

## A Criticism on Demonstration Lessons in EFL Teacher Training

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The scene is set, the audience waits with bated breath, the minor actors giggle nervously and fidget uneasily, the star performer checks his props and takes a last look at his lines. A scene in a West End theatre? It might as well be, but when we identify the audience as a group of TEFL trainees, the minor actors as foreign student volunteers and the star performer...does anybody out there recognize himself? Is there much difference between the demonstration lesson and a theatrical performance, or is that where the similarity ends?

I have certainly often heard it mentioned that there is more scope for ego-trippers in TEFL than in any other branch of the teaching profession. If this is so, and I suspect it is, *trainers* of TEFL teachers must be in danger of being regarded as *super* ego-trippers! Just as many teachers like to wallow in the satisfaction of *knowing* or *being told* that they have just delivered a cracking good lesson (full of vitality, zest, conjuring, tricks etc.), teacher-trainers delight in the adulation *they* receive from their trainees after a successful demonstration lesson (fireworks display stuff, usually, in which the trainer pulls out all the stops in the hope of giving his protégés something to strive after and aspire to!).

There are several reasons, I believe, why these one-off one-man shows (usually inflicted on a random sample of guinea pigs!) ought to be called into question, and why I now refuse to give demonstration lessons on training courses.

First of all, each teacher is an *individual*. The approach of the demonstrator may be based on very sound methodological principles, but the classroom interpretation of these principles is a matter of individual style and personality. The trainer's style of teaching may or may not be relevant to the differing latent styles of his trainees.

I have heard it argued, too, that a demonstration lesson should not necessarily be outstanding, and that extremely fruitful discussions result from less-than-perfect lessons. But I have yet to meet a teacher-trainer who would feel comfortable about consciously giving less than his best when displaying his talents so publicly. Besides, there are the learners to consider; is it fair to offer them second-best?

The delivery of a demo lesson to a group of trainees is, by implication, a very authoritarian, and almost certainly seminal, statement by a trainer. I have met students who remember lessons I have given long afterwards, a fact which used to flatter me but now worries me. Some profess to have been inspired by them, but I can think of trainees who have reacted differently, including a teacher of many years' experience who left my course in despair after such a demonstration, saying that she could never adapt to teaching *like that* at her stage in life. No amount of cajoling would persuade her that her approach might be equally valid. As far as I know, she is no longer working in TEFL.

As I indicated earlier, the artificiality of a

demonstration lesson is another cause for concern. Not only is the demonstrator likely to be 'on his best behavior', but everything else is unnatural too. The learners are not used to being gazed at by a large group of trainees, the environment is almost always strange (the front of a lecture room or even the stage of a school hall). The demonstrator has almost certainly designed the lesson very carefully to illustrate a particular teaching point, and is sure to have taken more-average care over his preparation. The lesson is almost invariably an isolated event, unrelated to past or future lessons in a course. All this can lead to the dangerous belief that a fireworks display in the trainee's practical exam is the passport to success, and to the jibe that many training courses turn out teachers who are technically outstanding but whose ability to analyze the language they are teaching is suspect. I have all too frequently seen lessons which are 'all technique and no content'.

Another important reason for thinking twice before giving demonstrations is that TEFL seems to be in a state of flux. I learnt how to teach when structuralism held sway and a direct method of teaching, with carefully staged lessons, was seen as the only real way of putting language over in the classroom. No-one doubted the approach; everything was quite straightforward, and I still remember very vividly the impact made by the many demonstrations of this method that I witnessed. These days it would be unfair and misleading to make such a simple statement to trainees. The teacher's role is changing. There are circumstances in which it may be necessary for him to keep a much lower profile than was once expected; there are approaches to language learning, such as Community Language Learning and Whole Language Approach, which demand

a radical re-appraisal of teacher-learner relationships. No scope for ego-tripping there! But the very least we would want to impart to a would-be teacher is that he needs to develop a flexible approach and to be prepared to adapt his role to the needs of his learners. No one has yet come up with a communicative methodology to cope with the most recent developments in syllabus design and language analysis, but if someone does, we can be sure that it will not be teacher-centered. That would be a contradiction in terms. So there is a danger of a demonstration lesson being taken as a statement of orthodoxy and imitated as such; its effects, particularly if given by an itinerant 'star' in front of a group of non-native teachers in an TEFL 'backwater' abroad, may be very far-reaching.

These are all reasons why, despite frequent requests and goadings to 'put my money where my mouth is', I now refuse to offer 'demos' on my courses. Instead I prefer trainees to sit in as regularly as possible, on 'real' classes, given in an identifiable context by experienced teachers. The trainees are given (with the full knowledge of the teachers concerned) guided observation check-sheets which they fill in after the lesson, or after a series of lessons, and are encouraged to discuss what they have seen with the teachers concerned and in their tutorial groups. These lessons, with all their inevitable imperfections in the context of a teacher's busy working week, are far more valuable for the trainee to observe. They help him to place lessons in a broader context, to become more aware of learners' problems and needs, and ultimately to be realistic about the career he is embarking on. He may come to *respect* the teachers he watches over a period; he is unlikely to be dazzled by them or to hero-worship them, as few practicing teachers put on star performances five days a week.

Video reruns of ordinary classes may also provide food for discussion on a training course, provided the context is known and established, though I find the absence of the third dimension very limiting.

Clearly, too, there may be scope on a course for demonstrating *on* trainees, on the principle of learning by doing. Many courses include lessons in an exotic language 'to put trainees back in the learner role'. These have their value, but it would be dangerous to use them as the basis for too many generalizations, as they are seldom more than single events, and the motivation of the trainees to learn, say, Esperanto, must be regarded as suspect! Obviously, too, there are methods, such as Community Language Learning and the Silent Way, which are best *demonstrated*; once again, however, compromise is involved, since the demonstration can, for reasons of time, seldom be *protracted*, and I have had trainees who have written off the Silent Way after a 2-hour demo because they liked neither the demonstrator nor the feeling of discomfiture they experienced in an unfamiliar class situation.

If we genuinely wish to encourage our trainees to subordinate their teaching to learner needs, we have to accept the consequences and practice what we preach on teacher-training courses. Or is the 'sickness to demonstrate' ultimately going to prove as incurable as the 'sickness to teach'?

## REFERENCE

Wright, Tony. Roles of Teachers and Learners. Oxford University Press, 1991.

Allwright, Dick and Bailey, Kathleen. Focus on the Language Classroom: an Introduction to Classroom Research for Language Teachers. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991.

Chaudrom, Craig. Second Language Classroom: Research on Teaching and Learning. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988.

## A TYPICAL CLASSROOM OBSERVATION CHECKSHEET

(Please complete this after the lesson and inform the teacher concerned that you have been asked to do it as a course assignment.)

1. Level of class.....
2. Number of learners .....
3. Length                    of                    lesson  
..... minutes.
4. Make a sketch of the classroom showing
  - (a) the teacher's most usual position
  - (b) the students' seating arrangement
  - (c) the position of the blackboard
5. What do you think was the aim of the lesson? .....
6. Do you consider that the aim was attained?  
Give reasons.....
7. What was the approximate ratio of teacher talking time to student talking time? Express this as a percentage. (e.g. 55-45) .....
8. Did the proportion vary as the lesson progressed? How far was the proportion determined by the type of lesson and the skills being practiced? .....
9. Was there an opportunity for independent use of the language by the learners? .....
10. What was the proportion of native language use to target language use? Express this as a percentage (e.g. 60-40).