

Understanding Learning to Improve (English) Teaching

Good afternoon ladies and gentleman, guests, colleagues. It is truly my great honor and privilege to be here speaking to you today and I thank you for giving me this wonderful opportunity. Especially, I would like to thank the organizers of this event for the wonderful job they have done in bringing us all together here today. Congratulations!

Today I will talk to you about five methods that you can use to enhance your teaching in the English classroom. I use the word 'enhance' rather than 'improve', because I do not want to imply that your teaching is in need of improvement.

The title of my presentation is, "Understanding Learning to Improve (English) Teaching." You will notice that the word *English* is surrounded by parentheses, this was deliberate. The reason being that I believe that the elements I will discuss with you today can be applied to the teaching of any subject, not just the English language. Today's discussion will focus how these factors can be applied in English language classes in Korean schools, but do not limit yourself to only using these elements in your English classes. I challenge you to expand the scope of these five elements to be included in all the lessons and classes you teach.

For each of the five elements to be discussed today, I will first define the term, second, explain the principles behind the concept, third, offer suggested operational activities, and fourth, conclude with a brief review.

In order of presentation, the five elements to be discussed today are: *social presence, interaction, cognitive strategies, collaborative learning, and learner-centered instruction*. Finally, I will close my presentation with a summary and conclusion of what we have discussed today.

I. Social Presence

Definition – What is it?

Social presence is a very dynamic quality and will differ depending on the choice of materials, the activities used to engage learners, and depending on the very learners themselves. For the purpose of this discussion, social presence will be defined as: “The dynamic sense of community characterized by the occurrence of familiarity and closeness between participants in a system.” In the case of an English class in a Korean school, the system’s participants are likely to include just two groups: the instructor and the students. To obtain effective social presence in the classroom, all participants in the system must share in the responsibility of creating social presence. Having said this however, the role of the instructor is more demanding than that of other participants and carries with it higher levels of responsibility for establishing and maintaining the

discourse that creates and sustains social presence (Rourke, et. al., 2001). The key words to remember here are *establishing* and *maintaining*. The instructor must play the role of facilitator in helping to achieve and then preserve social presence, but never dominate the system.

Principles – Why is it important?

Now that we have established a working definition for social presence, we must ask ourselves, “What is the importance of social presence?” If we consider that social interaction is a basic human need and a contributing factor to successful learning outcomes, then the importance of social presence in the classroom becomes quite clear. To ensure effective learning, students must be made to feel as though they ‘belong’ in the classroom. Further, social presence is essential because it has been proven that without this feeling of ‘belonging’ in the classroom, students are reluctant to take the necessary risks involved with learning. In their 2002 paper, Kreijns et. al. point out that students need to feel a sense of community before they are willing to open up and express ideas, evaluate peers, and put themselves at risk of being evaluated by their peers. Lastly, as social presence sets the stage for greater interaction among students, it also is related to greater course satisfaction for both students *and* instructors. (Picciano, 2002)

Operational Activities – How can I do that?

There are many ways that social presence can be incorporated into English classes in Korea. One very effective way is to make students aware of the importance of social presence. To do this, include a discussion and/or reading on the importance of community building in learning (Brown, 2001). If you want to really build social presence in your classroom, you must first teach the concept to your students. Other effective methods to create social presence in the classroom include creating areas in the classroom for students to post pictures and biographies of themselves (and of the instructor), choosing activities that are purely social as opposed to purely academic (allow students to use English in a setting that is familiar and comfortable), and having students create and present weekly reflections on what and how they have contributed to the community.

Review:

Social presence is the sense of togetherness created in the classroom by both the instructor and the students. Social presence can help to achieve better results in the classroom because it makes everyone feel more comfortable. If students feel more comfortable in the classroom then they are more likely to achieve lesson objectives and be active learners (take chances). Teachers can facilitate social presence in many ways, including making students aware of social presence, creating spaces for students to express themselves in English, choosing activities

that encourage English conversation in non-threatening environments and situations, and by having students reflect on exactly what they have done to contribute to the group.

II. Interaction

Definition – What is it?

While the term social presence is somewhat abstract, the term interaction is to some extent more concrete. For this discussion, interaction will be defined as, “The mechanical, intellectual, and social tasks that students undertake to incorporate new content with prior knowledge.” Mechanical tasks refer to physical processes, intellectual tasks refer to mental processes, and social tasks refer to four separate interactions: learner-to-media (how learners react to the method of instruction), learner-to-content (appropriateness of the course material considering the objectives and the learners), learner-to-instructor (types of communication, feedback, access, support, etc.), and learner-to-learner (communication, feedback, support, and dialogue between students).

Principles – Why is it important?

While there are various types of interaction as outlined by the definition, for this discussion, the most important point to consider is social interaction, specifically learner-to-learner and learner-to-instructor interaction. Since social interaction is a fundamental means of knowledge building and enriches the learning

community (Ragen, 1995) interaction is, in itself, another effective way to increase social presence. Another important point to consider is that high levels of interaction are associated with quality learning experiences (Curtis and Lawson, 2001). Increase the amount of interaction in the classroom and you are virtually guaranteed to increase the quality of the learning experience. Considering these two points, it is easy to see that the classroom environment must be an interactive environment, and not one that is dominated by the instructor leaving the learners to be passive spectators in the lesson.

Operational Activities – How can I do that?

To increase the amount of interaction within your classroom, it is important to include collaborative learning tasks as part of student evaluation and assessment. Make being interactive a required part of earning a grade in the class. In addition, clearly expressing your expectations regarding student participation at the beginning of the course is a very simple, yet very effective, way of ensuring greater interaction. Lastly, be prepared to act as a facilitator and a guide rather than the source of knowledge in class discussions. Students cannot interact if they are not given the chance!

Review:

Interaction is the way in which students incorporate new information into their existing knowledge. While interaction involves several different processes, our discussion today has focused on social interaction, specifically learner-to-learner

and learner-to-instructor interaction. Increasing interaction has been shown to increase the quality of learning in the classroom. Instructors can increase interaction in the classroom by assigning a portion of the students' final grade to participation, by letting students know that you expect them to participate and that a portion of their grade will be determined by their participation, and by acting as a facilitator, not a dictator, in discussions and activities.

III. COGNITIVE STRATEGIES

Definition – What is it?

Cognitive strategies are the techniques that students consistently utilize to learn new material. While it is relatively easy to find a definition for the term, to actually discover the cognitive strategies of your students can be a much more daunting task, but at the same time, a much more important task. In defining the term, it is important to remember that cognitive strategies are not limited to mental processes. Cognitive strategies for learning involve attention to affective, psychomotor, *and* mental processes.

Principles – Why is it important?

While the previous two concepts of social presence and interaction focus on the role of the student in the classroom environment, cognitive strategies focus specifically on each student's role in his or her own learning. Knowing how a student learns allows the instructor to create a learning environment that will

meet a wider range of students' needs. In other words, to build an effective classroom environment, you must first know how each student will learn *within* the environment you create. The challenge is to find the environment that will be best suited to meet the needs of the majority, if not all, of the learners in the class. Along the same line, insight into cognitive strategies can help instructors to select appropriate material and tools to help make learning more efficient. This selection process is based on the cognitive strategies of the learners and will influence the learning environment. Lastly, it is important to know the cognitive strategies of individual learners because making novice students aware of how experienced students learn can help the novice student to devise better learning strategies.

Operational Activities – How can I do that?

One of the best ways to incorporate the awareness of cognitive strategies in the classroom is to provide students with information related to cognitive strategies. Students will not be able to evaluate their own strategies if they are not even aware of the concept. In addition, consider all components (affective, cognitive, and psychomotor) of learning when you devise your teaching strategies. Lastly, ensure that your lessons include a motivational set. Motivational factors, while not being a cognitive strategy themselves, have an important bearing on learning and have a direct effect on the effectiveness of the implementation of cognitive strategies.

Review:

Cognitive strategies are the methods used by students to learn new material. It is important to be aware of students' cognitive strategies, because by being aware you will be able to create a learning environment that caters to the needs of a wider range of students. Ways to become more aware of students' cognitive strategies include pointing students to information related to cognitive strategies, taking into account all aspects of cognitive strategies, and providing adequate motivation to students.

IV. COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

Definition – What is it?

As with the other critical elements discussed today, there are many variations in the terminology of collaborative learning. Some researchers use the term 'collaborative' to describe any situation involving group-based activities. Others distinguish 'collaborative' activities (working together to achieve a common goal or output) from 'cooperative' activities (working together to achieve individual goals). For the purpose of today's discussion, I will define collaborative learning as, "learning activities that involve students communicating, cooperating, and collaborating with others in the production of personal and group knowledge." Collaborative learning is not just having students sitting together in groups learning about an assigned topic. Instead,

collaborative learning is having students actually *working* together, and building knowledge for themselves and for the group.

Principles – Why is it important?

Lessons that employ collaborative learning techniques facilitate learning by encouraging students to reflect and by enabling the social construction of knowledge. In order to ‘digest’ new information, learners need to construct their knowledge by acting on it, reformulating it, making their own personal interpretation of it, sharing it with others, and then building on these ideas and concepts through the reactions and responses of their peers. Collaborative learning allows learners to bring additional knowledge and skills that are not available through instructor-provided activities. A classroom full of students is perhaps the greatest resource available to an instructor; do not be hesitant to use the students as resources in their own learning. Lastly, while it does not apply to all classrooms, collaborative learning can provide an authentic environment for the development of workplace skills. Many workplaces require skills in working collaboratively with others.

Operational Activities – How can I do that?

To take full advantage of collaborative learning, instructors need to establish an environment that promotes collaboration and also provide students with background knowledge about its use. As with any of the critical elements discussed today, they will work best if students are introduced briefly to the

concepts. In trying to establish the proper environment, instructors must use a wide range of collaborative activities, while considering issues such as social presence, group sizes, and the timing of planned interaction activities. Lastly, keeping an anecdotal account of students' participation in activities and discussions as the basis for further activities is another way to utilize collaborative learning in the classroom.

Review:

Collaborative learning involves groups of students actively participating together to construct common personal and group knowledge. The importance of this type of learning is that it helps students to reflect on what they have learned, and by doing so, it helps students to better internalize what they have learned. Collaborative learning also allows students to 'personalize' their experience in the classroom by bringing supplementary information and abilities to the lesson that would not normally come from traditional instruction techniques. Instructors who would like to use collaborative learning in the classroom must inform students of the methods and benefits of collaborative learning. In addition, instructors must plan collaborative lessons paying specific attention to factors such as social presence, group size, and interaction timing. Lastly, instructors can keep a record of a student's participation in activities and discussions and then incorporate that record into future lessons and activities.

V. LEARNER-CENTERED INSTRUCTION

Definition – What is it?

In its broadest sense, learner-centered instruction might be equated with learner-managed learning which has been defined as, “any learning situation in which the learner exercises considerable control over key aspects of learning, including: what it is for; what it contains; how it is learnt; how progress is monitored; or how achievement is reported. However, for today’s discussion, learner-centered instruction will be defined as, “instruction that places the emphasis on the learner and the learning process as opposed to on the teacher and on the teaching process.”

Principles – Why is it important?

Since it has been widely accepted that because learners must ‘construct’ their own knowledge base by building on their existing knowledge and skills, more effective learning will result from instruction that focuses on the learner and encourages their active and reflective participation in the learning process. With this fact in mind, the importance of learner-centered instruction cannot be overlooked. Planning lessons that divert focus from the instructor and place focus on the students is a great way to give students more autonomy in their academic development. Students will not be coddled in the real world, why then should they be pampered in the classroom? Plan lessons that make students

responsible for their own learning and they will benefit much more than from being 'spoon fed' facts, figures, and rules!

Operational Activities – How can I do that?

Learner-centered instruction is not as simple as telling to students to 'get to it'. Learner-centered instruction takes much consideration and careful planning on the part of the instructor. Specifically, lessons that hope to take advantage of the benefits afforded by learner-centered instruction must be constructed with attention paid to all the factors that influence learning (these factors include the five elements discussed today, as well as many others [<http://www.apa.org/ed/lcp.html>]). Other techniques that will positively effect learner-centered instruction include:

- Defining explicitly the learning goals
- Providing meaningful interactions, with special attention paid to social presence
- Using media and content that are appropriate to the needs of the learner and the learning process
- Using assessment and evaluation schemes that are compatible with the objectives
- Providing feedback to the learners and providing opportunities for the learners to provide feedback to the instructor
- Ensuring effective support is available so that students do not feel abandoned

Review:

Learner-centered instruction focuses on the role of the learner, as opposed to the role of the instructor, in the learning process. Students can benefit from learner-centered instruction in that they are more active in the learning process; students themselves are responsible for their learning (as well as accountable for what they did not learn). Learner-centered instruction teaches students the ever-so-important life lesson of responsibility. Teachers can employ learner-centered instruction in their classes by paying special attention to the factors that influence learning (as discussed today) and by providing clear and explicit goals to the students, allowing for meaningful interaction between students, and by using appropriate materials, content, evaluation schema, and feedback.

VI. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Today I have told you about five elements of the learning process that you can incorporate into your English classes. As I mentioned in my introduction, do not limit yourself by only using these concepts in English classes. These concepts can be applied to all areas of teaching.

Throughout today's presentation, you have probably noticed how many times I used the words, 'community', 'facilitate (or facilitator)', and 'personalize'. The reason that I have used these words so often is that I strongly believe that these are areas which must be carefully considered in order to ensure effective teaching and effective learning.

I encourage you to build a community in your classroom. Do your utmost to make your students feel warm, welcome, and wanted. Do not forget to do the same for yourself. Open up to your students and they will do the same to you in return. The free exchange of thoughts and ideas is a fundamental part of learning and the English classroom in Korea should be no exception.

Facilitate English learning in the classroom by acting as a guide rather than a boss. Be prepared to relinquish some of the control in the classroom and *together* with your students arrive at your destination – that destination being the attainment of lesson objectives. Give your students chances to use what you have taught them. Give your students chances to use what they may have learned from outside sources. Give your students chances to make mistakes. Give your students chances to have a say in their academic development. While I am not advocating that students be given complete control over what happens in the classroom, I am suggesting that through careful planning and consideration that you do give students more opportunities to actively (as opposed to passively) participate in the both the processes of learning *and* teaching. Students are capable of both! Let them try!

Finally, personalize the learning experience for your students. Find out what interests them and teach towards that. Evaluate your materials and references to make sure that they are congruent with what modern students expect and indeed

need in order to learn. On a personal note, I've been in Korea for nearly five years. In that time, I have seen an astronomical amount of change in Korea. I am talking about physical changes (landscape, infrastructure, technology etc.) as well as mental changes (attitudes, outlooks, philosophies). I cannot even begin to imagine the amount of change that those of you who have been in the teaching profession for so long must have been witness to! I think that it is important for you to be aware of that change, and use it in your teaching. I am speaking specifically of technological change. Can you use the Internet in the classroom? Of course. Can you use CD-ROMS and electronic books in the classroom? Of course. Can you use students' cellular phones as instructional aids? Of course. Email? PCs? Multimedia? Yes, yes, and yes. Use these changes in technology to personalize your lessons, your teaching styles, your classroom and even yourself in order to better meet the needs of your students.

In closing, I am reminded of what one of my educational psychology professors told me when I was a student in university – REACH EACH YOU TEACH.

Today I hope that I have sent the same message to you and I also hope that I have provided you with some tools to help you do so.

Thank you very much!감사합니다!