

PROMOTING LANGUAGE LEARNING IN SECONDARY ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING: THE PELT PROJECT EXPERIENCE

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1. INTRODUCTION

As articulated in the objectives of this convention, one of its underlying themes is bilingual education. More specifically, the current symposium topic highlights the issue of implementation. This afternoon, my presentation is going to address, indirectly, only one aspect of this issue, that is, English language teaching, and in particular, English language teaching in Philippine secondary schools as viewed largely, but not exclusively, from the experience of the Philippines English Language Teaching (PELT) Project. First, a word about the project.

The PELT Project was a four-year teacher training initiative—from 1995-1999—made possible through the bilateral cooperation agreement between the British and Philippine Governments for the benefit of English teaching in public secondary schools in the Philippines, particularly in seven out of 16 educational regions in the country. It was managed by the British Council, and coordinated by the Ateneo Center for English Language Teaching with consultancy from the Institute for English Language Education at Lancaster University in the UK. Its main aim was to promote learning in the English language classroom. How it carried out this aim is what I am going to share with you in my talk this afternoon.

Having given this little background information on PELT, let me now outline the three major parts of my presentation. First, I will describe the current situation of English language teaching in Philippine secondary schools at the start of PELT. Second, I will discuss PELT's response to some major issues in this situation. My conclusion will articulate some preliminary effects of the Project on the teachers that went through its training program.

Let me now take you through the description of the current situation.

2. THE CURRENT SITUATION

In order to know where to begin to actualize this aim of promoting language learning in the English classroom and where to build from, the Project team did what is called a Baseline Study. This was done through classroom observations, a study of English textbooks and lesson plans, interviews with teachers as well as supervisors and other English Language Teaching managers through all the layers of the Department of Education, Culture and Sports hierarchy, and finally, a study of the documents related to the Secondary Education Development Project, which was the World Bank project that immediately preceded PELT. We felt that any new ideas that we might introduce should add extra value to existing strengths, not contradict nor negate them. From this investigation, we found both strengths and areas for growth which up to now seem to stand out.

First in the line of strengths is the SEDP English curriculum, which has set some direction for the teaching of English, with a more explicit communicative orientation. Second is the SEDP textbook series, which has provided a more tangible way by which this orientation may be actualized. Third is the SEDP mass training of teachers. It has equipped with macro skills teaching strategies those who went through the experience. Fourth is the presence of many enthusiastic and dedicated teachers who carry out their duties despite the drawbacks of crowded and poorly ventilated classrooms. The students, too, are generally well disciplined and docile learners who patiently sit through the lessons and follow all the exercises required of them by the teachers.

In our study, we recognized all these strengths as a good solid foundation for the work that is being done. However, we also realized that these strengths alone were not enough to harness the teaching-learning potential in the classroom. While no one will contest that the teaching of English is supposed to promote the learning of English, in reality the dynamics in the classroom is often much more complex. The key players in there may be operating from different sets of rules. Teachers have a syllabus to finish, a textbook to follow, and a lesson plan to implement. Students, on the other hand, have an exam to pass and a grade to achieve. More often than not, a lot of students, either by force of habit or as an act of faith, are known to simply abide by whatever the teacher has laid out for them in the classroom. In a situation such as this, the concern for learning can easily be relegated to the background or taken for granted or neglected altogether. This can be quite worrying, especially in Philippine secondary schools where the journey in English language teaching seems to have been going from a mainly English as a Second Language situation to the largely uncharted territory of an increasingly mainly English as a Foreign Language situation. Teachers and students alike can no longer rely today on the external linguistic environment to do much of their work for them. There are many more factors that impinge on the teaching-learning process in the classroom over which, most of the time, the teacher has no control.

However, this should not be the end of story, because in the classroom the teacher's rightful sphere of influence is his or her mastery of appropriate teaching methodology. The baseline study of PELT pointed to a number of aspects of classroom methodology in which English classrooms in secondary schools need some room for growth. Let me describe these aspects of the methodology profile. The first has to do with the level of challenge, that is the kind of thinking being done by the learners. This is shown in the way discussions are structured, specifically how reading texts are processed. More often than not, the discussions (or rather, the teacher's questions) tap only the basic level skill of literal

comprehension. This means that discussion is limited only *within the information given*; that is, communication activities allow learners to pick out responses from and stick to ideas provided by the material and/or teacher in the lesson. Or if an attempt is made to evoke critical thinking skills (such as: what is the central idea of the essay?), the students are not given enough preparation to get themselves ready for this question. That is, the questions are not sequenced progressively from those that require literal comprehension to those that require critical thinking.

The second aspect is the degree of learner involvement, that is, how much the students are actively participating in the lessons. This is related to the first in that it has to do with the manner by which information is derived by the students. In a discussion of reading texts, the teacher often switches on the *telling* mode of providing information; that is, the teacher ends up telling the learners information that they ought to look for, etc. For example, one often finds a situation where the teacher tells the grammar rule instead of allowing students to find out for themselves what the rule is.

The third aspect is creativity of grammar work. This means how much work is being used for communication rather than just mechanical repetition and memorization of rules. While sentence diagramming has disappeared, the *presentation/practice* structure has survived. The lesson usually begins with the presentation of rules (e.g. the definitions of the different kinds of sentences according to structure – simple, compound, compound-complex, and complex – and how they are formed). This presentation of rules is followed by sentence-level drills (e.g. change this compound sentence into a complex sentence, or join these two simple sentences to form a compound sentence, etc.). In a writing class, likewise, models of outlining and paragraph organization are presented first, then followed-up with a similar exercise. Through all this, students seem to feel that perhaps there is no end to the repetition of grammar rules and writing patterns. They did this in grade school, they are doing it now in High School, and for those who will go to college, you'll bet they will do the same thing over again. And yet, in general, students still make the same types of language inaccuracies.

The fourth aspect is the use of pair and small group work as a classroom learning format, that is, the ability of the teacher to allow the learners to work more independently and interactively. Class discussion is largely *whole class*. It is propelled by the teacher and ends with the teacher. The teacher asks questions, the students in the big group are expected to volunteer answers which are judged as right or wrong only by the teacher. In most cases, only the intelligent and the brave risk to respond; the insecure and the indifferent (which often comprise 80% of the class) all sink inevitably into oblivion. In other words, the level of student involvement in the classroom is very minimal, if not down to level zero.

These teaching practices were observed by PELT in 1995 and I'm sure that while I was describing these, many of you must have been struck by a haunting familiarity with some, if not all of them, vis-a-vis current experience. These practices reveal to us that the vision of a curriculum and the ideals of a textbook do not necessarily translate to appropriate teaching methodology. Instead, what they tell us, in general, is that teaching English in Philippine secondary schools addresses mostly the learner's basic level of affective and cognitive involvement. As such it provides the security and clarity that is necessary (but not sufficient) for learning. It is necessary that teachers give information to their students, that grammar rules are presented, that students know the details of a reading text. Doing all this will make the students feel secure that they have got the right

information. And our teachers are very skillful in giving the students this type of security. But doing this alone is not enough to help develop the more encompassing skill that our students need, and that is the skill of *learning*. As a result of making sure that information given is correct and uniform, what seems to appear is an undue emphasis on teaching as an end in itself. It is difficult to see how most of it relates to promoting learning, which is supposed to be an embedded goal in the SEDP curriculum.

To this situation, the PELT Project response came in the form of a teacher training program which provided a more learning-centered approach to teaching English – one in which the teaching was less of an end in itself and more of a means of facilitating learning. Let me now discuss the nature and structure of this training program.

3. THE PELT TEACHER TRAINING PROGRAM

The PELT teacher training program had two components. The first was seminar-based and the second was school-based. The seminar, which lasted for two weeks, was designed to be a stepping stone from the SEDP. While the SEDP training concentrated mainly on the teaching of the macro skills, PELT supplemented that training by cutting across teaching skills aimed at maximizing facilitation of learning. The school-based component was intended to help the teacher make the transfer of learning more effectively from the seminar to the school, so that the application of what was learned in the seminar would have a much wider dissemination in the work place on a long term basis.

It must be stressed at this point that while the PELT teacher training program was concerned with helping teachers become effective facilitators of learning among their students, it was equally concerned with facilitating teacher learning. The teacher factor is crucial in the learning process. The PELT Project was of the belief that before teachers can guide learners towards greater autonomy, teachers themselves need to experience this in their own learning. PELT wanted to highlight this issue as preliminary, in fact, to any sensible discussion of effective learner development in the classroom.

How did PELT address this issue in its teacher training program? The approach can be summarized in three steps, much like undertaking a journey. The first step was to try to help the teachers work out where they were starting from; the second was to show them some of the sights that lay ahead in the direction of the general potential destination; and the third was to help them along the road. This last step was dependent on their interest and/or feelings about their ability to make the journey towards these presented sights.

In practical terms this was done in the PELT training seminars by first of all raising teachers' awareness about the main focus of current practice as I already described earlier. After raising teachers' awareness about the current practice, they were then shown how these behaviors could be refined and developed by the *addition* of practices such as the following:

- ☞ Giving exercises that challenge the learners' inferential and evaluative abilities, e.g. asking the students to consider further implications of information.
- ☞ Structuring a lesson more cohesively towards a meaningful task (a problem to solve) which challenges the learners to decide on the appropriate linguistic tool and content knowledge required to fulfill this task; or also arranging the activities in gradual progression of complexity, each one leading to another – all in view of preparing the

learner to carry out the culminating task as successfully as possible.

- ☞ Doing discussions in small groups, where appropriate, to challenge learners to express themselves and work out a problem through collaborative effort; to help them build confidence in sharing what they know and asking help for what they don't; finally, challenging learners to make decisions and take responsibility for these.
- ☞ In a grammar class, students go beyond sentence-level practice through producing a communicative task that is meaningful, and where learners use in context the appropriate grammar called for. Through meaningful practice and communication tasks, learners discover rules of grammar or reflect on processes of arriving at solutions to problems.

After having gone through these two steps via workshops and feedback-giving on outputs, the teachers were finally given the opportunity to choose one of the areas to investigate further back in their teaching at the schools. They were supported in this by a follow-up action plan, devised in collaboration with the trainers during the seminar and executed afterwards with the support of the school ELT management. This action plan acted as their personal "route map" for the journey ahead, with the trainers and ELT managers assisting, to extend the metaphor, as "tour guides."

Clearly, the statement PELT wanted to make in all this was that, for an educational change process in the classroom to occur, a change process in the teacher has first to take place. The teaching-learning gap in the classroom can be bridged if the teacher is willing to be a learner again. That is why, in the PELT teacher training model, the seminar is considered simply as the trigger to teacher learning. For true learning to occur, it has to be sustained through guided reflection on actual classroom experience as a spin-off from what has been learned in the seminar. We recognize, of course, that since the classroom is a part of a bigger educational context, a chain of compatible and synchronized changes needs to occur ultimately in the other areas of the entire system in order to support and sustain the change that we want to happen in the classroom.

4. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

To summarize the discussion so far in this presentation, there are two points I want to make. First, English language teaching in Philippine secondary schools needs to be more consciously veered away from its tendency to make teaching an end in itself, forgetting that it is just a means to facilitating learning. As Kahlil Gibran's *The Prophet* puts it:

The astronomer may speak to you of his understanding of space, but he cannot give you his understanding.

The musician may sing to you of the rhythm which is in all space, but he cannot give you the ear which arrests the rhythm nor the voice that echoes it.

Second, the teacher factor is crucial to this goal of facilitating learning. To continue the quotes from Gibran:

If he [the teacher] is indeed wise he does not bid you enter the house of his wisdom, but rather leads you to the threshold of your mind.

That's what it means to facilitate learning. But in order to make this happen, teachers themselves must experience autonomy in their own learning. One way of promoting this is through process-oriented training programs that challenge teachers to become aware of their current practice, learn how to build on its strengths, and discover ways of improving their weaknesses on an incremental, on-going basis. This was what the PELT Project attempted to do.

I would like to end this presentation by posing and answering a classic question which anyone may well ask at the end of a project: what good has PELT brought to the teaching of English in the country? It seems too early to evaluate thoroughly the gains from the Project. But informal feedback from teacher trainees has been positive, mainly stressing how the training has made them become more reflective of their own practice, and how it has made them understand better the relationship between the theory and the practice of language teaching. During the lifetime of the Project, we monitored closely the developments in the field. Through our monitoring workshops with teachers as well as observation of actual classroom teaching, we discovered that there was a general increase in overall teaching competence among those that had trained in the Project. Reports from our surveys also showed that teachers had developed higher professional self-esteem as well as greater structure and self-direction. It was the hope of PELT that these positive developments would significantly affect the enhancement of the learners' communicative competence in English. This is the same hope that the Ateneo Center for English Language Teaching lives by as we continue to sustain the gains from PELT and apply its principles and practice through our teacher training programs for Philippine ELT.

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