock word
4. Ss compare answers in pairs
5. T checks answers w/ Ss

Part II: Song activity (cont'd)
1. First listening - Ss listen & select correct word to complete song
2. Ss compare answers
3. Second listening (Ss repeat Steps 7 & 8)
4. Ss compare one more time
5. T checks answers w/ Ss
6. Class sings song

Extra activity:
1. Ss asked to identify rhyming word pairs found within lyrics
2. Ss discuss meaning of song e.g. key words & metaphors
3. End of activity

T* = Teacher

Ss* = Students

IV. Future Implications

As more EFL professionals choose to take their services and expertise into the greater community, an increasing number of adult language learners and teachers alike will be able to mutually benefit from this valuable exchange. With an increasing number of adult learners interested in lifelong education, taking part in community-based courses is an excellent way for them to maintain, improve, and build on previously acquired English language skills. For English language educators, having the opportunity to teach adult learners is a way for them to also fine tune their skills; while at the same time, remaining open to the possibility of learning something new, beneficial, and applicable to their professional and personal life.

V. Conclusion

By opting to serve the language needs and interests of adult language learners residing with the local community, EFL educators and the academic institutions that they represent, play a crucial role by helping to take the school out to the community and to a demographic of students who may otherwise due to work, family, and schedule constraints be unable to further their education and fulfill their desire to

keep on learning and to keep on growing. Regardless of age, level of ability, and whether you are a student or a teacher, if the passion to learn and grow pushes you forward towards the fulfillment of your own (language) needs and interests, please remember that it is never too late to learn.

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Biodata

Sylvain Bergeron has been teaching EFL in Japan since 1993. He holds an MEd TESOL from the University of Wollongong. Currently a member of Gunma University's Education Center, his research interests include English language education for adults, bilingualism, and the psychology of language learning.

Appendix A

Appendix B

Song Listening Activity

Blowin' in the Wind
Bob Dylan (1967)

Activity 1: Listening
Listen carefully. Write the correct words to complete the song.

How many 1) _____ must a man walk down
Before you call him a man?
How many seas must a white dove sail
Before she sleeps in the 2) _____?
Yes, and how many times must the cannon balls fly
Before they're forever banned?

The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind
The answer is blowin' in the wind.

Yes, and how many years can a 3) _____ exist
Before it is washed to the sea?
Yes, and how many years can some people exist
Before they're allowed to be 4) _____?
Yes, and how many times can a man turn his head
And 5) _____ that he just doesn't see?

The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind
The answer is blowin' in the wind.

Yes, and how many times must a man look up
Before he can see the sky?
Yes, and how many 6) _____ must one man have
Before he can hear people cry?
Yes, and how many 7) _____ will it take 'til he knows
That too many people have died?

The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind
The answer is blowin' in the wind.

http://www.dylanfest.org/page10/files/imag

Word List

tree
ears
sand
deaths
nature
pretend
toads
hand
fountain
free
attend
tears
breaths
roads
mountain

Activity 2: Word Pairs
Look at the Word List. Write the word pairs that have the same sound.

1._____ _____   2._____ _____

3._____ _____   4._____ _____

5._____ _____   6._____ _____

7._____ _____   Extra Word: _____

Source: http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/bobdylan/blowininthewind.html