The Classroom Connection

On Not Being Friends with My Students

By Peter Thwaites

Many years ago, during my first few years as an English teacher, I was struggling with a class of Korean middle school students. The class was small, and the students were polite and respectful, but they were also very quiet, prone to mood swings, and quite good at not speaking English. I was a newly qualified teacher at that time, and I had a naive confidence in my ability to engage. I expected to quickly break through the barriers erected by my students' shyness. I set to work on designing materials that would make the students want to open up. I created language presentations based on amusing episodes from my life, for example, so that the students could get to know me and begin to relate. I personalized grammar and vocabulary activities, and I designed production activities around topics that I assumed they would be interested in.

As the weeks passed by with little change in attitude, I began to feel that my methods were not working. The students responded to my story-based language presentations with polite smiles, but they were no more forthcoming with their own contributions. They seemed to find it endearing that I had adapted my gap-fill activities to refer to aspects of their school lives, such as the boring cafeteria food, but this didn't make them want to use their newly learned grammar and vocabulary to actually talk to each other. I began to drift towards an unhappy conclusion: My middle-schoolers simply didn't want to communicate in English.

At something of a loss, I decided to approach a colleague for advice. He told me, "You have to stop worrying about the atmosphere in the classroom. Just teach professionally, and let the students decide if they are going to learn or not." I had heard versions of this advice before. On an orientation day for another job, for example, I was told, "Don't go wanting to be everybody's friend!" Was this me? Was I that teacher – the one who joined the profession more out of the desire for a captive audience for his banal life stories than out of a determination to help people to develop their language skills? Perhaps these colleagues were right, I thought, "Perhaps it is time for me to dispense with the chumminess and just teach like a professional."

All the same, skepticism remained. Ever since I had begun teaching, I had been complimented on my ability to develop rapport in the classroom. Even ignoring the hit to my pride, I felt unsure that it really made sense to let go of this aspect of my teaching practice. Surely this rapport improved my students' concentration? And didn't it also motivate them to speak more? But each time I felt this skepticism arise, my middle schoolers answered with their silence. So, with no better course of action available to me, I decided to give this new approach a go. I would prepare efficient, impersonal, technically sound lessons; I would require students to say less about themselves. I would stay closer to our textbook materials. Perhaps I would not teach better, but at least I would worry less.

It would be nice if I were able to now describe the explosive impact of this new approach – whether it be the students' astounding language growth or news of a classroom rebellion. In reality, though, nothing much about the class changed. We plodded on as usual, with low motivation and no noticeable increase in language use. With hindsight, I shouldn't really have expected anything different – after all, I was deliberately disengaging from my students. But one benefit that I might reasonably have hoped for – a reduction of my own stress regarding the class – also failed to materialize. My new approach bored me, and I couldn't shake the feeling that I wasn't doing my job properly.

But as the year went on, other things began to happen. I finally began to remember the students' names, and using them in class made the students

feel noticed. School events brought their mums and dads into the classroom, and this gave me a chance to learn a little about the students' home lives. Occasionally, I'd bump into some of the kids outside of school, and these chance encounters usually gave us something to talk about. Once, visiting a friend at his apartment, a student walked into my elevator, wearing casual clothes and carrying her new dog. In the moment, she was so shocked to see me so close to her home that she could scarcely say hello; but the next time we saw each other in class, she wanted to tell me all about the puppy. Moments like this had an effect in the classroom, building connections in ways that my earlier materials had failed to do.

The net result of these two processes – my sense of dissatisfaction with my new teaching approach and the increasing connections I was forming with my students – ended up leading me back in the direction from which I had come. I began once again to encourage a positive atmosphere. I resumed my work of encouraging the students' voices in the classroom. Only this time, I did not need to contrive teaching materials to make this happen because the students simply started having things to say to me of their own accord. With hindsight, this is what I had hoped for all along, but the actual route to this destination was not the one I had anticipated. We had gotten to know each other, and the barriers had started to come down, but it hadn't happened because of my teaching methods. Rather, it had happened organically, as a spontaneous process that occurred in parallel to, but oriented in the opposite direction from, the distinctly impersonal lessons I had been teaching.

So had my colleagues been right? Had my initial attempts at building rapport actually ended up getting in the way?

I'm still not sure. I certainly think it's possible – perhaps even likely – that the students had found my initial approach uncomfortably chummy. Perhaps they had sensed its contrivance or detected in it an attempt to make them speak English against their will. Perhaps this had led them to hide from it. Some of the students might also have hoped instead for a more genuine connection. I could not blame them if this were so – these would be fair criticisms (albeit of an essentially well-intentioned approach). Perhaps what my more experienced colleagues had wished to tell me all along was not (as I had inferred) that the health of a classroom atmosphere is beyond the teacher's remit but rather that it is something that grows organically and cannot be forced.

For me, though, there have been two key lessons that I learned from this episode. The first has been to trust my instincts regarding the importance of connection in the language classroom. It is not that the students' language learning went through the roof as our classroom came to life (it didn't). But the improved atmosphere opened up new possibilities. We became able to simply speak English to each other – halting, inaccurate,

and modest but nonetheless English. It became less necessary to thoroughly plan my lessons because the things that the students suddenly began to say to me, ("Teacher, I have a new cat"; "Teacher, I spent the whole weekend watching Power Rangers") were sometimes able to serve as raw materials for our language study. Perhaps more importantly, my students began to find their voices in English. A famous quotation, attributed to Charlemagne, has it that "to have another language is to possess a second soul." Well, if this is true, then it is also the case that this second soul is not simply given to us as we learn; it must be wrought by us out of the limitless set of possibilities that language presents. Students have to learn how to be themselves in their new language. Put simply, this won't happen if our classrooms contain no space for our students' voices.

The second lesson I have learned from my experience with this class is that although it may not be realistic to try to force a positive classroom atmosphere, it is certainly possible to cultivate one. At the start of that school year, I had not found the best methods for doing this. By the end, I was getting closer. Learn the students' names (and use them in class, every day), show an interest in their lives, and let the things they say have real influence on the direction that classes take. Although I was to learn much more in the coming years about how to develop healthy classroom dynamics, these early lessons became the foundation for the way that I would eventually approach all of my classes, in Korea and beyond.

The Columnist
Peter Thwaites is an assistant professor of English Education at Keimyung University in Daegu. He holds a PhD in Applied Linguistics from Cardiff University and is the author of numerous papers and articles on classroom interaction and L2 vocabulary learning. He has taught in Korea for more than seven years.
Email: peterthwaites@kmu.ac.kr; Twitter: @PeterDThwaites

The Classroom Connection

On Being Ready for Anything
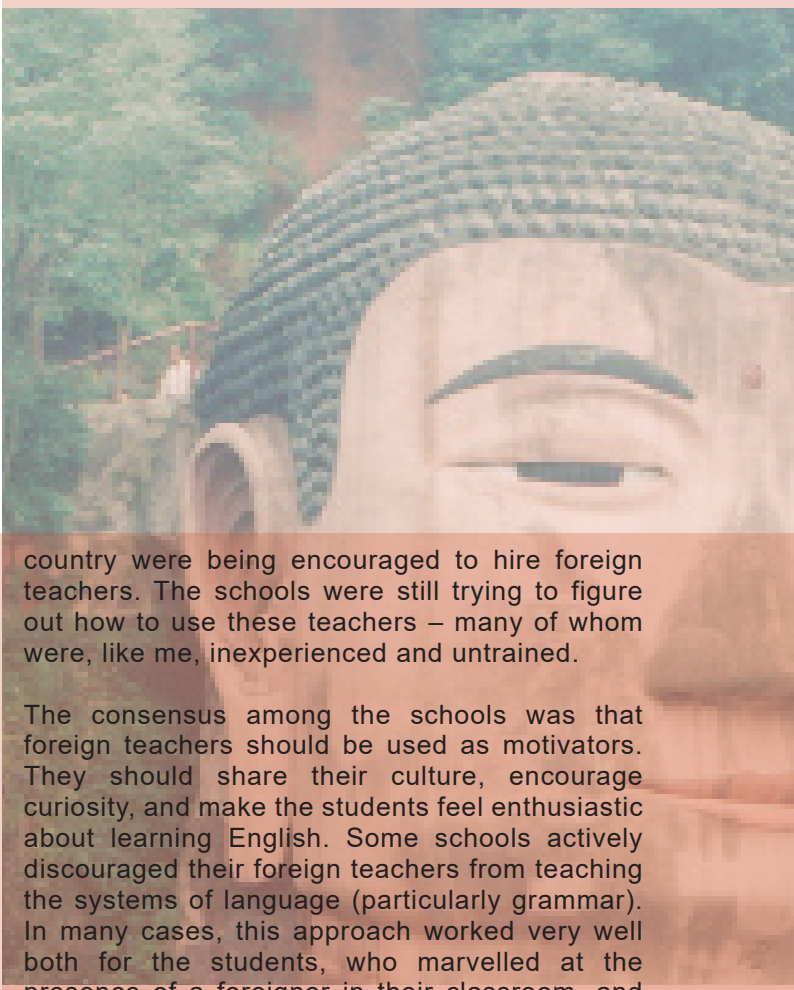
By Peter Thwaites

The day I taught my first class as a language teacher, I thought I was going sightseeing. I'd only been in China a few days, and my manager had arranged for me to observe a teaching demonstration being given by a colleague in a city named Leshan. A primary school there was hoping to recruit a foreign English teacher for the following semester. I was grateful for this opportunity because, having only recently graduated from university, I had no idea how to teach English (or anything else), and I needed to learn the ropes. But the thing that I was really thinking about, as we followed the signposts to the city, was the legendary Great Buddha. Leshan is home to the world's largest pre-modern statue: an enormous, seated Buddha hand-carved into a cliff face on the outskirts of town. Surely we'd have time to visit?

Then, as we pulled off the highway and into the city, my manager's phone rang and a Chinese-language conversation began. Moments later, everyone started looking at me. Worriedly.

I spent the final ten minutes of the car ride trying to piece together a lesson plan. There was no textbook available, my manager said. They had no topic or language item that they wanted me to teach. No materials. They just wanted the opportunity to compare my teaching with that of my colleague, she explained. I should just teach whatever I felt was appropriate. My panicking brain interpreted these words as "You're on your own!"

It was almost impossible to imagine, as I stepped out of the car and towards an inevitable humiliation, that I would end up spending almost five years as a popular and highly regarded teacher in China. Still less could I have imagined that I would eventually come to feel that I owed so much of my success to being plunged into exactly this type of situation: no materials, no syllabus, no time to acquaint myself with the students, only "Here is your classroom, Mr. Peter. See you in 45 minutes."

My day in Leshan was an artifact of Chinese language education policy. Schools across the country were being encouraged to hire foreign teachers. The schools were still trying to figure out how to use these teachers – many of whom were, like me, inexperienced and untrained.

The consensus among the schools was that foreign teachers should be used as motivators. They should share their culture, encourage curiosity, and make the students feel enthusiastic about learning English. Some schools actively discouraged their foreign teachers from teaching the systems of language (particularly grammar). In many cases, this approach worked very well both for the students, who marvelled at the presence of a foreigner in their classroom, and for us teachers, who often didn't know much about language or about teaching, but had an abundance of curiosity and enthusiasm. However, there were also cases in which teachers had mistaken their school's open-minded attitude for a kind of apathetic permissiveness and offered very little benefit to their students. Stung by these experiences, schools began to shy away from employing teachers directly, and instead recruited them from agencies such as the one that I worked for. This way, the schools could observe teachers before hiring them, as they were doing that day in Leshan, and could subsequently recruit teachers on a part-time basis rather than being stuck with them, full-time, for a whole school year.

While this system worked well for the schools, it led to some challenging circumstances for teachers. In my first year in China, I taught at a different school on each day of the week. In some cases, I would get to work with a group of students on a regular basis. But just as often, I would visit a school only once, never to return. On these occasions, I would usually not find out the students' age, or their proficiency, or how many would be in the class, until I entered the classroom. Class sizes ranged from less than

twenty to more than eighty. In most cases, the only materials I could rely on were a blackboard, some chalk, and a roomful of students.

I started out by handling this situation in much the same way as my colleagues: I developed a repertoire of "stock" lessons that I could roll out at any time. There was my lesson about families, a balloon debate about occupations, and a handful of others. My students seemed to find these lessons enjoyable enough, and having this stock helped me to overcome my fear of unplannable teaching assignments (a fear that began on that day in Leshan). But within a few months, my enthusiasm for this approach began to wear thin. For a start, it was boring. I didn't like teaching the same things week after week. More importantly, I was beginning to notice that my students all had unique strengths and weaknesses, and that my "one size fits all" approach was not meeting these diverse needs. I needed a way of teaching that allowed me to respond to my students as individuals.

Looking back, a few fledgling elements of that eventual approach were present even on that day in Leshan. The lesson started with me asking the students how they were feeling. I got back a chorus of "Fine, thank you, and you?" I found this unconvincing, so I asked "How are you *really*?" and the students told me that they were hungry, excited, and happy. After that, I asked the students to tell me about themselves. A few of the braver ones told me their names, ages, and hobbies. One student – a nine-year-old of exquisite empathy – appeared to sense my terror of the lesson never ending and spoke for a full four minutes about his family members.

An older, wiser version of myself would have been able to carve a productive lesson from these nuggets of language. I might have taken their "I'm hungry!" and their "I'm happy!" responses and shown them how to develop them using adverbs ("I'm extremely hungry!"), or use conjunctions to add a little nuance ("I'm really excited but a little bit hungry!"). I might have helped them to expand their repertoire of verbs for talking about their hobbies. I might have responded to their family descriptions by telling them about my own family members and then challenging them to reconstruct what I had said from some prompts on the board.

In Leshan, though, I could not have done these things because I didn't know enough about language or enough about teaching techniques, and was therefore unable to harness the students' utterances as raw material for learning. It has taken years to learn how to do this, and I'm still learning every day. So instead, that day, I left their utterances hanging, and moved on to something else. But what? A colleague had suggested that I teach some basic verbs for movements: *throw, catch, stand, sit, walk, run.* So for ten minutes, the class resembled a poorly organised children's birthday party. Things got thrown, people stood and then sat and then stood again. This continued for long enough to allow me to realize that the students had known these words all along, after which I gave up and looked pleadingly at the clock. The only thing I remember of the last ten minutes is the empathic boy shrugging at me while wearing a look of deep sorrow. We did not go sightseeing.

From days like that one in Leshan, though, I learned this: to start from where the students are. I learned this at first as a way of getting through these unplannable classes and later came to understand it as a general principle for good teaching. Get them to say things, get them to expand on those things, and from that linguistic sampling, figure out where to offer improvements. Perhaps a specific language point needs to be worked on. Maybe something more general, such as improved accuracy or fluency, is needed. The teacher's work is in being skilled enough to spot these snags and knowing the right intervention when the time arrives.

I'm not trying to say that this is easy. Teaching in this manner requires a patient ear, robust linguistic knowledge, and a diverse hoard of classroom techniques to pull from with minimal preparation. It takes time and effort to develop these skills. Nevertheless, I want teachers to make this their priority. So much of our time is spent poring over textbooks or syllabus documents, trying to put together coherent lesson plans for the day's classes. Our plans completed, we may find that we are led by them. With luck, we leave the classroom feeling that they have worked well and that our students benefited. And we should feel this sense of success, because teaching is difficult. But we must also have an eye for what is missing from such an approach: the ability to respond to those emergent, unplannable moments when our students wished to communicate something, receptively or productively, but could not; and a toolkit for that day when you, too, are thrown into your own "Leshan situation."

The Columnist
Peter Thwaites is an assistant professor of English education at Keimyung University in Daegu. He holds a PhD in applied linguistics from Cardiff University and is the author of numerous papers and articles on classroom interaction and L2 vocabulary learning. He has taught in Korea for more than seven years. Email: peterthwaites@kmu.ac.kr

What's the Point of Coursebooks?

By Peter Thwaites

It was monsoon season in Malaysia, and the rain was heavy enough to close roads. Out of the window of my classroom at the British Council Penang, I could see people dashing for taxis, going from dry to drenched in a flash. Indoors, it was time to start class. But only two students had arrived, and the other teachers were wandering the corridors, shrugging hopefully at each other. As I wondered how long I could manage to wait for the other students, the two shook off their umbrellas and excitedly retold, in Hokkien, the dramatic story of their shared journey to school. I couldn't understand what they were saying, and since there didn't seem to be much point in beginning my lesson yet, I asked them to switch to English so that I could follow their story. They looked at each other, an expression of "How do we start?" crossed their faces, and then they began.

The students spoke excitedly at first, blurting out big chunks of story in disjointed phrases. I made them slow down. We focused on getting one good sentence out at a time. I gave hints when helpful, and corrections when necessary. Utterances like "We not get wet. Don't know how!" became "Somehow, we didn't get wet!" When a sentence felt right and the students could say it to each other error free, I wrote it on the board, and we moved on to the next one. As more students arrived, the original two recounted the story again in their L1, so that the newcomers could join in. I facilitated, encouraging them to think of different language for expressing the events in the story. There was a buzz as the students experimented and dots got connected. The text on the board slowly grew. By the time we finished, we had three paragraphs of text, error free and with an impressive range of expression, and a group of 14 students who had all surprised themselves with their ability to create it. Then, each student used the text as a model for telling the stories of their own journeys to school. This process ended up spanning the entire two-hour lesson.

I offer this story as an example of classroom magic. The setup was so minimal – we had nothing more than an idea (the story), a task (writing the story with accuracy and expression), and a set of collaborators (the students and myself) – but the resulting lesson generated more student involvement, linguistic exploration, and moments of understanding than almost any other I've taught. Exactly why it worked so well is hard to put my finger on. But I think that all teachers have had these moments of magic, and I wonder whether yours shared some of the underlying simplicity of my "monsoon lesson." My guess is that they were similarly spontaneous and collaborative – similarly emergent from the experiences of the people in the room.

"If coursebooks can't generate the magic buzz, why not just ditch them?"

To take the idea of classroom magic a little further, moments like these rarely happen when we teach from a coursebook. I'd be surprised, astonished actually, if such a thing were to originate from the teacher saying something like, "Now do Activity B on page 62." So, here's a far-out question – if coursebooks can't generate the magic buzz, why not just ditch them?

Actually, there's a simple answer to this question – it's because coursebooks are useful. I've used them throughout my career, and now that I teach teachers, I teach them to use coursebooks, too. They provide invaluable support for less experienced teachers, lend legitimacy to classroom proceedings, and cut teachers' workloads. Academic coordinators rely on their ability to standardize classroom content, and students feel reassured by their presence.

But what I want to argue here is that coursebooks can only take us so far. In certain situations, such as in our early careers, at times when our workloads are particularly heavy or in situations in which multiple groups of learners must cover the same content, we may find them to be an invaluable ally. But in spite of these benefits, we must learn to teach without them. And I'll go further:

We must constantly be awake to opportunities in our classrooms to put the coursebook to one side and instead allow classroom content to be guided by the voices of the people in the room.

One way of thinking about the benefits and drawbacks of coursebooks is by using the metaphor of a shield. Shields protect people by serving as a barrier between themselves and some undesirable reality. Coursebooks serve this purpose, for example, by shielding teachers from their early-career skills gaps. As I recounted in the recent Autumn edition of *The English Connection*, I learned much of my teacher's craft by teaching without materials; but one thing I struggled with was planning a syllabus or a series of classes without a coursebook. The sheer randomness of classes sequenced in unprincipled ways can affect both teacher and students motivation. Coursebooks can shield us from such shortcomings.

But there are classroom realities that teachers should not be shielded from. Although coursebooks have a range of very practical benefits, they carry the risk of becoming a barrier between teacher and students. It is all too easy for busy teachers to begin seeing their classes as a matter of the "delivery" of coursebook content, and from there it is only a short step to seeing all of your students as essentially the same. That's when opportunities start getting missed.

One of these opportunities, for me at least, is the opportunity to experience joy in the classroom. Throwing away the shield means allowing my teaching to be spontaneous and responsive. Of course, there are times when classroom detours lead nowhere useful, and on these occasions, the coursebook can help us to get back on track. But on other days, allowing my learners to take control leads to the most meaningful of learning opportunities, when personal experiences lead learners to discover and resolve their own linguistic needs. In these moments, a sort of trinity of fulfilling emotions emerges: trust in my own professional competence, delight in helping the learners to express themselves, and pride in the linguistic gains that they appear to be making.

It is, perhaps, slightly selfish to think of classroom success in terms of how it makes me feel. But the benefits of teaching without a coursebook do not stop with the teacher's own sense of satisfaction. A more pedagogically oriented opportunity that can be lost behind the shield of a coursebook is the chance to discover and respond to each student's learning agenda – their "internal syllabus," in Michael Breen's term – which strongly influences what they take from our classes. Responding to the individual needs of our students not only helps our learners to progress; it also boosts their motivation and creates a sense of trust in the classroom.

Coursebook syllabi vary in the extent to which they might meet the individual needs of our learners, but it is arguably those that are most popular (i.e., coursebooks mass-produced by large publishing houses for global consumption) that do so least effectively. Such books rely on generalized estimates about what learners at a given proficiency level require. An experienced teacher with a good ear for their students' language ought to be able to do a better job both of diagnosing and treating these needs; a language course that never deviates from a coursebook syllabus can scarcely be called "learner-centered."

The temptation to fall back on coursebooks is strong – and with some justification. But we must resist it. On a rainy day somewhere in Southeast Asia, the convenience and face validity of a coursebook might lead a teacher to politely ask their students to turn to Unit 4, where they will study an impersonal lesson on the simple and progressive aspects of the past tense (example sentence: "It wasn't raining when I left the house"). In doing so, they might inadvertently ignore the animated conversations of their students, and thereby lose an opportunity to teach a more strongly contextualized, diverse, and meaningful lesson. The truth is that, had a few more students arrived on time that day in Penang, my "monsoon lesson" would have been passed over for a pre-planned coursebook lesson. Instead, I went with the stories of the people in the room, and the result was richer and more fulfilling for everyone.
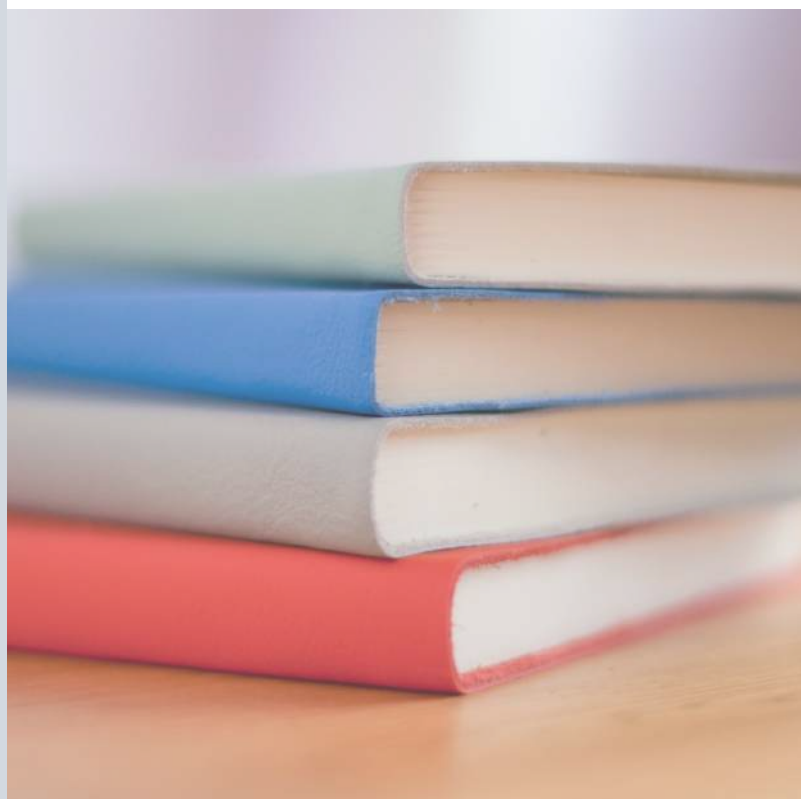
The Columnist
Peter Thwaites is an assistant professor of English education at Keimyung University in Daegu. He holds a PhD in applied linguistics from Cardiff University and is the author of numerous papers and articles on classroom interaction and L2 vocabulary learning. He has taught in Korea for more than seven years. Email: peterthwaites@kmu.ac.kr

The Classroom Connection

A Culture of Questioning

By Peter Thwaites

In the Winter 2021 issue of TEC, I argued that language teachers should prioritize the needs and voices of their students over prescribed coursebook content. Only by doing this, I suggested, can we truly describe our classrooms as "learner-centred." A reader got in touch to ask about this. His question was "How can teachers be more spontaneous and responsive on a daily basis?"

This gets to the heart of what I hope to achieve in this column. I want to persuade my readers that the foundation of a productive classroom is the connection that emerges when teachers allow their practice to be guided, at least in part, by their students' needs, preferences, and personalities; and moreover that there are solid techniques and methods that can help teachers to cultivate that connection. In my experience, one of the most reliable ways to connect with students is by asking and answering questions. This article is going to look at how to do that.

> ## "One of the most reliable ways to connect with students is by asking and answering questions."

Before getting into the details, though, we need to raise the issue of culture. In many classrooms around the world, questions receive only the most minimal of responses from students (sometimes that is all the teacher expects, sometimes not). Much of this is culturally bound. Classrooms reflect the wider cultures to which they belong: school culture, national culture, any sub-cultures to which certain students might subscribe. In some contexts, these cultural factors work out in favor of teaching styles that favor responsiveness over prescription. I found this to be true of teaching in Oman, for example. One day, at the beginning of a class with Omani adults, a student asked me what I had eaten for dinner the previous evening. After answering the question, I asked the students to work in groups of four to talk about the same question. An hour later they were still talking – asking and answering each other's questions about recipes, differences in dishes across national borders, and how they fit family meals around busy work schedules. I was able to relax into some of my favorite teacher roles – facilitator of effective communication, linguistic resource, classroom notepad, and participant in conversation. The prevailing culture of openness to asking and answering questions opened the door for this responsive teaching style to emerge.

In other contexts, though, the predominant culture makes it much harder to teach this way. There might be many factors here; expectations about student-teacher relations, stress about giving wrong answers, and fear of standing out all seem to be aspects of the often-anxious nature of Korean classroom cultures. Whatever the reasons, though, it is in such cultures that teachers need to work hardest to cultivate a classroom atmosphere of responsiveness. We must push back against the flow of the prevailing culture, making our classrooms places where normal rules do not apply.

So how can we recognize a productive "culture of questioning" in our classes? In a 1984 study, Joanna White and Patsy Lightbown investigated question usage in seven ESL classes in a secondary school near Montreal. They found that teachers asked an average of 200 questions per 50-minute class (around four questions per minute). This seems like quite a lot of questions. Could these classrooms therefore be said to have a "culture of questioning"? Further details from the White and Lightbown study suggests not, but they do help us to define what kind of classroom *would* meet this standard.

The first hint of a problem in the Montreal classes is that the students in these classes asked only eight questions per class, compared with the 200 asked by their teachers. Moreover, there was wide variance between classes: One group produced only one question, while another produced 47. Another hint came from discrepancies in the rate at which students answered teacher questions: One class answered 89% of teacher questions, while another responded to only 40%. Looking at possible explanations for these differences, White and Lightbown found that a key determinant of both was the amount of time that the teacher waited for students to answer their questions. The same two classes asked the most questions and gave the most responses, and in these classes the teacher wait time was 3.5 and 3.3 seconds per question. This compared with an average of just 2.1 seconds across all seven classes. In classes with the lowest wait time (1.2 seconds), only one student question was asked, and just 52% of teacher questions were answered.

But is wait time a correlate of greater student interaction, or its cause? Seminal research conducted by Mary Budd Rowe suggests the latter. Rowe found that when teachers were *instructed* to wait for between 3 and 5 seconds (as compared with other teachers who were told to wait only one

second), both question response rates and student questions increased – the same pattern observed by White and Lightbown. In addition, students in the longer wait-time classes gave longer, more confident answers to questions, and demonstrated greater student–student interaction. In the Korean context, Lee Kilryoung, in his 2004 article "Extended Wait-Time and Its Effect in ESL Class" seems to confirm at least some of these benefits.

These studies help us to identify some characteristics of question-friendly classes. They are places in which
- Teachers are willing to wait for students to respond to their questions;
- Students answer most of the questions that teachers ask;
- Where possible, these questions are answered at some length;
- Answers are delivered with some confidence; Students frequently ask questions of the teacher, and of each other;
- There is visible student-to-student interaction.

So, increasing the amount of time that you wait for students to respond seems like a reliable way to increase student participation. But there are other ways for teachers to cultivate a culture of questioning. I'd like to share some techniques that I've found to be helpful in my classes here in Korea. If you have quiet students, these methods will not suddenly turn them into extroverts (nor would we wish to do so); but they might help to relieve that part of their language anxiety that results from any prevailing culture of avoiding questions in the classroom.

The first is a practice that I've mentioned before: Use students' names. Being asked a question by name can make some students anxious at first, so start with simple yes/no questions, and move on to more open questions as learners become more comfortable. Another very gentle introduction to being asked questions is the "padded questions" technique, described in Jonathon Newton and Paul Nation's book *Teaching EFL/ESL Speaking and Listening*. In this activity, the teacher talks to the students about a simple topic such as their pets or their family. At various points in this talk, the teacher stops and asks a few questions of named students: "I have three brothers, one older than me and two younger. What about you, Minjung?"

In cultures where students are not expected to ask questions in the classroom, it is likely to be necessary to find methods that can gently train students to alter this expectation. One icebreaker that serves this purpose involves writing on the board some numbers that have a personal significance for you – birthdays, number of pets, your office number, etc. – and have the students ask questions to guess what each number refers to. A similar method involves telling students a story about your life, with the twist that you give students only a few hints about the topic,

and then require them to ask questions to uncover the rest of the story. After some preparation time, the students themselves can later be invited to the front of the class to "tell" their own stories.

Reading and listening activities can be handled similarly. Rather than simply playing a recording, students can be told the general topic of the text and can then ask questions regarding predictions of text content. The teacher can answer these questions with "yes," "no," and "maybe." The students' subsequent reading/listening tasks are then to check which predictions were correct and to figure out how the answers were linguistically realized.

Another activity good for modifying student–teacher expectations is "Control the Teacher," also described by Newton and Nation. The teacher can read out or dictate a text, but with the explicit instructions that students are to shout out requests to slow down, speak more loudly, repeat a sentence, etc. as required. With younger learners, the teacher can demo this by slowly whispering the text, forcing students to ask for more volume. The teacher can continue exaggerating their reading until the students get used to the idea of asking for changes.

One final suggestion is more of a principle than an activity. It is simply to consider using questions to elicit things *from*, rather than telling them *to*, your students. Perhaps the most common context for elicitation is in vocabulary teaching. Rather than telling students a word and then describing what it means, teachers can describe the word and have the students guess the meaning – "Does anyone know the English word for this?" But there is no end to the things that can be elicited from students. Try asking them, "What are we going to do in class today?" or "Which page of the textbook do we need today?" While the main purpose of these questions is to encourage students to think back to previous classes and notice continuities with today's class, you might also find that simply by asking questions like these, the students' sense of involvement increases.

Finally, it's worth saying something about how we should handle students' answers to our questions. Ultimately, the goal of activities like those above is to help students to feel comfortable around the idea of speaking up in class. This sense of comfort depends upon an atmosphere of acceptance, so it's important to ask questions that don't have right or wrong answers (though we can also use more constrained questions), and to respond with warmth to any genuine attempt at a response (though we can still focus on the form or correct errors in what the students say). This welcoming attitude towards questions is one of the keys to accessing the more "spontaneous and responsive" style of teaching that this column focuses on. I hope that the suggestions above will help you to access something of that style.

The Columnist
Peter Thwaites is an assistant professor of English education at Keimyung University in Daegu. He holds a PhD in applied linguistics from Cardiff University and is the author of numerous papers and articles on classroom interaction and L2 vocabulary learning. He has taught in Korea for more than seven years. Email: peterthwaites@kmu.ac.kr

The Classroom Connection

Encouraging Creativity in Korean Classrooms

By Peter Thwaites

Language learning is an inherently creative endeavor. We do not passively absorb new language; we construct our linguistic system through mental activity. Much of this requires creativity. We create hypotheses about language, for example, and test them in our speech or our writing, learning from the feedback we receive.

A willingness to take risks is an important part of this endeavor – so says a 2013 article by Jack C. Richards, entitled *Creativity in Language Teaching*, which lists characteristics of creative classrooms, framing risk-taking as a key component. Creative teachers are risk-takers, Richards argues, willing to try out new methods and use varied approaches to match with students. Good learners also take risks. Richards describes one student who took the risk of showing samples of his creative writing to his academic writing teacher and was rewarded with encouragement to make use of his creative writing skills in his research reports. When Richards turns to the properties of classroom activities which encourage creativity, risk-taking is again an essential component. In order to stimulate creativity, Richards implies, activities must encourage learners to let go of their worries about making mistakes so that they can push their linguistic boundaries.

In my experience, a willingness among learners to take risks and behave in creative ways is strongly influenced by a country's educational culture. I have taught in contexts where the local culture encouraged students to be talkative and unafraid of trying out new language in class. I've also taught in contexts (and many of my classrooms in Korea fit this category) where students are risk-averse and need considerable encouragement to be creative. If it's true that the willingness to take risks is culturally bound, then it follows that our approach to nurturing classroom creativity should also vary from one context to another.

What I'd like to suggest in this article, though, is that there is one very general technique which, when used appropriately, can help us to bring out our students' creativity in almost any context. This technique is the creative application of constraint.

The role of constraint on creativity is well described in an article published November 22, 2019, on the Harvard Business Review website (https://hbr.org/2019/11/why-constraints-are-good-for-innovation) that addresses a conventional wisdom on creativity, namely, the view that "by getting rid of rules and boundaries, creativity and innovative thinking will thrive" (para. 1). The study's authors argue that this view, though apparently widely held amongst business leaders, is incorrect. Reviewing more than a hundred studies on the relationship between creativity and constraint in businesses, the authors found that when managers imposed constraints, employees generated more varied solutions and connected ideas from more diverse sources than when working under freer, less constrained conditions.

In addition to challenging this misconception about creativity, the HBR article also offers a helpful taxonomy of productive constraints. It contains only three items: limiting resources (such as the working budget), imposing specific processes (such as following a pre-selected method for generating ideas), and specifying detailed completion criteria (such as the need to use certain materials in the construction of a new product).

It isn't too difficult to think of ways to apply these constraint types to language classrooms. In fact, we use them all the time. We limit resources, for instance, when we restrict students' dictionary usage or provide them with limited time to complete a task. We often impose specific processes when we insist that they produce a written essay plan or first draft before submitting a final essay. And we set completion criteria whenever we provide students with a rubric for their assignments.

But is the creative use of constraint really effective in all contexts? Does it apply equally well to the gregarious, risk-taking students I taught in Spain or the Middle East and to the quiet, risk-averse students I often face here in Korea? I would argue that it can but that a different approach is required in each setting.

Several years ago, while working at the British Council in Oman, I was asked to teach a month-long summer school for a group of teenagers. My students were the school's most linguistically advanced – confident, intelligent, self-motivated people with diverse interests. Seeking to give them room to spread their wings, I developed a "blank slate" project-based course in which they would be given free rein to create, in groups of three or four, a creative project that showcased their skills.

The students' initial reception to this idea was positive. They were excited by the broad remit,

and threw themselves into the process of gathering ideas. By the second or third lesson, work had begun on school newspapers, short films shot on mobile phones, and blogs about video games. There was energy in the atmosphere. But by the midway point, it was becoming clear that something was going wrong. Enthusiasm was in decline, and progress on many of the projects had stalled. Some groups claimed to be finished, but their work was low on quality and barely hinted at the students' language skills. Confidence dropped as learners began to realize that their projects would not match their expectations. Conflicts emerged over the direction that projects were taking, and accusations began to fly over who was pulling their weight and who wasn't. Most groups rallied as the course ended, but a sense of disappointment still hung over the finished projects.

In the light of the conclusions of the HBR article, we can interpret this situation as being a problem of too little constraint. Though my students' started with great enthusiasm and creativity, somewhere along the way they switched from this creative mindset to what the HBR article terms the path-of-least-resistance, a unspoken decision to get things wrapped up as quickly and effortlessly as possible, and in doing so, taking comfortable options rather than pushing for greater achievement. My students wanted their projects to be successful, but they also wanted to relax and conserve energy (it was a summer school, after all). A more proactive set of constraints, such as specifying the use of multiple media or insisting upon a live presentation to wrap up the projects, might have helped to tip the balance from lethargy to creativity.

Here in Korea, I've found myself faced with a slightly different challenge when seeking to stimulate my students' creativity. Although hard-working and diligent, my Korean students tend to be reluctant to take risks with their English. In my conversation classes, for example, the most trusted strategy often seems to be to simply keep quiet. When teaching presentation skills, the biggest challenge is often persuading students to let go of their scripts. Admittedly, my Korean students are often less linguistically advanced than the Omani group I described above, but even lower-level students in Oman, and several other contexts in which I've taught, seem much more at ease with the idea that risk is a part of the learning process.

It can be tempting to believe that this risk aversion is itself the result of constraint, that students already feel somehow restricted in their language use. We might therefore feel that our priority should be the removal of constraint, not its addition. But even in the Korean contexts described above, I believe this would be the wrong approach. Admittedly, the approach to constraint that I've found most helpful here in Korea is not the same one that I ought to have used in my Omani summer school. There, I needed constraints to raise the stakes, to ensure no easing-off on the risk-taking. Here, I've found the

most useful approach to be one that helps to make higher risk levels manageable. In other words, where in the Omani context I needed to use constraint as a "push" factor, here in Korea I need it to "pull" my students.

A task sequence that illustrates some "pull" factors is provided by Dave and Jane Willis in their 2009 book *Doing Task-Based Teaching*. Their activity focuses on the topic of drug abuse, and it contains a sequence of increasingly demanding tasks that slowly pull students towards the boundaries of their competence. Firstly, students are asked to individually respond to a series of statements (e.g., "All drugs should be legalized," "All convicted drug dealers should be given long prison sentences") by rating them on a four-point scale from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*, making notes to justify their opinions. These ratings and notes are then used as the starting point of a group discussion in which each student explains their own rating. Then follows the negotiation of a "group rating" for each statement. Finally, the results of this negotiation are presented to the rest of the class.

Compare this sequence to a simpler approach in which students simply talk to their partner about the same topic, and you'll see how much constraint is built into Willis and Willis' approach: constraints in what aspects of the topic are discussed, in the processes used to generate ideas, and in the task completion criteria. The goal of these constraints is to nurture students who are, in the Willises' words, "confident enough to make the most of their language with all its shortcomings and inaccuracies," thereby laying "a basis for [future] language development" (p. 33). They do this by breaking down a large and potentially intimidating topic into a series of much less intimidating sub-tasks. Together, these provide the pull factor needed to encourage students to use their linguistic resources creatively. The risk has become tolerable.

When planning lessons here in Korea, I believe that learners benefit when teachers use constraints to scaffold their exposure to risk in this way. It follows that teachers can benefit from reflecting on ways that constraints could be integrated into their classes. Imagine a speaking activity in which pairs of students discuss their morning routine. What constraints can we add to bring out students' creativity? Could we limit their resources? Specify that only the first thirty minutes from waking up can be discussed. Could we specify a process? Before the discussion, make a detailed list of everything you do within this period, and then base the discussion on these lists. Could we set completion criteria? Students must identify as many similarities with their partner's routine as possible, and be prepared to report these to the class. By constraining tasks in this way, you might find that your students' creativity finds the conditions it needs to emerge.

The Columnist
Peter Thwaites is an assistant professor of English education at Keimyung University in Daegu. He holds a PhD in applied linguistics from Cardiff University and is the author of numerous papers and articles on classroom interaction and L2 vocabulary learning. He has taught in Korea for more than seven years. Email: peterthwaites@kmu.ac.kr

The Classroom Connection

Dogme & I

By Peter Thwaites

In 2005, just a year after my CELTA course had taught me how to teach perfectly reproducible lessons, I discovered a small online chat group dedicated to discussing a wildly different approach. The group aimed to, according to Scott Thornbury at the TESOL International Convention (2022) in Pittsburgh, "look for ways of exploiting the learning opportunities offered by the raw materials of the classroom; that is, the language that emerges from the needs, interests, concerns, and desires of the people in the room." In other words, it sought methods for teaching languages through interaction and genuine communication. Its members shared descriptions of classroom activities and discussions of theoretical touchstones, which together hinted at a way of escaping from standardized teaching practices and, instead, building both individual lessons and wider curriculum content out of learners' voices.

I was captivated. It had taken only a couple of months of CELTA-style teaching – of presenting, practicing, and producing – for me to start feeling unfulfilled. I felt that by going into class with pre-selected content, I was assigning a passive role to my students, and thereby missing opportunities to let their needs guide our classes. True, my pre-CELTA teaching had been chaotic, but by starting from where the students were, it had made them feel involved and valued. It had pushed me to develop skills – an ability to create rapport, a capacity to address learner needs on the fly – which felt redundant in delivering teacher-centered PPP classes. The chat group exhilarated me because it made me believe that I could bring genuine interaction back to my classes without sacrificing educational gain.

Besides, it was just so exciting following the discussion. The group's first 600-odd posts communicated not only a new vision of language teaching but also the thrill of people finding their place. I feasted on the joy, respect, and togetherness that the group embodied, and it wasn't long before I was posting my own classroom descriptions and making contributions. Inherent in the group's appeal was its gently counter-cultural orientation. Since they viewed genuinely communicative classes as being unrepeatable, the group's members argued against standardization in all its forms, from the textbook-dominated classrooms to the dominance of on-rails methodologies in teacher training programs. It's not hard to see why this chimed with me: Having spent the preceding months feeling that the quality of my teaching depended on perfecting precisely that standardized approach, I felt freed. The year or so that followed were the most exciting of my career: Every time I stepped into the classroom, a sense of possibility came with me. And because I could share my experience with the chat group, I felt that it was not only my own students who could benefit but also a wider community who were shaking our profession up.

To be fair, I wasn't the only person in the world to be swept along by an online chat group in 2005. In fact, half the world probably felt the way I did. It was the height of Web 2.0, the period in which user-generated content began to alter the structure of the internet, and just under a year after, I discovered the ELT Dogme Yahoo group. Time magazine would declare "You" to be its person of the year in acknowledgement of the way that online activity was changing human interaction. In years since then, much of the infrastructure that initially enabled these online communities to emerge has disappeared (Yahoo Groups closed in 2020), replaced by larger but less coherent communities on Twitter or on the blogs and websites of star contributors. The ELT dogme movement fragmented in much the same way: Though its insights spread into classrooms all over the world, as a movement it became less collaborative, less coherent than during its heady beginnings. Ironically, given the importance that dogme attaches to the voices of individuals, the stories of its individual teachers became harder to discern.

As the dogme chat group fragmented, my efforts to develop a more communicative style of teaching became more solitary. As my career progressed, I took jobs in increasingly professional institutions who saw standardization as a means of establishing or protecting their reputations. Facing a need to "deliver" pre-determined content, and to prepare students for standardized achievement tests, spontaneity got pushed to the peripherals. Combined with the increases in teaching and administrative loads that come at higher pay grades, it often felt easier just to do the textbook stuff. Dogme started to become a fringe activity in my classes: We could pursue learners' needs and interests, but only after we'd completed Activity C on page 12. Although my own approach to dogme continued to evolve, I gradually lost track of the wider movement; In truth, I started to assume that the movement had, like me, lost momentum as its lofty ambitions hit up against day-to-day realities.

So, I was both surprised and excited to see Scott Thornbury (one of the founding fathers of the ELT dogme movement, and still its global figurehead) recently give a presentation to the TESOL International conference arguing that dogme had "come of age." Thornbury's argument rested on three propositions. Firstly, he argued that in the years since the dissolution of the dogme ELT group, he and others have made efforts to address the tendency for dogme to be defined in negative ways – for example, that it is "anti-textbook" or doesn't trust materials. He suggested that dogme can be framed more positively by discussing what it does involve – namely, a set of teaching practices in which cycles of task, feedback, and repetition are built from learner interests and aim to address (emerging) learner needs. Dogme therefore reveals itself to be a form of task-based language teaching in which standardized materials such as textbooks are replaced by texts created by the people in the room.

Secondly, Thornbury argued that recent research has offered a firmer theoretical basis upon which dogme can stand. In particular, he highlights the

growth of socio-cultural and usage-based views of language and learning. Both research traditions emphasize the social roots of language and the need for language learning to emerge from participation and social interaction. He cites, for example, Nick Ellis in his Cognitive and Social Aspects of Learning from Usage: "Language is learned from participatory experience of processing language during embodied interaction in social and cultural contexts" (2015, p. 61). Such research, Thornbury argues, provides theoretical support for the importance of the social and interactional aspects of classroom activity that the dogme movement has long treasured.

Lastly, Thornbury highlighted the extent to which teachers have found, and continue to find, inspiration and opportunity in the dogme approach. Quoting from teachers' Twitter posts, he showed how dogme can influence teaching careers. One teacher, for instance, claimed that dogme "marked my progression into actually being a teacher … not an instructional attendant." Such testimonies suggest the power of the dogme approach to connect teachers with the core elements of being a language teacher – the root practices of listening, noticing, scaffolding, and facilitating. They echo the process of reconnection with teaching essentials that I underwent when discovering the dogme ELT chat group.

So, is it true that dogme has "come of age"? Well sadly, I don't think it has. Thornbury's arguments certainly seem to suggest that it is less precariously poised than in its early years – more clearly defined and with deeper theoretical support. But dogme nevertheless remains a relatively marginal, counter-cultural aspect of TESOL culture. Scholars Geoff Jordan and Humphrey Gray (2019) have noted, for example, that "it is rare to see any of the alternatives [to standardized language teaching approaches, such as dogme] discussed in journals, or at conferences, or in teacher training courses such as CELTA" (We Need to Talk About Coursebooks, *ELT Journal, 73*(4), 438–446). This is to say nothing of the near-total lack of knowledge of these alternative methods in many EFL contexts. There is a reluctance or a resistance to the wider adoption of these methods. My take is that it doesn't feel true to talk of a method coming of age when it remains so marginal.

"So, standardization in TESOL isn't going anywhere."

This reluctance to embrace alternatives to TESOL standardization is not a new thing – indeed, it was a key part of dogme's founding ideology. As early as 1998, Scott Thornbury made an analogy between bottled water (which could be said to represent the privatization and commodification of something that nobody owns) and the publishing industry's treatment of grammar, which they "bottle" and commercialize in order to drive profit. The

dogme chat group also discussed the challenge of teaching alternative practices like dogme on initial teacher training courses like CELTA. (This discussion continued for some years on the website teachertrainingunlugged.com.) And of course, few would deny that it can be helpful, at least in some cases, to standardize teaching practices – doing so can help newly trained teachers to feel competent, increase professionalism in schools (at least on the surface), lend face validity to classroom practices, and also form the basis for wide acceptance of linguistic proficiency tests.

So, standardization in TESOL isn't going anywhere. But alternative methods like dogme have a role to play that goes beyond their immediate use in the classroom: to provide a check on the power and influence of standardization in language teaching. Its job is to make sure that teachers don't forget that real education requires real student participation – not just in the sense of speaking up during class time but by helping to guide curricula content. It may not be fair to suggest that dogme's coming of age can only be celebrated when the giants of the TESOL world have been felled; still, I think that it is impact, not clarity of theory or method, that alternative methods must be judged by. To maximize this impact, we need to talk about how to implement alternative methods at scale. Can initial teacher training programs, such as the CELTA, be adapted to help trainees teach without standardized methods? Can we persuade administrators that paying customers in language schools are not necessarily happier when standardized methods are used to erode the differences between individual teachers? Can we establish best practices regarding the classroom situations in which published materials really help, and in which they hinder?

Looking back on my own journey with dogme, I wonder now whether I began to drift away from the movement not only because it became more fragmented but also because it turned its focus inward, toward self-definition and theoretical support. I suppose that this is fair enough. But if Thornbury's claim of dogme's coming of age means anything, perhaps it is that the time has arrived for the movement to look outward again: to re-assert its critical, counter-cultural credentials. That is where it is needed most.

The Columnist
Peter Thwaites is a postdoctoral research fellow at UC Louvain, Belgium. He spent 20 years as an English teacher and teacher trainer in Asia, including many years in Korea. His interests include classroom interaction, group dynamics, vocabulary learning, and language assessment. Email: peter.thwaites@uclouvain.be