

Classroom Dynamics

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Sue Leather, author of 'Safety and Challenge for Japanese Learners of English' (ETP/Delta), examines learners' apparent contradictory needs.

At first glance, 'safety' and 'challenge' appear to be opposites, yet both are important aspects of successful learning. How can they be reconciled?

Here is a teacher describing a lesson: "I recently decided to give a class of pre-intermediate mixed-nationality students a 'jumbled reading' exercise which concluded with a class discussion about relationships. Previously, they had done a lot of guided structural work; this was very different and I knew it could be difficult for them. I pre-taught the vocabulary in the reading task and did some other pre-reading activities. Then they got on with the task. I monitored and helped them, encouraged them when necessary, corrected them, and praised them at the end for a job well done."

This description is, I think, typical of the type of process that teachers go through all the time. We are constantly making decisions about what to do with our students,

and how to do it. What is evident is the teacher's concern with getting the balance right: her concern for the students to get the benefit of being challenged without the potential dangers, and her concern to make them feel safe in the learning environment.

The idea that safety and challenge are important to learning is one that permeates pedagogy. On training courses, teachers are taught to move from the known to the unknown, to think of learning as 'building blocks', and to provide learners with both a secure environment for learning, and challenging activities which encourage curiosity.

Theorists, too, recognize the importance of balancing the two. Krashen's 'comprehensible input' or 'input plus one', is, in a

technical way, talking about safety and challenge. Input may be comprehensible, and therefore safe, but there is a 'gap' which challenges learners to develop their language further. Similarly, in the field of pedagogy, Vygotsky's 'zone of proximal development' suggests that learning takes place when there is a combination of safety, by way of adult or peer support, and challenge, offered by input at a level just beyond that of the learner.

Degrees of safety and challenge

As well as the safety that results from not being given tasks or material which are so far beyond their level that they have no hope of success, learners have what we might term social and psychological needs. They need to know that the teacher is going to use her authority to protect them from being made to look foolish. With some cultures this need for safety seems to be particularly pronounced: with Japanese learners, for example. The concept of safety has a high value in Japanese society, perhaps partly because of the importance of 'face'. Another factor may be what Hofstede refers to as 'the strong/weak uncertainty index', which suggests that cultures differ in their acceptance of uncertainty. Some of us enjoy being 'thrown in at the deep end' more than others, and this is a cultural, as well as an individual, preference. But though it may vary in intensity, the need for safety is a cultural constant.

In the classroom, learners from all cultures need a measure of safety, but this alone is not enough for learning to take place. There also needs to be an element of challenge. This may be high challenge, being 'thrown in at the deep end', or it may be a relatively low challenge, such as Krashen's 'input plus one'. Choice depends on a large number of factors; the teacher's skill lies partly in being able to judge the level of

challenge required at any given time.

Balance

In some way, then, effective teaching and learning always depend on a careful balance of safety and challenge, but the relationship between the two is not a linear one. Although they might be presented as discrete entities, both should be present in all classroom activities. Challenging activities will not be successful unless there is a context of safety, and challenging, counter-cultural activities, in particular, should always be done within a framework of safety. The concepts are not polar opposites, therefore, but complementary, and it is in the balance, or interplay, of the two which makes teaching and learning successful.

We can represent this interplay visually. In the diagrams below, safety is the outer ring, always holding 'holding' the challenge, which is smaller or bigger, depending on the activity.



This is a different way of conceptualising safety and challenge and one which could be useful in pushing forward our thinking about what it is that makes teaching and learning successful.

References:

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