

Psychology and ELT

Nick Michelioudakis explains the difference between observation and experience.

‘You can see what it’s like, can’t you?’

Down and Out

‘Write about what you know’ was a tip George Orwell was given as a budding writer. The thing is he wanted to write about poverty. And he knew little about it. So he decided to find out what it was like. And he did. He turned himself into a tramp in London. Later he lived a hand-to-mouth existence in Paris. No wonder his book *Down and Out in Paris and London* is so vivid; the experiences do not just sound real – they are real! Since then a lot of people have followed his lead¹ and this way of exploring what things are like ‘from the inside’ as it were has become quite widespread. Of course there are realities which are closer to us in a way – people in wheelchairs for example live among us and we feel that we have an idea of what their life is like. But would an hour’s actual experience make a difference?

The wheelchair experience

In a remarkable study, Clore & Jeffrey (1972) asked some students to pretend they had been involved in a car accident, paralyzed from the waist down and confined to a wheelchair.



¹ A striking example is that of Norah Vincent, a lesbian journalist who spent a year dressed as a man to get an insider’s view of the male world.

They had to try to get about as best they could, following a predetermined route which involved their having to negotiate lifts, doors and ramps. At the same time, another group followed them around observing everything they did and every difficulty they faced. This lasted for about an hour. The researchers wanted to see whether this experience would make a difference in the attitude of these students towards disabled people and towards disability-related issues (e.g. whether funds should be allocated to making it easier for such people to get about). The two groups were interviewed immediately after the session. The results were telling: compared to a control group, both the students who had used a wheelchair and the ‘observers’ showed increased sensitivity to the difficulties faced by disabled people but interestingly, the students who had had the ‘hands on’ experience showed far more empathy towards the disabled. But would this sensitization persist over time? The researchers checked that too; they called up the subjects four months later and covertly assessed their views by means of a disguised attitudinal measure embedded in the telephone interview. They found the same difference!

Applications in the field of ELT

The basic idea here is the following: experience beats observation – hands down. It is the difference between watching the chef effortlessly creating sumptuous dishes on camera and trying to do the same thing yourself! What is perhaps more important, it seems that the effects appear to be long-lasting. Naturally, this has implications for EFL teachers.

Activities

I have often been in workshops where the colleagues present are reluctant to engage in the activities themselves (‘Ok, we know how to do things...’); I have also been in others where the speaker refrains from asking colleagues to participate for fear that s/he may be seen to be talking down to them. I have to say I am a little puzzled by these attitudes – I think the best way to understand an activity is to experience it as if you were the learner (Nunn & Lamb 1996). Let us have more workshops please!

Technology

While on the subject of seminars and workshops, here is another amazing discovery from the field of Psychology: if something is hard to imagine, people tend to assume it will not happen! (Kenrick et al [eds], 2012, p.43). This is completely bizarre, but it seems that the brain translates the difficulty in understanding something into decreased likelihood of it actually occurring! I have often seen this in talks on technology – after five minutes of the expert talking about their favourite Web tools, the participants’ eyes sometimes glaze over. They just cannot imagine themselves using this innovative technology and their brain dismisses it out of hand. Naturally, ‘hands-on’ experience (workshops!) would greatly increase uptake!

Your lessons

How do we know what our lessons are really like? It is very unfortunate that we cannot be both teachers and learners at the same time in our classes... Many solutions have been suggested – e.g. recording your lessons and then observing them by means of a range of observational tools (e.g. Wajnryb, 1993) But that still

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runs into the problem of ‘The Curse of Knowledge’ (Heath & Heath, 2008). The thing is, we know what our plan was and what we had meant to teach. Much better to have a colleague observe us – as a learner! Then we can compare notes and notice any discrepancies.

The learner’s perspective

Time and again trainers, researchers and colleagues have argued that one of the best ways to develop as a professional is to start seeing things from the learner’s perspective – by taking up a foreign language yourself. Suddenly everything you have been telling your students becomes more real; you can see for yourself what works and what does not. You can see for yourself how students feel when they have to cope with something unfamiliar. Indeed, some people have taken this a step further; they argue that becoming a learner is beneficial regardless of what it is you may be learning (e.g. Claypole, 2010, p.56).

The teacher’s perspective 1

Conversely, classes can benefit from another role reversal – placing students in the role of teachers (Dornyei, 2001). Educators have often stressed the beneficial cognitive effect this may have for learners – if someone is to present information to others, this clearly requires a

greater ‘depth of processing’ on his/her part. What is perhaps more important however, is that by placing themselves in the teachers’ shoes, learners can gain unique insights into what it means to be a teacher and the challenges that go with the role. Learning benefits aside, teachers often report that this leads to more mature subsequent behaviour on the part of these students.

The teacher’s perspective 2

In the same way that a teacher may forget what it is like to be a learner, a DOS may forget what it is like to be a teacher. I think a large proportion of the problems between management and staff in large schools arises because DOS often stop teaching thus depriving themselves of experiences which would help them empathise with teachers (this dimension is often lacking from otherwise very informative books – e.g. Impey & Underhill, 1994). This ‘detachment’ is perhaps more easily observable in the case of some academics who do not teach language themselves (and some of them never have!). Sound though their research might be, when they move to classroom implications, you have the feeling that their suggestions would simply never work! The moral: piloting is crucial – and that applies to systems and methods as well as techniques.

Back to wheelchairs



But let us for a moment go back to the people in wheelchairs. Do we know what their life is like? Do we have any idea of the frustration of crossing the street when you cannot get on the pavement opposite or what it means having to be helped on the bus each and every time? Well, now we can find out more – and so can our students. The Disabled Access Friendly is a campaign launched by people in our field. In their site² you can find ready-made materials for all levels. These are meant to improve students’ English while also raising their awareness of the difficulties these people face on a daily basis. Through reading, role-playing and project work our students can come closer to a reality which we may see around us almost every day – but we may subconsciously block. So – try out some of these materials. And, if you get the chance, give yourself a ride on that wheelchair



² <http://www.disabled-accessfriendly.com>

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Nick Michelioudakis



Nick Michelioudakis (B. Econ., Dip. RSA, MSc [TEFL]) is an Academic Consultant with LEH (the representatives of the Pearson PTE G Exams in Greece). In his years of active involvement in the field of ELT he has worked as a teacher, examiner and trainer for both teachers and Oral Examiners. His love of comedy led him to start the 'Comedy for ELT' project on YouTube. He has written numerous articles on Methodology, while others from the 'Psychology and ELT' series have appeared in many countries. He likes to think of himself as a 'front-line teacher' and is interested in one-to-one teaching and student motivation as well as Social and Evolutionary Psychology. When he is not struggling with students, he likes to spend his time in a swimming pool or playing chess. You can visit his site at www.michelioudakis.org.

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