



The Naked Teacher:

Losing our dependence on textbooks

by Johh Bardos

“Throw away your textbooks and free yourselves from the tyranny. Teachers of the world unite; you have nothing to lose but your chains. “ Okay, maybe a bit too much, but consider this: How much of what you teach is decided by what you think your students need to learn and how much is decided by the next page in your textbook?

Naked teaching principles are based on the ideas of Hans Monderman, a traffic engineer who believes safer roads can be created by removing traffic signs, lights, crosswalks, etc. His basic belief is that roads can be made safer by removing all of these roadway constructs. Without these restrictions people tend to be more human and make eye contact with other drivers and pedestrians. Roads actually became safer and more humanized in the absence of rules and restrictions. Sometimes the structures and systems we create to make our lives better, actually defeat the intended purpose.

Perhaps language classes can benefit from this type of thinking. In the absence of textbooks and a predefined schedule of targets to teach, teachers are forced to consider the real needs of students. Students needs and wants come first, not the next page in a text book. Here is what the authors of Top Notch, Joan Saslow & Allen Ascher have to say;

Learners in the EFL setting lack exposure to the English language and opportunities to practice. In our experience, textbooks don't come near to providing enough quantity or quality of input, opportunities for practice, or enough deliberate and varied recycling to make English memorable. Most textbooks present something on page, say 36, and then that language is never seen

again after page 38! It's impossible to acquire a foreign language without enough multiple exposures, intensive practice, and systematic recycling to make it memorable.

Textbooks have inherent limitations due to their basic form. They are linear, they can't cover every variation of grammatical targets due to page constraints, they are only one context, they are not personalized for students, most often they are culturally neutral to appeal to a world-wide audience and they are generally not age-specific.

If you want to see if your students are actually acquiring the target vocabulary or expressions you are teaching, try a simple test. Go back a few months in your textbook, maybe 15 or 20 pages back and ask the students a question completely out of context to see if they can answer and understand. If the lesson was abilities, maybe ask them a question like “Can your mother swim?” If they answer, “Yes”, maybe they understand or maybe they don't. It takes some skills to effectively evaluate whether students have acquired the target or not. If they answer, “Yes, she can” it is likely that they have truly internalized that language. If your students can respond to and use English in this manner, I would guess that your lessons are not based on a single grammar target suggested in most textbooks. If you do use textbooks I would also guess that you are probably only using them for a small portion of class time. If your students cannot use previously learned targets effectively, maybe the very same targets you teach can be restructured to provide better results.

Here is a simple approach that will give your students the necessary review to be able to communicate the same targets you are currently teaching. Take any textbook you are using and look at the table of contents. Let's say there are 15 chapters, then you have 15 targets to teach. List each of those targets horizontally in a chart with all of the student's names in a class listed vertically. In each class, try to teach

in your textbook, maybe it wouldn't hurt to try a game where students encounter that vocabulary or grammatical structure. If they already know the target you can move on to something else. Maybe you will discover that they have forgotten a previous target that will facilitate the new one. Then it makes sense to go back and review that old target first. Many novice teachers plough through a lesson or textbook blindly without paying attention to whether their students are learning or not. Students learn at different speeds and have different learning styles. A teacher has to constantly evaluate what students know and make judgements about what to teach next. Some targets may be more effectively learned through a song, others through a game or a storybook. Some targets are best practiced through a dialogue or real communication with the teacher or other students. The point being that the textbook or teaching materials you use should not be the driving force of the class. What students need and want to learn is a far more productive focus for lessons. Put your students' needs first. "Students first" always.

Teacher Talk

I think this is the most important factor of all. Teaching a set of targets each class over a period of time rather than one target per class enables teachers to get a better understanding of where students are going in their learning. If teachers have a solid grasp of what students have learned and what they will be learning in the future, we will naturally and effectively learn to communicate at levels appropriate for each class. Looking at English lessons in terms of a page in a textbook is akin to wearing blinders. The focus becomes the current page and current target, often to the exclusion of everything else. Taking a broader view of what the children are learning allows teachers to find new ways to review and to connect with students. This is where the real communication takes place in an English class, the target English is secondary. In an ESL setting, children have dozens of hours of outside English exposure so clear grammatical targets as used in textbooks are effective. In an EFL setting, the only chance most children have to communicate in English is in the class. It is important to use class time as efficiently as possible. Everything teachers say should be a learning opportunity for students. Talk at too low a level and students don't learn anything new. Too high a level and students don't understand and just block it out anyway. I am fond of saying that everything I do or say in class can be a learning opportunity.... or not.

Ineffective teacher talk is a common stumbling block for new teachers. Initially, students do not understand anything that the teacher is saying. It takes time to learn how to simplify teacher talk to suit the level of students. For younger children especially, all the English they meet will be encountered in the classroom or through some type of materials. Teachers have a choice of using songs, books and games that are largely incomprehensible to students. Or teachers can carefully select materials and the English used in class so that students can acquire as much English as possible.

It is, in principle, not possible to find materials which would interest everyone. It follows that the emphasis should be moved from attempting to provide intrinsically interesting materials, which we have just claimed is generally impossible, to doing interesting things with materials ... these materials should be chosen, not so much on the basis of their own interest, but for what they can be used to do (Brown and Yule, 1983 p. 83)

Experienced teachers know that there are clear steps students must make to improve their English ability. Too big a jump and students will not comprehend. For example, asking students a question like "Have you completed your worksheet?" is much more difficult than "Finished?" Knowing what students are capable of understanding and slowly and systematically expanding their vocabulary is the fastest way to help students learn a language. To do this effectively, teachers need to understand what each class and student is really capable of. Just because targets were studied in the past, doesn't mean students know and use that English. Only massive amounts of repetition and constant assessment can ensure language acquisition. This is where the evaluation I mentioned before comes into play. Appropriate teacher talk and accurate evaluations of students have the added benefit of solving many discipline problems. Kids tend to misbehave when things are too difficult or too easy. Challenge kids appropriately and they will be more engaged in the lessons.

One of the most valuable training exercises I have for new teachers is to have them use one particular game, book or activity with several different classes of varying English abilities and ages. It becomes very clear that the way you talk to higher level and lower level students is a key factor in maximizing

English acquisition. It is obvious that the way you talk to a two-year-old is different from how you would address a 12-year-old, but it is much more difficult to differentiate between someone who has studied for four years and someone who has studied for only two. You can't learn appropriate teacher talk from the teaching manual in a textbook. Appropriate language can only be mastered by teaching all the targets in each level repeatedly. That repetition is necessary for students and teachers alike.

Ease of Lesson Planning

Planning classes specific to the levels of a particular class takes only minutes when there is a simple but effective evaluation system in place. Rather than teachers just passing time with the same activity for various levels and classes, level- and age-specific games, songs and activities can quickly be selected because the teacher can see clearly from the evaluation chart what students need to learn next. A teacher can look at the evaluation chart and say,

“This class hasn't mastered present continuous verbs, adjectives and prepositions yet. I will focus on these three things this class. We also haven't done school supplies in a long time so I will combine school supplies and prepositions in a game. We can do charades for the verbs, and we can play that adjectives bingo game we have. For a backup activity, let's do possessives, we haven't reviewed that in a while. Let's combine this with that blends phonics game.”

In a matter of minutes a focused lesson plan can be created specifically for each class. Students can be guided to learn what they need to learn and adequate review is ensured because teachers continuously but discretely evaluate students' understanding and ability to use the targets.

Coping with the realities of a conversation school

Students quit, new students join, some students are absent for extended periods of time. If you teach in a linear fashion like that dictated by a textbook, some students will inevitably miss major sections of what you are teaching. With constant recycling and dozens of review opportunities, it is much easier to ensure that all students will encounter all targets at each level.

Take a look at any textbook series for children. Look at all the targets children study over a period of six years in once a week EFL classes. I believe you will see that those targets are generally covered in six months to a year in a typical adult text. Studying six years or more for children is the equivalent of studying six months to a year for an adult. Developmentally, EFL children are not ready for the narrowly focused lessons most textbooks propose. Spend your limited class time engaging in real communication with your students and you will see more real dialogue evolve.

Before you throw away your textbooks and get naked, realize that it is not the content that is weak, it is just the linear page structure of books that can inhibit language acquisition. Of course, there are many great teachers teaching great classes with a variety of textbooks or other teaching materials. I would tend to say that great classes occur despite the materials used, not because of the materials used. Focus on chants and students need song cues to answer questions. Focus on flash cards and children need images to help understand the context of the question. It is important to understand that there is no single way best for all students or teachers. Over-reliance on any one type of teaching material or resource can limit the potential of students, and teachers for that matter. Most teachers naturally assume that textbooks are the only way to teach without considering the drawbacks. Textbooks are linear, whereas language acquisition happens in a spiral manner. The language in any given textbook is a small fraction of what students and teachers will need to use to communicate in the classroom. Different teachers have varying preferences and styles of teaching, not to mention students. It is impossible for any textbook or teaching resource to possibly be perfect for all using it.

There is a limit to what teaching materials can be expected to do for us. The whole business of the management of language learning is far too complex to be satisfactorily catered for by a pre-packaged set of decisions embodied in teaching materials. (Allwright (1981, p.9):

Textbooks are just one of many teaching tools. Games are tools, storybooks are tools, songs are tools, computers are tools. Textbooks are a tool for teaching just as a hammer is a tool for building. The problem is that when your primary tool is a hammer, every problem starts to look like a nail. As teachers, we need to get the experience and skills using a variety

of resources and techniques to fill our teaching tool boxes. Textbooks can initially reduce the effort and skills required of teachers, but this is the primary problem. Teachers need a basic knowledge of the complete syllabus that students will progress through. This helps teachers in three primary ways. Firstly, upcoming targets can be introduced at times when children genuinely want to know and communicate that English. Learning a language shouldn't be boring drills in an artificial context. All students learn best when they are learning what they want to learn. Secondly, previously learned targets can be reviewed and introduced naturally in the class when opportunities arise. Students need vast amounts of review and recycling to truly acquire language targets. It is difficult for teachers to review if even they themselves are not familiar with previously learned English targets. The third and most important factor is that teachers can learn to adjust their language appropriate to the level of each class. This is key in maximizing students' language acquisition. A great syllabus guides students through an ever-expanding knowledge of English. This syllabus can be manifested as words in a textbook, it can be in the heads of teachers or it can be a simple chart of targets that will be covered over the course of a year. No textbook series can possibly provide review in the variety of learning styles and contexts that students need. It is up to the teacher to fill in the blanks. Communication happens between people, not with a book as an intermediary. As teachers, we need to learn what our students need to learn first. Then we can focus on how to best help our students acquire that English.

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