

How I Pay Attention in Class

by Mario Rinvolucri

I remember once, as a young teacher, giving some students a dictation on a hot summer's afternoon and actually going to sleep halfway through it! That experience jolted me into thinking about paying attention, which, I would suggest, is possibly more important than what we say, do, or don't do. If we want our teaching to be reactive to each student and to what is going on in the group, then the way we observe is of primary importance. Gattegno (1976) says it all in one of his maxims: "The students work on the language and teacher works on the students" (p. 14).

Let me whet your appetite with a couple of examples of very different types of observation. During a writing exercise, I may move around the room and simply observe the physical way that people are writing because the way they write gives me another vision of who they essentially are. I watch, for example, how they space the words, how joined up their letters are, how they slant the letters, how fast their hands move over the page, and how much they dig into the paper.

In the second example, I am doing a puzzle story activity (see Rinvolucri, 1999). I ask one student to sit outside the group and represent his or her fellow students on a piece of paper as small boxes. Each time a classmate volunteers a question or a comment, the student puts a tick in the relevant box, and each time a classmate responds to a prompt from me, the student marks a cross in the appropriate box. If the activity lasts 10–15 minutes, I am given a simple, accurate picture of how much each person volunteered, how much I prompted students, and which students were not verbally active.

As I have continued to "work on students," I have found that observational opportunities fall into three categories: linguistic, psychological, and inward.

<1>Linguistic Observation

- I may observe all the things that the students get surprisingly right in their language one morning. I may take notes and feed a few of these things back to the students at the end of the lesson. It makes sense for me to be aware of how high a level students can reach linguistically, especially when they are on form and feel good. It is also important for them to be aware of this.
- I may decide to listen closely to the students' language and notice when a student has said something correctly and adequately, but where I surmise the student does not have other means for expressing the idea. Suppose I hear a student describing habits and saying *often, usually, and normally* over and over again. I realise he does not have *to tend to* as part of his active vocabulary, so I teach this high-frequency semimodal verb (see Carter & McCarthy, 1997). Here I am observing the "safe" ways students say things and offering alternatives.
- One morning when I do a lot of oral correction, I may decide to observe the way each student reacts to it. I know full well that some students internalise teacher-initiated correction and others mentally delete it because they learn by taking the initiative themselves. This observation is useful because it helps me identify who should be orally corrected and who should be left in peace. It helps me understand who the very self-referenced, independent learners are.
- I may decide to watch students' body language and gestures. Little is more bizarre than a student with very good English in all areas except for speech-linked movements. This area is one that speakers are least conscious of when they are "in flow" in a foreign language. In this kind of observation, I need to register and remember some of the off-

beam gestures that accompany specific snatches of speech so that I can feed them back to the speaker.

- If I know the language(s) of my students, I may decide to listen contrastively—in other words, listen to the sounds they make in English but allow myself to picture what they are saying in their mother tongue. If I hear someone in a class of Italian low-intermediate students say, for example, "Anyway, I am here since 2 weeks," I mentally hear "D'ogni modo, sono qui da due settimane." The phrase the student has put into English as *anyway* is a neutral discourse marker in Italian and has none of the slightly dismissive feeling it takes on in English. By listening in this way, I can give the student some useful bilingual information. The more salient verb tense error is also contrastive.
- I may listen to voice uses that are un-English. Some students may get their volume control wrong, either by speaking too quietly (e.g., some Japanese women) or by booming (e.g., some Turkish men). Certain languages tend to be spoken either more quickly than English (perhaps Cantonese) or more deliberately than English (e.g., Finnish). Some languages (like Greek) have different conversational interruption rules from English. Some students will tend to speak English at a higher or lower pitch level than is normal for the language. Successful modification of these voice features is not easy, but if it happens, it definitely improves the way the student comes across orally.

I presume all of you will accept that the sorts of language-focused observation outlined above make sense, to a greater or lesser degree, because we can surely all agree that language is the domain of the language teacher. However, in my view, to be a language teacher without an interest in psychology is like being a fisherman who is unconcerned about water, so for me the next section of this article is the most interesting.

<1>Psychological Observation

- I may decide to pay a lot of attention to students' feelings, ideas, or opinions with the intention of committing some to memory in order to play them back to their authors later in the course. If I manage to retain and replay even 5% of what I hear in class, the effect on the students concerned is magic: They feel that what they say is important enough for me to remember. (I learned this student-self-confidence-boosting idea from Morgan, 1983, 1986.)
- I may decide to watch the students' eye movements when they are answering my questions or when they are doing small-group work. I know that students who look up and to the right and left and sometimes gaze into the distance in an unfocused way are talking from the visual part of their mind. Those who look down to the left tend to be talking from within their inner monologue/dialogue, as if they were talking to themselves. People tend to go into this inner-talk mode more when speaking a second language because it is in their inner space that they find the words. Students who look down to the right a lot are speaking from their emotional part. I pay close attention to students who speak from this eye movement: They tend to be telling you things with strong feelings attached to them, so it is sensible to be ready to respond in an emotionally adequate way.
- Eye movement patterns are among the best indicators of how visually, auditorily, or kinaesthetically a student experiences the world (O'Connor & Seymour, 1990).
- Sometimes, I may not feel like observing in a technically exacting way. Instead, I may programme myself to tune into the singularity of each student, notice just how differently they see and feel the world from the way I do, and wonder at their otherness. It is this striking otherness that makes teaching utterly new to me in each lesson even after 35

years in the area of education. I often do this "wonderment" observation on the first morning of an intensive class. For example, on the first morning of an advanced class, a student from Trondheim, halfway down Norway, had just described the climate of the area she lived when a student from Rome burst out, "But . . . how can anybody live there?" I sat there enjoying my amazement at the naiveté, spontaneity, and lack of interpersonal awareness of the Roman, and wondering how the outburst might affect the Norwegian, who had been brought up near North Cape and who, upon marriage, had moved south to what she considered the relatively mild climate of Trondheim.

- Every now and then I observe the students' outer appearances: clothing, colour coordination, shoes, earrings, the way they wear their hair. A girl's hair up in a tight bun can indicate a different mood from when she has it tumbling over her shoulders.

<1>Observation Inwards

Equally important to linguistic and psychological observation is observation inwards, being aware of some of the things going on inside me. How aware am I of my feet, of my posture? How am I breathing? What emotions am I carrying from before I came into this room? I could be carrying stuff from a dream, from home, or from a conversation I had with a colleague a few minutes earlier. How well attuned do I feel today to this group? Is my state good enough, or would I benefit from modifying it? To what degree is the group inhabiting my mood in a congruent and useful way?

Some teachers may fail to realise the huge impact of their inner state on any group, particularly if the students are young. Students of any age, though, are unconscious experts in reading the teacher's mood, and this ability is a powerful reason for teachers to work on inward observation and on modifying their inner state. In my view, a central task for teachers is to go

into class in an open, unhassled, and congruent state of mind, heart, and stomach. To take this task seriously has four results: (a) You maintain better discipline, (b) you teach more effectively, (c) you enjoy yourself more, and (d) you keep burnout way over the horizon.

But enough of me! I have used my experiences in observation as examples simply because I am the area I know best. What is important is the reactive, creative thinking you have been doing while reading this article. If you pay attention to aspects of teaching in ways that could be useful to your colleagues, why not send them to Phil Quirke, the editor of Out of the Box (phil.quirke@hct.ac.ae)? Many voices are more interesting than one.

<1>References

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