

“Hungry Tigers Talk to the Wall”: An Action Research on Reflective Teaching Practice Cycle

*Dhruba Babu Joshi**

Abstract

This paper reports a result of an action research (AR) on "Hungry Tigers Talk to the Wall" on the effectiveness of shifting the weight of thinking from teacher's teaching to students' learning. I present how I move to observing students' learning and reflecting upon the implications for my teaching. Particularly I have tried to justify that the most productive starting place for teachers' professional development can be their own classroom experience. Further, I discuss how I have involved students as guide of my teaching.

Introduction

A teacher is like a tailor. Usually a shirt that best suits Tom Cruise (an actor) may not suit us. Exactly a best teaching method, a perfect approach and an excellent lesson plan that suits in one situation may not succeed in another. However, a teacher can adapt strategies and techniques and apply them in their situation the same as a tailor copies the style of a fashionable shirt and stitches a new one that best fits in customers. I agree with Roberts' (1998) reforming teaching which is one of the fundamental ways of professional development; teachers are more likely to learn when reflecting on and testing personal theories. Teaching in fact includes caring for all aspects of the learners' needs. Teachers must be able to identify learners' needs, encourage and lead them to achieve their desired goals. The most important trait of a complete teacher is commitment "an intellectual or emotional bond to some course of action" (Morrison 1993:5). The first commitment must be to the self which involves a promise to self to do best in existing situation. In this article, I discuss how I identified a challenge in my situation, how I planned a course of action and involved learners in their learning process and move on to how the chain of actions "Hungry Tigers Talk to the Wall" was developed.

Background

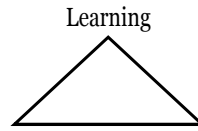
For the last six years, I have been teaching English at the Campus of International Languages. Every semester, I ask a question to myself how I, in my present classroom situation, can do something different. Last semester, I involved learners in their learning process by providing them responsibilities for their learning pathway.

In order to explore the possible areas, I asked my students, "Why do you come to learn English?", "How do you think you can improve

* Mr Joshi teaches at the Campus of International Languages, TU.

your competence over language?” “What are the opportunities available in learning English?” and “What are the challenges?” The most common answer for the first question was that they would have plenty of opportunities if they learned English. For the second question, most students asserted that they were very excited to learn English. In order to improve competence in the English language, they said that they need to read at least an hour a day anything written in English like newspapers, magazines, novels, and stories, get into conversation with friends whenever they meet each other, write at least a page a day in their diary and listen to English news broadcast by BBC/CNN or watch English movies. They mentioned plenty of available opportunities in their list. Books are available in reasonable cost; free e-books can be downloaded from Internet. Moreover, there are libraries in the city where they can be members. They can also practice English among friends. I reflected on these answers; the act of reflecting means taking an attitude of inquiry and curiosity towards my teaching practice to become more aware of it rather than just immerse in it (Adrian, 2006). Next, I asked why they were not able to improve their English. The most frequent answers were, “I make plans but do not follow”, “Today, I promise to myself to practice English and in a few days I forget.” Finally, I came to a conclusion that every learner knows what he/she supposed to do but he/she does not implement it. In this report, I use the word “*knowledge*” means what learners know about English and the word “*action*” means what they exactly do in order to practise it.

The focused question was what accelerates the learning of English? Obviously, *knowledge* and *action*. The discussion among the learners revealed that they know what they have to do to improve their English but they hardly apply it in action. Consequently, there exist a wide gap between the *knowledge* that learners possess about the best ways of language learning and what they exactly do. Certainly, there is a triangular relationship among *knowledge*, *action* and *learning*. I illustrated this figure in the class in order to motivate the learners what they are supposed to do to develop competence in English.



Knowledge Action

*The wider the gap the
slower the learning*



Knowledge Action

*The closer the gap the
quicker the learning*

Then I involved the learners in the activities which could minimize the gap between the *knowledge* and *action*. They were asked what obstacles they had to overcome in minimizing the distance. The most frequent answer was that they do not have conducive environment to speak English as many of their friends prefer to speak in Nepali. Some others said that they did not have enough command over English to use it. Likewise, they had a list of problems. Then I asked them to divide their problems under three different columns- under controlled zone, under influenced zone and under not influenced zone. The controlled zone refers to the kind of activities upon which learners have control, for example, to read something written in English or to watch English movies or to listen to English news or to write in English a page or two daily. They were also asked to focus on influenced zone that means on the kind of activities on which they can have high influence, for example, to speak English with friends in the classroom. However, they were suggested not to worry about the things on which they do not have any influence, for example, the classroom size or students' politics. This certainly motivated them to make commitment to focus on the area they have control over and use the same to improve their English.

Classroom activity

I reasonably agree with Adrian (2006) that we need to examine our own experience in order to learn from it, but where do we start? In my situation, I started with a view how would I get my learners to use more English. Then an idea occurred to my mind. I wanted them to give a metaphorical name so that they would feel it and be encouraged to practice English among friends.

I name the class "Hungry Tigers" and make the tigers talk in English. The tigers do not eat grass in any condition but the meat; in the same way the tigers in the class would always speak English among the friends in any condition. In fact, they were asked to make commitment on what they agreed. Further, they also promised to read an hour anything written in English. I also demonstrated an example of freefall writing and asked them to do so on anything that comes in their mind while writing. Once they started writing, they would not stop it unless they write at least a page or two. Certainly, that encouraged the class to speak English whatever English they knew. The atmosphere of the class changed; in fact the class became much quieter. A few days later, I asked for their responses; they replied that though the concept was effective, they did not have much to talk in English and often shifted to mother tongue. This idea worked, however, the challenge ahead was how to involve them in more practice. This forced me to think something new.

As a result, "Hungry Tigers-Talk to the Wall" was formed that means they could speak with any object around them. I demonstrated how they could speak to a table "*I brought you five years ago. I had to pay a lot of money. You were so attractive and looked really nice in this room. But now you have lost your beauty. You have gathered dust all over you.*" Likewise, students talked with many other objects such as photographs, pressure cooker, TV set, etc. Everyday ten students were scheduled to present in the class. Learners were also allowed to record their presentations, actually that was very common as many learners had camera in their mobile. The students were suggested to have a view of their own presentation and also to discuss on their strengths and weaknesses. This discussion and the exchange of ideas among the friends actually brought them closer to each other and they felt confident to express themselves in English.

Later they were also asked to describe a scene they saw around them. For example, a student described "*Today I saw a woman selling vegetable to an old man. Behind her, there was a cow eating thrown part of green vegetable. On the other side, there*

was a car parked (sis) and the driver was reading a news paper....." To me such written pieces were reliable original teaching materials because of which the classroom became more interesting. I was also able to spot major weakness in their language structure.

A month later, "Hungry Tigers Readers Group" was established. One day I sat together with learners discussing what to do next to empower the learning cycle. I proposed that they could read simplified version of fictions and stories available in the market as they are very cheap. A book costs in between Rs. 45-50. First, a name list of novels or short stories was prepared. Then the class was divided into five groups of six to eight members in each group. Then each member was asked to buy one of the books from the list. Each student bought a different book when the group was finally formed the class had thirty more simplified version of novels. I provided learners some pre-reading stimuli. Usually, before reading involved, for example, previewing the title and the cover illustration, the cover illustration or looking at the list of contents or chapter headings.

Everyday before I started the usual class I gave sometimes to discuss the book they had read- at least a book a day. Discussing on the final outcomes proved to be very motivating for the learners. The type of question we discussed were similar ones- was the book enjoyable for you? Why or why not? What were your favourite or least favourite moments? Who were your favourite or least favourite characters? Certainly, I agree with Ellis (1991) involving learners in reading helps them expose to richness of English and develop language awareness, language competence and passive vocabulary assimilation.

Error correction

As far as error correction is concerned, most common errors were recorded indirectly and later these were corrected in groups. I did not correct all the errors they made. I focused on those errors that most of the learners made, for example, subject verb agreement. In addition, the errors committed in the target language item were also corrected. For instance, if the lesson was about events and circumstances, the

appropriate use of the past simple tense and past continuous tense was considered for the correction. Most importantly, when to correct the errors has been a difficult decision for me. However, I corrected errors sometimes just after they committed them, for instance, when they were involved in controlled practice. Sometimes the errors were corrected when the language learning activities were over such as post-lesson activities. In order to correct errors different techniques were used. For instance, the erroneous parts of the sentences were repeated or a similar alternative situations were provided. And as far as possible, the learners themselves were given opportunities to correct their errors.

Conclusion

I accept Richards' (2003) argument that the right to teach the way we want is very important for teachers. If we lose this right, we lose the courage to try new ideas, to explore more than one alternative, to explore freely. With this in mind, I started to explore my teaching- seeing teaching differently. I have been more open and attempted to see and understand what was going on between me and students and among students themselves that actually liberated me from the traditional role of a speaker. My aim was to involve my learners in their learning path. I particularly led them more than I fed. Every time they were the centre of learning; all the learning responsibilities were given to them. It was really an amazing experience to watch the “Hungry tigers” very closely in their learning highway. My aim was to encourage my students to make their own learning decision based on their context. Actually, I have discovered students are more attracted by the rich opportunity of interactions. One of the biggest advantages to involving in such learning cycle is that

they take ownership of their learning process. Such spiral cycle was developed from “Hungry Tigers talk in English” to “Hungry Tigers talk to the wall” to eventually “Hungry Tigers’ Readers club.” This has encouraged me to explore further, leading to fresh insight and new questions to explore. Empowering students refers to creating opportunities for developing autonomy. According to Vilches (2005), it pertains to recognizing that ultimately all learning must be done by the learners. The role of teachers is of the facilitator. This also justifies the concept that a teacher cannot teach a language as such but they can definitely create an environment where learners learn a language.

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