

**Tikrit University / College of Education for Women**

**English Department**

**ELT/ 2nd. Class**

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**Lecture2.**

### **Exploration of Teaching**

To truly develop as teachers, we need to be free to explore teaching, and exploration can be based on a set of principles and ways to explore. Principles can include: (1) transcending the goal of improving our teaching by aiming at seeing teaching differently, (2) taking responsibility for our own teaching while recognizing the need for others, (3) taking a non-prescriptive stance; (4) basing teaching decisions on description, (5) being non-judgmental, (6) being reflective, (7) going beyond a problem-solving attitude, and (8) exploring through different avenues, such as by trying the opposite of what we normally do.

There are a variety of ways that we can explore our teaching. We can read professional books and journals on teaching and learning languages. We can establish a mentoring relationship with a more experienced teacher. We can also learn another language. Keeping a teaching journal is another way to explore, especially if we take the time to read and think about what we have written. We can also explore teaching by doing action research. Action research can be quite useful as a way to identify, pose, and work through problems in our teaching.

Other ways to explore our teaching include self-observation, observation of other teachers, and talking about teaching we observe.

### **Self-Observation**

Self-Observation or Reflective teaching means looking at what you do in the classroom, thinking about why you do it, and thinking about if it works - a process of self-observation and self-evaluation.

By collecting information about what goes on in our classroom, and by analysing and evaluating this information, we identify and explore our own practices and underlying beliefs. This may then lead to changes and improvements in our teaching. Reflective teaching is, therefore, a means of professional development which begins in our classroom.

Bailey, Curtis, and Nunan (2001) point out that self-observation is the cornerstone for all professional development. It is through the process of observation that we can have something to say in journals, work through action research projects, and talk about our teaching with others.

But, self-observation as a way to explore our teaching for the purpose of seeing our teaching differently has its own unique approach separate from other professional development activities.

## **Teaching while Collecting Samples of Classroom Interaction**

To make self-observation possible, we can collect samples of our teaching, and this can be done in a variety of ways. However, some teachers prefer to videotape because it is easy to recognize who is talking, and possible to study nonverbal behaviours.

At first, the audio recorder or camcorder may seem a novelty, and some students will change their behaviour because they are being taped. But it really doesn't take long before students accept it and act normally.

How taping is done often depends on the goals of exploration. For example, if you are interested in the students' reactions to instructions or explanations, the audio recorder or camcorder can be focused on the students. If you are interested in what happens during group work, it is logical to place the audio recorder or camcorder with a group of students for a period of time. The idea is to think about the objective of the exploration and to consider how to tape the class to obtain useful samples for later analysis. Of course, it is also possible not to have an objective, and to simply collect random samples of teaching. Sometimes such descriptions can lead to interesting discoveries about our teaching.

## **Analysing the Samples of Teaching**

An analysis can also depend on the objective of the exploration. For example, if you are interested in knowing about the number of questions you ask, you can tally each question you ask, as well as jot down examples of actual questions. You can do the same thing for the number of errors you treat, the number of times students speak English or their native language, and the seconds you wait for students to answer a question.

A second way to analyse the collection of teaching samples is to make short transcripts from the audio- or videotapes. Again, what you decide to transcribe can depend on the focus of your exploration.

## **Interpreting and Reflecting**

After doing an analysis, you can stop to make sense of the descriptions of classroom interaction. To do this, researchers suggest a focus on several questions. One set of questions "How does the interaction in this class provide chances for students to learn the language?" and "How does the interaction possibly block students from learning the language?" Of course, you can narrow the question based on a particular interest. For example, if you are interested in error treatment and have analysed the patterns of interaction around the treatment of students' oral errors, you can ask, "How does my way of treating students language errors possibly provide

chances for the students to be more accurate in their use of English?” Possibly hamper their accuracy?”

You can also ask: “Do I do what I think I do in the classroom?” Gebhard (2006) has found that most teachers are surprised by the answer to this question. It is not until they have had a chance to describe their teaching and think about it that they realize that what they believe they are doing does not always match what they think they are doing.

Other exploration questions include “Are there any issues of ‘self’ I need to address?” and “Am I facing my ‘teaching self’?” There is a wide range of issues that we, as teachers, might not want to face, more than I can possibly write about here. One example is that some teachers avoid certain issues that trigger negative feelings, such as disciplining students or getting personally involved in troubled students’ lives. Another example is the teacher who struggled in facing the realization that not all students appreciate or accept his friendly highly personal way of interacting with them.

Jersild (1955) points out in his book *When Teachers Face Themselves*, to gain in knowledge of ourselves, we need to find the courage to seek it, as well as the humility to accept what we discover. Such an exploration of the self is not easy for some teachers. But, such exploration can be well worth the effort.

## **Deciding on Changes in Teaching Behaviour**

At some point we will want to decide on changes we want to make in our teaching through such questions as: “What do I want to continue to do?” and “What small changes do I want to make in my teaching behaviour?” Here Gebhard agrees with John Fanselow (1987) who has observed that small changes can have big consequences.

One reason to change the way we teach is that there is a problem to be solved: Students don’t talk; instructions aren’t clear; students habitually speak their native language. When we are problem-solving, we can make calculated changes aimed at solving the problem. For example, if some students aren’t talking during whole class discussions, the teacher might try group work to see if these students will talk with classmates. If the teacher discovers that students do not understand instructions when they are given orally, the teacher might write them down.

Problem-solving is the usual way that teachers make decisions about what to change in their teaching. However, as Gebhard has said, it is also possible to explore teaching simply to explore, to see what happens. This could include doing the opposite of what we usually do or trying out something we have never tried before. For example, even if the students understand the oral instructions, it is still possible to write them down and let students read them just to see what happens. If most of our questions are from the text, we can ask questions that are not in the text. There are endless opposite possibilities.

## **Observing Other Teachers**

One of the best things teachers can do to improve their teaching is to look outside their own classrooms.

Observing other teachers is a key part of development; it improves teachers' own self-awareness of their skills and also makes managers more effective in identifying areas for further growth. It is paradoxical that opportunities to observe teachers and classes are presented more often to those who already train teachers, rather than teachers themselves. In many ways, these trainers need to observe less to aid their own development than those who are just starting out as teachers.

At first, the idea that we can explore our own teaching by observing other teachers may seem contradictory. However, as Fanselow (1988) points out, as teachers, we can see our own teaching in the teaching of others. When we observe others to gain knowledge of self, we have the chance to construct and reconstruct our own knowledge. Fanselow articulates this in another way: "I came to your class not only with a magnifying glass to look carefully at what was being done but with a mirror so that I could see that what you were doing is a reflection of much of what I do" (p. 2).

While observing other teachers, it is possible to collect samples of teaching in a variety of ways. We can take fast notes, draw sketches, tally behaviours, and jot down short transcript-like samples of interaction. As with collecting samples in our own classes, it is possible to audio or videotape other teachers' classes and photograph interaction. These can be used later to analyse classroom behaviours.

## **Talking with Other Teachers about Observations**

In addition to observing teaching, talking about the teaching we observe can offer chances to see our teaching differently. Unfortunately, talking about teaching is not something that normally goes on among EFL/ESL teachers, and when it does, it seems to take on a face-saving nature. As Arcario (1994) points out, the way conversations about teaching normally take place, to begin with, the observer giving an opening evaluative remark, such as, "I liked your class." This is followed by a three-step evaluative sequence. In the first step of the sequence a positive or negative evaluation is made, such as "I think the students liked the activity" (positive) or "Maybe the students don't have enough chances to speak" (negative). These comments lead to a second step, justification (explanation of why the comment was made), and then onward to the third step, prescriptions about what should be done in the class to improve teaching, such as, "You should do more group work." Arcario points out that this last prescriptive step is more obvious when a negative evaluation is made because there is a perceived problem to be solved.

This usual way of talking about teaching we observe is not especially productive. It is also not necessarily easy to change. But change can be made, especially if we take the time and effort to prepare for the discussions and follow agreed on rules that aim at the non-judgmental and non-prescriptive discussion. This was evident from an experience in Japan where Gebhard (2006) had the pleasure of working with twelve experienced American, Canadian and Japanese EFL teachers, all of whom taught in different settings (Japanese public and private schools, corporations, and language schools). They planned for and visited some of the teachers' classes in small groups of three or four. After observing, they talked about the class over lunch or coffee. They found both the observations and discussions to be highly stimulating and informative, and part of the reason was their planning. Before each observation, the teacher whose class they were to visit gave them an aspect of teaching on which she or he wanted them to focus attention. For example, one teacher wanted them to focus on the time's students speak their native language, another on the number of time students stayed on task.

They also established rules about how to talk about the teaching they observed. They came to an agreement to stop themselves from making both positive and negative judgments about their own and others' teaching. They also agreed not to seek prescriptions about teaching, in other words, what they should do in the classroom. Rather, they worked at generating alternatives based on descriptions of teaching. They looked for possibilities to try out, not the best ways to teach. The teachers and Gebhard found these two sets of rules to be very powerful. They gained lots of description of teaching and were able to generate lots of alternative ways to do things in the classroom.

