

Article Title

The Traffic Cop Syndrome

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Bio:

Mr. Eric Pollock is an English instructor at the Kyunghee University of Seoul, Korea. In this article he considers the role of the language instructor in the classroom and notes the role of the language instructor is generally misunderstood by students in an EFL situation. He further suggests the language teacher has far greater depth of responsibility towards his/her students than being simply a Language educator.

Introduction

Over twenty years ago, Long (1983) suggested that the teacher made very little difference in the development of a student's language ability. When comparing language learning as to the time spent on it in class, on a whole, it could reasonably be argued that the teacher could do very little in the way of improving a student's ability in a relatively short amount of time. If a student spends 3 hours a week in class, what do they do with the other 165 hours of the week?

Language learning has come along way since then. The student has become the center of the language classroom (Tudor, 1996), and the role of the teacher has been to one of enabling the student to develop their own language abilities as they see fit (Benson & Voller, 1997). This is a more holistic approach and considers the various aspects of the individual's needs to learn language.

But what happens to the teacher when they try to be "everything" to the student? Not only do teachers teach, but they also have to facilitate, counsel, motivate, and so on. Teachers who try to be "more than they are" become what I consider to be a "traffic cop" in the language classroom.

The traffic cop is a very visible person in many large cities. Everyone recognizes them. They are the police officers directing traffic in many directions. With a simple wave of the arm, traffic goes or traffic stops. Cars turn right or cars turn left. It is the responsibility of the traffic cop to make sure that cars travel freely, without accident, and without any problems. So it is true of the foreign language teacher.

A syndrome , according to a dictionary, is a group of symptoms that collectively characterize a disorder. And, when characterized by a foreign language teacher, this means that there is a disorder or problem that occurs in the classroom. This generally occurs from the misunderstanding of the role of the foreign language teacher, and the resulting relationship that the student perceives is no more than a teacher directing the students in the manner that a traffic cop directs traffic, without problems, without accidents; but, it is not

educational, informative nor much use to the student during their academic life.

The role of the language teacher that the student perceives is often misguided, or misunderstood. In the same way the bank teller is thought of as only accepting money or giving it out, the foreign language teacher is seen as something which they are not nor should be. The bank teller is an agent of the bank and performs whatever duties that entails. The role of the foreign language teacher, and in this particular case, the English language teacher, is to be an unsubrogated model and educator for English linguistic ability and performs whatever duties that entails. It is more than just being a caretaker, or a good listener, or something that is actually ancillary to the basic functions of the teacher.

The language student should accept nothing more than their teacher being a good model of what spoken English should be. The student should expect the teacher to talk no more and no less than is necessary for the student to develop good listening habits and good speaking habits. After all, the teacher is the authoritative reference in the class when it comes to the use of the language, just as a dictionary is the authoritative reference for meaning, pronunciation, and other necessary aspects of the word.

It has been suggested that the teacher minimize the amount of English that they use in class to offer the students the most amount of available class time for their own practice. And, it has been also suggested that the teacher speaks for most of the class, and that the students reproduce the material outside of class. These two approaches reduce the teacher to being simply a traffic cop.

The teacher who minimizes their spoken time speaks for a short time, and then with a wave of the arm directs the students to try to reproduce it within groups, the teacher mingles along to direct the flow of conduct in the classroom and sparingly adds some correction to the mix. The teacher, in the end, directs the flow of the language within the group without being a good language model. Their actions subrogate the language to the students to develop their own habits after the teacher discussion has ended. On the other hand, the teacher talks for most of the class, and subrogates language performance to outside of the classroom. This is often the case in which the teacher lectures for a long period of time without allowing enough class time to try to reproduce that language which the teacher had spoken about.

The optimal situation is where the teacher does not minimize their spoken language but maximizes it in relation to the student. The teacher speaks for as long as necessary with the students, that there is constant language exchange being spoken in the classroom and that there is constant reinforcement, reproduction, and practice available to the student.

Being a model also carries some responsibility on the part of the teacher. This responsibility is that the student will not only parrot good speaking characteristics from the teacher, and will pick up not only the rhythm, stress, and intonation of the teacher, but also many nuances of the teacher which might not be readily apparent. These are everything from the constant use of rejoinders to colloquialisms, to slang expressions. After all, if this is not the case, then there would be no need to have a native speaker of the language in the

classroom. Any person would be suitable to teach students to be proficient in the language. But, since the native speaker's role is to be a good linguistic model, students have to be able to reproduce the language of the teacher, and to produce it in a natural and authentic situation.

The second detrimental characteristic of the language cop syndrome is that the teacher is not an educational force in the classroom. One of the covenants of education is that there is educational value in all that the student does. For example, the student is required to learn from beginning concepts to advanced concepts in conversation. This would entail that concepts in the beginning are easier to grasp than concepts in the later stages of development or towards the end of the English program. This approach is commonly found in many theme or subject oriented classrooms.

What happens in the usual traffic cop scenario is that the material being used in the beginning is no more difficult than material being practiced at the end of the program. The only difference being is that the topic of conversation is different. If you looked at the material from beginning to end it would appear in difficulty as a parallelogram instead of a triangle. The material at the beginning of a semester or class is just as difficult as the material at the end. The entire program could be turned on its head in the fact that the middle term exam is no more harder or more difficult than the final exam material. This parallelogram approach to educational practice undermines the student's ability to achieve greater scope in the use of the target language. The mere fact that the material does not become harder nor more difficult interferes with the student's own maturation process of

evolving language complexity in usage and in functional situations.

This aspect, the lacking of an increase in difficulty, is a difficult aspect for the student to overcome. What the student believes in class is happening in the way of much discussion, turns out to be just that, mere discussion, and little learning of ever increasing language structures and forms.

The final aspect of the traffic cop syndrome is to believe that prior learning is to be remembered and utilized. That if a student has had some prior contact with the target language in a previous school, then they should be held accountable to have some sort of experience to move on from. For example, in the case of outside work, the student is usually assumed to have studied writing in a previous setting, and the production of written material by the student should be an easy task. But this approach lacks the fundamental question of why should a student be held accountable for material which might not have even been learned properly or for something which is outside the nature of the classroom.

This is also the case in which students are required to produce journal entries of their experiences in a notebook, and the student is expected to already have an understanding of sentence construction. This is a fallacy in that why should the student be held accountable for prior knowledge? Shouldn't everything that the student learns be available to be achieved in the classroom? Suppose their sentence construction is poor or very limited. The traffic cop teacher assumes that the student has learned how to write sentences and their approach is to correct the grammar and composition of poorly made entries. Then, the

student is left to wonder what they are learning in class, how it is applied to the outside world, and when they are going to be held accountable for new acquisition of language.

The traffic cop syndrome is all too common in the language classroom. This notion that the teacher minimizes speaking, lacks educational value in their work, and requires students to have prior knowledge, is based on poor educational values. The teacher should strive for higher and higher quality in student work, including their own, and should foster the ideal that learning is a process to develop not merely a convention to deal with.

References

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