"F-R-O-N-T: 5 Ways To Make 'Exploring' (in an ESL classroom) A Shared Adventure, Rather Than A Disembodied Barrage"

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ABSTRACT

Combining cooperative learning strategies, storytelling-as-a-performance-art skills, and public speaking fundamentals can make "Exploring" (in an ESL classroom) a shared adventure, rather than a disembodied barrage (resulting from misused tools). Audience analysis when applied to a classroom of students helps instructors to accurately target initial and ongoing needs, so that "change for the better" becomes a healthy habit. All too often language instructors face non-responsive students. There are reasons, other than "this group just seems to be that way," for such behavior. Employing some simple techniques could turn your classroom into a fun-filled adventure. This paper puts forth the FRONT approach to engage students, rather than to repel them (or, worse yet, to accept apathy), within the classroom. **F**raming, then Painting; **R**eactive and Proactive; **O**wn, Don't Moan; **N**o Techno Babble; and **T**ales – when applied in YOUR classroom - will lead to students wanting to return and participate. Developing such a win-win learning situation helps everyone to come out in FRONT in (second) language acquisition efforts!

WIN-WIN APPROACHES

In the language learning classroom should we offer tangible (capitalizing on students' extrinsic motivation) rewards for instructor-perceived achievements? Should punishment be considered for "non-productive" student behavior? Both of these put the instructor in the role of judge, and demean the students' position from the start. Why create such barriers in the first place? Instead, we could acknowledge learners as responsible individuals who have taken up a challenge and deserve to be coached through the language acquisition process within a relationship based in mutual respect.

By capitalizing on a learner's intrinsic motivation, perhaps we could more readily satisfy her/his curiosity (Dev, 1997) and subsequently, augment positive team-building approaches within the classroom as a whole. This requires examining and working through cultural variances within the class group, as well as estimating levels of ability for self-directed learning of all members of the group.

By encouraging risk taking in a non-threatening environment, coach-learner relationship(s) – (both instructor-to-student, and student-to-student) - and by offering additional resources for comparative follow-up self-directed learning, sharing of responsibility within the learning process can be expanded. When instructors let their students know that through a challenging, truly cooperative effort, every learner's (second) language ability could be elevated, they provide the impetus for exploration.

AUDIENCE WITHIN A CLASSROOM

Students can be asked to consider the classroom group as an audience. A few key elements concerning interactions between a speaker and her/his audience can improve expression of mutual respect, while increasing awareness of the value of peer input

within (second language) exchanges. Whenever one person is speaking, all others - including the instructor, become the audience. Once that tenet is established, everyone can be reminded that good speakers are good listeners. So, in order to have (your) own voice heard, pay close attention to what others have to say. But, rather than being told to wait until a raised hand is recognized by the speaker, each student is asked to be an active listener, to say out loud any relevant idea that springs into her/his mind at the moment, while also making a quick note on paper (that would be used to verify or clarify something the speaker has said). As in a question and answer session at the end of a speech, students ask direct and complete questions when the speaker pauses during the classroom interaction. That way, input will be appropriate and not stray off topic within a discussion. An added plus is that group thinking springboards from this.

Audience members follow intently and often express their thoughts out loud when listening to an effective speaker who leads them from premise to proved conclusion. This idea of completing the speaker's thought with (your) own words can be applied within a classroom group. Students can be asked to contribute vocabulary or "fill in the blanks" for classmates who appear to be at a loss for a word, or who cannot finish the train of thought. This assistance given to peers also leads to students trying to "fill in the blanks" when the instructor wants to check for comprehension of ideas being covered during a class meeting, or to review information from a previous class meeting.

Looking at audience from a speaker's point of view, students should pay attention to the behavior cues given back from the audience. If someone disengages from the group by looking at the ceiling, or ends up face down on the desktop, then immediate attention-getting action is needed on the speaker's part. When responsibility is placed on the students' to maintain the audience's interest, some very creative and funny moments ensue!

IMPLEMENTING F-R-O-N-T

F = FRAMING, THEN PAINTING

Since language learning is a constant layering or building process, "painting" is used here rather than "drawing" or "sketching." Drawing and sketching include the process of erasing what has already been documented as expressed thought. Instead of getting rid of those thoughts, however, we have the opportunity to better express them, to further define them or add to the learning as it takes place. So, by providing the framework, then guiding learners through the process of filling in the details to complete that particular learning session - painting, the instructor can ensure that each session becomes worthwhile in and of itself.

For every class section, and every class meeting, it is important that the instructor constructs a verbal and written frame - the complete classroom schema (in a briefing), then documents the classroom experience as students and instructor go through it together, and finally, provides a review (debriefing). This gives the parameters that every student needs (regardless of whether s/he is in the class to secure an "A" grade, or to acquire or improve language skills - no matter what the final grade on record). Once that has been provided, it is up to each individual student to decide whether s/he

wants to put in additional effort (e.g. clarifying notes during the class meeting).

The system for flow of information needs to be described, demonstrated and reinforced by the instructor. Prior to the beginning of a class meeting, post all (intended) class activities for that day, as well as approaching deadlines of all tasks/assignments at a specific location on the classroom board. This gives students the chance to write down important information, and to ask questions of fellow classmates, or of the instructor, regarding what has been posted.

In addition to the in-classroom posting, use of a discussion or message board on an electronic portal can be quite useful for reinforcing information exchange. One advantage of this system is that students can use it like a "blog" site if they wish – providing the opportunity to discuss (with each other, or with the instructor) course projects or concerns. Plus, this medium gives the instructor a chance to respond and provide additional clarifying information to any questions posted. This can save time and effort if one student has a question that several classmates share. Note: It is important that students understand that these types of electronic communication channels are NOT confidential; students should not post confidential student-to-instructor concerns on it. Explanation of this concern demonstrates to the students that the instructor wants to respect the rights of each individual, and it establishes the value of student-instructor conferences during office hours to focus on individual learning needs.

<u>Modeling</u>

To encourage critical thinking, it is important that instructors not only tell students what to expect, but also model and give guidelines concerning activities or information to be processed. Otherwise, heads may nod, but true comprehension of the intended lesson may not occur. For example, if the purpose in a class meeting is to identify the features of a well designed set of power point slides, then: 1) show the students some examples of poorly designed power point slides; 2) have them discuss in pairs or small teams the poor features of the slides as they perceive them to be – and have students dictate to you what changes they would suggest for those slides; 3) edit and improve those slides based on your additional input to their suggestions; and, 4) show them the differences between the original (flawed) power point slides and the improved (by students and instructor) slides. Complement all the class team on a job well done!

To complete the critical thinking process of the above example, further discuss with the students how their (other) suggestions might be used for a different specific purpose of the overall power point presentation, and the specific audience that would benefit from such changes. That reinforces a<u>ll s</u>tudent input, and helps students to recognize that different audiences have different requirements or needs.

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ACTIVITY: TEAMS OF 3 PEOPLE – defining terms and writing goals essays
TERMS TO DEFINE:
Tasks; Rules; Assignments; Goals; Choices; Individual; Team; Teamwork; Success; Strategies

Within the framework of communication/information flow, students could be asked

to establish a hierarchy of information based on specific terms provided by the instructor. So, let's go through an example of "Framing, then Painting." Teams of 3 will reach consensus regarding definition(s) of given terms. Then teams will provide definitions to be considered by the whole group present. The instructor will provide clarifying information only if needed to accurately portray the terms provided. Otherwise, the instructor will merely serve as the facilitator and whole group recorder of this task.

After whole group consensus of definition of terms, individuals will be asked to identify three specific goals (of each individual – these can be specific to the course, concerning major area of study, or goals outside of classroom involvement) to be pursued in the next 6 months. Then, the instructor will give a quick review of essay structure. This will be followed by the original teams of 3 re-grouping to help each other organize structure for an essay (of at least 5 paragraphs). Team members are to ask each other "why" questions concerning all goals stated. Each individual is to be responsible for an essay, but team members can work through organizational structure together. Terms discussed are to be used in that written piece. [Note: In this workshop, we will stop the activity prior to writing of first draft. In the classroom, these written goal essays would be a homework assignment, and they could be referred to (by instructor with each student) throughout the term to gauge students' progress toward achieving target goals].

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R = **REACTIVE AND PROACTIVE**

The traditional (Macao, and several other areas of Asia) student's role within a classroom has been completely reactive. Students were given information, and then later told to reiterate that information accurately to be considered successful in an assessment. Rote memorization is the main element in this process. To change these students into proactive learners means requiring more decision making on their part.

Proactive students should express wants and needs. Whenever possible, they should be involved in the decisions of the classroom. Their needs should be addressed and met within overall classroom interaction. A simple example of this would involve responding to spontaneous situations that arise within the classroom. One extremely hot day, the air conditioning failed in our classroom in the middle of an activity that was particularly challenging for the students. They were working very hard, but getting overheated (literally) and losing enthusiasm as a result. So, I simply asked them to tell me what they wanted to do right at that moment. One student made a comment about a movie he'd just seen. Another student followed up with, "Let's watch a movie." I didn't have a movie with me, so I said, "Sorry, I don't have a movie with me; but, what would you like to do that has something to do with movies?" Another student said, "Let's talk about movies we saw recently!" So that's what we did – small groups discussed their particular movies; then, members round robin rotated to different groups and shared ideas about their initial team members' movies. At the end of class everybody was excitedly sharing all the latest movie tidbits, and I had to ask the students to please leave the (still very hot) classroom!

Confidence building activities can help this reactive-to-proactive perspective change to be a positive, rather than negative or frustrating, experience for all involved. Peer coaching can help to build such confidence. In this activity, the instructor provides a

common topic, and then asks the class to separate into pairs. One student of each pair is designated as the holder of all the information needed, but that student's partner is to present the information to the audience. The presenter must ask "why" questions of her/his partner to get full perspective on what exactly is to be expressed to the audience. The first time through this process should involve a very brief presentation of less than two minutes.

Initially, there is angst and stress because students aren't sure just what is actually happening. Questions arise, like: "How could **I** say what s/he wants to say?" or, "**Why** should I try to say that; just ask her/him." The process flies in the face of traditional training and logic as they have known/experienced it. After a couple minutes of students' attempts to follow the instructions, the instructor should model the procedure. Doing it this way creates more of a discovery and risk taking environment for the learners. They will, in turn, be more inclined to take that initiative in similar tasks later. If the instructor models before this discovery attempt, students might not even attempt to figure out the process, but simply do what they have always done in their traditional system of learning – wait to be told what to do!

So, when modeling, have a student tell the instructor what is to be presented; then, the instructor should ask questions of the student partner to clarify purpose of the presentation – prior to giving the presentation to the audience.

If, during the presentation, the instructor purposely makes a blatant mistake which the student partner recognizes and identifies, the whole group will see that it is okay to make mistakes in the (critical) learning process. Then, the entire group can focus on the process itself.

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ACTIVITY: PARTNERS – Peer Coaching –
Speech topic = "To what extent, if any, should ESL learners' first language be used in the ESL classroom?"
One partner outlines a 2 min. speech; other partner delivers the speech

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O = OWN, DON'T MOAN

If students feel that they somehow have an influence within the classroom learning process, they will be motivated to participate fully in that process (Brooks et al., 1998). Involving students in simple decisions within the classroom can motivate them to learn. One example is to use music that students have provided (when designing listening exercises for their class).

Sharing responsibility within routine classroom (maintenance) tasks can help students assume more responsibility in the learning process too. Having students as timers for fellow students' presentations helps them to be more aware of the budgeting of time within their own presentations. Asking students to assign specific roles within their groups (e.g. recorder, facilitator), rather than the instructor assigning roles, encourages students to take on ownership. Relying on students to take on ownership within the classroom, to use peer behavior monitoring, is much more pleasant for all involved than having the instructor impose punitive measures in order to maintain student focus. If students become distracted and the instructor simply stops speaking, the

power of silence reminds students to help peers to reconnect with the task at hand.

Student ownership means students need to think critically. One way to explain the importance of students' involvement in decisions is to discuss their own (tertiary) education. They are consumers of a product – the product is (language) education. If they can see a practical use of that target language in their future, then it is a true investment that is worth extra time and effort. So, a discussion that involves students looking toward their future(s) and speculating on uses of the target language in that future, could help those who have not attempted, or are not attempting, critical forward thinking.

If, however, no practical application (of the target language) can be anticipated in their future, then the motivation might dwell in the course grade desired. That would entail discussion of how to be a successful (second language) student in that particular class. Both these discussion areas challenge students to step out of their usual comfort zones and investigate new territories.

N = **NO TECHNO BABBLE**

Use of technology tools within the classroom should not be so complicated that students become intimidated or alienated by them. Any technology use should be for a specific purpose, not just to be flashy or to offer a different medium. If a movie clip is shown, prior information concerning the overall context of that clip, along with explanation of what the purpose is for showing the clip, should be given. Viewing/study guides are ideal. Simply bombarding students with media can result in their confusion or frustration.

If a common portal is available for posting of course materials and supplementary information sources, it is important that students are adequately coached in the use of the portal, and that they demonstrate ability in using that resource. Otherwise, all that useful information sits like a book gathering dust on a shelf.

<u>Making Connections</u>

Help students to make the critical connections between course objectives and practical applications (in real life situations). Also, attempting to create bridges of understanding and comparative explanations within the curriculum helps students to avoid confusion. One example would be to point out similarities of a purpose statement for a speech and a thesis statement for an essay. If students can recognize that the organizational structure for each follows a similar pattern, it could help with overall acceptance of the organization of (critical) thought in the learning process.

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ACTIVITY: TEAMS OF 5 – "How do YOU use technology in YOUR classroom?" Teams share applications; then, shift members to meet with new people & share ideas with other teams

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T = **TALES**

Recently, while interviewing a small business owner in Macao concerning the challenges she faces in the rapid expansion of this city, I was given a valuable cultural

anecdote.

> "The majority of Macao Chinese tend to be very shy; they tend not to express themselves properly. Like, if you ask them something, even if they don't understand they'll say, 'YES,' because they're afraid – 'if I don't say 'yes' it means that I didn't understand and therefore I'm not that smart.'" – Nina de Senna Fernandes Lichtenstein

It is important within the classroom experience that we share and applaud cultural idiosyncrasies and/or tendencies. Through discussion concerning these cultural incites, students and instructors can better understand communication barriers that might ensue as a result of cultural issues or sensitivities.

Personal stories should be encouraged to enhance engagement within the classroom. This leads to recognition of the importance of using specific, real examples in order to further define or clarify meaning within messages given to listeners or readers.

Effective use of (traditional) tales, or stories within the classroom could include: sharing tales from the instructor's home culture; sharing tales from the students' home culture(s) [as told by their instructor]; sharing tales from the students' home culture(s) [as told by students]; and, personal stories, anecdotes or incidents – requested by the instructor – delivered by different students at each class meeting to the whole class group.

Such information sharing often draws like-minded people into friendships that had not been established prior to the sharing of personal stories. It also helps to reinforce ongoing rapport between all class members, thereby enhancing the learning environment!

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ACTIVITY: INDIVIDUALS – "One of my Life Changing Moments" (2-3 minute impromptu speeches – as many as time will allow in the session).

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