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ESL Techniques for Peace

- The premise of this paper is that learner-centered classrooms characterized by cooperative learning, affective-humanistic activities, cross-cultural instruction, and Freire's problem-posing method promote successful language learning because they create peaceful oases in which people learn easily. They are microcosms of a just world order based on the global values of positive interdependence, social justice, and participation in decision-making processes. The paper discusses threats to the peaceful classroom—misunderstanding, prejudice, and destructive conflicts—and how they can be avoided or resolved. It concludes with a list of resources teachers can consult if they wish to create peaceful ESL classrooms.

We don't always get the chance to see the influence that indefatigable behind-the-scenes peacemakers have on world events, but we do often see the power of peacebuilding as we go about our teaching duties in the language classroom. As practical ESL teachers, we may not recognize that the classroom situation we create is peaceful, but many of the techniques we find effective with our students work so well precisely because they create a classroom atmosphere free of tension, competition, and conflict—which leads to greater language learning. Learner-centered, cooperative ESL classrooms can be, in fact, microcosms of a just world order. In this paper, I will detail how teachers can use these and other proven methods to foster an ESL classroom based on positive interdependence, respect for diversity and human dignity, social justice, and participation.

Positive Interdependence

Positive interdependence means that individuals (be they people, towns, states, or countries) deal with each other out of a sense of security and strength which they have gained through self-sufficiency, autonomy, shared knowledge, and shared responsibility. In the ESL classroom positive interdependence translates into a relationship between teacher and students and among the students themselves in which individuals:

- (a) are self-sufficient, autonomous, and equal;
- (b) can trust each other to fulfill obligations; and
- (c) realize that more can be achieved by working together than by other means.

I try to achieve these goals in three ways: by modeling a flexible and nonauthoritarian attitude, by encouraging student autonomy, and by using careful cooperative learning.

Most ESL teachers are flexible and nonauthoritarian; it is no accident that our field attracts these individuals. Only flexible and nonauthoritarian teachers can move away from center stage in the classroom so that learner-initiated activities may spring up. Only flexible and nonauthoritarian teachers can establish reasonable standards for their students and then step away from judgments so that they can assume the role of encourager and work with the students to set and achieve goals.

However, students must be personally self-sufficient and able to work independently to achieve a truly positive interdependence, so the teacher should include well-planned cooperative work along with individual and competitive work. The teacher's role is to set up the cooperative work so that each student can work from a sense of strength and independence, building self-esteem and confidence. Groups must be chosen carefully, activities must be done in small clearly described steps, and both groups and work must be monitored often. Cooperative learning is excellent for both lower and higher achiever, but if one or two students in a group do all the work and other students do nothing, everyone can end up feeling used and abused. Nothing is more destructive of positive interdependence. Many students have to learn to work cooperatively. To help them teachers should:

1. Explain carefully that both attendance and participation are heavily weighted in grading. Explain that individual grades, sometimes along with a group grade, will be given.
2. Begin with smaller projects. More ambitious work is reserved for when students are accustomed to working together.

3. Make sure group members know exactly what their responsibilities are at each point in the project. They should feel some pressure to fulfill their obligations, and they should be held accountable for completing the work.

4. Monitor progress carefully and ask for frequent feedback from group members. In debriefing, ask them to evaluate the experience or to assign grades to their own and their group members' work. Draw generalizations from each project which can enhance learning in the next one.

5. Allow enough time for everyone to complete the work.

6. If there are persistent slackers, speak with them individually about their effort. Do a cooperative project in pairs and place the slackers together.

7. Choose projects that the students will value, enjoy, or at least see some need for.

Respect for Diversity and Human Dignity

One cornerstone for a just world order is that true security for individuals, communities, and nations is based on a respect for diversity and human dignity. ESL teachers can encourage respect in the classroom by means of affective, humanistic, and cross-cultural activities, which, if properly handled, can lead students to self-knowledge, a concern for others, and ethnic pride. When chosen carefully, they can also increase the students' sense of *species identity*, the sense that for all our diversity we ultimately claim membership in the race of humans (Boulding, 1988).

When doing affective/humanistic activities, it is crucial to affirm not only the students as individuals, but also cooperative groups and the class as a social unit. Furthermore, students need a careful introduction to the idea of sharing, a focus on positive feelings and ideas without denying the negative, an emphasis placed on similarities rather than differences, and a tolerance for those who do not want to participate for personal or cultural reasons. Teachers must offer those who decline to take part an alternative which is acceptable to them. Future lessons should be structured so as to attract reluctant students, perhaps by having them share less personally threatening or revealing information.

These techniques will not lead inevitably to acceptance or liking; that is why the peaceful classroom is predicated instead on respect for the dignity of others. Teachers should hesitate a long time before trying to openly persuade their students to change a differing view. Although teachers may share their own opinions, they should model for their students sensitivity and openness to new ideas. For instance, one ESL reading teacher was quite taken aback by a Muslim student's insistence on creationism and denial of evolution. The teacher was about to argue with the student, but

instead she bit her tongue and merely pointed out that, given his opinion, his interpretation of the reading selection would differ from the other students'. Some may argue that this teacher missed an opportunity to educate her student about science and evolution, but I believe that a peaceful classroom must tolerate many differing beliefs in the interest of personal security and dignity. This teacher gained more by tolerating the student's opinion than she would have by trying in vain to convince him to see his "error."

In cross-cultural learning, it is not enough to expose students to different individual or cultural priorities through values clarification experiences and decontextualized lessons about different holidays, foods, or customs. Rather, a second thrust of cross-cultural learning involves leading class members to the awareness that we are all global citizens with similar needs, problems, and joys. For example, a discussion about a particular ethnic art form in my class led to an exploration of the common human need to create beautiful things. A lesson about the Mexican day of independence turned into an exploration of a universal drive for self-governance. Cross-cultural activities must not only promote understanding of cultural contrasts and different values, but take the classroom community to a deeper realization of our common human condition and connections.

Here is an example from another class, composed of beginning grammar students at a university, Hispanic students for the most part, and four Muslim women from different countries. Students were engrossed in discussing the topic of the day, coeducational versus single-sex schools, when the conversation shifted to a related topic: Love marriages versus arranged marriages. The Hispanic students lined up on the side of love. The Muslim women were in favor of arranged marriages, citing the stability of unions which did not depend on physical attraction and pointing out that affection often grew between the husband and wife. Suddenly one of the Muslim women pointed to the teacher and said, "Look at our teacher. She works very hard. She teaches classes, studies in graduate school, and takes care of two small children by herself. No one takes care of her. She is alone against the world. Me, my father took care of me and now my husband. I have no worries. I have time to do what I want."

The teacher felt an emotional surge and saw that simplistic Western-chauvinistic value judgments were inadequate. The Hispanic students got a new perspective as well—that some social institutions we condemn may actually bring some benefits to a society and that freedom may be in the eye of the beholder.

Participation and Social Justice

If our goal is positive interdependence and respect for human dignity, then it follows that both individuals and societies must work towards participation in decision making, social equality, and justice. A classroom in which authority is distributed is peaceful; the cooperative, learner-centered classroom allows distribution of authority. Another area in which freedom of participation can be explored in the ESL classroom is decision making by consensus. In building a consensus, all class members bring their thoughts and preferences to a discussion with the objective of arriving at a resolution which everyone can agree to. Arriving at a consensus is not as fast as voting, but it tends to have a more peaceful and long-lasting result because the participants have been heard out and the decision approved by everyone. If our students are using their target language to brainstorm possibilities and evaluate alternatives, then consensus building becomes a meaningful practice of the language. However, teachers must be willing to accept the diverse solutions which may be negotiated by the students.

Problem-posing techniques which emphasize critical thinking and social activism challenge students to want to work for justice and participation for themselves and their society. This is exactly what occurred in an intermediate class of undergraduates at a large midwestern university where there were 15 Arab, Puerto Rican, Spanish, Korean, and Japanese students.

The reading textbook contained Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" sermon, which the students read and discussed. The teacher played a tape of the speech during listening practice and a discussion of racism in the U.S. sprang from that. Because of the students' interest, the teacher arranged to show the film *A Soldier's Story* which provided an historical context for the current situation in the U.S. The teacher wanted to drop the subject at this point and go on with the syllabus, but she got a note from one of the Japanese girls. The note said, "I wish we could stop talking about discrimination because I am embarrassed. In my country Koreans are discriminated against and now that I have some Korean friends in the class, it is too painful to discuss this topic. When I lived in Japan I did not consider this policy of my government, but now I see that it is bad." The teacher decided to have one more discussion in class on the topic of societal and individual guilt, from which two main ideas emerged. First, the students realized that every student could point out some form of discrimination which took place in his or her region. Second, the students decided that individuals were not guilty for past injustices, but they were at least partly responsible in their own small way for continuing injustice committed by their society or government.

The students were still not ready to leave this topic; they demanded to have a debate. The topic they decided to discuss was "Resolved: Homosexuals should be prohibited from holding certain jobs where they serve as role models for children." After some preparation, a debate ensued in which it became clear to most students that this form of job discrimination was not correct. Those students who continued to support the resolution were in fact more open-minded at the end because their opinions had been given respectful audience.

Finally, the students were willing to leave the topic of discrimination, but all the classroom participants, teacher included, had been changed by the experience. They viewed their own countries and societies as well as each other with fresh eyes. They had discussed their opinions freely but accorded respect to those who disagreed. And it is obvious that they had also learned a lot of English in the process.

Challenges to the Peaceful Classroom

Just as a peaceful world order is not something which can be achieved once and for all, a peaceful classroom is not something which teachers can create and then sit back complacently and observe. Peaceful classrooms, like a just world order, will require constant preparation and vigilance because there will always be external and internal threats to peace. One type of interference to peace in the classroom may come from outside: from the school administration, parents, or community who may misunderstand or distrust new teaching methods. School administrators may distrust classrooms which are learner centered because it seems like the class may get out of control. They, along with parents and even students, may misunderstand cooperative learning and prefer more traditional competitive learning. They may look more at high scores on competitive exams as a mark of a good school. Cross-cultural and humanistic activities have come under attack because they are felt to be unpatriotic or antireligious. These challenges cannot be ignored or dismissed lightly; they must be addressed in a serious and respectful way.

Teachers who are convinced that peaceful learning benefits the students personally and academically can work together to achieve their own professional freedom through local TESOL affiliates or national groups like Educators for Social Responsibility. They can try to convince school officials, parents, and reluctant students that their methods are just as effective, or more so, than traditional methods and that they are based on current educational theories and philosophy. They need to inform the public that the goal of cross-cultural learning is not to make everyone the same, but rather to encourage a respect for differences within a single community,

and that humanistic techniques in the classroom are not contrary to religious beliefs.

Another threat to peace in the classroom may occur because the school administrators and the community have a prejudice against the ethnic or racial group of the students in our classrooms. Similarly, when students have learned to dislike a certain ethnic or social group, the negative attitude directly conflicts with the respectful attitude fostered in class. Teachers should encourage critical thinking and help pupils make up their own minds based on their classroom experiences. At the same time teachers should stress that polite and respectful behavior is necessary inside the classroom, on the school grounds, and in the community. Most importantly, teachers should be prepared to deal proactively with any type of conflict by teaching conflict resolution skills.

Almost 20 years ago, in Madrid, Spain a fistfight erupted in my class between a Basque student and a Franco supporter over a seemingly uncontroversial historical point. The other classmates acted quickly to bring the situation under control by grabbing both students and separating them. The two students ignored each other after that, but their antipathy created a tensely charged classroom atmosphere which interfered with learning and only gradually dissipated. There are two morals to be learned from this. First, we cannot expect external political and ethnic conflicts to vanish magically within the walls of the peaceful classroom; we can only hope to have a small positive effect on a few individual class members. Second, in order to have a positive effect on class members, we must be prepared to teach peacemaking skills openly to engage the students in the maintenance of a peaceful classroom.

In creative conflict resolution, classmates confront their disagreements and work towards a solution together. Conflict in the classroom does not need to be negative; students can learn to turn conflict into something positive if they can master a few techniques:

1. Say clearly what the problem is in the form of an I statement: "I got angry when you said that my opinion was unscientific."
2. Do not insult, judge, or threaten. Do not call anyone a name.
3. Listen actively to the other person. While listening, do not think about how to answer. Reflect the feelings of the other: "It seems like you are really disappointed that you weren't picked to be on that team."
4. Use problem-solving techniques: Define the problem; state views; brainstorm possible solutions; evaluate solutions; select one or all of the solutions to try; leave an opening for further discussion.

Students of all ages enjoy role playing negative conflicts (anger, name calling, blaming, etc.) and then positive conflicts (I-statements, active listening, problem solving, etc.).

Peacemaking: From Theory to Practice

ESL teachers have a very real opportunity to build and maintain a peaceful classroom by encouraging positive interdependence through learner-centered and cooperative activities, by promoting respect for human dignity and diversity (while emphasizing species identity) through affective, humanistic and cross-cultural activities, by educating for social justice and participation through student autonomy and Freire's problem-posing approach, and by learning conflict resolution techniques and teaching them to students so that they increase their ability to approach conflicts positively and learn from them.

The books and articles listed in the bibliography are just a few of many excellent sources for teachers willing to try building a just world order in their ESL classrooms. ■

Barbara Birch is an assistant professor of linguistics whose main interests are ESL, child language acquisition, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, and peace education. She has taught ESL in Wisconsin and Connecticut and EFL in Spain, Ecuador, and Pakistan.

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