

A Novice Teacher's Experience of Practicing Eclecticism in a Foreign Adult Classroom

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ABSTRACT

This article intends to highlight some of the experiences that an International novice English teacher had in the classroom of some pre-degree students of Malaysia, who were in their twenties. As a student of education, the author has some theoretical background in the field of teaching, with which he realized that an eclectic teacher is the one whom a classroom always needs; not a lesson plan-bounded teacher especially for adults, provided that he or she has an active and creative mind, not only inside, but also outside the four walls. The paper introduces some new approaches that the author practiced for a two-month Intensive English course for Malay students, whose local language is unfamiliar to the former. Among these approaches were some new dimensions of self-disclosing approach, free talking approach, labeling approach, behavior diversion approach, translation approach, and teacher-student conversion approach. Being cognizant of both positive and negative consequences of eclecticism, this study would analyze some of the pros and cons, underpinned by an experience-based understanding. The research design used in this paper is basically observational method after which a narrative analysis method is exercised. The article concludes with some of the implications for the pre-degree students as well as early University students arguing that eclecticism should be valued not only for schools but also for post-school periods.

Keywords: *Eclecticism, self-disclosure approach, free talking approach, labeling approach, behavior diversion approaches, translation approach, teacher-student conversion approach.*

INTRODUCTION

Recent trends in teaching have seen significant updates on creative teaching methods in various disciplines (Kochhar, 2008). To be creative, sometimes, means to be competitive in nature and being so in teaching is not something different. Most prominent educational institutions including primary schools and highly reputed universities excel because of, first of all, their concern about creative and practical ways of disseminating knowledge to their 'customers'. In other words, creativity is a movement stemming from an active mindset towards different audiences, directly or indirectly. Referring to the act of creative teaching, it is an active participation of both teacher and student in the process of the movement. In current years of research, the nature and impact of creativity in teaching has been the focal point in a variety of subjects. Ministries of Education in many countries have come up with policies emphasizing the importance of creativity in the curriculum of each subject. For instance, a recent report from the UK contended that the economic prosperity and social cohesion of Britain stand upon establishing a strategy for a type of education which is creative and culture-oriented (Dörnyei, 2010).

Creative teaching needs a wide range of different skills according to the context. In an immediate classroom setting, the teacher is rigorously tested and judged if he or she is able to "rise to the

occasion". Nowadays the question, "what will you do if..." has been a cliché to many of us and we still continue to ask the same question mainly to the novice teachers. The present researcher is sure that many of the readers of this paper have faced this question from the recruiting authority. The reason is simple; creativity inclines with a long journey of experiments. It is the utilization of imaginative approaches to make learning more attractive and enjoyable (Jeffrey & Craft, 2014) and the administrative body of the institutions, of which we are going to be the would be contributors, are in a sense aware of creativity. Before moving to one of the imaginative approaches practiced by the present author, it seems reasonable to have a review on creativity in teaching languages.

CREATIVITY IN TEACHING LANGUAGE

The following is an example of language teaching classroom presented by Cameron (2006) in his paper titled "Creativity in the Language Classroom". Contending on the creative use of languages, he proposes the idea of 'saying what you mean as a beginner in a foreign language'. From many of examples cited in his paper, the first one was from data collected in a class of 8 year old beginners in Japan by Ohashi (2005). The teacher, in his English classroom, is introducing a singing activity and pupil P1 uses Japanese to comment on this idea. When the teacher asks "Are you ready?" the pupils respond in chorus using a phrase they clearly know well: "Yes, we are". However, two pupils (P2 and P3) respond differently – and using their limited English creatively. To the suggestion from the teacher "let's sing Doh Re Mi. OK?" P1 replied as "really, do we have to do it every time?" which was in Japanese, while P2 and P3 responded "yes we no" and "no it isn't" respectively.

P2 was trying to come up with the negative form of the phrase 'yes we are', using the negative indicator 'no' instead of 'aren't'. While at the same time, P3 wanted to convey the same meaning in a different way. 'He picks a formulaic phrase – 'no it isn't' - that he may have learnt in other contexts, e.g. 'is it red?' 'No it isn't'. Both students were creative enough to find the ways of convincing what they have inside through a second language with which they are not much familiar. In other words, although their knowledge of English language was limited, they were "creating" the language expressions with their own understanding (Cameron, 2006, p. 10).

This simple narration shows creativity matters much. Illustrating the linguistic creativity, Szerencsi (2010) argued that creativity in language teaching should not be belittled by any means as it could diminish student motivation to acquire different languages other than their local language. Creativity, like in every discipline, with its nature and impact has been highly discussed in recent researches in theoretical and practical manners. The term purposefully indicates the competitive dimensions of companies, organizations and educational institutions which are learning-centered, rather than test-oriented (**Richards, 2013**). Competition always requires the activeness of mind; this implies that the notion of creativity is a mental preparedness of teachers, when it comes to the profession of teaching, and students, when it is connected to learning or any other field.

Creativity in teaching has a social consequence too. That is to say, a society enriched with positive development and potential ability to cope up with advanced transformation, to some extent, is dependent upon creativity in schools. The students would be highly motivated to contribute to their society for a better tomorrow once they experience the creativity which is always a positive stroke in the teaching and learning process (**Richards, 2013**). Student academic achievement and teacher job satisfaction are inextricably connected to creativity. For the former, to be creative is working well with a variety of attitude in home works, presentations, assignments and classroom participation; while for the latter, it is about approaching the class room with dynamic and pragmatic teaching methods. This could be the conclusion for the abovementioned opinion.

A significant amount of literature has proven that creativity in language teaching is one of the cardinal predictor of better academic outcome and student performance (Maley, 1997;; Jeffrey & Craft, 2004; Teresa, et. al., 2009; Kaufman, 2011). Creative intelligence can significantly influence language teaching and learning. Teachers who possess a variety of creative skills, including good communication, humor creation, spot narration, and the like to teach language can always put the key performance indicator into a high level. As Yavuz (2007) opines, the teacher with a creative mind can constructively influence student behavior; the teacher, by giving positive appraisal, encouraging environment, creative ideas, mutual respect and true stimulus is one of the best motivations for the students. Such teachers would also promote critical thinking in students. Thinking creatively means a lot in education; to think with an active mind can affect the

individual and social process of learning and teaching. An active mind always results in positive outcome even it sometimes takes time for the result to manifest.

In a study held in Pakistan, a focus group of teachers defined creativity in their career as one's mental ability to create something new. It means that originality is a must for creativity which is asserted by Runco and Jaeger (2012). However, originality alone is not sufficient according to them.

Originality is vital for creativity but is not sufficient. Ideas and products that are merely original might very well be useless. They may be unique or uncommon for good reason! Originality can be found in the word salad of a psychotic and can be produced by monkeys on word processors. A truly random process will often generate something that is merely original (Runco & Jaeger, 2012, p.92).

Originality, from this point of view, should be effective to show that it is worthwhile. And for anything to be effective, human intelligence should be used, as **Robinson (2001)** has contended in his definition of creativity. According to him creativity is an engagement of human intelligence. When it comes to teaching, the teachers themselves are the cardinal instrument to use intelligence for creativity. However, for effective learning, the students also must take responsibility for being creative which is to be a reflection of the teacher. This article is a narration of the author's experience as a foreign novice teacher in applying eclecticism in a Malaysian classroom.

ECLECTICISM

"Propel the language teaching profession beyond the limited and limiting concept of method." The words by Kumaravadivelu (2012, p.1), an eminent educator, imply that improvisation, which can be a part of eclecticism, has to be promoted by carefully understanding the meaning of both. In a normal classroom context, the teachers tend to keep themselves in a comfort zone, which is the traditional teacher-centered method. This traditional approach, in a way, restricts their motivation toward finding or experiencing any new approach. That is why eclecticism, otherwise known as effective or successful eclecticism, enlightened eclecticism, integrative eclecticism and new eclecticism has been an influential entity in the current classroom setting. The fact that it carries many names shows its popularity and acceptability among creative teachers (Wali, 2009). It is undoubted that nowadays it recently has been widely acceptable among teachers and some of them even use it as symbol of pride in their career.

A study conducted by Xiao-yun, Zhi-yang and Peixing (2007) in a Chinese context investigated the attitudes and perceptions of College English Teachers toward eclecticism and principled eclecticism in teaching of an Intensive English Program; they underpin the same fact that we mentioned before. Through that case study, after analyzing and interpreting the questionnaire from 155 teachers and 51 students, a 12-week classroom observation and person-to-person interviews, the authors found that the concept of eclecticism not only exists but also is widely practiced and promoted by the teachers. This is an indication of recognizing diversity in the classroom settings. In addition, it shows that even though the teachers do not know the concept by theoretical understanding, they are ready to practice it. As a result, a new concept known as 'principled eclecticism' was advocated by Mellow (2000, 2002) by which he meant a description of the desirable, coherent and futuristic approach toward teaching. The same concept was called 'disciplined eclecticism' by Rodgers (2001). He perceived that this approach seems to be something that will shape second language teaching in coming decades (Rodgers, 2001).

The concept of eclecticism was firstly advocated by some of the applied linguists from Britain in the 1920s and 1930s. They promoted a theory in which the systematic selection of principles was a cardinal concern (Rodgers, 1986). Looking into the definition of the word, Johns and Butman (1991) view that the most frequently used psychological definition of eclecticism was that of English and English (1958), who explained the term as 'selection and orderly combination of compatible features from diverse sources, sometimes from otherwise incompatible theories and systems; the effort to find valid elements in all doctrines and theories and to combine them into a harmonious whole' (p.168). Before it was introduced as a systematic method, Sweets has highlighted some of its aspects in 1912, as he believed that a good method of language teaching must be, first of all, comprehensive and eclectic in nature. The scholars of linguistics such as Sweets argued that the language teaching programs should not be adhered to any invariable theory or approach; rather they should be flexible according to the needs of the context.

Ali (1981) contends that eclecticism has the following principles:

- 1- Providing the teachers a chance to identify and select various types of methods that help teachers to accomplish their classroom goals in a clear and apprehensible way. In other words, the more the chances to use different language teaching techniques, the easier the ways of success.
- 2- Flexibility for the teachers--regardless of the contents of what they want to teach-- in choosing the methods according to the classroom needs. The teachers are free to be creative.
- 3- With regard to the students, they experience a myriad of teaching techniques different from traditional approaches. The classroom monotony is abolished and a better comprehension of the subject is achieved accordingly.
- 4- Eclecticism can be considered as a 'problem-solving treatment' for students by which the content can be introduced to them in a different way.
- 5- The usage of 'on the spot' teaching aids in a creative way, for sure, will enhance the effectiveness of classroom participation; the students will be an active audience and participants for a longer time compared to the traditional classrooms.
- 6- Saving a lot of time and effort in presenting language activities (Wali, 2009, p. 40).

RESEARCH METHOD

The research design adopted here is a qualitative mode and the data were collected using observation method, after which the author could interpret his classroom experience in a narrative manner, with 'what', 'when', 'where', 'who', 'why', and 'how I feel' and analyze the new approaches stepping on the experiences. Narrative analysis "can be said to provide a portal into two realms" according to Bamberg (2010, p. 3). First one is the realm of experience where the narrator sketches the individual experiences related to certain events and they confer their subjective meaning on to the experiences. The second one is the realm of narrative means to make sense. The classroom contained 26 students including 6 males and 20 females who were in their twenties. All these participants were Malays. The observation was made directly following the steps introduced by Creswell (2012). The researcher selected the site to be observed, and started taking initial notes, followed by identifying what and whom to observe. Then the author determined his role as an observer and conducted multiple observations within a period of two months. After all, it was the time of preparing field notes for the research purpose. Data were collected casually as proposed by Yin (2009). The author, while using some eclectic approaches, took the field notes while experiencing and observing the real classroom context.

EXPERIENCE OF BEING ECLECTIC IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

As a novice teacher, in a foreign environment of 26 Malaysian adults who were preparing for their first degree program, the researcher's teaching environment started with a "matured classroom" capable of adopting and coping up with any new experiments in an eclectic approach. The class started on 30th July, 2014, according to the scheduled period and time. As usual, without showing any of the complexities likely to overwhelm any international novice teacher, the researcher started to get to know all of the participants. As for the first day, it was the day of engagement with some teaching methods that the researcher used to practice in other training sessions. However, all these were apt for the school students; not for those who were in their twenties (i.e., the pre-degree learners). Therefore, the researcher thought of planning to change all the previous usual 'tactics' being aware that the traditional classroom settings would not be an 'eye opener' for them.

During the two month English course, the researcher had also been occupied with some other academic research projects which dealt with counseling. As a teacher, at that time, the thought of applying some of these counseling lessons to the present 'clients' came to the researcher's mind. The great psychiatrists including Jung, Adler and others from whose books the researcher planned to practice his first eclectic approach to the students, should be acknowledged at this moment.

It was a kind of self-disclosure that was done firstly in the classroom; starting from the second day of the first week, after the introduction part, the researcher began to talk about himself in a regular manner. This was the researcher's attempt to be open by all means being one of their close friends at least for a two month period, with an intention that it might help further contribute to the research. The researcher spent a significant time to open some of his personal chapters, in order for the clients to feel

comfortable with him and attract the 20-year-old 'clients'. Further justifications of choosing self-disclosure as an eclectic approach, are strongly underpinned by Conte (2009) as he describes what the term refers to:

Self-disclosure means telling someone something about your life, something about you personally. Outside of the counseling world normal conversation involves a ping-pong game approach to sharing: One person tells a story from experience, then the listener takes a turn at disclosing her story. Everyday conversations are the way many people get to know each other. Conversations that occur in counseling, however, are professional ones intended for one person to get support and guidance from the other... (pp. 30 - 31)

The first reason for applying this approach was the students' discouraging and disappointing responses to the daily questions the researcher had posed to each of them. Even though some normal conversations took place, nobody was up to the expectations, as they continued to be underexposed in the classroom due to some unknown pressures which haunt any regular student. The act of revealing by the researcher kept going on. Not much time was spent before some of them started speaking up; asking questions, and answering the questions. The result came out in a way that some of them, after completing the course, wrote to the teacher that it was their first time to converse in English, with a teacher who knew almost nothing from their language. It was a gradual process from asking about current status which the researcher was in educational field to the question: "Sir, why don't you have a girl friend?!"

Following the same method of eclecticism, the next turn was of free-talking and labeling approach. Students were motivated enough to start, develop and maintain the conversation as usual. In response, not surprisingly, not even a single question other than "how are you?" was heard. It was the time for the teacher to show them how to talk about anything in mind; some of them tried to follow the talking tips which were given accordingly. Meanwhile, others were conversing with their mates. The researcher inquired in detail about what they were talking in their local language. They replied that they were "gossiping" about the teacher. Without any complex, they were welcomed and asked to narrate them in English. At the end of class the researcher approached each of those who made gossip to come up with something new every day, and they were labeled as 'gossiping girls'. In the same way some of the males were given the title of 'sporting stars' and they started updating on each 'label' day by day. What distinguished from the usual free-talking approaches of a language class is that it was not the instructor who gave them the topic to talk; but they themselves were given the chance to choose their topics. The researcher not only asked to talk on their label, but also gave the same label for the writing task. This process of free-talking did not finish even after classes ended. Students came to meet the teacher during their leisure time to discuss on different labels and made personal conversation. It was understood that the more the teacher becomes an active listener during these personal meetings, the more interested the students were in maintaining dynamic conversation.

Behavior diversion approach was the most challenging of all the eclectic approaches chosen. It was fascinating to realize that the teacher's anger could be turned to one positive dimension of eclecticism, provided that the procedures are carefully applied. In the fourth week of the class, one of the female students' misbehavior caused some unexpected scene in the classroom. She was called by the researcher to the front. The classroom environment changed from excitement to seriousness. That is to say, the teacher was extremely angry with the student. Some disappointing words were used for everyone who made mistakes in the classroom on that day. The teacher kept voicing out his anger to them as if he was not a friendly man at all. All of them were down enough and silent till the end of the class. After the incident, nobody from the students was given a chance to meet the researcher at the café or somewhere outside, where the usual meeting took place. On the next day, the class started normally; the students were wished good morning and the researcher started talking about some grammatical point. Some of them were still in the hangover over the last day's incident. After a pause, the researcher asked them to close their books and started apologizing for what happened. The researcher called the same female student, apologized to her and did some self-criticism. All of them started looking at what was going on at that moment. As usual, all the students were asked to pose some questions to develop their communication skills. Everybody kept silent. The researcher kept talking using some heart-touching words, and as a reader of counseling, it seemed that the words would deeply affect them positively. The effort was successful. After sometime, they started asking some questions. It was a beginning of deep friendship between the researcher and students. And unsurprisingly, they started apologizing to their teacher for not meeting his expectations. To his

understanding, this was one of the best motivations for some of them, as they continued communicating with him until the end of the program without any formalities.

The weeks passed, with a comfortable environment both for teacher and students. The following weeks another experiment was tried. The researcher’s ignorance of ‘Bahasa Melayu’ (BM) was used as a positive point. Everybody was given a chance to teach their teacher any components of their native language. They began to talk in BM and translated into English as much as possible. Each of them used whatever available resources such as dictionaries, language learning books, Internet and so forth. Hence, this was the time when the researcher found that translation approach could be used as one of the eclectic teaching methods. The approach was highly emphasized and regularly practiced by both teacher and students inside and outside the classroom.

During the last week, the class carried out student-teacher conversion; the researcher asked everyone who was voluntarily ready, to act as a teacher for a maximum duration of twenty minutes. In turn, the teacher promised them to be a student, on condition that they had to treat him only as one of their students.

The students could choose any topic from the study material and were supposed to teach all of their students including the researcher using any resources. Ample preparation time was given to each student teacher. They started teaching; some ‘controlled’ the researcher, checking his level of understanding, while others even got angry with the ‘researcher student’ for not taking notes during the lesson. They had to express everything in no language other than English. They were not only learning the content itself, but also realizing what problems they had in communicating and convincing students in a second language. As feedback, some of the students wrote to the researcher:

‘Usually what do we know about teaching...? As usual, teacher comes to class, take attendance, and then gives homework. Only these things we know as the job of the teacher. But it seems so difficult to become a teacher...’

‘I felt so happy when I became a teacher and I was so confident to face my classmate and also my Sir...Even though (I made some mistakes), I will try to not give up, try to be ready and more confident to face others before to do something...’

Table 1 shows the eclectic approaches used by the author in an explanatory manner followed by a reflection:

Table 1 Eclectic Approaches Used with Explanation and Reflection

| Eclectic Approach | Explanation | Reflection |
|---------------------------|---|---|
| Self disclosure | It is telling someone something about your life, something about you personally. Outside of the counseling world normal conversation involves a ping-pong game approach to sharing: One person tells a story from experience, then the listener takes a turn at disclosing his/her story (Conte, 2009). | Like in a group counseling session, the students in the classroom reacted once the teacher disclosed himself. It was observed that this approach is easily practical in a normal adult classroom setting. Yet, if the teacher possesses no proper communication skills this could be ineffective. |
| Free-talking and labeling | It refers to the act of engaging students with a variety of topics that come into their mind, followed by naming them according to what they converse and convince. The teacher would ask each of the students to talk and label them with anything with a positive stroke. | The labeling should be positively used; otherwise it may cause offense. The teacher should be able to manage the classroom situation well especially in choosing the topics for the discussion and conversation. |

| | | |
|----------------------------|---|---|
| Behavior diversion | The process of diverting one type of behavior into another one. Usually this approach could be acknowledged as a play of opposite emotions from one person, who is here the teacher. | This was the most challenging approach that the author practiced in the classroom as it took time for the students to comprehend what the teacher exactly meant. |
| Translation | This approach dealt with two languages. Students are supposed to teach the foreign teacher any components of their language; the teaching process is to happen in English. In the case of this study, <i>Bahasa Melayu</i> was taught by the students in English. | For a classroom of primary school, this eclectic approach is not suitable because it requires students who have acquired the basic language and communication skills. |
| Student-teacher conversion | Both students and teachers are converted into teachers and students respectively. In this individual act, each student teacher would teach any classroom material and clarify the subject to the real teacher, who for the time being is a normal student. | The practicality of student-teacher conversion approach is more in higher classes, particularly in degree level classrooms. The teacher must be tolerant in coping up with any type of 'teachers' with diversity in behavior. |

WHY SHOULD WE BE ECLECTIC? DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

As a novice teacher, the following is my observation on practicing eclecticism in a foreign classroom. During the period of a two month program, I could realize that generally speaking, eclecticism should be applied and practiced in every classroom context, regardless of age. Based on my classroom experience, I have had some observations, highlighting positive and negative dimensions of being eclectic in a foreign classroom, as follows:

1. Students were highly motivated to practice their lessons, and successful in terms of cooperation with their teacher.
2. Identification of problems in using second language was always the first concern of the classroom and it was done in creative ways depended upon the active mindedness of the teacher.
3. It was a term of experiencing the language in a creative mood with a mutual understanding between the teachers and the students, not studying or teaching in a traditional way. It was all about guidance.
4. For the teacher, being eclectic in teaching is one of the best ways of creativity as he can be versatile in using all the skills he possesses.
5. Supporting Brown's (1994) view, "an enlightened eclectic teacher should take an approach that most if not all of the principles he has concluded. That is, teachers ought to take all the principles in the respects of cognition, affection and linguistics in to consideration at the same time." (p. 74)
6. Being positive is to be a challenge for the eclectic teachers; to my perception, to be positive in teaching means to be as creative as a teacher can. It is totally an act of mind where thought is focused toward a positive engagement.
7. As a negative, eclecticism may not be always effective in poorly motivated students, who do not follow the language of their teacher. At least it would take time for them to "be in the classroom".
8. If teachers do not have an effective chemistry of teaching, with some innate skills, they may fail in applying eclecticism in a creative way.

CONCLUSION

The paper highlighted some of the experiences the author had, as a novice teacher, in an adult English language classroom in Malaysia. Being a foreign teacher to the degree level students, the author, with an active observational mind, tried to draw the classroom scenario of two months, in a narrative analysis method, detailing what he meant by self-disclosing approach, free talking approach, labeling approach,

behavior diversion approach, translation approach and teacher-student conversion approach. Introducing some of the literature in creativity in language teaching and theoretical basis of eclecticism, all these approaches were described with an experience-based narration. Before going to the conclusion, some observations in practicing eclecticism were made to imply that this could be one of the significant doors to step into new areas and concepts of the eclectic approach in teaching. As argumentative in nature, the paper observes some of the positive and negative dimensions of being eclectic in the classroom which could be implied not only for adult classrooms but also for some school settings as well as higher level classrooms, provided that the teachers or tutors have a proper understanding of the chemistry between themselves and their students.

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