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Sources of Security and Community in the EFL Class in Mexico: Student Teaching Paper

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C O N T E N T S

I N T R O D U C T I O N

My second internship took place in Querétaro, Mexico at the Language Institute of the Universidad Autonoma de Querétaro during the summer of 1980. Located in downtown Querétaro, the Language Institute was affiliated with the high school and shared both a building and many students. It was well-equiped, having large classrooms, blackboards, an alcohol copier, a small library, tape recorders and a wireless language laboratory which were at my disposal. Four languages were taught there during the school year, but only my English classes were being offered during the summer vacation.

In my previous internship I had worked with adolescents in rural Vermont using Silent Way principles and materials and CLL ideas about security and community. Here I wanted to further explore factors affecting security and performance of both students and teacher, and the development of community in the class. I wanted to continue working with Silent Way materials as well as ideas such as trying to develop my students' inner criteria and powers to analyze critically, effective uses of teacher silence and non-verbal correction. I had used the rods and French fidels with mixed success, and here I planned to use rods, the sound-color chart and Silent Way pictures, and to try to develop some materials of my own.

This internship followed three phases. The first two weeks I spent examining my broad teaching goals against the reality of my three classes. At the end of that time I reformulated my objectives and reorganized my intermediate and advanced classes into one large group. Two weeks later I found it necessary to selectively organize a third group again due to need and pedagogical problems created by the regrouping. Thus I taught a beginning course for eight weeks, a mixed intermediate-advanced course for eight weeks and two different advanced sections for about two and four weeks respectively.

I N I T I A L P H A S E

Arrival

When I arrived at my internship site, I spoke only twenty words of Spanish. I was met by the Experiment representative and taken to my homestay family: a young couple with limited English and a screaming three-year-old. The following day the representative brought me to the Language Institute. The director was away on business, but had left a very welcoming letter explaining what had been set up. I was presented with three class lists, a ream of applications and questionaires (mostly in Spanish) and found that I was scheduled to interview more than sixty students in two hours in order to determine the level of their English.

With no previous experience in ESL, I found the task formidable and eminently unscientific. In addition, many of the students I interviewed were not on the lists I had been given and most students had already pre-selected the level they wanted to take. Some students wanted to take an intermediate or advanced course which, judging from our brief interview, I thought might be an ambitious choice. Several told me they could only attend a particular class because of their working hours. Faced with my first decision I decided that rather than exclude these students who seemed enthusiastic, or begin on the negative footing of requiring them to go to a lower level, I would give them a chance in the course of their choice.

The following Monday, which was to be the first day of classes, I met the director in the morning. He explained that the winter internships had been successful and mine had been set up similarly: a beginning, intermediate and advanced class from 4 to 8 p.m. He felt that probably I would want to concentrate on the beginning class, where I would find that most students were false beginners, possibly dividing it into two sections of one hour each. I was free to conduct my classes as I wished, could make use of all the school's material, and was not required to provide any evaluation of the students beyond a record of

attendance. I could make whatever changes in the classes and scheduling I felt necessary.

I was given a large classroom with a table, chairs with arms and two blackboards. The director presented me to my first class in Spanish. That first day I wanted to learn about my students, get a more complete and realistic idea of the level of their English and their goals than I had been able to get during the interviews, and begin to establish teacher-student rapport based on equality. This impression was important and I was extremely concerned not to project an image of authoritarianism, either through my classroom manner or through the students' perception of "superior knowledge".

I first introduced myself in English, then attempted to take attendance from the class lists. For several reasons this proved difficult and not just a little demoralizing due to my unfamiliarity with Mexican names, of which most people had three to five. Besides the problem of reading and pronouncing, there was a wide discrepancy between the students listed, the students I had interviewed, and the actual students present. My struggling provided an immediate, effective model of me as a language learner so that in my intermediate class one student felt prompted to get up and take charge of attendance procedures.[1] We spent the rest of the class doing paired interviews, which enabled me to see how the students interacted, after which they introduced each other to the class. I then asked them to answer some questions and provide some information about themselves, their interests and reasons for studying English on file cards which I collected.[2] I asked the intermediate and advanced groups for their goals and expectations. To all groups I explained that, for obvious

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1. I quickly resolved the question of monitoring attendance by abandoning roll call as neither an effective use of time, nor a way to learn students' names. Instead, I passed around a sheet for students to sign.

2. from Gertrude Moskowitz's Sharing and Caring in the Foreign Language Class, Newbury House Publishers, Rowley, Mass., 1976.

reasons, this would not be a translation course, but that the emphasis would be on understanding and using the language appropriately.

Student Profile

Theoretically all students were enrolled in the University or the Preparatoria affiliated with it, and were therefore studying within the English program. Actually, the groups were much more diverse. A few very young students had enrolled legitimately through the director as favors to their parents. Brothers, sisters or friends of University students made up another portion of the enrollment, and several older people who needed English in their jobs and had heard of the courses had simply come to the class. Two University professors also attended. Although a good percentage were pre-University or University students in law, chemistry or languages, there were also several secretaries, housewives, factory workers and teachers as well as a nurse, some merchants, hotel, restaurant and business employees.

It was not important to me who was a "legitimate student" in the groups, but that students showed the interest to want to study. This was especially true regarding the older students, and so I consciously ignored the issue of whether they had a right to be in class.[3] As a result, students had quite varied English backgrounds and interests and they ranged in age from 13 to about 55.

On their file cards students most often cited the importance of English as an international language, or the fact that they liked it as their reasons for studying. Many had travelled in the U.S. or had relatives there and hoped to travel or study. There seemed to be a high level of interest and need for English.[4]

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3. Because of the problems checking the attendance list posed, I found it very difficult logistically to know who was officially enrolled and I found that some of the most eager students were "undocumented".

4. Querétaro is a large and growing city whose economy is based on heavy industry. Much of the industry is American affiliated or dependent on

The large beginners class encompassed a wide range of false beginners and a few real beginners. My intermediate class, also large, was basically intermediate but spanned the low and high ranges. The advanced class, however, was small but a very mixed group of some truly advanced students (including English teachers or aspiring English teachers) and some low-intermediate students, a result largely from scheduling difficulties. Some students spoke confidently and easily, but I noticed that many seemed reticent to speak, and would only speak if called on. Several people showed a great deal of anxiety.[5]

Although the ability range was unwieldly, I hesitated to move any individual students down because I felt that they had chosen levels above their ability out of some psychological need. This had seemed evident from some of the interviews. Perhaps they felt it important to feel that they could function at an intermediate level or an advanced level, even if they had been in beginning or intermediate classes. As an inexperienced teacher trying hard to measure and satisfy my students' security needs, I felt at the time that it would be a better idea to let these students de-

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4. (cont.) Americans and the technical manuals which accompanied machinery would be in English. Therefore Mexican employees would find that they needed a reading knowledge of English, good communication skills, or both in their jobs. Many students were studying sciences for which they needed at least a reading knowledge of English in order to keep up with their studies. Some of the younger students were taking English because their parents felt that they should prepare for the future.

5. I learned later that English is part of the required secondary school curriculum throughout Mexico, in recognition of its importance as an international language and one of the keys to development by making foreign technology accessible. However, in Mexico the secondary English programs are often badly administered without clear learning objectives. Many students learn over a period of years that English is difficult--if not impossible--to learn, often that they can not learn it, and yet they are compelled to keep trying because they feel they need it. It is not uncommon for beginning students to have a high level of learned anxiety or to be afraid to speak. I found this to be especially true among older students who were not ordinarily enrolled in English or another language class, and among the younger students.

cide on their own that the class they were in was too advanced for them and move down a level. I believed that asking students to move back would be embarrassing for them and would reinforce a notion of inadequacy, which would be a negative way to begin the summer course and which could result in losing students. It seemed to me that the challenge of trying to keep up would be preferable to dropping out. The director and I disagreed on this point.

Classes and Activities

In the beginning class I decided to start with extensive pronunciation practice with the sound-color chart, and to work with time and mathematical operations, following as closely as possible procedures outlined in Common Sense[6] in order to give my students a broad entrance into a new style of learning and transferred, immediately useful universal skills. I concentrated on vowels and a limited number of consonants, trying to give every classmember time for group and individual practice, tapping out words and short phrases.

In the first week I noted that students responded but not enthusiastically. This may have been a reaction to the new materials, content, my self-presentation in class (striving to be classically non-commital, so as not to make students dependent on my judgments at the expense of their own), the slow pacing, my competence in handling the material and conducting the class, or a combination of any of these factors. By the end of the week I noticed a marked decrease in the number of students. I decided to move away from the sound-color chart (which I did not feel completely at home with), and work more with the rods, using verbs such as give, take and put, which allowed greater variety and student interaction. This included work with subject and object pronouns, colors, possessive adjectives and question words, while still beginning class with some work on pronunciation.

Changing activities in this way helped lighten the atmosphere in the

6. Gattegno, Caleb, The Common Sense of Teaching Foreign Languages, Educational Solutions, Inc., New York, 1976.

class. It allowed students to assume more control of the learning situation and to interact more freely with each other. It took the focus away from me. Not only were they working with more linguistic material which was more challenging, they were physically controlling the learning materials and causing each other to respond in or in relation to English. There were some nice moments both in respect to cognitive learning and personal interaction in the class, and students personalities began to emerge.

Students showed a strong inclination to write and take notes, which was contrary to what I wanted them to do. I preferred that they concentrate on the activity we were involved in: on listening, speaking and participating. At first I did not want to write or to leave anything written on the board. I felt that reading and writing would take them out of what we were doing when I wanted them to "stay with" me and the class. When it seemed necessary I would write words on the board, but I would erase them after all the students had taken mental note.

It became apparent that this was not adequate either for the students' sense of security or for their ease in learning. It was unnatural to divorce them from the written form of the language. I therefore decided to make up a word chart modeled after Gattegno's charts, comprised randomly of verbs, verb endings, possessive endings, the plural ending, pronouns, numbers and other vocabulary we were using as a reference. I realized that by not letting them take notes I was depriving them of another access into the language and a valuable learning aid, and I felt that the word chart would compensate for this. This chart and the two I subsequently made still required the students to discriminate and construct the grammar for themselves, but it gave them a sense of security by making the linguistic elements available and not requiring them to reconstruct everything solely from memory.

The charts had generally very positive results. Students showed more recall, interest and concentration. They interacted well with each other, volunteering help if someone was stuck, and they saw highlighted the dif-

ferent features of the language so that they could test themselves by putting together or recognizing the correctness of a statement, command or question of their peers. There was a generally cooperative, though subdued, spirit among the students.

I did not use the Silent Way materials or a Silent Way manner in the intermediate or advanced classes. For these students it seemed more appropriate to begin with communicative activities which allowed their free expression and from which I could determine their grammatical needs. I wanted the content and direction of the course to reflect a high degree of student self-investment. I used the lists of skills and topics which the students wanted to cover and frequently-committed errors as a guide for lesson planning. Their goals covered the four skill areas. The intermediate group wanted to: 1) be able to carry on a telephone conversation; 2) converse with American and native English speakers; 3) speak better; 4) write a letter; 5) understand university classes; 6) read magazines; 7) understand pronunciation, contractions and slang; 8) be prepared to study in England or the U.S.; 9) understand British English. The advanced group was interested in 1) idioms; 2) culture and customs in the U.S.; 3) making formal talks; 4) pronunciation, intonation and phonetic symbols; 5) specialized vocabulary related to specific themes or situations (i.e., in a bank, at the airport, etc.)

From the introductions and file cards I made up a list of sentences with grammatical and lexical errors which I asked students to study, find and correct the mistakes in small groups. This was followed by a large group discussion of the results of their corrections and enabled me to see their awareness of the grammar and their powers of observation. I hoped that it would also lead them to appreciate the depth of their responsibility in the learning process. Directly I did not want to tell them anything; any formulation of grammatical rules I wanted to elicit from them. I wanted them to think.

In both groups we worked on pronunciation and whenever possible had

discussions. The members of the advanced group wanted to prepare oral reports about some aspect of Mexico of their interest, after which we discussed the content of the report. The enthusiasm of the students was not always matched by their ability to perform the task. Grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary problems abounded, seriously affecting communication. I was uncertain how to deal with this, either pedagogically or affectively. I invited two of the strongest students from the intermediate class to join this group as well, and hoped they would strengthen it.

In the second week both classes began working in the language laboratory with a cloze exercise I had prepared for a song about the lives and professions of 'average' people in the United States.[7] The tape provided intensive work in many areas: listening comprehension, idioms, contractions and slang as well as ideas for discussion. Reactions to the song were generally enthusiastic. Everyone enjoyed the music, but the level of language was high: a musical geared for the enjoyment of native speakers, some of it choral, thus more difficult to understand than a single voice. I tried to treat the cloze passage like a detective case: what students did not understand they should try to deduce from context and from what they knew about the English language. Differences between students' levels came out very clearly but for most it was a challenge and interesting on at least some levels. It was, however, quite long. Whenever possible we commented on or discussed some aspect of the song.

Towards the end of the second week several of the strongest students in the advanced group asked permission to attend both the intermediate and

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7. from the musical version of Studs Terkel's book Working. I chose this tape because of its high quality, diversity of musical styles (jazz, folk, country, blues, choral, etc.), descriptions of a wide variety of typical occupations in the first-person, and the wide-ranging issues it addressed (racism, sexism, pursuit of the American dream, independence, family relations, pride, struggle, regret, etc.) which would provide an excellent starting point for discussing American culture specifically and, more broadly, the human condition. The songs are written in colloquial English and present a wealth of common idioms in a natural way.

a result of this, and because of the tremendous overlapping of abilities which reduced the differences between the two latter classes, I decided to extend the beginners class to one and a half hours (4-5:30) and to consolidate the other classes into an intermediate-advanced class of two hours length, with the option of forming an auxiliary advanced group if I felt there was a real need. This seemed to conform more truly to the reality of the teaching situation, and would give me the greatest lattitude in putting together an advanced class.

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8. The advanced group was one hour long, while the intermediate was one and a half long.

the class. They included minimal pair work with words

and sentences (testing both reception and production) or card games which required students to order words according to shared sounds. Because punctuality was always a problem, this allowed a productive margin of time in which latecomers could arrive without disrupting an ongoing class activity. Our work on pronunciation was not confined to this time only. I often wrote examples of students' mispronunciation on the blackboard as they occurred to keep attention focussed on the sound-letter-meaning relationships.

The exercises lent themselves well to a slightly modified human computer technique. This gave individuals the opportunity to control their practice time, gave me the opportunity to monitor the students and afforded contact between me and individuals. I was particularly pleased by the effect this had on class atmosphere in both groups. It directly contributed to feelings of well-being and security for us all.

In the beginners class we extended work with the rods into relative pronouns, quantifiers, the calendar, question words and continued work with commands and the present progressive. Once, when a new student seemed mystified by the class, one of the other students explained, "We're playing." Our work was serious but the atmosphere was lightened by the non-conventional method and materials. We also worked with spelling and food vocabulary. Students enjoyed asking questions about each others' food prefenences and particularly enjoyed the cookie-eating operation. I tried to be flexible and incorporate realia and new information about them as it came up to make the content more immediate and interesting. Sometimes spontaneous classes worked well and sometimes they failed miserably, but this was also true of well-planned lessons. Students continued to drop-out though I was never formally notified.

The intermediate-advanced group concentrated on discussion or sustained conversation about the students, their perceptions and opinions regarding different topics or current events. We worked intensively both in and out of the language laboratory with "The Housewife's Song" from

"Working", using another cloze exercise and brainstorming vocabulary, grammar and idioms. This song lent itself to discussion about the differences between Mexican and American housewives, the traditional role of women and how that is changing, the concept of family and male and female roles. The controversial subject and diverse backgrounds and opinions of classmembers gave rise to some lively debate.

We listened to the Hispanic American's song (in Spanish) which students translated orally for me, and we talked about its significance. Discussions were held in a large circle or in small groups.

We worked extensively in class and at home with worksheets on reported speech and the difference between say and tell. We explored the differences of gestures and body language between English and Spanish, and conducted role-playing to contrast cultural attitudes regarding dating behavior and citizen-police interaction. The pace of the class was somewhat uneven. I tried to slow things down when there seemed to be furrowed brows of discontent or extreme concentration. Advanced students participated heavily. We had our first written evaluations, which seemed to confirm that many students desired more structure (either teacher control or grammar), and many were quiet not by preference but because they felt the class to be dominated by a few vocal people. They wanted expanded opportunities to speak.

I had usually assumed that a student would speak when s/he had an idea s/he wanted to communicate, but sometimes I went around the room and asked each student for an opinion, in order for everyone to participate and to know that their presence was noticed and important. With the exception of Arturo who came infrequently, the most vocal students were not people who had moved in from the advanced group. I tried to be more aware of students dominating, and to elicit participation from everyone. I had begun to see the unbridgeable discrepancy in levels as a major problem for advanced and low-intermediate students. I decided to put together an ad-

vanced section which would meet in the mornings so as to include only advanced students and to give them an opportunity to do advanced English. I hoped this would alleviate some of the difficulties for students at both the top and bottom.

THIRD PHASE

In the beginning course we did few specific pronunciation exercises and moved into descriptions and verb tenses. I introduced adjectives with personal descriptions about ourselves, pictures and realia. In writing we worked on the sentence level, but more work was oral. We used the rods somewhat less, concentrating more on visuals, TPR and student-generated content. For the last month we introduced and practiced the past tense and compared and contrasted it with the "going to" future, the present progressive and the simple present. We learned a few traditional American folksongs. We tried the Jazz Chant "Baby's Sleeping", but the students "didn't like the song", did not find the humor in it, and did not want to work with it. We worked with daily schedules about hypothetical people and ourselves. We also worked on adjectives, antonyms, comparatives and superlatives. We personalized as much as we could. We continued to work on pronunciation within the context of errors as they happened.

A big breakthrough occurred when we introduced extended discourse and when I gave them a dictation. Students were very challenged by activities in which they re-told stories and wrote narratives. By the end of the course classes included a good balance of the four skills.

In the intermediate course we did more pair work, reading, writing and role-playing, and worked with more handouts. Much of the content was notional/functional or examining appropriate behavior and differences in register in different situations. I provided a number of handouts on grammar, vocabulary and language behavior in different contexts. Students worked with extended oral narration such as group story-telling and wrote stories. We used jig-saw listening and role-playing and from this did work on stress and intonation. The class contrasted the past simple, present perfect and present perfect progressive. After studying examples where these tenses were appropriate or not appropriate, they analyzed the meaning and devised rules to explain their usage. If their analyses

were not correct, I gave them further examples which required them to revise the rules until they arrived at the logic expressed by the tense. We worked with modal verbs and in pairs conducted job interviews. We learned several American folk songs and tried some Jazz Chants which they responded to enthusiastically.

The classes were more task-oriented and focussed than they had been and everyone was required to work. Role-playing and pair-work increased total participation. On a more limited basis we continued to have large circle discussions, primarily about sociological issues and cultural differences between the U.S. and Mexico. When students became very concerned over the threat of an imminent strike, several members worked hard to find locations where we could continue meeting should the need arise.

So that the one belligerent personality in the advanced section would not cause problems, I began this section by stating my expectations and some general rules including: 1) the primary focus would be oral; 2) everyone would participate, 3) everyone would respect everyone else's right to speak and to have ideas and opinions which were different, 4) no one would be laughed at or ridiculed for any reason, 5) recognizing that we all make mistakes, and that from our mistakes we and others can learn, we should not be afraid to make mistakes.

For each student in this course I did specific pronunciation error analysis with a tape and I provided them with my written recommendations for individualized work on pronunciation. We did both listening and production exercises in class. Some of this was combined with stress and intonation work with poetry. We looked at style, mood and imagery in Frost's "Stopping By Woods On A Snowy Evening". An exercise in headline expansion resulted in discussion about the Mexican political system. We conducted a debate about Mexican oil policy which ran well past class time, and from the errors did extensive written corrections.

T E A C H E R S E C U R I T Y

When I felt secure in my role as teacher I could give my full attention to my students and the workings of the class. When I did not feel "accepted" in the Curran sense, I found it difficult to view the class globally and to fulfill my role as teacher. I have identified six main areas which affected my sense of security and therefore my performance: 1) my sense of national identity; 2) the effects of being a foreigner; 3) authority; 4) planning; 5) attrition rate and 6) student responsiveness.

1) Sense of National Identity

One can not live in Mexico without being shocked by the poverty and differences in living conditions, especially contrasted with a highly industrialized super-power like the United States. I tried to cultivate an understanding, sensitivity and appreciation for what I saw and to express that whenever possible and/or appropriate. I was particularly aware of the differences between the two countries in economic and world political power and did not want to communicate anything which could be construed as imperialism or the arrogance of privilege.

Although I was teaching during a time of important international differences between the U.S. and Mexico (over oil and tuna), my students never reacted negatively to me as an American. Political discussion never implicated me and I was never challenged about my country's policies, though I was often asked for my reactions. This was reassuring to me, as it meant that I was completely accepted as an individual and students showed genuine interest in my opinions and point of view.

There was, however, an older man who was a physics professor, who had decided on the basis of my name that I was German. During class he often asked me questions--relevant or otherwise--about Germany and Germans, and he made references to German history in a manner which made clear that he thought of me as being German. It became obvious from his comments and questions that he found German character and morality questionable at best

and that he expected Germans of all ages to share the sense of guilt that is the legacy of their modern history.

No amount of correction seemed to convince this man of my true nationality. Ceasing to be simply annoying, his mild-mannered persistence in this line seemed antagonistic and threatening, although I am not certain that he meant to provoke a strong reaction from me. I felt completely ignored as a person, being treated rather as a stereotype for a group to which I do not even belong. I also felt that there must have been a certain malice in his doing this in front of the group. Nor could I understand why this student had come to learn English from me if he thought I was German. I had come prepared to represent my culture, but I was not prepared to be put on the defensive for an identity which was not my own, but one for which I did feel certain ties and understanding for having lived a year in the country.

This man's participation became increasingly disconcerting until on one occassion a remark of his, only very tenuously related to the topic of countries and nationalities which we had been talking about, prompted me to completely depart from my lesson plan. I wanted to correct an historical inaccuracy in his comment and in so doing to assert my authority and to "put this student in his place", so that he would learn not to use everyone's valuable class time to circumlocute activities in order to pursue his private and misguided prejudices. I therefore gave a brief history lesson about the German national anthem.

The presence and behavior of this student had a definite impact on my attitude and teaching and did culminate in a minor spontaneous incident, but because he was unique and so mistaken I did not generalize him as being representative of the group attitude in any way. Fortunately I could isolate this as a bizarre occurrence, although one with important insight into potential conflicts. Before I began my internship I had been afraid of encountering similar reactions to my American identity. It would not have been possible to dismiss him completely as a kook if in-

stead he had been needling me as a stereotype and representative of American government and business actions globally. I would have had to have taken him seriously, would certainly have suspected his attitude to be more widespread even if not expressed by other students, and the consequences would have been more serious. It would have exacerbated difficulties I was experiencing in cultural adjustment, and could have easily caused me to react so defensively as to mistrust and reject the culture entirely. I can not imagine that it would be possible to teach an EFL class in which one felt antipathy for the students and host culture, and self-conscious in the role as the Ugly American.

2) Effects of Being a Foreigner

As stated, I was trying--insofar as possible with a very weak knowledge of Spanish--to understand and identify with the host culture. This was most easily accomplished in the intermediate-advanced class, where we could talk freely in English, and we could discuss customs, behavior and history. I was sensitive to the image of American imperialism, the problem of "superior knowledge", and the need for the teacher to be accepted as a person. As the course advanced I grew increasingly comfortable using Spanish in the class--asking how to say something in Spanish, at times feeling compelled to try to speak Spanish in order to expose my weakness as a learner, to show that I was interested in their language and culture, not just in mine, and that I was doing something about it. Besides genuine curiosity, this was an appeal to reduce the distance between student and teacher roles. Using Spanish in our first feedback session was a great source of relief and sharing with my beginning class.

Generally I felt a lot of rapport with my more advanced students, which contrasted sharply with my experiences in my host family, where I usually did not understand what was happening or why. My lack of ability to communicate at home was in direct contrast to my classes, and had several ramifications in the classroom, both negative and positive. One result was that I sometimes talked too much, finding in school an outlet

which I did not have in my personal life. I sometimes found myself too psychologically dependent on the success or failure of my lessons to be able to have a detached perspective on the class or the students. Sometimes this dependence created enough anxiety in me to ensure a bad class. My experiences with culture shock made me occassionally feel defensive in relation to the culture in general, and this impaired my abilities to assess the classes and to function well as teacher. On the other hand, this increased my awareness of real differences and topics which could be the basis of class discussion and role-playing. One result was that when I ran into an impasse at home I tried to formulate it as a question and bring it into the class for discussion. I realized how important human responsiveness is in the classroom.

3) Teacher Authority

In the beginning class it was more difficult to establish a rapport because of the limited basis of communication we shared. This was exacerbated by the high attrition rate after the first week in which I tried using the sound-color chart. My inability to see where many of their mistakes were coming from, or to provide comprehensive explanations of the grammar, or to see where Spanish and English had parallel structures that did not warrant extensive work or elaborate introductions to them, did create in me a feeling of inadequacy or at least of unpreparedness.

For pedagogical and affective reasons my approach to this class was quite different from the others. It was much more teacher-controlled and more cognitively-oriented. Besides Silent Way derived techniques and materials, we used operations and pictures. I was much less apt to let go of my authority, as I felt it here to be both the most needed and most tenuous of all my classes.

In this class I was more prone to feel that repeated mistakes were a failure of my teaching and/or a rejection of me and my methods. I wanted all of my students to learn well and was reluctant to move on if there seemed to be a lack of learning from someone in the class. This attitude

became problematic. My youngest student, a thirteen-year-old boy, exhibited a lot of anxiety, seemed to stubbornly refuse to develop any sense of inner criteria, failed to hear himself, clung to translation from other class members, and only participated when called on. He appeared to have no interest in learning the material, yet he always came to class early. I was torn over how to deal with this. I felt that especially in this class it was important for everyone to participate, yet whenever I called on him he made a laborious and painful display of helplessness, appealing to one of the older students to translate even the simplest and most practiced parts of the lesson. This meant spending a lot of time with him, but I did not feel comfortable ignoring him completely. I began to suspect that he was playing a game with me--a classic example of "Stupid" which Stevick talked about in Memory, Meaning and Method--and I was not sure how to break the game and get beyond the learning barrier he had set up. I was not able to effect any evident changes or learning in this student. I did meet his father, a very successful businessman, who came because he was very concerned about the progress of both his children[9] which he did not feel was fast enough, and informed me at length about his plans to send them to an American high school, and how necessary it was for them to learn English. Obviously the two children were coming to the class under extreme parental pressure, and their class performance reflected a lack of interest and resentment. Eventually both students dropped out of class.

In my intermediate and advanced classes I had a different challenge. In those classes I wanted to keep a very low profile as authority figure. This was made difficult by one of my students who was a behavioral psychologist and English teacher who attended sporadically. Arturo's presence was confrontational and critical in general, and he forcibly disrupted class atmosphere in three main ways: 1) by trying to dominate

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9. His daughter was in my intermediate class. I had suggested to her that she might also come to the beginners class, but she had ignored the suggestion.

class activities, speaking very rapidly, side-tracking discussion and using elevated language (usually inappropriately) whenever possible; 2) by expressing negative criticisms about "the Latin mentality" which he felt needed correcting and 3) by confronting me on questions of educational philosophy during class. He had a disruptive effect on class atmosphere, and I felt that my authority and beliefs were being scrutinized very critically. This made me feel both extremely self-conscious and protective towards the class.

Arturo deliberately set himself apart from the class which I believe came from a conflict of identities from being both an English teacher and now a student among students. He could not give up his authority. Since his attendance was sporadic and his presence at least mildly belligerent, it was not possible to draw him into the community of the rest of the class. He became known among the other students as "the psychologist".

When Arturo announced to me his intentions to attend class regularly this was a major catalyst in forming the small advanced class. This would allow the advanced students an opportunity to work on special problems at their own pace and it gave me the opportunity to remove Arturo from the large group.

4) Planning

Planning was often difficult because of a variety of factors I could neither foresee nor control. Punctuality and attendance are particularly hard to ensure in Mexico, and were complicated by the fact that this was a summer course and many of my students had vacations or erratic work schedules and might disappear for a week or more. The rainy season sometimes brought heavy downpours and occassional flash floods in the late afternoon which made getting to class quite hard. I could therefore never predict how many students I would have. Often I would have a lesson plan designed for a large group and upon getting to class would discover that only a small group had come to class. Sometimes, after I had abandoned my large group lesson plan, students would straggle in until there was a

fairly large class, but by that time I judged that I did not have enough time to complete the activities I had originally planned.

I found this to be somewhat frustrating. It interrupted the continuity I had planned and until I became more flexible, the well-prepared lesson I thought I would give might become a series of impromptu attempts at salvaging a seemingly unplanned, disorganized class. I found it was necessary to make both a large-group and an alternative small-group lesson plan.

Erratic attendance and tardiness definitely affected my morale. I found that I could come to class full of enthusiasm over what I was certain was an interesting well-thought-out lesson, and feel personally and professionally rejected by lack of attendance and/or students arriving late. Early in the summer I was not aware that this is characteristic of Mexicans, or that many of my students were employed full-time and in addition to my course were juggling a full range of family and business commitments or that several of my students worked all night in factories.

5) Attrition rate

I saw attrition as a kind of Nielsen's rating of my classes and teaching. It was greatest in the beginning course, and prompted me to make many changes in my style and the course content in an attempt to fix what I thought was causing students to drop out. Attrition was really demoralizing. At the time I did not have self-confidence enough to realize that dissatisfaction was only one of its many causes. My insecurity stemming from this "rejection" impaired my ability to evaluate both what I and my students were doing, and thus to effect appropriate changes. In this way it had a kind of vicious cycle effect. Since we did not have recourse in Spanish until the latter half of the course it was not possible to discuss what was happening in class feedback sessions. It is also contrary to Mexican culture to criticize, so one usually is given a false impression that everything is fine, rather than be hurt by the truth. A Mexican will drop out smiling instead of risking confrontation.

6) Student Responsiveness

Curran said of the profession that one is "sick to teach"[10] and that we need an open, warm, receptive channel to receive what we feel compelled to give. If students are captivated, enthusiastic and eager to participate, it recreates energy and we feel stimulated or excited when we finish class. If students participate and are interested, we feel good. If the class is sluggish, students seem bored, disinterested or impatient, it saps our energy and it is hard to go on.

My problems with student responsiveness resulted primarily from teaching a class of widely mixed levels. If I taught to the middle or slower students, the advanced students would get bored. If I taught to the advanced students, the less-advanced students would feel lost or frustrated instead of challenged. I thought that if I paired advanced students with less-advanced students that this would invite a counseling response, but sometimes the advanced students instead reacted impatiently to their partner's less-developed skills. Impatience would in turn further inhibit the slower student's performance.

Impatience, boredom, clock-watching or minimal responsiveness would inhibit my performance. My two greatest problems were in 1) psychologically detaching myself so as to be able to accept this in a non-personal way and 2) evaluating clearly and changing aspects of the class appropriately. For instance, I would slow down or speed up the pace of the class when I detected discontent, whereas a simple change of focus of an activity, as from oral to written work, might have provided the necessary challenge and change of rhythm the students were missing.

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10. Curran, Charles, Counseling-Learning in Second Languages, Apple River Press, Apple River, Ill., 1976, p. 12

STUDENT SECURITY

I observed that my students' security and performance were strongly influenced by seven factors: 1) sense of identity; 2) group dynamic; 3) methods of correction; 4) method; 5) structure, materials and techniques; 6) relevance of the content and 7) the pacing and level of language.

1) Sense of Identity

Students were more likely to participate if they felt respected and recognized as an important and integral part of the class. One source for this was when I and other class members remembered their names and something about them. I tried to make a point of learning all of my students' names as quickly as possible and incorporating personal information about them in the class. Given the large number of students and my unfamiliarity with Mexican names, this was somewhat difficult. I regularly mixed-up two students, and I noticed that my unconscious denial of his existence had an adverse effect in attitude on one of them. He participated less frequently and with less enthusiasm as time went on. Likewise, about mid-course one student reacted angrily to correct another student who had called her by the first name she did not use instead of her second name which she used. This seemed to be a forceful demand to be noticed and accepted on her terms.

I tried to treat everyone equally and to reinforce their bond with the class by recalling comments, previously shared experiences and information of different class members. In this way we built a common, shared history.

2) Group Dynamic

One of my main goals was to create community and foster interpersonal sharing so that students would develop as people through learning English. Group dynamic and its effect on the individual's self-concept had critical importance.

In the beginning class students were friendly and helpful to each

other. There were no domineering personalities. The only interpersonal problems stemmed from my relation to the boy Luis and my tendency towards overly controlling interaction leading to teacher dominance. When I minimized my presence and the amount of teacher talk, the class ran smoothly and usually with humor. Students liked each other and most of them liked English and the intellectual challenge the class posed.

The advanced class, with the exception of Arturo, was composed of a very compatible, lively and intelligent group of young pre-University women who related easily and well with each other. These women were well-informed in many areas and loved discussion. Fortunately, as his presence was hard to integrate, Arturo did not always attend, though he related better to these women whose linguistic command and quick thinking more closely matched his own.

The intermediate group, being the largest and most diverse in every respect, had the most interesting and least predictable group dynamic. The youngest students were thirteen- and fourteen-year-old secondary school girls, the oldest were middle-aged men, while the majority were in their late teens or twenties. They came from economically disadvantaged to well-to-do backgrounds.

Some students had trouble adjusting their identies to our classroom situation. Arturo, the English teacher and behavioral psychologist in his late twenties, could not let himself integrate with the other students because of his strong identity with Authority. He began the course late and interrupted his class or my other group[11] at will, whenever he had a question, problem or comment, behaving as if specially privileged. He took over class activities and challenged me philosophically during class in what seemed a power struggle. At every opportunity he reminded the class of his professional position and that he was not an ordinary member of the

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11. He once marched into the middle of the beginning class without apology in order to ask about his schedule, information he could have gotten from the office or more discreetly from me at an opportune moment.

group, an idea which he broadened significantly when he attacked "Latin mentality" which he said was "typically incapable of following through on a simple task." Arturo used the class aggressively as a forum to flaunt his personal identity with power and achievement throughout the course, and consequently remained on the outside of the group.

Silvia, twenty-two, began the course by assuming an aggressive leadership role and setting herself apart from other class members, but she ended it having made great gains at integrating herself and forming friendships with certain classmates. Outside of class she held a high position of executive secretary within the local chapter of the ruling political party, with which she was supporting her family, and she was also finishing high school at night. Silvia, in words and actions, expressed that she wanted to be somebody in life.

From the outset she was a strong and outspoken member who commanded the group's attention by her physical presence and her frequent contributions. Her previous successes in what must have been a rigorous, grammar-based competitive English course and her personality set her apart. She distinguished herself by both what she said and how she interacted. Frequently she followed other students' statements by "That's wrong," indicating that they had made grammar mistakes. Her manner was usually brusque and authoritative and many students saw her as bossy and intimidating. Since her behavior was not typical for a Mexican woman, her interaction with men was not typical. As a macha[12] she threatened yet intrigued some of the men, but in two cases she was met with rejection which caused her to become sullen and defensive.

As teacher I had the job of toning down Silvia's energy to channel it more positively into the class, so that she would interact with the group as people, not linguistic competitors vying for status, and so that she would not run away with class attention as she frequently tried to do.

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12. A woman whose behavior is characteristic of and appropriate for men.

Silvia was a real challenge for me.

To do this I used hand signals and body language to discourage expressing negative behavior and encourage respect towards others. Frequently I pointed out students' mistakes as intelligent and/or interesting. I corrected and called on Silvia frequently, and experimented with pair and small group combinations. I wanted her to see that she was part of the group process and to learn to cooperate. During the summer Silvia exhibited noticeable changes in behavior and linguistic performance. Slowly she dropped her roughness and attempts to control people and she softened towards other students, eventually aligning herself closely with a few of the younger women and an amiable middle-aged family man. Instead of being confrontational, she became friendly, although this change was not total. Linguistically her English appeared to worsen rather than improve, and instead of being outspoken, she sometimes refused to participate. This was true if she felt threatened personally or by content which she did not dominate.

Silvia's backwards progress was a source of great concern to me, and I think can be explained two ways. Firstly, I think that I overestimated her competence in English, and as time went on her weak areas became more noticeable; but this is only a limited explanation. Curran's model of the five stages of growth and the interraction of the cognitive self with the affective self provided insights into Silvia. Through much of the summer she was experiencing a number of serious personal and family conflicts. Those coupled with minor power struggles and confrontations in class and with her areas of weakness caused her to regress affectively. This fed back to her cognitive self and showed up as less competence in English.

In general, many women in their mid-twenties and older automatically took a passive role in class. Although these women were usually not strong students, their passivity as learners can largely be explained by cultural conditioning: women defer to men. The pre-University women, on the other

hand, already reflected the changing status of women in society.

As a rule, students were cooperative and treated each other with respect.

3) Methods of Correction

Students' ability to handle correction correlates deeply with their self-image. I tried many different styles or correction, and noted that most students responded the most freely when I was physically removed from sight or when the form of correction was unobtrusive and posed an intellectual challenge to them.

In oral work I used hand signals to indicate tense changes (past, present and future), word order reversal, stress and intonation changes, or that something should be omitted or added. This type of correction required students to think through and re-work what they were saying, and unless over-used was positive for most students. It communicated to them that they were intelligent enough to self-correct. In most cases it encouraged students to speak. However, it had a stifling effect if the student was making many mistakes but very much wanted to tell us something. Too much emphasis on a grammatical utterance communicated to students that I was not interested in what they were saying, but only in how they were formulating it. Overcorrection stopped communication.

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of correcting was knowing when and to what degree it was appropriate. If the message was obviously important yet garbled, depending on the student's willingness to accept correction, I would either indicate there was an error so that they would self-correct, or I would "understand" the student's statement after s/he had finished. Understanding showed the student that s/he was being listened to and gave the student an opportunity to hear those thoughts reflected back in grammatical, colloquial English. Understanding responses may or may not have made students aware of the mistakes they made, or even that they had made mistakes.

When providing a verbal correction of any sort I tried to use a matter-of-fact tone and facial expression. Different students were very sensitive to tone and body language, and withdrew if they noted any sign of impatience or criticism.

I tried usually to first elicit self-correction, then peer correction, or failing this, teacher correction. If the situation seemed delicate and I felt students would be inhibited by correction, I did not use any at all and let mistakes go by. These could be ignored or picked up in the future in another context.

I usually collected mistakes from everybody and presented them to the group in written form for correction, either on the blackboard or on mimeographed copies. Students became much more aware of their mistakes if they saw them. This is also true of pronunciation errors. Students might not hear the difference between [s] and [c], but if they saw they were saying "cheese" instead of "she's" the error had new meaning and they had a tangible direction in which to focus themselves. I tried not to treat student errors as something serious. I wanted students to see errors as thoughtful responses from them that provided clues to their thinking and understanding but which did not reflect badly on their person. Errors were therefore something useful, helpful and usually intelligent which could teach them and others.

4) Method

As stated, many students in my beginning class dropped out during the first two weeks. This was primarily in reaction to the Silent Way as I understood and practiced it. This method and the materials were totally alien to my Mexican students. The emphasis upon individualized learning and deductive reasoning was diametrically opposed to traditional classroom teaching where the teacher gives information and students ingest it. Latin culture is group-oriented, noisy and expansive, whereas our class was controlled, the teacher relatively silent and the focus was on the individual.

The differences were so far from what previous educational or social

experiences had led students to expect that many completely rejected it. Those who remained were often puzzled by our strange classes, seeing them as a kind of playing rather than studying in a normal sense. Those who accepted this method and participated made a lot of progress.

In the other two classes I did not use any one method.

5) Structure, Materials and Techniques

In the first feedback session with my intermediate group several students requested "techniques for learning." As a result, I made up a number of handouts and work sheets. Students performed much better when they had access to written materials and when they had tricks and rules to aid them.

"Techniques for learning" I realized did not mean solely take-home materials. They wanted a more discernable structure and a more hard-core grammar focus than we had been getting in that class. I had not been systematically or very formally treating many grammar points there, concentrating instead on getting students to speak and express their opinions and feelings. One student said he felt the course was "one's heart's content", whereas he wanted to learn grammar rules. I had been focussing on errors, correction and new language that came up naturally, but I had been feeling uncomfortable about the lack of formal grammar we had done, feeling that understanding and spot correction were not teaching in a broad or efficient sense.

Many student comments seemed to confirm this and as a result I tried to emphasize a more systematic analytical approach to grammar and to provide more written exercises for homework and class correction, as well as oral activities which were still situational or functional but more closely tied to the grammar points we needed to work on. One of the difficulties had been deciding which grammar points to cover. This stemmed from the wide-range of levels in the class.

The beginning class had followed a grammar-based syllabus from the

start, so for them I tried to provide handouts and exercises which would reinforce class work and extend their English for use in more situations.

Students were more confident with something in their hands: a reference they could bring home, work out or study. Classes seemed more concrete. In exercises and material which I made up I tried to use information about class members so that through English we were always learning something about ourselves. This increased interest.

In the intermediate-advanced group we used a lot of communicative activities, all-class discussions, pair work and small group discussions based on current events and topics of interest such as the Olympic boycott, the problem of the U.S. wanting to buy more oil than Mexico wanted to sell, the role of women in Mexico, the family, political, economic and moral questions. Feedback ranged from dislike of small group work because the teacher was not listening to everything being said or because the student was not hearing everything in class, to enthusiasm for being able to talk unhindered by the teacher or self-consciousness in front of the group. Some people voiced dislike of large group activities because discussion was often dominated by the strongest students and the weaker students had limited participation. My attitude had been that students would participate if they felt strongly about something and wanted to communicate an opinion. I did not want to force participation. When I became aware of a certain amount of dissatisfaction because of stronger students' dominance I tried to control large group discussions more to elicit participation from everyone, and I experimented with mixing and matching levels in paired and small group work.

Human computer exercises and my efforts to be non-threatening and to encourage everyone on different occassions to express their opinions and feelings did result in creating the kind of atmosphere I had hoped to achieve in which each person would feel important as an individual. On at least three occasions students felt moved to share a significant emotional experience with me and the group. I saw this as a sign of trust

and a bond with the other class members.

6) Relevance of the Content

This point seems obvious, but in practice was not easy to gauge and implement. Considering grammar, we can decide what is necessary and relevant for a given level, but in working with very mixed levels what is timely for some students is repetitive and boring or too advanced and frustrating to several others. Thus I tried to cope with grammar by giving students a broad sample of their own errors and concentrated in grammar lessons on a few specific items of general misuse in what I thought was an interesting context.

Student awareness of the limitations of their ability to express their thoughts precisely and easily led to a desire for more structured learning and less conversation. Thus, as the intermediate course progressed we moved from topical discussion to more role-playing and situational and functional uses of language. In the beginning course we moved from manipulating specific elements of grammar to narrative use of language. In the advanced course we concentrated on comprehension, vocabulary, style and refining what students said to mean what they wanted to express.

7) Pacing and Level of Language

Students were frustrated by classes which were too fast or slow, or which represented too much or too little challenge for them. Songs and other materials succeeded if we worked with them in digestible pieces and for limited time periods. Students tired easily, especially when the level of language was high, yet they responded positively to changes of activity.

C O N C L U S I O N S

Most of my difficulties came from lack of experience or from trying to do the impossible with a difficult situation of hopelessly mixed levels. The teacher should take a strong hand from the beginning in making sure that the students are grouped according to their linguistic level. Students will feel the most motivated and secure in a homogeneous group, and they can concentrate better on learning. There is less chance of boredom, irritation or resentment from faster students that they be used as teachers. It would also make planning infinitely easier. The director was right.

Ideally a mixed group could work well if the class were divided into ability sub-groups and each group were given different tasks while the teacher took turns working with each of the groups individually. In order to be successful this would require a lot of teacher preparation and reliable attendance on the part of the students.

Traditional Silent Way teaching did not appear to work well, its relative lack of success in large part due to cultural incompatibility. Latin culture is group-oriented, animated and noisy; Silent Way demands intense individual concentration, intellectual autonomy, silence and reflection. The individual becomes involved in group process when it serves internal individual growth needs. Orientation is inward and individualistic. This appears to be in direct conflict with the expansiveness of the Latin orientation outward to other people.

Silent Way materials can be used successfully and with a great deal of eager student response with Mexicans when they have been treated as a game and team-work is emphasized. The colorfulness and simplicity of the rods and sound-color chart are inherently intriguing and invite imaginative response when used freely and creatively.

Students need a sense of progression in the language in order to feel motivated. There must be an evident structure in the course which satisfies the needs and objectives defined from the beginning. The teacher must

be flexible and open to changes according to student response. Unless it is an ESP class, students should work equally with the four skills. Mispronunciation is often a clue to misconceptions about spelling; work with the written language reinforces skills with oral language instead of interfering with it.

Even though I was not very successful at finding a satisfactory approach for teaching mixed levels of students in a large group, I feel I made great strides in accomplishing my primary objectives, developing my teaching approach and identifying areas in which I needed work. Students had learned English and had learned about themselves.

Although my beginning group seemed to be working slowly, which I sometimes found discouraging, we actually covered quite a lot of language. Most students did not study outside of class. By the end of the course they were able to sustain basic yet fairly extensive conversations in English. I was surprised and gratified when they put together the different pieces of language we had been working on in somewhat isolated units and I realized how much they had progressed.

I think we were quite successful in fostering security and creating community. On the last day of class, which fell within the first week of the new University semester, attendance was unusually large. When the period ended no one wanted to leave or to acknowledge that the class and the course were over. For me this indicated that the community I had wanted so much to create had been a reality and something of significance for many students. Some months later Silvia told me that as a result of our English class she had come to see her relationship to other students in her classes differently, and that she now felt much more inclined to cooperate and extend herself to others than she had previously. This is the kind of response I had hoped to generate through my teaching.