

Interview with Mario Rinvolutri

8/15/87c by Max Holgersen

LT-Mario, you do a lot of teacher training. In your mind, what is a good teacher? What makes a good teacher?

MR-A person, perhaps, who has a capacity for being in an OK way with a group of people as group leader, which is a very general way of answering your question. But I don't have model in my mind as to what a good teacher ought to be or should be.

LT-On teacher training then?

MR-We're trying to bring out the latent capacities in a person, but it has to be within their frame, because otherwise you're doing nothing. I can't at all conceive of training towards a model kind of behavior in a teacher. In a sense what happens, because training courses, similar to other kinds of courses, do have a kind of content but the trainee also has a great deal of responsibility in picking out the things, the aspects which for her or him make sense. The individualization, by its nature, is going to be done by the trainee. But you ought to offer a frame which allows that to happen as easily as possible.

My personal aim is to help people, if it's necessary, to modify the way they relate to their students. We use lots of techniques. We give them lots of goodies but the meta-aim, the real aim, is to try to modify the way they relate to their student if this needs modification, and sometimes, of course, it doesn't. So in a sense, the techniques are screwdrivers, they're the tools toward another aim.

LT-How do you get teachers to move from "activities as self-contained entities" to seeing the theory or seeing the system?

MR-From the linguistic point of view, it's difficult because

it depends on the concept of language that they have from their initial training; implicit and explicit from their university or ~~universe to their~~ college studies. And I suppose we don't really tackle that too much. Very often the way they see teaching in terms of their teaching, in terms of their pedagogical activity is the way it's defined in the coursebook. So if they come on to the Cambridge English Course, for example, they are going to suddenly upgrade vocabulary. And if they are teaching with another textbook, they'll be very much conditioned by what that textbook gets them doing. The most interesting thing to me is how they fit new things, new technical ideas, new nitty-gritty technique things into perhaps a different way of seeing their students.

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A very simple example is listening work. And listening for real, to what is actually being said rather than listening purely for language correction. I think that would be a fairly general aim, to try to encourage that.

In terms of the psychological aspects, one thing is to discover new capacities in yourself. For example, in my own development as a story teller I had one automatic "Mario" way of telling a story. Through watching colleagues suddenly I realized that there were other ways, maybe more powerful, and through going to the odd workshops in the field of storytelling as an art, I found

that there were yet other ways. And I've used these insights, these techniques, these new feeling "fields" to try to diversify from the original "there is only one way a Mario-person can tell a story." And for me that's been very enriching. To escape, in a sense, from the shell that our lifscript has given us as a teacher and to try to go beyond it. Hopefully, much more positive than negative. I don't think you're going to grip the soul and the heart of a teacher on a training course and if you simply make him go away feeling less adequate than before. He needs to go away feeling more adequate having found new things in himself. And since we only use a tiny percentage of what we are, it's not that difficult to open a few more windows. It's very feasible, even on a short course.

LT-You spend a lot of time on the road doing teacher training workshops. Do you ever worry that, for example, after a JALT conference, everyone goes out and during that first week, every class is full of new ideas but by the second or the third week, things start to dwindle?

MR-I feel that those kind of workshops are like the trailers for a film. And you don't expect a person to react with their full strength to a trailer that you see on the cinema screen for 2 or 3 minutes. If they never see the film, then, well, it will have been one of those little episodes. Hopefully, by writing magazine articles and by writing books one gives some people the chance of sort of continuing what they got a taste of at a JALT workshop. It would be arrogant, it would be heuristic to believe that an hour workshop or a three-hour workshop, or the one-day workshop or the one-week workshop you are going to radically transform something as complex as a complete human being. I don't think it works that way. If from this roving work I manage to positively

effect, over a period of time, 10% of the people I work with, that's not too bad, in terms of behavior change, rather than in terms of using one little technique one time. I do think that techniques have their own intrinsic power, however. I think that a reasonably sensitive person who gets into working with a technique can be partly changed by it. Not really by the technique but by the way his students operate within the frame of the technique. That's happen to me this year; I picked up a rather nice idea for transcription work for taking down a text you just read. It's so simple that I thought it was nothing at first. I didn't understand the technique at all. You put a series of little passages, hopefully of a memorable sort, outside your classroom. You ask the students to leave their pens and papers in the classroom. They go outside. They read the text. They cope with all the comprehension problems and they pick 2 or 3 that they relate to strongly, each individual does, ←

and the task then is to go back into the room and write down the passages exactly as they are there on the wall. And I thought, maybe the same thing you're feeling, "What's so great about that?" But what I discovered was, It's a whole exercise because it's actually an area in which you are working entirely as an individual in rapport with the writer who is outside on the wall, but you're working within the group. And there is something very special about very individual about very individual work happening within the group. You bump into people in the doorway, all sorts of things like that. And that was an example of a learning process which my students offered me within my particular framework. But my framework was completely empty. And it's now set me thinking about other exercises in the same family. I think that particular technique has allowed me to become a slightly better teacher of very introverted students, whom I'm not the best teacher for. So there you've got a tiny little technique which I can describe to you in three sentences which can have a very strong modifying effect on my appreciation of certain students in my group.

LT-This brings up the issue of the student-teacher relationship.

In Japan we often face classes of 40 or 50 or more.

MR-I would have thought that the way I would imagine you doing a TPR class with a big group would allow each of us, if I were in the group, to meet you and feel your personality.

LT-Is there a danger in that kind of situation that the teacher becomes too important?

MR-Yes, I think you've put your finger on a very serious problem because, in fact, because the teacher becomes more hallow, more receptive, less directive. They (the teachers) actually gain power, not lose it. The teacher becomes more powerful. This is one of the insidious traps in humanistic teaching. In other words, the ego trip is more sophisticated and greater. If people who talk about teachers going into teaching anyway to cope with personality needs or the helping professions for that matter, ways which allow us to satisfy those needs more totally (maybe have a negative aspect, you've touched here on a quite serious problem and I don't have the answer.)

LT-The other option is trying to diminish the role of the teacher, doing almost everything in groups, the language going on between the students rather than between the teacher and the students.

MR- Does that diminish the teacher's role, though? Suppose you put me into a Moskowitz exercise, one of the more classic, beautiful ones. You say to us "How many people here are first borns? How many are middle borns? How many are last borns and how many are only children?" so we put our hands up. You then ask all the first borns to congregate in one corner of the room, all of the middle borns in another, etc. We get involved with each other. The students have very strong contacts with each other but you (the teacher) are the magician that put us into this position. And your spirit hangs over us during that work.

So I would question that you haven't, in fact, used a very powerful mechanism. In my perception the mechanism and you are strongly linked. I don't think you lose power. I think that if you were standing up in front being a drill sergeant, marching us up and down, you'd have less power than in that apparently standing back role.

LT-That's a very interesting perception of it. But what kind of power? Moving from the tradition of "teacher as knowledge giver" to ...

MR-"Teacher as listener" and to "teacher as perceptive listener" I mean there's no two ways about it; for many teachers, they receive more "transfers", if you want to use the technical, psychiatric term, positive and negative, in this kind of humanistic role than they would if they were working much more coldly.

And by transference, I mean transferring the emotion from the learner, emotions that are not really directed at the teacher, but which are directed at other important people in the learners' lives and are sort of, they use the teacher as a clothes hanger, to hang these feelings on.

LT-I realize that you're not excluding the things that traditionally go into teacher training (MR-Not at all), but with all this focus being on self-growth, humanism, and so on forth, is there a danger of ending up with some very self-actualized teachers who lack the basics, the nuts and bolts of pedagogy. Might we have people who end up "reinventing the wheel" because they lack a background in the body of knowledge that already exists?

MR-If a year's teacher training course didn't offer them experiential learning in terms of the nuts and bolts of methodology and didn't help them to become as clear as they can be about the nature of language, practical linguistics, then it would be a bad course. I'm stressing the other because on the whole it only exists sporadically and intuitively rather than being a standard and recognized part of teacher training courses.

LT-In Japan, and I think this is true throughout much of the EFL world, we have a lot of teachers who have little background in teaching.

MR-You mean the "ex-pats."

LT-Yeah. And on the Japanese side of it, a great percentage of the Japanese public school English teachers were actually trained in English literature or something rather than language teaching. What should they do in terms of filling out their training?

MR-The best model I know is the teacher training model in Italy where the state offers no formal training. What's happened there is that groups of predominately female teachers ('cause that's what they are in the H.S. system) have, over the past 15 years, got together and started their own cooperative teacher training courses. USIS in Rome came in on the act and helped the leaders of these groups be offering them 6 weeks at courses in Berk^eley, I think (in one of the California Universities). And they've been very successful. They've seen excellent results. Rather late in the day the British council...came in and helped. But the important thing is not these foreign agencies. The important thing is that these people got together and started running their own thing. Very, very practical,

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Down to earth, it included a lot of language improvement because their level wasn't that good. And I've seen radical improvement in the spoken abilities of some of those teachers. Very exciting, positive sign. A beautiful model for other places.

LT- A lot of non-native speakers worry about their English ability. Often you get to a point where you feel like you have reached a plateau. What do you suggest for people in that situation in terms of improving their language?

MR-Basically, to find some way that they haven't tried before and to look at some area which is fresh and new. An example, if they were the right sort of people, would be reading spoken language; getting hold of books where you can absorb the spoken language through the eye. That has a "making new" effect.

LT-So it seems related to, to sort of expand it, like what John Fanselow talks about with "figure out what you are doing and do it differently."

MR-Yes, exactly. It's the "making new" effect.

LT-So if you are a student of Japanese, maybe you don't sign up for another Japanese course, maybe you sign up for an ikebana course.

MR-Exactly, so you don't go banging your head against the same old stuff. You bang a different part of yourself into something new.

LT- And if you're a student of English, maybe you sign up for a computer course that's taught in English.

MR-Another example would be talking to yourself in the foreign language. Or working dramatically with a video in terms of, for example, following the body movements of the people you're listening in the foreign language. Those are three examples of "making new", of approaching the problem of language in ways that maybe you haven't tried before, if you learned the language traditionally.

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LT-A final question. What do you think about the "EFL/ESL" distinction? Are they basically the same, basically different?

MR: I think we came up against this distinction first when Australian colleagues joined our team in Pilgrim's on our summer program in Canterbury in the UK and some of these Australian teachers who were used to ESL situations (teaching migrants who had recently arrived in Australia) got very annoyed by the fact that many of these Europeans were studying English almost as a game, or as a social accomplishment or an adjunct to their studies while in Australia these people were confronted with people who desperately needed English. They were teaching the initial ten week courses that the Australian offers an immigrant. When I went to Australia, I suddenly understood why they felt annoyance with the EFL students they had in Canterbury. I saw potentially rather mediocre teachers teaching really very well, lifted by the energy and enthusiasm and need of the students. So, in a sense to be an ESL teacher, I think, to many people maybe is an easier task because you've got the ,not always. but you have this immense motivation that fills you, from your students.

LT: The students have very concrete goals.

MR: And another thing, not only the concreteness but also the vital emotional need. Certainly the Macedonian classes, classes of southern Yugoslaves I witnessed, I saw in Australia. All of the people in that room really wanted to learn. Some of them were doing better than others as you'd expect, but that "WOOMPH" was there and you'd have to be, I don't know, some kind of idiot as the teacher not to have responded.

There is also the whole pastoral element which makes ESL more of a helping profession. A colleague of mine most recently got herself involved in a "maternity English project" superbly funded by the Australian government. She discovered in the teaching of this material which was aimed at women on prenatal courses and then actually going through labor, that it was impossible for the female language teacher to confine herself to working entirely on the

language of childbirth because there was a whole social worker aspect. This had to be built into the course. I think this effects both the methodology and the kind of people who want to come into this kind of work. It's apparently a deeper form of work than simply teaching a language. I think that's the way many ESL teacher see it; as more of a vocation.

LT-Almost a mission.

MR-Well certainly some of the people I've worked with.

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