

HUMANIZING MY BUSINESS ENGLISH CLASS AND MYSELF

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE MASTERS OF ARTS IN TEACHING
DEGREE AT THE SCHOOL FOR INTERNATIONAL TRAINING
BRATTLEBORO, VERMONT

BY

ANA-MARIA NICOLAE

NOVEMBER 2007

© ANA-MARIA NICOLAE 2007

This project by Ana-Maria Nicolae is accepted in its present form.

Date _____

Project Advisor _____

Project Reader _____

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my teacher and supervisor Bonnie Mennell for her enthusiasm, support and time as well as for teaching me how to make small magical changes in my teaching practices.

Copyright Notice

The author hereby grants to the School for International Training the permission to reproduce either electronically or in print format this document in whole or in part for library archival purposes only.

The author hereby does grant the School for International Training the permission to electronically reproduce and transmit this document to the students, alumni, staff, and faculty of the World Learning Community.

© Ana-Maria Nicolae, 2007. All rights reserved.

ABSTRACT

A teacher of English for Business at a Romanian business college reflects on her experiences and beliefs about language learning and teaching before and after attending the Summer Master of Arts (SMAT) Program at the School for International Training (SIT). The project reports on some of the changes that the humanistic tenets of the SIT SMAT program brought about in her teaching and includes three examples of how these humanistic principles could be applied in an EFL business college classroom. The first example showcases her attempt to address affective factors during the first Business English class. The second example focuses on her making teaching oral presentation skills a more authentic and motivating experience for the students. The third example is a series of mini-lessons which allow students to inquire into their beliefs about language learning.

ERIC descriptors: Professional development; Instructional improvement; Humanistic education; Attitude change; Beliefs; Undergraduate students; Business English

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter

1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
2. BEING AND BECOMING A TEACHER.....	8
3. HUMANISM AND TEACHING AND LEARNING LANGUAGES.....	19
4. HUMANIZING MY FIRST BUSINESS ENGLISH CLASS.....	27
5. TEACHING ORAL PRESENTATION SKILLS.....	46
6. STUDENTS' BELIEFS ABOUT LANGUAGE LEARNING.....	56
7. HUMANIZING MYSELF.....	77
APPENDIX.....	82
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	85

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Project

Fall 2001. The same job: English teacher. New school: the Academy of Economic Studies. New classes: freshman and sophomore college students. New coursebook: English for Business Administration. New, almost esoteric subject matter to teach: Business English. If you could have entered the very first day of class with each of the twelve groups of students I had been assigned, you would have been struck by the same silence repeating itself in an almost exacerbated way: twenty-five students, sitting quietly in rows and looking at their teacher. Each of them had a different motivation to be there, a different idea about what an English class is supposed to be, and yet they were all somehow nervous and excited to begin school and, for some of them, a new chapter in their lives: college. You would have also seen me, their English teacher, looking no older than them, standing in front of those rows and uttering majestically the already classic sentences said by teachers all over the world: “Hello group 112! Welcome to English for Business Administration. My name is Ana-Maria Nicolae and I’ll be your teacher for this school year. First of all, let me call the roll.” And their names would start dropping out of my mouth in an even quieter silence. And then I introduced the syllabus and the coursebook. And then I talked about the assessment and expectations for the class. And then the class was over. And then the school year was over. And yes, I had survived and

managed to cover the coursebook. Luckily, in June 2002 something changed and I became a student myself in the Summer Master of Arts in Teaching (SMAT) program at the School for International Training (SIT).

Statement of the Problem

Analyzing those four sentences which are part of a teacher's routine at the beginning of every new school year, Earl Stevick (1982) points out the messages and promises which teachers, and therefore I as well, convey through these words. First, by saying "group" or "class" ("Hello group 112!"), we, the teachers, acknowledge our students as human beings who have brought certain goals for that specific class; we also take on as our duty to find out which these goals are and to what extent they match the school's goals. Second, by welcoming our students ("Welcome to English for Business Administration!"), we promise we will make our students and ourselves feel at home, safe and motivated to learn/teach the language. Third, by uttering "I'll be your teacher" we assume our roles as teachers and make sure we have explored our motivations for being a teacher. Forth, the act of calling our students' names ("Let me call the roll") is the first step we take towards getting to know each of them better and putting them at the core of the language teaching process and not our needs to impress them with our knowledge or to ask for gratitude.

If at the end of the year you would have asked me whether I thought I had delivered on all those promises spoken out in the first day of classes, I would have said "yes and no." However, did I truly know the promises I had made? Was I aware of what

was happening in my class? What had I done to align my practices with my beliefs? There was a lot of confusion, dissatisfaction and anxiety on my part and this is how I started the SIT SMAT program.

All those negative emotions were also fueled by the context I was in. The western educational tradition is known to be based on rationality and the knowledge transmission model. There is the assumption that cold abstract reasoning only can guide us in life to discern between good and bad, effective and ineffective, while affect or emotions are considered detrimental and labeled as non-rational (Goleman 1994). There is also the belief that teachers, as the only legitimate holders of knowledge, can teach by spoon-feeding their students, deciding what and how much knowledge they should pass onto the learners. I was raised in a teacher-centered educational system, with a focus on the rational and cognitive aspect of learning. I was raised with the belief that the teacher is the expert, and still, there I was teaching Business English, I, who had never been to an English speaking country and had never had any business courses before. I was feeling like an impostor in front of my students who had English accents better than mine, many of whom had graduated economic high schools. It seemed as if my previous experience of teaching in a public high school and in a private language center could hardly help me cope with the new teaching challenge. It seemed as if I had never taught English before and I had to learn everything all over again.

In any teaching practitioner's professional development a Master program represents a moment of reevaluation of her past practices, a time to get in touch with the research that backs up her everyday teaching and a reflection over her role in the world of education. Such a program can shift entire teaching paradigms or crystallize an already

existing system of beliefs and practices. In my case, the SIT SMAT program played the role of both a coagulating factor and a change agent. When I started the program, little did I anticipate the consequences this program would have upon my teaching beliefs and practice and my perceptions of myself as a teacher. Little was I aware of the value of reflection as a tool to reach deeper and new understandings. Little had I tried before to articulate my teaching philosophy.

Purpose of the Project

This project is intended to offer a retrospective look at my teaching beliefs and practices during the academic years 2002-2003 and 2003-2004 in order to identify and document some of the changes brought about by the SIT SMAT program. Written as narrative inquiry, the project explores in-depth these changes and acknowledges their humanistic nature as a reflection of the direct influence of the humanistic tradition of SIT's philosophy. As Palmer puts it in his book *The Courage to Teach*, "We teach who we are." This project also investigates the relationship between my self and my teacher persona and examines how the context of a Romanian business school and my students' beliefs and actions have shaped my own teaching.

This project tries to address the broad question: "What were my teaching beliefs and practices during the interim year of the SIT SMAT program and in the following year?" This question can be answered by addressing five more specific questions:

1. What were my teaching practices and beliefs behind the first class of Business English in a semester and how do they impact the subsequent classes? (chapter 4)

2. What were some of my teaching practices and underlying beliefs in teaching presentation skills? (chapter 5)
3. What is the importance of students' inquiry of their own beliefs about language learning and how can it be incorporated in the Business English class? (chapter 6)
5. What are my main teaching beliefs after the SIT SMAT program? (chapter 7)

Significance of the Project

First of all, there is my personal and professional benefit deriving directly from the writing process; as Jackson and Golombek (2002) note, writing about professional development is in itself part of the professional development. This project gave me the opportunity to articulate my own knowledge and practices using my own voice and make sense of my changes during the years 2002-2004. By stepping back, I could get a clearer picture of where I had stood in my teaching before the Master program and where I went from there along with my students in our humanistic endeavor. For example, part of my journey was the realization of how the cognitive and affective sides of learning and teaching are so intimately connected and how learning teaching was not about finding “the best method to teach.” At the same time, writing this narrative meant for me reliving the past classroom dilemmas, my pedagogical and moral choices and all the emotions of joy, fear or anger accompanying them. That is why such reflective writing represented for me a “journey into the realm of practical ethics” (Noddings 1984: 10)

Second, this project can be helpful to other language teachers who might face similar problems: making the coursebook more relevant to their students' needs, creating

space for each student's voice, teaching under the pressure of a rigid curriculum in a rigid environment, finding it difficult to recognize their failures and limitations. It can join the ever increasing body of teacher-generated knowledge and bring its modest contribution to helping solidify the status of teacher action research as a valid and solid type of research.

Last but not least, this project can also add more to the relatively small body of written work on the Romanian teaching and learning environment as it helped me discover some of the possible patterns to be found in the English classes in a Romanian undergraduate business program as well as uncover my struggle as a Romanian teacher to improve my practice.

Limitations

As any other teacher research project, this one is also limited by my own subjectivity in observing myself and my own students with the purpose of improving my teaching practice. Still, the project starts from the premise that as both the teacher and action researcher I tried to do everything with honesty and report on accomplishments as well as on flaws and failures. The lack of systematized gathering of data at certain moments and incomplete triangulation might have yielded a less coherent picture of the intricate classroom life and my own journey and therefore affected the credibility of the project.

Although writing a narrative inquiry is a process of bringing order into and putting into perspective my thoughts and actions, there is also a certain amount of messiness left, which has been acknowledged as inherent to the way practitioners think

about and carry out their work (Woods 1996). The same holds true about myself and this project.

Another drawback is that being set in the specific setting of Romanian business higher education, this narrative inquiry will probably resonate directly only with a limited number of teachers. However, since humanism goes across cultures on the assumption that the teacher respects and appreciates her students in their own cultural context, I am hoping that EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers in general and BE (Business English) teachers in particular will derive some inspiration from my teaching practices described.

Overview of the Chapters

Chapter one introduced the background of the problem and the guiding questions. Chapter two deals with the experiences and contexts that had shaped my teaching before the SIT SMAT program. Chapter three focuses on humanism in language teaching and learning and my experiences during the SIT SMAT program. The subsequent chapters are devoted to exemplifying the humanizing of my teaching English for Business Administration in the largest public business school in Romania. Chapter four delineates the changes which took place in my teaching when dealing with the first English class. Chapter five centers on the changes I made in teaching oral presentation skills. Chapter six is a project which allows students to inquire into their beliefs about language learning. Finally, chapter seven highlights the main changes in my teaching beliefs after the SIT SMAT experience.

CHAPTER 2

BEING AND BECOMING A TEACHER

Introduction

One of my favorite quotations from the book *The Courage to Teach* says that “...good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher” (Palmer 1998:10). According to the Merriam-Webster online dictionary, the word “identity” comes from the Latin *idem*, meaning “the same,” influenced by the late Latin *essentitas*, meaning “being,” and the word “integrity” derives from the Latin adjective *integer*, meaning “complete”, “whole.” The meanings attached to the etymological roots of these words led me to reason that a good teacher must be a person who knows herself and has a well-articulated system of beliefs about language, teaching and learning, which allows her to express the whole of herself and be consistent in her practices.

Yet, a teacher’s beliefs and identities are shaped by her interactions with students, peers, superiors, mentors and other professional communities and are subject to various societal influences and, therefore, can be seen as the resultant of many forces at work of whose presence we are, most of the time, oblivious. That is why in the process of answering the question “Who am I as a teacher?” I had to consider all my past experiences as a learner and teacher in different contexts in order to identify and analyze all the possible layers that have contributed to the making up of my teaching persona.

I as a Technician Teacher

In the Deweyan conception, reflection as an active and deliberative cognitive process has been recognized over the last two decades as a vital element in a teacher's classroom practices and her wish to improve herself (Borg 2006). According to Cruickshank (Barlett 1990), a reflective teacher thinks about what happens in the classroom and asks herself about a certain course of action, students' performance, her performance, etc. In contrast, Zeichner and Liston (Barlett 1990) propose a broader perspective and point out that a reflective teacher is one who "assesses the origins, purposes and consequences of his or her work at all levels." In other words, Zeichner and Liston's definition expands teacher's thinking beyond the classroom into the greater areas of societal contexts in which she lives and teaches; such a teacher is aware of the social, historical and cultural determinations of her teaching and her students' learning.

Barlett (1990) notices that while Cruickshank's definition focuses on the "what" aspect of the teaching-learning process, Zeichner' and Liston's view adds the "how" and the "why" aspects, allowing a reflective teacher to connect what happens in her classroom with who she is as a person and who her students are as people embedded in a certain socio-cultural context. Looking at my teaching from the perspectives put forward by the two definitions, I can say that prior to the SIT SMAT program I had been more of Cruickshank teacher and what Zeichner and Liston call a "technician teacher" (Barlett 1995: 206). I was mainly concerned with moving away from the traditional teacher-centered methodologies, with embracing the communicative approach, and with finding the most effective way to teach a certain grammar tense or vocabulary item or designing

activities for the development of the four skills. I used to do all of this without challenging my beliefs, without finding a moment to “stop and breathe,” as my supervisor would say, and question the underlying reasons for what I was doing.

What I lacked was a coherent picture of myself and my teaching, a unified sense of how I had become the teacher I was, and how I could have become the teacher I wanted to be. My lack of coherence and integrity in my practices manifested itself in a schizophrenic mode of teaching which depended on the educational context I was in: public or private. In order to clarify this dichotomy in my teaching, I need to draw a picture of the macro and micro teaching contexts that had shaped me before the SIT SMAT program.

My Profile

I am a white middle-class Romanian woman with a bachelor and a master degree from the University of Bucharest in Romania. When I began the SIT SMAT program, in my late 20s, I had had five years experience teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English for Business (EB) in Romania, both in the public and the private sectors. For three years I had taught EFL in a public high school at a time when the post-communist national curricular reform was bringing about important changes. For another year, I had taught English for Business Administration to freshmen and sophomores at the most important public business college in Romania.

Parallel with being a teacher in the public sector I had taught for five years as a part-time teacher at a private language center set up with the support of the Academy of

Economic Studies and the British Council. There I became familiar with the communicative approach and most of the innovations in foreign language education in post-communist Romania. I taught a variety of classes, from elementary to upper-intermediate levels, one-on-one English for Business to corporate clients to TOEFL and BEC Cambridge Exams Preparation Courses. I was also in charge of administrative issues and curriculum development, which together with teaching made the experience at this private language center the most important arena for professional growth for me.

Post-Communist Romanian Public Education

Most of my English language learning experiences took place in a communist Romania with closed borders. Our teachers would employ a mixture of Grammar Translation and Direct Method, taking us through a detailed structural and lexical analysis of literary texts. We took laborious notes, did boring grammar exercises and wrote long literary analyses of the texts in the coursebook. The focus was on developing our reading and writing skills and having us master the grammar and vocabulary taught. There was little incentive to work on listening and speaking skills, since knowing a foreign language and especially English, the language of the “capitalist enemy,” was considered dangerous by the Communist Party. I learnt the language anyway being probably one of those “method-proof” students who love learning languages, admire their teachers and place high value on education in general.

The fall of the communist regime in 1989, followed by the transition from a totalitarian to a democratic society, affected foreign language education as well. Once

Romania opened up its borders, the English language with its increasing status of lingua franca gained in importance; for the first time in 50 years people could travel abroad freely, meet L1 English speakers (native speakers of English), and enjoy foreign mass media and therefore they were eager to learn the language. All of a sudden, English teachers were in high demand, since they held the key to teaching a “liberating” language, which connected its speakers with the world outside Romania and better jobs. However, the low salaries prevented many English graduates from wanting to become English teachers and forced those who were already English teachers to take up a huge amount of private tutoring and second jobs with private language schools in order to meet their everyday life needs.

I had become an English teacher because I loved the language and so many of my former teachers had been such an inspiration to me. I was the product of a teacher-centered educational model but I had to adapt myself to the new guidelines of the educational reforms. The then minister of education Andrei Marga insisted that the new education system should promote the values of and prepare students to fully function in a democratic society and multicultural Europe, eliminating the traditional communist focus on passive memorization and transfer of knowledge (Mihai 2003). As to the foreign language education, the “new” methodology (the communicative approach) was the buzz word.

The transition from one political system to another one comes with an inevitable amount of confusion. For many years I taught high school seniors from the same communist coursebooks I had used as a learner and juniors from a variety of new coursebooks, coauthored by English, American and Romanian authors under the

guidance of English and American educational specialists. It was exciting to finally have new textbooks with contextualized grammar, listening exercises, pictures and interesting texts. Unfortunately, the high school English graduation exams and college entrance examinations had not changed much and were still based on traditional prescriptive grammar and school type compositions.

Teacher training has been often called the “engine” of any educational reform; however, in many reports on the state of Romanian education, the lack of large scale appropriate teacher training was repeatedly identified as a major weakness (Ministry of Education and Research 2002). Like many of my peers I did not question the validity of what “new” in “new methodology” and “new coursebooks” meant: I had enormous respect for the knowledge of the specialists and thought that anything that came with the “native speaker” label had to be new, therefore good for us. The workshops for English teachers I had attended were about practical ideas on how to teach a literary text or grammar tense with a focus on communication. Still, when I would go back to my classroom, I felt that the implementation of the new teaching techniques didn’t make a difference. My students would sit in fixed desks, facing me and addressing me most of the time; those who would volunteer to answer my questions were the same “good” students; we still had to do lots of grammar, translations and literary analyses, because this was what the final exams were about. I felt I couldn’t change anything and kept blaming the rigidity of the public education system. If only, I thought, I had the freedom I had in my other teaching job at the private language center!

The Private Long-Life Informal Education

After 1989 many private language centers appeared all over Romania as part of continuing informal education in order to meet the growing demand for English. Most of the teachers at these centers have part-time positions because they work full-time in the public schools. For them and for me working at a private language center meant not as much supplementing the low income as being able to teach in a quasi-ideal environment, with small groups of highly-motivated learners of all ages, with mobile desks we could move around and all the material support we needed. I was able to choose the coursebook and supplementary materials I thought appropriate, and there was no pressure from a tight curriculum or unrealistic examinations. Because the main goal was to help the learners learn the language and because most of the learners were adults who had not finished school recently, I paid attention to creating a learning environment in which they would have as many opportunities to practice the language as possible, make mistakes and feel comfortable with each other and me.

The Students at the Academy of Economic Studies

After teaching high school students for three years I decided I needed a change and accepted a position teaching Business English at the Academy of Economic Studies, the most important business school in Romania. All of a sudden I found myself at square one in my teaching: a new subject matter, new coursebooks, and new students.

When you meet each of your twelve groups you have to teach only once a week for an hour and a half and you have to rush through six units in twelve weeks, it seems almost impossible to have any time left to get to know your student better. On the first class of my first year of teaching Business English I had the student fill out a questionnaire meant to give me some information about their level of English. On the whole, the business students' level of English was very good, ranging between intermediate and upper-intermediate and even advanced with some exceptions of pre-intermediate level. The questionnaire asked them about how many years of English they had or if they were interested or not in grammar exercises. I was focused on their cognitive needs and accomplishments, forgetting their psychological well-being.

More than half of my students were freshmen. Psychologically speaking, college freshmen are not very different from the high school seniors, and the transition from high school to college can be very traumatic, especially during the first semester. I discovered it was very important to create time during the first and the last class of the first semester to let them talk openly and compare their high school experiences with their college experiences in terms of their relationships with the professors, their colleagues, extracurricular activities, etc. One of the recurrent themes of these discussions was alienation. For most of them starting college meant that for the first time in their lives they were far from home and their parents. Moreover, the sense of connectedness they felt in high school, when teachers knew them by their names, asked why they were absent and shared a personal history with them, was almost gone. I keenly remember student remarks such as "Most of the professors here don't ever get to know our names and some of them don't care if we are present or not at their lectures," or "Since evaluation is done

mostly at the end of the semester through a big exam, the professors don't care if we learn anything throughout the semester.”

Students came from all over Romania, from urban or rural schools, and held different learning beliefs and styles; many came from places where isolation and individualism are seen as management behavior tools or life philosophies. Occasionally, there might have been a couple of foreign students, Turkish, Greek, Russian or Slovak who brought with them the experiences of other educational systems.

These were the students at the Academy of Economic Studies, with their thoughts and feelings. They were in the same room with me for the first year of my teaching Business English but I did not see much of them, because my obsession with covering the content of the coursebook had blocked my view.

A Schizophrenic Way of Teaching

Before starting the SIT SMAT program my teaching had been a continuous swing between public schools and the private language center. The public education was about meeting the requirements of a high-stake exam focused on testing grammar and literary analysis. At the private language center we could concentrate on developing real-life communicative competencies that the learners needed for tourist or work purposes. Very soon, without even realizing it, I got set in two very different, almost irreconcilable routines of a schizophrenic-like teaching: teaching in a public context was about following the rigid rules of the curriculum; teaching in a private context was about being creative and caring about the learners.

Therefore, my move from the public high school to a higher public education institution fell into the same category of a frozen-like routine. Since the Academy of Economic Studies was a public business school, it came as no surprise that when I started teaching there I felt, like in any other public school, that the strict curriculum offered me too little freedom in teaching and that I had no other choice but to maintain the tradition of the “academic” teacher-centered teaching.

As I was to discover at SIT, the impression of having very little freedom in teaching was an obstacle that came not as much as from the external factors as from my inner convictions. This realization started with the encounter with Shakti Gattegno during a demonstration workshop on Silent Way at SIT and culminated with the experience of the one week supervision during the interim year with my SIT supervisor. SIT’s humanistic message that, notwithstanding the external limitations, teachers are free in their classrooms, and change can happen if they allow for the change to happen finally began to make sense to me once I could face the fears and deeply ingrained beliefs that had held me back for so long.

First, there was my preconception that “at the academic level” things need to be done “seriously” with a strong emphasis on cognitive development, and that students are supposed to manage most of the tasks individually, which had made me look at my students not as a group of whole persons but as isolated incomplete individuals. Second, my previous experiences with teaching in public schools with fixed desks in rows had made me think that there was no way I could rearrange those rows so that the new seating could encourage more group work and communication among students; this immobility of the physical environment was just mirroring the immobility in my teaching practices.

Third, my own anxiety about teaching a new subject matter and my reverence towards the coursebook had contributed to the narrowing of my already myopic teaching focus on the survival of my own teaching self and the spoonfeeding of my students.

A change in my teaching started to happen after the first summer of the SIT SMAT program, after being immersed in an environment of reflection upon what learning and teaching mean from a humanist perspective.

CHAPTER 3

HUMANISM AND TEACHING AND LEARNING LANGUAGES

Humanism and Language Learning

In an attempt to clarify the various nuances of the concept of “humanism,” Stevick (1990) starts from a definition of “humane” as provided by The Oxford English Dictionary, a definition which points out the “behavior” or “disposition” towards others which makes us different from animals. Stevick divides the features that distinguish humans from animals into five main categories: feelings, social relations, responsibility, intellect and self-actualization, the last one often referred to as “realizing one’s potential” or “getting in touch with one’s real self.”

It has been often said that classroom is of one of the most contrived settings, which hardly allows for a learning environment in which all the five above mentioned aspects are given equal attention (Arnold, 1999). The communist educational system in which I had been raised focused on different values, which, as a teacher, I continued to unwittingly perpetuate in my own classrooms. Greater attention was given to the intellect, at the expense of the affect. Isolation, as a perfect companion to competition, was also much cultivated because any form of collaborative work could not be objectively graded and therefore would have counted as cheating. Our responsibility as students was limited to learning what had been taught to us without questioning much the authority. We were at school to enrich our knowledge about subject matters and not our knowledge about

ourselves, to get grades that would help us enter a college that would have later provided us with a decent job.

Educational systems have been often criticized for relying on business models, driven by short-term performance, end results, standardized testing and percentages of students who have passed the state exams. The immersion into the SIT SMAT humanistic program helped me realize that we the teachers have to be aware of the negative consequences such a reductionist process has on students' future development and that we can and should resist it if we truly start looking at our students as whole persons and not just names or numbers.

Reading *Working with Teaching Methods: What's at Stake?* by Earl Stevick, in which he enumerates four basic features of the whole learner, I could see clearly how schools in general, and the schools I had been at in particular, depart from the humanistic tenets. The first tenet is that the learners learn by doing and the doing must take place without the teacher's strict supervision. This comes in contrast with the traditional view that learners are just passive recipients of the teachers' spoonfeeding knowledge. The second tenet is that in the process of learning all the three major components: cognitive, affective and physical are affected since they cannot exist separately. This goes against the claim, still very much in practice in many schools, that teaching and learning address mainly the cognitive/intellectual part, with the physical and affective parts almost dismissed as if inexistent. The third tenet is that learning happens in a community of learners. Schools have encouraged individualism and isolation, competitiveness, banning cooperation and groupwork as something not to be desired. The fourth tenet is that the whole learner needs more than just the teacher's approval or the satisfaction of having

accomplished a task. Unfortunately, schools and teachers often forget about other student needs, such as the need to be in a safe environment where they can experience a sense of real belonging and of moving towards a deeper and larger goal.

My Humanistic Experiences at SIT

The SIT Master of Arts in Teaching program has a long tradition which started in the 60s, and was known throughout the 60s and 70s as a cradle of fervent experimentation which aimed at best preparing foreign language teachers for classroom teaching. Thinkers like Earl Stevick and Caleb Gattegno, Charles Curran, Georgi Lozano, and David Kolb brought their contributions in order to support the original vision, namely that through education we can make the world a better place. Even if one of the core courses of the program, “Approaches to Teaching,” was based on the thorough analysis of three approaches considered as innovative in the 70s, the Silent Way, Community Learning and De-suggestopedia, it was actually designed to offer a postmodernist teaching framework. The ultimate goal was to enable us, the teachers, to use introspection in order to develop our own practical theory of language teaching infused by the humanistic perspective.

At SIT we found inspiration in Gattegno’s mottos: “We are our own best resources” and “Teaching is subordinated to learning.” We attended workshops and demonstrations conducted by representatives of the three teaching methods, namely the Silent Way, Community Learning and De-suggestopedia. The initial enthusiastic reactions at the effectiveness of each demonstration were replaced by a careful analysis

of what might become of that particular method if applied in our teaching environment. The principles of these approaches seemed extremely appealing to all of us: the Silent Way promotes developing learner's inner criteria for correctness by becoming aware of how the L2 works, De-suggestopedia focuses on overcoming psychological barriers to learning, and Community Language Learning is concerned with students' learning nondefensively as whole persons, following developmental stages. However, we concluded that the methods accompanying these approaches, due to their prescriptive character which overlooks a classroom's reality, can hardly be used in their purest forms in our own classrooms.

Moreover, even the highly experienced teachers with solid training in one or more of these methods confessed that they don't always strictly follow the principles and procedures of the adopted teaching philosophy. This led us to conclude once again, in the spirit of Kumaravadivelu's claim for a "postmethod condition" (1993), that there is no such concept as "the best method," but "our own best method" which is shaped by our own values and teaching contexts. Consequently, we started our quest for who we are as teachers and the terms which can best describe our teaching style. This required much monitoring, introspection, journaling, reflection, willingness to risk and experiment with new ideas as well as questioning our prejudices and already formed ideas about teaching. Furthermore, it included our developing an increased sensitivity to learners' continuous feedback so that we can always stay in touch with their needs and progress.

From the very beginning the focus was laid on direct field experience, which put into practice the experiential learning cycle, a core model for this program. Through the use of experiential learning we realized that any pedagogic framework developed by us

must emerge from our classroom experience and that this framework will work if validated by the sense of involvement both teachers and students are supposed to experience.

Experiencing and Reflecting on Autonomy at SIT

In *Working with Teaching Methods: What's at Stake?* Earl Stevick explains that the humanistic orientation is about facing the question whether we teach only certain linguistic skills or whether we want, as teachers, to give our students more than that. If this is so, then what exactly do we want them to acquire? Two answers given by the three approaches are: to acquire a “fully developed awareness” and their full human potential through “a new language self.”

The starting point is developing learners' autonomy, so that they can continue the learning process even after the end of the course, outside the classroom. The teacher's mission is to help them learn how to learn and become conscious about the learning strategies they seem to possess intuitively. As any learner has already acquired at least a language, namely his mother tongue-language, it means that they come into the classroom fully equipped to learn a new language (Gattegno 1972). The teacher is not supposed “to feed” the student as if the latter were an empty recipient, but to build on what the student brings with him. The teacher's mission is to tap into the learner's inner resources and create the proper learning environment in which the student will gradually take responsibility for his own learning.

All these aspects I could experience during one of the program's courses, the Beginning Language class. Being a student once again raised my awareness as to what a beginning student may feel and think during a language class. Learning Japanese, a language totally new to me, helped me discover the inner psychological obstacles of the adult learners confronted with the fear of making mistakes and damaging their self-image. I also got to experience and understand the battle between the two selves, the doer and the critic, as explained into *The Inner Game of Tennis* by Timothy Gallwey and understood how important it is to create a non-threatening environment in which mistakes are seen as not something to be punished, but the best answer the student can give at that time.

Awareness as a Key Element in the SIT Program

The key word standing at the heart of the SIT program was awareness. Translated into our field, it means becoming able to observe, record and reflect on our own teaching and see how it yields results in practice, mirrored in our students' learning. As students in the workshops on the three approaches, the Silent Way, Community Language Learning and De-suggestopedia, we monitored our reactions, and even if at the end we showed a distinct preference towards one of the approaches, we clearly saw that as teachers we needed not to indiscriminately adopt one of them, but rather articulate our own view of teaching.

Throughout the program we tried to define ourselves in terms of who we are as humans and the values we cherish, so as to better assess our attitude towards teaching and

our students. As empathy is a core teacher characteristic, understanding others is best achieved through a better understanding of ourselves. As Jim Scrivener puts it, “It is our attitude and intentions rather than our methodology that we may need to work on” (1994:12).

Discussions on the concepts of “awareness” took place in our classes built around selected readings from Caleb Gattegno. There we compared what is usually called academic intelligence (usually measured through various standardized tests) with other types of intelligences, such as emotional intelligence, which helps us live to our fullest potential. We talked about how children learn by observing adults or their peers and realizing there are differences between what they do and say and what adults and their peers do and say. We also talked about how school distorts this genuine way of learning and makes students accumulate knowledge which they are supposed to reproduce to get good grades and approval instead of using it to make a better version of themselves. No wonder then that school has become a place for demotivating learners.

Most often, students do not come to classes with a certain motivation in mind, but we, the teachers, can make learning become a motivation in and of itself. Every time the student accomplished a task seen as a doable challenge, he lives what Csikszentmihalyi (1990) called “the optimal experience” consisting of an incredible feeling of power and of being in control of the situation. After all, in Latin “to be able to” and “power” have the same root, which means that one is powerful every time one manages to accomplish something one could not do before. If learning is a system which perpetuates itself, then students will continue to learn even outside the classroom, in order to re-live the “optimal experience” of conquering new linguistic territories.

With these new understanding about learning and teaching I started my second year of Business English, hoping to bring more integrity to my teaching. Some of the changes I made in my teaching practices are recorded in the following three chapters.

CHAPTER 4

HUMANIZING THE FIRST BUSINESS ENGLISH CLASS

To Change or Not to Change

If you could have had a look at the sketchy lesson plan I had prepared for the first class of Business English with the college students from the Academy of Economic Studies, you wouldn't have seen much. The first part was a quick scribble of the approximate time allotted to reading aloud students' names, showing them the coursebook and talking about the seminar requirements; the second part was an extended list of activities from the first unit of the coursebook, a list from which one could have predicted that, once in the classroom, I was going to tackle the activities in the exact same order and following the exact same requirements as set by the coursebook.

However, I still remember that while planning that very first lesson I did experience some dilemmas. For example, the first activity was a listening one based on a dialogue between a Romanian business woman and a British businessman who make contact at a business conference. As a pre-listening activity, students were required to brainstorm and thus anticipate possible topics of discussion for the two characters; then they had to listen to the dialogue to compare their expectations with what they were listening to and also identify any inappropriate choice of register in the conversation. The

purpose of these tasks was to introduce students to the language of “the first five minutes” of social interaction in a business setting.

The exercise as such did not seem too appealing to me. I had never been to business conferences before, but I had attended a few conferences on English teaching and I knew that the coffee breaks were busy lively moments, when people were eager to talk to one another, be they old acquaintances or new faces. What a difference between the dynamism of a real-life conference break and the task my students were supposed to do. I could imagine them just sitting down and trying to be interested in the language exchange of the two business characters and I could anticipate that they would find it difficult to relate to that situation. However, although I could sense that something was missing, I didn't take any steps to make the task more interesting and therefore relevant to them. After all, it was the first time I was teaching Business English to business students using that coursebook; I personally knew and admired some of its authors, and trusted them completely. Moreover, I knew I had to cover as much as six units in twelve seminars, so at moment it made sense that I had to tackle the first unit as soon as possible and go through the material as it was presented in the coursebook. That was exactly what I did the following day during my first business English class, and I still remember the silent unmotivating atmosphere during the listening activity.

The kind of choices I had made for the first day of class was symptomatic for how the rest of my business English teaching year was going to unfold. Unfortunately, as I was to realize later, I was focusing on the book while forgetting about the students and myself. Even more, I had approached the textbook with an attitude of “reification,” as if the book was “an immutable and almost mythical object” (Richards 1998). I was eager to

dive into the linguistic components, and thus meet what the coursebook writers had considered were the students' cognitive needs, totally omitting that the first English class had gathered together, just like at a conference, people with different interests, from various part of the country, who had to introduce themselves to one another first before starting a conversation.

My Beliefs about the First English Class before SIT

Research in teacher cognition (Woods 1996, Borgs 2006) has agreed that when making classroom decisions, teachers draw on their previous learning and teaching experiences, previous training, as well as on their beliefs and assumptions about what effective teaching and learning is in general and in particular for a certain group of students. Had you had a chance to ask me about my choice of activities for that first Business English class, you would have definitely been able to discern a multitude of factors that had triggered those choices.

First of all, my past experiences as a language learner with the first class in a public school mostly fell into extremes: either the teacher informed us about the syllabus and the books and then we had an informal, unstructured conversation about what we had done over the vacation or the teacher would start teaching the first lesson, usually a lecture type with occasional attempts at having us remember vocabulary and grammar. In both cases, the building or rebuilding of our class members as a cohesive group was omitted under the assumption that breaks were the periods the time when we were supposed to get to know each other better.

Orientation Week at SIT

As a student at SIT I was struck with how much emphasis was laid on the creation of a relaxed and safe learning environment: we had a whole week for orientation to get to know each other better and to develop our interpersonal and intrapersonal skills. We had time to say our names and who we were, to look carefully at our colleagues and who they were and to question why we were thinking what we were thinking. We sat in a circle together with our teachers and had time to get to know them and who they were beyond their professional persona.

For the first time in my life I was focusing on who I was both as a teacher and a person; what we learnt in each class seemed to take the methodological objectives into something deeper pertaining to life skills; there was genuine interest from our teachers as to how we expressed ourselves and guidance in how to peel off the layers of socio-cultural factors that had shaped us into the teachers-people we were. I was using the language to give voice to my daily discoveries about myself, what I thought as well as what I felt. That kind of orientation was completely different from the small ice-breaking activities I had gone through in previous teacher trainings.

What remained with me from that orientation week was the desire to integrate this new vision of teaching-learning into my practices and make this change visible from day one of classes, through what I would say explicitly to my students and especially the activities I would like them to be engaged in. Therefore, I decided that the first class would no longer be a quick diving into the first unit of the coursebook, for fear I might

not “cover” all the units in time. I decided that: 1) I would acknowledge the anxiousness and fear of the unknown of the first class 2) I, the teacher, would acknowledge that I was as nervous as the students; 3) I would no longer stand in front of the class all the time, as if marking a separation of power between myself and the students; 4) We would work together towards some classroom management rules 5) We would take some time to get to know ourselves and each other better.

The Cocktail Party

The first Business English classes of the academic years 2002-2003 and 2003-2004 were so different from the first class I had taught in my very first year at the Academy of Economic Studies; that was possible because, being inspired by the SIT program guidelines, I wanted to start from the students and myself rather from some characters in our black-and-white textbook. First of all, to the linguistic objective of the first class “student will be able to learn the language of socializing,” I added another one: “students will be able to get to know each other, themselves and the teacher better.” This resonated with what Rinvoluceri says, namely that it is extremely important not to get into the core of the teaching matter right away, and instead spend more time on activities that help students “warm into both their target language and being in their group” so that they can have their “anxiety calmed and the linguistic unconscious opened up and made ready to go” (2002:11).

Another important shift was to trust my students more and let them guide me as to how the lesson would unfold. That would translate into my creating more opportunities

for me to ask for their feedback and assess their current knowledge and skills. I had noticed that if the Business English class was scheduled during the first half of the week, my class was also students' first and maybe only chance to shake hands with each other and interact with all their classmates. In the second year, at the beginning of the first class of the semester, I asked the students whether they knew their colleagues' names and whether they had had the chance to mingle and shake hands with everybody else during the other seminars. The answer was invariable "no" for the groups on Monday and Tuesday and "not with everybody" for the classes in the rest of the week.

I decided to start with an icebreaker, the classical cocktail party activity. This was meant to give students the opportunity to activate their schemata about parties, experience what it is like to take part in a party where everybody speaks English, to create an authentic motivating environment for them to use the language and prepare them for the listening about the two businesspeople in the coursebook. Lots of books with practical activities have variations on the theme of the cocktail party. Here are the steps I used:

1. Get the students to stand up and mingle.
2. Tell them ahead they are supposed to introduce themselves, shake hands with the other person and ask three questions, such as: "Where are you from?", "How long have you been studying English?", "Can you tell me something about you that you would like me to share with our colleagues?"
3. Give them a sheet of paper where they can write the name of the person they just met, and the answers to the questions.

4. As a teacher make sure you also get to mingle, shake hands with them, and ask and answer the questions.

As simple as it might seem, the cocktail party was more than a fun game-like activity. First of all, it was a great leveler of power, since it had us all perform the same activity. Second, it had students do something in English right way; it was really meaningful to them, because at the beginning of the year students are really curious to meet their colleagues and find out more about them. Third, it gave me the time and space to address my personal welcome to each of them, which had a huge impact on the students. From their feedback on this activity I found out that I was one of the very few professors that shook hands with them and made them feel really welcome to this institution of higher education.

The cocktail party activity had its challenges as well. There were classes where it took students more time to start mingling and where the energy built up more slowly. There were students who were reluctant to shake hands with their colleagues. There were shy students who would have rather stayed aside and watched, so I had to go towards them and introduce myself. There were some students who would have rather watched me interact with other students than mingle with their colleagues. I let them watch, because I knew that they needed somebody to model the interaction for them, but then I encouraged them to go and meet the other colleagues or I would introduce them to some of their peers. Usually the classrooms would not provide us with much space for this activity, and although it got crowded at times, it felt good to be physically close.

The biggest reward for me came when the students got so engaged in the activity and seemed to be having so much fun that it was really difficult to make them stop and go

to their places. After they came back to their places we had a whole class discussion and they had to introduce to the rest of the class one of the colleagues they had spoken to during the party.

Now It's the Students Questioning the Teacher

Sometime during the second semester of my first year of teaching Business English a couple of students were looking for me at the teachers' lounge. They didn't know my name, but they were looking for "the English teacher for group 114." After they left I couldn't stop wondering whether my students had ever got a glimpse of me as a person with a name besides my professional persona.

When I started the SIT program, I noticed that at the beginning of each course each professor took the time to introduce herself so that she no longer remained a mystery. It was important to somehow unveil the mystery of that person who was supposed to have the knowledge about the subject matter and acknowledge their past professional and personal experiences. That is why I decided to create space during the first Business English class so that I could briefly introduce myself and give the students the opportunity to ask me questions. I made sure I would mention experiences through which I could connect with them, such as how inspirational some of my high school teachers had been or how I had decided to come to college in Bucharest, the capital city, because I wanted an environment full of opportunities.

I had them work in pairs or groups of three and prepare at least two questions for me in what took the form of a short interviewing session. They were curious about my

age, marital status, whether I had children or not and why I had chosen to be a teacher. This last question always popped up and I gave it the outmost importance, because I wanted to let them know that I loved my job and working with students and this was a process from which we both parties had something to learn. Another question was which other foreign languages I could speak and why I had chosen Latin as my minor in undergraduate school. This was another opportunity for me to stress the importance of learning foreign languages and how teachers could inspire us in choosing our future careers.

This was a great teachable moment and depending on their questions, we would have a follow up discussion about which questions are or not appropriate to ask and in which circumstances and the importance of speaking foreign languages.

The Classroom Contract

One of the messages of the SIT SMAT program was, in Gattegno's words, for the teachers not to do what the students can do for themselves. It sounds unusual because which teacher does not want, using again Gattegno's words, autonomous, independent, responsible students? However, in my discussions with my supervisor this issue came up recurrently. I began to understand that out of my very best intentions to help my students, I was doing maybe too much for them, which actually had negative consequences: my decreasing energy level and their decreasing involvement in the class.

The classroom, as any other social group, must act within the framework of certain rules regulating appropriate behavior and the teaching-learning process.

Traditionally, since the teacher was regarded as the “power,” the authority, or at least the representative of a higher authority such as the school board, these rules were imposed from the exterior and were exclusively concerned with what the students, the “less powerful” are or are not allowed to do. With the shift of the focus from teacher to learner, with the act of empowering the students, these rules can be generated by students in collaboration with the teacher, in a process of negotiation that gives the learners a sense of involvement and ownership. They are also more motivated to respect them since they take part in their creation, which increases their sense of responsibility and autonomy.

This is an activity which I did as a student in the first year of the SIT SMAT. As a student, I felt I could voice my own concerns and make my own promises. As a teacher I found it extremely useful for both students and teacher, because it takes the responsibility to enforce the dos and don'ts from the teacher and gives it to the students. Although it has an element of playfulness attached to it, it integrates all the four skills; students speak and listen to English, as well as read and write. They also learn the value of collaborative work from day one and learn to appreciate their classmates' ideas. It also gives them the opportunity to leave their chairs and do a gallery walk, which adds an element of novelty. A gallery walk is an activity in which students display their work in the form of posters on the wall and then the whole class, as if walking around an art gallery, gets to have a close look at each of the posters. Usually the authors of the posters stand by their own work and answer their classmates' questions.

I find this activity important especially because it replicates an instance they will very often meet in the real world. As businesspeople, they will function in an environment regulated by contracts which stipulate rights and duties. Moreover, it makes

obvious the tacit rules about behavior that govern a class, so that both students and teacher share a common body of rules. At the same time this activity adds an element of playfulness and gives students the opportunity to express their opinions and have their voices heard. Here are the steps we followed:

1. The teacher introduces the contract and its role.
2. The teacher divides students into groups of three or four. Each group chooses a secretary to write down the contract, or each of them can take turns in doing this.
3. The teacher draws the layout of the contract and gives the first examples, such as “Teacher will always speak in English” and “Students will always speak in English.”
4. Each group writes down their rules of choice after they have been given poster paper and markers.
5. Students’ posters are exhibited on the walls.
6. Students and teacher have a gallery walk.
7. During the gallery walk the students read their colleagues’ proposals and put a check if they agree/like the idea or a cross if they disagree with it.
8. The teacher collects the posters; the teacher and students negotiate especially on points such as “The teacher will never give us much homework” or “The teacher will always be understanding;” the teacher has to be very specific about the cases she does not agree with, such as repeated absences.
9. The teacher or one of the students will take the posters and type up the rules.

10. During the next class the teacher and each student will sign the contracts in duplicate; one copy will remain with each student and the other with the teacher.

11. One copy should stay on the wall at all times during the English class.

12. There should be a section specifying the consequences if any of the rules are broken.

Here is an example of such a class contract:

English Class Contract

Group 112

<i>Students</i> will:	<i>Teacher</i> will:
Use only English during the English class	Use only English during the English class
Support and help each other	Excuse the students if they are a few minutes late
Try to study seriously and have fun	Be patient, tolerant, understanding, friendly and close to her students
Try to get good grades	Try to give good grades and smile a lot
Talk to each other	Not “kill” the students if they say/do something wrong
Obey the rules	Tell students jokes in English
Respect the teacher and their classmates	Respect the students
Use polite language with their classmates and the teacher	Support the students in times of need
Try to be on time for the classes (no more than 10 minutes late)	Party with her students
Come with ideas for projects	Allow students to listen to background music
Not smoke and chew gum during the class	Work with the whole class
Be nice and friendly with each other	Bring audio and video tapes
Turn their mobile phones off	Turn her mobile phone off
Be cooperative and work as a team	Try to be funny and inventive

Student’s signature

Teacher’s signature

What Makes a Good Student and What Makes a Good Teacher

The Merriam-Webster online dictionary defines “contract” as “an agreement between two or more parties for the doing or not doing of something specified.”

Although it has connotations of legalese, the classroom contract usually stipulates the teacher’s and student’s duties, and can be used as a great way to let students voice their expectations and the promises they can make for the class.

Sometimes students, besides asking for little or no homework and good grades, did not know what else they should come up with or maybe what they were allowed to say. A good intermediary step, which almost always worked, was to ask them to think for a couple of minutes about their favorite high school teachers, to think about what they liked most and least about them and then compare their thoughts with their colleagues’. A recurring theme was that of good teachers being those that “do not put students in the spotlight” or “embarrass them in front of the classroom” that “bring them interesting material” and understand when “family problems” might interfere with their study. The result of such a short survey showed me that students wanted a caring teacher that respected them as whole human beings, both intellectually and emotionally.

Although I tried the contract only once, I found it a very useful tool to use whenever students would use their cell phone to text messages or would not speak in English. If I were to use the classroom contract again, I would try to design it having all the rules grouped into categories, such as rules governing behavior, rules about homework, rules about class atmosphere, etc. I would also plan to find time in the middle

and at the end of the semester to get students' feedback on the contract, to ask whether they found it useful, what worked well and what didn't. I would also have the contract written as a big poster and display it on the wall, somewhere where everybody could see it.

Creating Yahoo! Groups

The creation of the Yahoo! groups was inspired by the Blackboard communities we had at SIT. Since our college did not have the Blackboard software, my supervisor suggested that a Yahoo! group might work as well, provided the students had access to computers. The school had a computer lab which, unfortunately, was not always available to the students.

A Yahoo! group offers virtual space to a group of people with shared interests. Anybody who has access to a computer can join or create a group if they go online to the website: <http://groups.yahoo.com/> and follow the instructions for joining or creating a group. It's easy and it's free of charge. In most cases, I was the one in charge with setting up the group, but whenever I found students familiar with this procedure I assigned this task to them. Also, during the first class, students were asked to choose a name for their group, which would be representative for themselves as a community. The names ranged from neutral to really funny ones: *group 114*, *111englishcommunity*, *114gullivers*, *133happy_people*, *2Bfree323*, *all41and14all215*, *biz_addict*, *byrum*, *coolBft1G*, *cooldestinypickles*, *English_please*, *sels211*, *aesgroup_112*, *englishcommunity112*.

There were definitely many advantages to the Yahoo! groups. First, it gave students a place where to express their voice, post their pictures, essays, projects and give a visual identity to their group. In time they started using it to communicate on other issues as well, but since they had a place where they could keep in touch with each other and with the teacher outside the classroom, they had more chances and were more motivated to participate and use English in an authentic environment. The teacher presence was less felt and they could develop their reading and writing skills in a non-threatening medium. I started using it to get feedback from them after the English classes, in conjunction with short oral feedback.

There were also disadvantages to Yahoo! groups and virtual communication in general. For the students with limited or no access to computers it was very difficult to take part in the on-line community; those students were given the option of a feedback notebook in which they could record their impressions and suggestions. Not all the students participated and those with computer access and a better level of English almost always dominated the exchange of ideas. Another drawback was that I had to monitor the activity of twelve groups, which became overwhelming at many times throughout the semester.

Negotiating Curricular Requirements

Since the learners were all pre-service business students, they couldn't be expected to come to the classroom with a clear agenda and with specific needs that have to be met. The syllabus with eleven topics in our Business English coursebook was meant

to give them the opportunity to acquire the language and communication skills to function in various general business situations. However, I learnt that instead of the “here’s the coursebook and the topics we have to cover” approach, I could give up some of my control, by telling them that I would do my best to accommodate other topics of interest to them. That was how several of them mentioned that they would like to set up their own business and this idea became the unifying topic throughout the year.

The students’ most important concern was assessment because it had a direct influence on their grades. The first lesson was also a good opportunity to explain to them how assessment would be done and how standardized assessment through a major exam at the end of the semester would be balanced by peer and self-assessment.

Changing the Physical Environment

One of the highlights of my supervisor’s visit to see me teaching at the Academy of Economic Studies was our joint efforts to make changes in the classroom environment. That was my big “aha” moment when I could literally see how the changes in the physical setting could lead to significant improvements in the classroom atmosphere, the patterns of interaction and the instructional process in general.

At the Academy of Economic Studies all the classroom and computer labs had desks and chairs set in rows; that arrangement suited the lecture-type of class, in which students mostly took notes and interacted very little with their classmates. As a student, I also had to sit in rows, facing the teacher and my colleagues’ backs. As a high school teacher, I had to teach in the exactly same arrangement. On the contrary, at the private

language center where I had my part-time teaching job three out of the four classrooms had mobile desks, so that it was very easy for me to have the learners grab their desks and move into a big circle or horseshoe-shape for a whole-class activity or in small arrangements for group work.

However, the real issue when I started teaching business English at the Academy of Economic Studies was not that the desks were big and heavy and really difficult to move around. After all, I had already experimented with various mobile desk arrangements at the private language center and I could have at least tried to do something similar with the business college students. The real problem was that my schizophrenic way of teaching due to all my previous learning and teaching experiences in public schools had created a very strong connection in my mind between rigidity, inflexibility and public education. Nobody is blinder than the one who does not want to see and I refused to see that those heavy desks could be moved to facilitate better communication among students.

My supervisor's coming into my own classroom was equivalent for me, using her words, with "having another pair of eyes," and with "having somebody to hold a mirror in front of me." She suggested that the big heavy desks arranged in five rows could actually be moved and arranged in two long rows next to each other in the shape of a long conference table, so that half of the group could face the other half of the group. We did this with a group of freshmen during a lesson on oral presentations and the effect this arrangement had on how they interacted with each other was really amazing for me. When one of the students was asked to share her previous experiences with attending conferences I could clearly see that the rest of the students were paying a lot more

attention than they would have if they had been sitting in the traditional rows. That was definitely due to the fact that now they were more motivated to pay attention: most of the students could see the speaker's face and her gestures really well and she had a real audience she could talk to. All of a sudden I, the teacher, was no longer the center of the attention; although many students were self-conscious about my presence and when asking their colleagues questions or making comments were looking for my approval, it was obvious that they were getting used to the idea that their audience was made up of their colleagues too and not only of their teacher. The most satisfying moment for me was when they got all so engaged in a debate on what constitutes a good presentation that they had almost forgot about my and my supervisor's presence.

This arrangement worked so well that we kept it for the rest of the year as well. It took a while until students got into the routine of arranging the desks into the two big rows at the beginning of the lesson and putting them back at the end of the lesson. There were many classes when students said that they were too tired or too worried about the coming exams and they would rather not move the desks. Those were the moments when I would help them move the desks or suggest an element of novelty: for example, when teaching meeting skills, the desks were arranged into one big table; when teaching negotiation skills the desks got arranged into two or four smaller tables. The goal was always to offer students a realistic setting for their conversations that would increase their rate of participation in the discussion.

Given the impact the physical setting had on student participation, I realized that it was very important to bring this subject up even from the very first Business English class. I learnt that it was important to illicit this need for a new desk arrangement from

the students themselves. For example, on the very first class with a group of freshmen in the fall of 2004, I asked them what they thought about the current desk arrangement and whether they liked it. Most of them said it was all right with them, but one woman student told us about her English class in high school, when her teacher made the students sit in circle so that everybody could see everybody else's faces. So we followed her suggestion and ended up arranging the desks in a shoe horse shape and all the group was excited with the new arrangement. That incident reminded me once again that students know and can do a lot more than I give them credit for.

CHAPTER 5

TEACHING ORAL PRESENTATION SKILLS

Introduction

As mentioned by Fantini et al (2000), one tenet of the humanistic education is acknowledging the fact that both teaching and learning are value-laden processes; as a consequence, teachers must be aware of and account for the values they want to teach in the classroom. Earl Stevick (1990) also points out that language teaching is not only about teaching the language. If teachers are to try to address the whole person of their learners, then they must be aware that teaching content is always accompanied by the instilling of a variety of values and attitudes, which will stay with the students long after they leave the classroom.

My Previous Beliefs and Experiences about Teaching Presentation Skills

It is often said that people fear most speaking in public, even more than death. Research in foreign language has also established that certain learners can experience serious anxiety when having to perform in a foreign language. No wonder that foreign language anxiety coupled with public speaking anxiety can lead to disastrous results especially for the shy students who can get literally paralyzed in the middle of an oral presentation. That is why I considered that in teaching presentation skills I had to help

students acquire the necessary language but also the self-confidence to speak in a foreign language.

In the first year of teaching oral presentation skills to the business college students I adopted the goal proposed by the coursebook: had students design and deliver effective short presentations while showing mastery of the language specific of presentations. In the unit entitled “Business Trends” the coursebook *English for Business Administration* introduced a comparison between an oral and a written presentation. The students were asked to identify the major features in terms of language and discourse and then do a short role play, a presentation based on the information they had previously extracted from a reading text.

Not only were the language structures provided for the main parts of a presentation very scarce, but the coursebook had no controlled practice, assuming that once the students had extracted the information from the text and prepared a layout, they were also fully prepared to successfully deliver the presentation. This restricted what an effective presentation is only to its linguistic components, overlooking other elements such as body language, the presenter’ fear of public speaking, the importance of rehearsal and peers’ feedback. There were no activities for students to make oral presentations on a subject of interest to them, no discussion of what it is like to deliver a presentation, and what is or not effective.

After the first year of teaching presentation skills it became obvious to me that I needed to give more time and attention to this topic: not only that delivering presentations is part of any business person’ life, but some of the students were already members of various student organizations and were expected to present at students meetings and

conferences. One of the challenges was that advanced or upper intermediate students were already familiar with public speaking and had participated in public speaking contests in high school. Many others, especially the lower levels ones, had no experience at all and had never had to do presentations in a foreign language in front of a larger audience. However, that could be turned into an advantage because the more experienced students could be used as resources and asked to share their experiences with their colleagues.

We all know how strenuous presenting in a foreign language can be and that is why I considered that the Business English class should be a safe environment for all the students of all levels. Yet, speaking in front of familiar faces had its advantages and disadvantages: for some students it was less threatening when speaking to a familiar audience, whereas some students actually felt more stressed out because of the fear of losing face in front of their colleagues.

Practicing presentations in the class had its own management challenges: just like during any other role play, when only some students were active, the other ones who were the audience and just watched could get bored if not given a specific task. That was the moment when, if students worked in pairs or groups of fours and took turns in practicing their presentation skills, those who acted as the audience were required to give feedback on their colleagues' delivery. A peer's feedback can be really useful if the student-audience knows how to give constructive feedback; this is how "giving feedback on an oral presentation" became another teaching objective for me.

Involving Students in the Decision Making Process

First of all, one major change I needed to make in teaching oral presentation skills was to introduce a final authentic task. Students needed to be motivated to put effort into learning how to design and deliver a good presentation and that could be done if they knew that at the end of the semester they had to deliver a presentation not on a topic chosen by the authors of the coursebook or by me, but on a topic of their own choice. We all agreed that nothing could be better than having them make a presentation on their big Business English class project: their imaginary business.

The “imaginary business” project first emerged as a result of my dissatisfaction with the fragmentary nature of the learning as proposed by the coursebook. Students learnt how to socialize in business, what it took to set up a business of their own, how to design a marketing campaign and write a business report, but there was no unifying activity to require them to put together everything they would have learnt throughout the semester and showcase their understanding of all these business processes and phenomena as applied to something that really interested them. I had thought of using the writing of a business plan as a partially unifying element, but one of the students suggested that it would be more interesting if they could set up a business of their own choice and deliver a final presentation on it.

Nothing would be more motivating than this, indeed. At the end of the semester I could see how students were really excited to present the project they had worked on to their colleagues. Of course everybody knew what kind of businesses the other groups had

set up, but they wanted to see the final product, the presentation with the visual aids included. When the presentation day came, everybody was really curious and therefore highly motivated to listen to their colleagues. The atmosphere was completely different from the atmosphere of the classes when they had to do controlled practice and practice parts of presentations on topics that had been chosen by me. Nobody was bored this time and they willingly took time to give thoughtful feedback in writing to their peers. I was really happy that they had put so much effort and enthusiasm into preparing the presentation, and all this had happened because I had departed from the coursebook and had let them make their own decisions.

Adding More Humanistic Objectives to Teaching Oral Presentation Skills

When I started introducing peer feedback as a tool to improve students' oral presentation skills, I discovered that I needed to add more objectives to my lesson besides the traditional ones. Our coursebook mentioned the following objectives for the students: to learn the basic language of making presentations; to be able to deliver presentations in both formal and informal register; to learn about the importance of visual aids and to develop appropriate body language, tone and voice. However, when students worked in pairs or small groups to practice presentation skills and were asked to give feedback on their peers' performance, they would say something very general such as "It was ok" or pick only on what they thought went wrong, such as "Your voice trembled and you didn't try to make eye contact with the audience." Also, when engaged in the debate on what makes an effective presentation, some students showed an increase level of intolerance to

their opponents' counterarguments, while others simply switched off and withdrew from the conversation.

Language classes are usually tailored for students to accomplish linguistic goals, but I realized that many students did not know how to give constructive feedback to their peers, did not know how to acknowledge their colleagues' contribution and progress and would not listen to what their peers had to say. That was happening because on the one hand I myself hadn't been specific in my instructions on how peer feedback should be given and on the other hand because most Romanian students are raised with the mentality that the professor is the only person worth listening to, since she has all the knowledge and the power in the class.

To change that, I asked students to structure their feedback around two things they liked about their peers' performance and two things they thought needed improvement. We also had a short discussion about why it is important, when giving feedback, to start with acknowledging the strong parts of their peers' presentation and to talk about the aspects that need to be worked on in a non-judgmental way. For those students who were not used to doing collaborative work or were extremely competitive by nature, it took longer to realize that peer feedback was about helping each other to make progress and not about assessing and grading. We also brought into discussion the fact that the way they gave feedback to their peers showed how much they actually respected their peers and that they had to be responsible for the statements they made when giving feedback.

A Lesson Outline on Teaching Oral Presentation Skills

I was really lucky to have my supervisor see me teaching the same lesson on oral presentation skills on two different days with two different groups. That gave me time to reflect on what happened in the first class, discuss my reflections with my supervisor, listen to her suggestions and then work together on possible changes I could make for the second class.

Both groups were freshmen with an intermediate plus level of English. The first lesson took place on a Monday at noon. The classroom was small, with desks arranged in rows and a small aisle for the teacher and there wasn't much space to move around; yet, it had a TV set and a VCR, which meant I could show them the video of a presentation. The second lesson was on Thursday afternoon, in a large computer lab with desks arranged in rows; the advantage was that there was plenty of room to rearrange the desks and the lab was equipped with a TV set and a VCR as well.

In the discussion we had after I had taught the first lesson, several things stood out for me: first of all, I needed to move the center of attention from myself to the rest of the class and this could be done by rearranging the desks into a long conference table so that students could face each other and not me only. Second, I had to make sure I gave the students clear instructions and had checked their understanding before asking them to start a task. For example, as a warm-up activity, I had asked the students to work in groups and share if they had ever attended a presentation and what they had thought about it; however, while walking among the groups I realized that they had problems

with the concept of a “presentation.” Third, I needed to create more opportunities for students to feel at ease while talking and thus build confidence in their speaking skills. As a case in point, during that part of the lesson I had allotted to discussing about what makes a presentation effective, I gave them the categories on the board (“content”, “delivery”, “visual aids”) and relied entirely on a whole-class brainstorming. Obviously, only few students were able to give examples to fit the categories; the rest of the students would have benefited more from being allowed to work in groups first and come up with what they thought were the good features of an effective presentation without being constrained to finding examples to fit the categories given by me. Last, I needed to model more language for them, encourage the shy students to participate more and speak up when addressing somebody in a whole-class discussion.

Here are the steps I used when teaching this class for the second time. The objectives of the lesson were to introduce students to the concept and language of presentations, help them discover the features of an effective presentation and have them identify what went wrong with a less effective presentation.

1. Changing the desk arrangement. Following my supervisor’s suggestion, at the beginning of the lesson I asked the students to help me arrange the desks in the shape of a long conference table. When we finished arranging the desks I asked them if they could guess the purpose of the arrangement. One student said that it seemed like we were preparing for a conversation, because they could see each other.

2. Modeling the introduction of an oral presentation. I asked the students to imagine that they were all managers gathered around a conference table. While standing, I introduced to them to objectives of the lesson, modeling my speech after the introduction of a

presentation. “Good morning ladies and gentlemen. Thank you so much for being here. We are here today to talk about oral presentations. First...second...third. Please feel free to interrupt and ask me clarification questions.”

3. Clarifying the concept of “presentation” and activating students’ schema for presentations. In order not to repeat the mistake made in my first lesson, I asked for volunteers to explain the meaning of the word “presentation.” A student volunteered with her definition and shared her experience of having presented at a conference on topics concerning NGOs. Starting from a student’s own experience made the interaction more authentic and motivated the other students to ask more questions about her presentation. After this I wrote the words “where”, “what”, “who”, “purpose”, “visual aids” and “structure” on the board and had students do brainstorming in groups and then as a whole class.

4. Eliciting from students elements and features of an effective presentation. I asked the student who had already talked about her NGO conference experience to tell us what features made her presentation effective and I wrote her answers on the board. Then I had the class brainstorm in pairs more elements. In order to have more freedom in monitoring the whole-class discussion I had a student volunteer to write students’ suggestions on the board. With more and more students getting involved in the discussion I had to handle several challenges at once: help them with the precise vocabulary to talk about effective presentations (which I handled less successfully), make sure that everybody stayed on the topic and had a chance to voice their opinions, and manage the more dominant students with a tendency to interrupt and contradict their peers. However, the biggest challenge

was to point out repeatedly to the students that when commenting on one of their peers' ideas they were supposed to look at that colleague and not at me.

5. Categorizing the features of an effective presentation. I wrote the five main categories on the board (“overall structure”, “content”, “delivery”, “body language” and “visual aid”) and asked them to try to match each of the features of an effective presentation with its corresponding category. This allowed students to think again over all the concepts and practice the vocabulary. After that I gave them a list I had prepared before with the categories and their subcategories and asked students to compare it with their own list and tell me if they had identified one or two new elements.

6. Using humor and the example of a less effective presentation. Once the students had the vocabulary and criteria needed to assess the effectiveness of a presentation, I showed them a video and asked them to identify what made that presentation effective or not. It was a humorous video in which the presenter seemed to have done everything wrong. For classrooms which are not equipped with a TV set and a recorder, the video can be replaced by the teacher impersonating the unprepared and absent minded character.

7. Exemplifying an effective presentation. After we had a whole class discussion about what was missing from the humorous presentation, we watched the good version of the same presentation. Students were exposed again to the language of presentations and had a reference point for when they had to prepare their own presentations. Watching an effective and a less effective presentation on the same topic allowed them to make associations between the abstract categories discussed in the first half of the lesson and the concrete examples from the videos.

That was the most exciting class I taught during my supervisor's visit; because I had managed to incorporate some of her suggestions, the class felt a lot more motivating and authentic and the students had more opportunities to engage in conversations.

CHAPTER 6

STUDENTS' BELIEFS ABOUT LANGUAGE LEARNING

Introduction

A significant element of the SIT SMAT program was to have us do a systematic inquiry into our beliefs about learning, teaching, and the role of language through journal writing and in-class discussions. It was that inquiry into my previous learning experiences, my previous classroom practices and my previous training and the supervision week that made realize later why I had been so resistant to making changes in how I taught in a public educational institution such as the Academy of Economic Studies. It wasn't that I wasn't able or I wasn't allowed to, it was the fact that I had deeply thought that I wasn't allowed to and therefore I wasn't able to. By the same token, I became aware that students come to the language class with certain beliefs and preconceptions that can prevent them from acquiring the language.

The literature on language learning beliefs (Horwitz 1988) mentions two important factors that shape a learner's system of beliefs: their previous language learning experiences and the societal conceptions about language abilities. In the case of my business college students, it was their high school English learning experiences as well as whatever they might have read or heard about foreign language learning from their parents, friends, television, published materials for foreign language learning,

commercials for private language centers, etc. In our short discussions at the beginning of the year about what a “good teacher” is, these students often emphasized “a teacher with a good accent,” which they explained as near-native accent, be it British or American. It sounded as if they believed that such ability on the part of their teacher would automatically ensure their acquisition of a “good accent.” However, given that as business majors they will function in an EIL environment (English as an international language), interacting maybe more with L2 speakers of English (usually referred to as non-native speakers) than with L1 speakers of English (usually referred to as native speakers), their emphasis on the importance of near-native accents might raise unrealistic expectations on their part. Moreover, depending on their previous high school experiences, whether or not they had an American or British teacher for their speaking class, they could develop a stereotypical thinking in favor of the American or British accent, based on their preference for that particular teacher.

On the other hand, there is this group known as the “lazy” students who actually have various reasons for not putting effort into improving their English. Some of them might see no relevance in learning more than just basic vocabulary and grammar structures to be able act successfully in a business environment because they have met Romanian people who have managed in their businesses with little English; others might just think that language learning requires some special qualities which they don’t have, so that any attempt on their part is doomed from the very beginning.

I had short informal discussions on this topic with my business college students, but, unfortunately, these conversations remained at the superficial level of my asking a question and their answering it. The coursebooks hardly had this issue on their agendas

and at most they would feature some scarce language learning strategies. However, it seems like common sense that showing somebody strategies for coping with functional language may be unsuccessful if it goes against their beliefs that learning business vocabulary is the single most important aspect of learning Business English and if they are not given the opportunity to explore and question this belief.

I had never created for them a structured environment in which they could systematically inquire into some of their beliefs and Romanian urban myths about language learning, reflect on them and possibly revisit them. Therefore, I think that the introduction of mini-lessons throughout the semester, lessons based on the exploration of their beliefs about foreign language learning would benefit them for several reasons. First, it would make them aware that they actually hold these beliefs. The literature on beliefs cannot stress enough that beliefs are so much engrained into who we are, that most of the time we take them for granted without questioning their validity or the validity of their sources. Second, such a project would give the students the opportunity to inquire into how society shapes these beliefs, how dangerous some stereotypical forms of thinking are and how unrealistic their expectations built on those beliefs can be. Third, it would encourage them to look deeper into what motivates them to learn English and whether the L1 speaker of English is still a viable option as their absolute language reference point.

Design of the Project

The inquiry into their beliefs about language learning will feature three main stages. First, students will be administered a questionnaire so that on the basis of their

answers we can better tailor future class discussions. The questionnaire can use Horwitz's BALLI (Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory) as a starting point (Appendix A).

Second, students will be asked to keep a journal in which to answer questions before and after the in-class discussions, which will give them the opportunity to reflect on possible changes in their beliefs and monitor any increase in their awareness regarding this issue. With students' permission, I will have access to their journals and read their entries before the classroom discussions, so that I can address their concerns during the lesson. Students will be free to share their journal entries with me or one of their colleagues.

In order to maximize the interaction and feedback opportunities we will use computer mediated communication through the Yahoo! groups. The class will be divided into groups of four on the basis of their answers to the initial questionnaire, so that each group incorporates students with as many diverse answers as possible. Every other week each member of each group will be asked to post an excerpt from their journal and the rest of the members will be invited to comment on it. I will monitor the activity in the Yahoo! groups and answer those questions directed at me. I realize that a challenging part is students' access to the IT labs in the business college or to other computers; therefore very careful planning will be required on my part when it comes to providing the students with internet access.

Third, these 20-minute mini-lessons based mostly on discussions are meant to create an open environment where students can express their beliefs as openly as possible. Since one's display of one's beliefs can be anxiety-inducing and face-losing for many students, we will always start from widely held beliefs as presented through the

eyes of George, a fictional character. George's problems can be turned into small case studies whose solutions can be adopted by students to various degrees, function of their understanding. The ultimate goal is to have students share their personal opinions and language learning experiences, but having a common character we can all refer to will play the role of a teaching safety-net.

The mini-lessons will take place every other week to give students time to reflect on their beliefs and the class discussions and give me time to read their journal entries.

Assessment

Students will need recognition for their commitment and effort, so that a percentage of their semester's final grade will be allotted to this project. Students will be given several options to showcase their understanding of language learning beliefs: a) they can write a "Dear Abby" type response letter in which they can address one of George's beliefs that hinder his language learning and offer advice; they can draw a poster, compose a song or write and perform in a short play based on George's issues with language learning; they can choose one of their own beliefs which they think they have reflected on the most and write about it, comparing and contrasting their belief before and after the class discussion.

If time allows, at the end of each mini-lesson students can work in pairs to fill out rubrics on a poster with suggestions in response to George's language learning beliefs. I will collect the posters and bring them for the following mini-lesson so that students can write new advice for George. At the end of the six mini-lessons we will display the

posters on the wall and have a gallery walk with the poster authors explaining the content of their poster.

LESSON I

Activity 1

The class will be introduced to George, the main character, a business student like them, who is constantly complaining about his failure to become a successful English language learner. He believes he will never be able to speak “good English” and has several reasons for that. I will write on the blackboard George’s first three beliefs about language learning.

George’s reasons for failing to become a successful English language learner

- I’m no Einstein.
- I’m only good at numbers and economics.
- I wasn’t born to be good at languages.

Activity 2

Work in small groups or pairs to answer the following questions:

- Why does George mention Einstein? Does one need to be Einstein to be able to learn a foreign language? If you had been born in another country would you have been able to learn that country’s official language?*
- What does it mean to be intelligent? Is it restricted to only one domain? Can there be “linguistically” intelligent people?*

Scenario for whole class discussion: I expect students to interpret George’s mentioning of Einstein as his belief that learning a foreign language successfully can be done mostly by intelligent people. We will discuss traditional views of what intelligence is and how it is traditionally measured. I expect students to mention an agile mind who thinks fast as a characteristic of intelligent people.

Activity 3

In 1983 Howard Gardner, professor of education at Harvard University, developed the theory of multiple intelligences. He suggested that the traditional definition of intelligence, based on I.Q. testing, is too limited and proposed seven different intelligences.

a) For each type of intelligence (column 1) try to give an example (column2) and mention a domain of activity in which people predominantly use this type of intelligence (column 3).

Type of intelligence	Explanation/Example	Possible Domain
1) Verbal/linguistic	I often see clear visual images when I close my eyes.	Journalism
2) Logical/mathematical		Science
3) Visual/spatial		Architecture
4) Bodily/kinesthetic		Sports
5) Musical/rhythmic		Music
6) Interpersonal		Leadership
7) Intrapersonal		Philosophy

(adapted from Thomas Armstrong, *Your Seven Kinds of Smart*)

b) As you can see, there are linguistically intelligent people, who are better at using words than numbers, for example. Does it mean that George is destined to be a poor language learner?

Scenario for the whole-class discussion: I expect students to understand that genetic endowment does not put a label on somebody as being a poor language learner. Research claims that since everyone was able to learn a first language, than they are able to learn any other language as well. It is true that some languages are easier to learn than others. For example, the Romanian workers who go to Italy or Spain for temporary employment pick up Italian and Spanish very quickly, because Spanish, Italian and Romanian are all Romance languages, derived from Latin. However, if Romanians were to go to Hungary or Finland, they would need a lot more time to learn Hungarian or Finnish, which are Finno-Ugric languages, very different from the Romance languages.

George might be better at sciences, but this does not make him a poor language learner. We will also discuss how some beliefs can turn into self-prophecies, in the sense that George, for example, might give up trying to learn a foreign language altogether if he thinks that all his effort is doomed to failure from the very beginning. What George can do is to make sure he has realistic goals. Since his goal is to become an economist and not a creative writer in English, he will have to adjust his ideal of attaining a native-like proficiency to the requirements of his future jobs.

Follow-up activity if time allows for it: Students work in pairs to fill out a poster rubric with suggestions for George directly aimed at his three beliefs discussed in this lesson.

Assignment for the next class: Students are asked to write their first journal entry; they will select any beliefs from the ones discussed in the class and write how the in-class discussion made them reconsider their previously held beliefs.

LESSON II

George's reasons for failing to become a successful English language learner

- I didn't start learning English when I was a child; now it is too late, I'm too old and my brain is just stiff.
- I'm a shy person. I don't talk much, not even in Romanian.

Activity 1 – Debate

You will be divided into four groups:

- Groups A and B will prepare the pros and cons respectively regarding whether children are better language learners than adults are. You are asked to prepare your arguments based on what you know or can assume about brain development, acquisition of native-like pronunciation and the age at which one becomes “slow” in learning a new language.*
- Group C and D will prepares the pros and cons respectively regarding whether personality traits affect language learning. You are asked to prepare your arguments based on what you know or can assume about shy versus outgoing people when it comes to speaking opportunities and focus on language learning activities in general.*

Scenario for the two debates:

- a) *Children versus adults debate.* I expect group A to assume that children are better language learners because they have a more flexible brain and can pick up the accent more readily. They may also assume that children have a fresh memory whereas a college student has a lot more information to process. Group B might counteract that adults, unlike children, know to read, have the tools to study grammar and have developed language learning strategies, especially if they can speak already another foreign language. In terms of George's beliefs, it is important for students to understand that even if he didn't start learning English at an earlier age, this does not represent a major obstacle. Once the debate is over, students can brainstorm on what kind of strategies they used to learn another foreign language other than English and whether and how they could transfer those strategies to English language learning.
- b) *Shy versus outgoing people debate.* Group C will most likely agree that shy people have fewer opportunities to practice their speaking skills since they engage less in conversations that outgoing people do. Group D can argue that even if shy people like George speak less, they may be of a more reflective nature and therefore focus better and pay more attention to language activities in the classroom. In terms of George's beliefs, it is important for students to understand that even if somebody has personality traits perceived as less conducive to language learning, it can always be counteracted by the use of language learning and volitional strategies.

Follow-up activity if time allows for it: Students work in pairs to fill out a poster rubric with suggestions for George directly aimed at his two beliefs discussed in this lesson.

Assignment: Students are asked to go over their latest journal entry and revisit it, mentioning what exactly from the class discussion made them reconsider their language

learning beliefs. Students are also asked to record a new journal entry on the two language learning beliefs from the following class, lesson III.

LESSON III

George's reasons for failing to become a successful English language learner

- I think that learning words and expressions is very important, but my high school teacher gave more importance to grammar.
- There are too many words in English and as a future businessperson I need only a limited vocabulary.

Activity 1

Work with your partner to answer the following question. Pay attention to which points you agree on and to which you disagree with:

- What is more important to you when learning English, vocabulary or grammar? Does it matter if English teachers and English exams focus more on grammar?*
- Do you agree with George when he says that a businessperson can communicate effectively with a rather limited vocabulary?*

Scenario for the whole-class discussion: The purpose of this discussion based on the questions above is to make students more aware of the fact that one major factor in shaping their beliefs is their previous language learning experiences. One important aspect is to have them acknowledge that if grammar seems more important than vocabulary or vice versa is because their teachers and the educational systems through the established English exams send these messages. Most of the time teachers are supposed to teach for the tests, so that exam tests influences to a great extend what is taught in the class. Students will be

encouraged to share their high school language learning experiences and it would be interesting to see whether a common pattern arises (for example a common focus on grammar). As to question b, I expect a variety of answers based on their personal experiences. Students might say that George's success in a conversation will depend on who George's interlocutor is, a L1 or L2 speaker of English. They may also add that conversation partners usually use lots of hand gestures when they don't know the word.

Activity 2

Globish is a new kind of English which seems to be used more and more in internal business communities. Read the following article and decide if you are one of the potential Globish speakers.

If you plan to travel the world expecting to get by on English, think again. The language you need is Globish, according to a French author who says that the British are failing to seize the mother tongue of international communication.

Globish is a simple, pragmatic form of English codified by Jean-Paul Nerrière, a retired vice-president of IBM in the United States.

It involves a vocabulary limited to 1,500 words, short sentences, basic syntax, an absence of idiomatic expressions and extensive hand gestures to get the point across.

"Globish is a proletarian and popular idiom which does not aim at cultural understanding or at the acquisition of a talent enabling the speaker to shine at Hyde Park Corner," he wrote.

"It is designed for trivial efficiency, always, everywhere, with everyone."

Mr. Nerrière says that his globalized version of English is now so common that Britons, Americans and other English-speakers should learn it too. "The point is that Anglophones no longer own English," he told *The Times* in Paris.

He says that in multi-national meetings, Anglo-Saxons stand out as strange because they cling to their original language instead of using the elementary English adopted by colleagues from other countries.

Their florid phraseology and grammatical complexities are often incomprehensible, said Mr. Nerrière, who added: “One thing you never do in Globish is tell a joke.”

“The only jokes which cross frontiers involve sex, race and religion and you should never mention those in an international meeting.”

The program checks English words and eliminates those not included in the 1,500-strong Globish list. Mr. Nerrière said: “English- speakers need to make the effort to speak like everyone else. If they do, they will not be seen as arrogant and they might even become popular.”

He said that commercial ventures could depend upon the mastery of Globish. “If you lose a contract to a Moroccan rival because you’re speaking an English that no one apart from another Anglophone understands, then you’ve got a problem.”

Aware that purists may balk at his ideas, Mr. Nerrière insists that Globish should be confined to international exchanges. Other languages — French, German, Italian as well as orthodox English — should be preserved as vehicles of culture.

(Adam Sage, *Globish Cuts English down to Size*, The Times, 11 December 2006)

Scenario for the whole-class discussion: We will focus on the advantages and disadvantages of Globish and the status of English as an international language. The purpose is to raise students’ awareness that no matter how appealing this solution might be, the attempt to take culture out of a language leads to the creation of an artificial, purist form of communication. More discussion is needed to clarify what it usually understood by the concept of culture and that one nation’s culture cannot be reduced to literature or important pieces of art alone.

Follow-up activity if time allows for it: Students work in pairs to fill out a poster rubric with suggestions for George directly aimed at his two beliefs discussed in this lesson.

Assignment: Students are asked to go over their latest journal entry and revisit it, mentioning what exactly from the class discussion made them reconsider their language learning beliefs. Students are also asked to record a new journal entry on the two language learning beliefs from the following class, lesson IV.

LESSON IV

George's reasons for failing to become a successful English language learner

- I don't know if coming to classes will help me. I'd better buy one of those books saying that I can "learn English fast and easy in 40 days."
- We should be using CDs in schools, because this is the best method to learn English. It's so much fun and I would probably feel just like when I was a baby and I was learning Romanian.

Activity 1

As an assignment for this class, you were asked to go to a bookstore and look for self-help books for learning English. Work in groups and share your books titles. Discuss if you would buy these books or whether you would recommend them to your friends. Do you think that one can learn English "fast and easy in 40 days?"

Scenario for whole-class discussion: The purpose of this discussion is to raise students' awareness that language learning cannot happen overnight. I expect students to see the promises made by publishing houses more as a marketing tool meant to increase their sales. We will discuss the role of practice in learning a language, since some of these self-help books offer recipes for miraculous learning which presupposes little effort on the part of the learner.

Activity 2

George has found an advertisement in Time magazine for language software which claims to be used successfully by millions of people worldwide. Work with your partner to answer the following questions:

- a) *The company promoting their language software claims that this software “teaches without translation, memorization or grammar drills.” Are the words “translation”, “memorization” and “grammar drills” used with positive or negative connotations? Have you ever used translation, memorization and grammar drills in learning a language? Was it effective or not?*
- b) *This company claims that their software “successfully replicates the experience of your first language.” Do you think it possible? Do you think that there are any differences between your experiences of learning Romanian and learning English?*

Scenario for the whole-class discussion: the purpose of this discussion is to raise students’ awareness that modern technology such as CD-ROMs can improve language learning but cannot replicate the experience one had when learning their native language. This is due less to the CD-ROMs’ limited interactional opportunities, and more to the cognitive and emotional development which differentiates an infant learning their first language from an adult learning a second or third language.

I expect students to agree with George that CD-ROMs are more entertaining and motivating than books and can create the impression that language learning is easy and therefore doesn’t require much effort. We will discuss the importance of practicing the new language in a variety of situations to increase long-term retention. I would also like them to think of the advantages of using translation and grammar drills which most of the time are dismissed as mechanical and boring. Finally, we will look into how realistic expectations in learning a language are based on the realization that the more one increases one’s language competencies, the longer it will take one to reach the next language proficiency level.

Follow-up activity if time allows for it: Students work in pairs to fill out a poster rubric with suggestions for George directly aimed at his two beliefs discussed in this lesson.

Assignment: Students are asked to go over their latest journal entry and revisit it, mentioning what exactly from the class discussion made them reconsider their language learning beliefs. Students are also asked to record a new journal entry on the two language learning beliefs from the following class, lesson V.

LESSON V

George's reasons for failing to become a successful English language learner

- I think it is very important to be able to speak with a perfect American or British accent.
- My language model is the native speaker. I really want to make as few mistakes as possible and be able to speak and write just like a native speaker.

Activity 1

Listen to the following excerpts. You will hear six different people speaking in English.

Choose from the list below the adjectives that best describe their accent: beautiful, ugly, smart, dumb, rich, poor, funny, dull, easy, and difficult. Compare your choices with your partner's.

Whole-class activity: Students will listen to five 30-second excerpts featuring the following accents: Southern American English, RP British, Indian English, American Network English, and Manchester English.

Scenario for whole-class discussion: I expect students to associate Queen's English and American Network English with adjectives denoting positive connotations and Indian and

Manchester English with adjectives denoting negative connotation. We will discuss whether these accents have these “inbuilt” qualities or if our perceptions that some accents are “beautiful” and some are “ugly” are actually more a reflection of how society judges the speakers as a function of their social status. We will listen once again to the excerpts, identify all the accents and determine which ones students would associate with upper class and which ones with lower class status.

Activity 2

Work with your partner to answer the following questions:

- a) Think of your future job; how much do you think you will interact with L1 speakers of English and how much with L2 speakers of English?*
- b) In the current international business environment how important is to be able to speak English with a native accent?*
- c) What do you think about George’s choice of the “native speaker” (the L1 speaker of English) as his language model?*

Scenario for the whole-class discussion: Students will most likely acknowledge that most foreign investors in Romania are not from countries where English is the official or the most spoken language. We will discuss the concept of EIL (English as International Language) and address the issue of the L1 speaker of English as the language model. In the business world successful communication is the key and accent is not a matter of concern unless it prevents comprehension. On the contrary, language learners who are obsessed with perfectionism and reaching a native-like proficiency can become less and less

motivated if they don't see any significant improvement in their language learning according to their high expectations.

Follow-up activity if time allows for it: Students work in pairs to fill out a poster rubric with suggestions for George directly aimed at his two beliefs discussed in this lesson.

Assignment: Students are asked to go over their latest journal entry and revisit it, mentioning what exactly from the class discussion made them reconsider their language learning beliefs. Students are also asked to record a new journal entry on the two language learning beliefs from the following class, lesson VI.

LESSON VI

George's reasons for failing to become a successful English language learner

- I don't think I have to put much effort into learning English because Romanian people are good at learning languages; other nations, such as American and British people are not.
- If I had been a Canadian or Swiss or if one of my parents had been a native speaker of English, I wouldn't have any problems with learning English!

Activity 1

Read the following excerpt from an interview with Robin Baker, Deputy Director General of the British Council and answer the following questions:

- a) *Do you agree with Robin Baker that Romanians have a "natural talent for learning languages and why? Do you agree with George that British and American people are not good at learning languages? Why do Romanians learn foreign languages? Why do Americans and British people learn foreign languages?*

b) *Who is responsible for the bilingualism in Canada and the multilingualism in Switzerland? If one of your parents were an L1 speaker of English, would you automatically be exposed to English?*

Britain has some professionally very good English language qualifications with an international validity, and we have to recognize that Romanians are becoming increasingly mobile in terms of the job market. The big challenge, I think, for Romania is to get people back to the country, not to stop them going. So we are working very much in Romania in meeting the demand for English language tests. More and more young Romanians are taking the Cambridge examinations through the British council, which is hardly surprising: **Romania has the highest passing rate in the world** – over 90% of Romanians taking those tests, at any level, are passing. It's an extraordinary achievement and an eloquent indicator of **the natural talents and superb teaching and learning abilities of Romanians** (Interviews with Romanian Cultural Centre).

Scenario for the whole-class discussion: I expect students to acknowledge that successful language learning is not a matter of “natural talent,” but more of motivation. For Romanians, foreign languages and especially English are a passport to economic development. Romania has become a good market for foreign investors and outsourcing businesses – for example, many call centers have been set up in the major Romanian cities, such as the Oracle call center. On the other hand, the L1 speakers of English might find very few incentives so learn foreign languages since English is considered an international language. Besides the naturally occurring bilingualism/multilingualism, societies and educational policies are responsible for encouraging foreign language learning. We can also discuss how many years of foreign language study are required in the American or British system as compared to the Romanian one.

Activity 2

Wikipedia (the free on-line encyclopedia) is a growing source of information for people all over the world; however, since everybody can contribute to the Wikipedia's articles,

the accuracy and reliability of the information presented there comes often under question. Do you find the following information on Romanians' English competency accurate? Discuss.

English AND-- ESPECIALLY-- other Romance languages such as Spanish and Italian-- is fast growing in Romania, and most people, especially the younger generation, use it with a considerable deal of fluency, both in speaking and writing. A well-educated Romanian who graduated from an average university can speak English and another European language, usually Italian. Prior to 1990, French was the most common foreign language known in Romania, so someone over 40 will most likely understand French. If you go out from the common tourist routes, you will hardly find somebody that can speak English, and the only way to ask some information is in Romanian. (*Wikitravel -- Romania*)

Follow-up activity if time allows for it: Students work in pairs to fill out a poster rubric with suggestions for George directly aimed at his two beliefs discussed in this lesson.

Assignment: Students are asked to go over their latest journal entry and revisit it, mentioning what exactly from the class discussion made them reconsider their language learning beliefs.

Conclusions

Although these mini-lessons were designed to be taught in Romanian Business English classes, they can be used in any other English class as well. With a careful examination of the socio-cultural teaching environment she is in and of her students' concerns about language learning, any teacher can identify some major beliefs widely held by her students and allot time during her English classes to raise students' awareness about them.

CHAPTER 7

HUMANISING MYSELF

Some of My Golden Principles

Drawing has often been used in teacher training to help teachers express their beliefs about themselves as teachers. When we had to do such a drawing at SIT, I drew myself as a little wizard with a magic wand among my students. I saw myself as having those special powers that trigger the “aha” moments in my students, as if the students were totally dependent on me and my magic tricks to learn the language. A wizard is thought to have superhuman powers which ordinary people cannot understand. It seemed that as a wizard I enjoyed a special status and miraculous knowledge.

In hindsight I can say that that drawing revealed an arrogant and unrealistic side of me. The encounter with the Silent Way approach and Earl Stevick’s book *Working with Teaching Methods: What’s at Stake?* taught me that as a teacher I can fall easily into the trap of thinking of teaching as performing miracles on my students. Once I started believing that, I stripped my students of their independence and denied them the respect and trust they deserve as human beings. Once I started believing that, I unwittingly sent them the message that they came to my classes with a blank slate, that I am the only one to set standards for them, to assess them, to tell them what is to be learnt and how. If I were to do that drawing again, I would just draw myself sitting at the same table with my

students and having the “aha” moments together with them, because as a teacher I learn along with them.

At the end of this journey I come back again to Parker Palmer’s quote: “...good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher (1995:10). I believe that good teaching comes from those principles and rules we have set for ourselves that define ourselves and our teaching, not matter what the context we are in. Here are five golden principles I have established for myself:

1. Put the learner at the center of my teaching

At the beginning of my teaching I had often judged my teaching on how well I mastered the professional jargon and current practices. For a long time I was obsessed with replacing one teaching methodology with another and with teaching to prepare my students for school exams. Whereas passing school exams is often the short-term goal, the longer goal has to be helping students acquire competencies they are likely to use in their future jobs and life skills they needs as human beings. When they learn how to deliver a presentation in English in front of an audience, they might be doing that to get a good grade; at the same time they learn how to be concise and persuasive and control their public speaking fear.

2. Students learn by doing, so don’t do for the students what they can do for themselves

Gattegno, the creator of the Silent Way method, always advised the teachers to give their students only what they really need. Easier said than done because most of the time I have been a teacher who thought that this was part of my duty, to give my students as much knowledge as possible and to help them as much as possible, such as finishing a

sentence for themselves. However, this principle number two means that I should start trusting that my students can do a lot more than I give them credit for and show them they have to value their own experiences. For example, in my first year of teaching English business I was the one telling the students the criteria for what is generally considered a successful presentation, meeting, negotiation, etc. After my supervisor suggested that that was something my students could do by themselves, I asked the students to come up with their own criteria. I would help them with the language or some missing criteria, but in the end I learnt I had to trust students' inner resources.

3. Learning takes place in a safe environment, through challenging, doable and motivating tasks

There are so many elements that can make the English class anything else but a safe environment. Students may be afraid to open their mouth for fear of making mistakes, losing face and getting bad grades. First, because my students have more specialized business knowledge than I do most of the time, I learnt to openly acknowledge that, thus showing my students that it is all right not to know and make mistakes. Second, I think it is important to help them set realist goals for themselves and assess their progress in English not only in relationship to certain set standards but also with respect to the progress they have made individually. We can all benefit if students rewrite their business reports till they get them right: in the process they have improved their English and we get to give them good grades. Third, it is hard to customize each and every task for each and every individual, but there are various techniques for making the activities more challenging for the advanced students and easier for the less proficient ones, such as

pairing stronger students with a weaker one or setting various time limits for the completion of a task.

4. Be kind and gentle with yourself as a teacher; be patient with yourself and your students

Teaching requires huge amount of energy, especially if you are at the beginning of your career or teaching in a new environment. I would dare say that women teachers, due to their biologically nurturing nature might have a predisposition towards more intense burn out. I remember how much energy I would waste in frustrations and complaints: too much workload, I didn't like the textbook, we had classes that were too large, I couldn't assign that lab with a TV set and VCR to all my groups and felt as if I had committed a serious injustice if I could only show a video to one or two groups out of the 12 I had. My supervisor always suggested that I should start "small," that is choose one group and making specific changes in my teaching in that group, because it would actually have a ripple effect and improvement will be visible in my performance with the other groups as well. For a long time I was reluctant about this suggestion because I felt I would not be treating all my students equally, but I learnt that there are certain given facts we cannot change. In time I realized that instead of blaming myself, the students and the system, I should have just tried to do the best under the given circumstances. For example, I could use drama with those classes which did not have access to a video, and I or one of the students would be the one playing the character in the video.

5. Being a caring teacher is more important than implementing the latest teaching methodology

At the end of day, this is the most important lesson I take with me: if I was a caring teacher, then I did my job properly. It is not about a certain methodology, or context, or set of materials, it is about seeing and respecting my students for who they are, listening to them, trusting their inner resources and giving them time.

Conclusions

The opportunity to do this project meant for me being able to” look back” on my teaching practices and articulate how I applied and will further apply what I learnt from the SIT SMAT program into my Business English classes. An important result has been the practice I gained in doing reflective teaching and conducting classroom research, which has led to significant changes in my teaching. These changes in classroom activities allowed me and my students to get to know ourselves and each other better and find more joy in the learning and teaching of Business English.

Reflective teaching has helped me realize that the only impediments in improving my practices were my own conceptions about language teaching and learning. This awareness has nurtured my growing interest in the role of teacher and student beliefs in the process of teaching and learning languages and ways to raise awareness about these beliefs. After all, the five golden principles I established for myself reflect my newly acquired beliefs about learning and teaching during the SIT SMAT program which hopefully will guide my future classroom practices.

Appendix A

BELIEFS ABOUT LANGUAGE LEARNING INVENTORY (Horwitz, 1988)

Students are asked to read each statement and indicate:

- A- strongly agree
- B- agree
- C- neither agree or disagree
- D- disagree
- E- strongly disagree

1. It is easier for children than adults to learn a foreign language.
2. Some people are born with a special language ability which helps them learn a foreign language.
3. Some languages are easier to learn than others.

Xxx

4. The language I am trying to learn is:
 - A. very difficult
 - B. difficult
 - C. medium difficulty
 - D. easy
 - E. very easy
5. The language I am trying to learn is structured in the same way as my native language .
6. I believe that I will ultimately learn to speak this language very well.
7. It is important to speak a foreign language with an excellent accent.
8. It is necessary to know the foreign culture in order to speak the foreign language.
9. You should not say anything in the foreign language until you can say it correctly.

10. It is easier for someone who already speaks a foreign language to learn another one.
11. It is better to learn a foreign language in the foreign country.
12. If I heard someone speaking the language I am trying to learn, I would go up to them so that I could practice speaking the language.
13. It is ok to guess if you do not know a word in the foreign language.

Xxx

14. If someone spent one hour a day learning a language, how long would it take him/her to become fluent?
 - A. less than a year
 - B. 1-2 years
 - C. 3-5 years
 - D. 5-10 years
 - E. you can't learn a language in 1 hour a day
15. I have a foreign language aptitude.
16. Learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of learning many new vocabulary words.
17. It is important to repeat and practice often.
18. I feel self-conscious speaking the foreign language in front of other people.
19. If you are allowed to make mistakes in the beginning, it will be hard to get rid of them later on.
20. Learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of learning many grammar rules.
21. It is important to practice in the language laboratory.
22. Women are better than men at learning foreign languages.
23. If I speak this language very well, I will have many opportunities to use it.
24. It is easier to speak than understand a foreign language.

25. Learning a foreign language is different from learning other school subjects.
26. Learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of translating from your native language.
27. If I learn to speak this language very well, it will help me get a good job.
28. It is easier to read and write this language than to speak and understand it.
29. People who are good at math and science are not good at learning foreign languages.
30. Americans think that it is important to speak a foreign language.
31. I would like to speak this language so that I can get to know its speakers better.
32. People who speak more than one language well are very intelligent.
33. Americans are good at learning foreign languages.
34. Everyone can learn to speak a foreign language.

Bibliography

- Arnold, Jane. *Affect in Language Learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Armstrong, Thomas. *Seven Kinds of Smart: Identifying and Developing Your Multiple Intelligences*. New York: Plume, 1999.
- Barlett, Leo. "Teacher Development through Reflective Teaching." In *Second Language Teacher Education*, edited by Jack C. Richards and David Nunan, 202-214. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.
- Borg, Simon. *Teacher Cognition and Language Education*. New York: Continuum Publishing House, 2006.
- Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. "Enjoyment and the Quality of Life." In *Flow: the Psychology of Optimal Experience*, 48-67. Harper and Row, 1990.
- Fainting, Alvin E., Donald Freeman, Tim Maceio, Wendy Redlinger, Alex Silverman, and Claire Stanley. *Language Teacher Preparation. SIT Occasional Papers Series*. Also at <http://www.sit.edu/publications/docs/teacher.pdf>
- Gattegno, Caleb. "The Spirit of a Language." In *Teaching Foreign Languages: the Silent Way*, Educational Solutions, Inc., 1972.
- Goleman, Daniel. *Emotional Intelligence*. New York: Bantam Books, 1995.
- Horwitz, Elaine K. *Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory*. Austin, TX: University of Texas, 1983. (instrument)
- Horwitz, Elaine K. "The Beliefs about Language Learning of Beginning University Foreign Language Students." *The Modern Language Journal*, 72 (3), 1988.
- Johnson, Karen E., and Paula R. Golombek. *Teachers' Narrative Inquiry as Professional Development*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- Kumaravadevelu, B. "The Postmethod Condition: (E)merging Strategies for Second/Foreign Language Teaching," *TESOL Quarterly*, 28, 1993.
- Mihai, Florin. "Reforming English as a Foreign Language Curriculum in Romania: the Global and the Local." Doctoral dissertation. Florida State University, 2003.

- Ministry of Education and Research. *Change and Continuity in the Compulsory education curriculum*, 2002. A summary of the English version available at <http://www.cedu.ro/cerceten001b.php?id=1>
- Noddings, Nell. *Caring: a Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*. Berkeley University of California Press, 1984.
- Palmer, Parker. J. *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*. San Francisco: Jossey- Bass Publishing House, 1998.
- Richards, Jack C. *Beyond Training*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- Rinvoluceri, Mario. *Humanising Your Coursebook*. Surrey: Delta Publishing, 2002.
- Romanian Cultural Centre London. At <http://www.romanianculturalcentre.org.uk/index.php/interviews/2006/09/30/robin-baker>.
- Scrivener, Jim. *Learning Teaching*. Heineman ELT, 1994.
- Stevick, Earl W. *Teaching and Learning Languages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982.
- Stevick, Earl W. *Humanism in Language Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990.
- Stevick, Earl W. *Working with Teaching Methods: What's at Stake?* Heinle & Heinle Publishers, 1998.
- The Merriam-Webster On-line Dictionary*. At <http://www.merriam-webster.com/>.
- The Times online*. At <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/europe/article667004.ece>
- The British Council. *English for Business Administration*. Bucharest: Cavalliotti Publishing House, 2000.
- Woods, Devon. *Teacher Cognition in Language Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Wikitravel*. At <http://wikitravel.org/en/Romania>