

The direct addressees of this article are teacher trainers but the issues raised concern all language teachers. I describe the conscious aims of a role-switching teacher training exercise and follow this with an outline of the way the exercise works. This leads to a look at some of the effects the role-switching normally has on people in the trainee group. The core of the article lies in an account of some of the unforeseeable effects role-switching has had with three groups of trainees. Finally the exercise is situated within a human relations centred view of teacher training and teaching.

A role-switching exercise in teacher-training

Introduction

My purpose of this article is to propose an exercise that has been useful on one week and two week in-service training courses that my Pilgrims colleagues and I frequently find ourselves doing in Europe.

The exercise, which involves role-switching within the trainee group has a number of aims:

- to provide a realistic language learning situation for some members of the group and the trainer

- to provide a realistic language teaching situation for one member of the group, and via empathy with her for the majority of the trainee group

- to provide a senior person in the trainee group, particularly a DOS, with an insight into another way of supervising teachers

- to provide more than half the group with a chance to work on a major teacher skill: accurate observation of interactions

- to allow a freeing of pent-up emotions directed at the trainer over the previous days.

I have used the exercise three times and do not yet feel I have properly explored its potential. If you feel that you could usefully use it in your work I would be very pleased to hear the further implications it may have in your hands. An exercise passing from one trainer to another will often change and substantially improve.

The problem

On short in-service training courses one is often working in a place where none of the teachers' students are available as guinea pigs for lessons and so it is hard to find ways of engineering relatively real language learning situations. Micro-teaching of a language everyone knows is little use with in-service people, as the situation is too artificial to work on real attitudes and feelings. Basically, since no learning is taking place nothing is happening. To have people observe such hollow interactions is to waste their time. How, then, can one create a language learning situation that is real and central to the group?

The mechanism of the exercise

Preparation

The trainer chooses a person in the trainee group who knows a language that the trainer and three or four others in the group do not know. This person will teach language X to the subgroup, including the trainer. It makes sense for the learner group to be small, thus offering the observers a manageable task. The person picked as teacher must feel relatively willing to teach the trainer. For some participants this role-switch may feel threatening. The teacher prepared a 10-15 minute lesson.

The trainer chooses a senior person in the group, maybe a DOS or somebody with teacher-training responsibilities to act as the teacher's supervisor. The person chosen needs to be a good, in-depth listener and needs to be humanly acceptable to the teacher. The supervisor's task will be to absent herself from the language lesson and then to carefully listen to the teacher's account of it as soon as it is over. The supervisor needs to listen and maybe echo what she is told. She does not need to praise, commiserate, criticise or give advice.

In class

The teacher, the supervisor and the learners separate out from the rest of the group. Everybody else pairs off - they are told they are going to observe a short lesson, given by the teacher, in language X. they spend five minutes deciding what they will observe and how. The what and the how is their decision - it is not advisable to give them pre-structured observation sheets. Their task is observation of what they hear and see. This is different from both interpretation and hallucination.

-The supervisor goes off to have coffee for 15 minutes - the teacher and the learners negotiate where in the room they want to be and the observers get themselves into position. The lesson starts.

-At the end of the lesson the teacher goes out to tell the supervisor about her lesson. The learners pair off and feedback their feelings about the lesson to each other. The observers compare notes in their pairs. This process takes ten to twenty minutes.

-Everybody comes together and the supervisor and the teacher sit together. The supervisor starts the plenary feedback session by recounting the teacher's experience, as she has just been told it. The teacher comes in to disagree, to add more details, to tell the group things she did not tell the supervisor, etc.....

-The learners now analyse the lesson as they lived it, from a linguistic, emotional and relational point of view. The trainer joins in this learner feedback.

-The observers finally report their observation. In this part of the session the trainer comes back into the chair and, when necessary challenges statements that go beyond the observable. One way to challenge is to ask the person observed if the observers' comment corresponds to what s/he

experienced.

The dynamic effects of role-switching

In this exercise everybody in the group has a new or modified role. After three or four days as an in-service trainee, the Teacher, is back in a position of normal power and authority. She is responsible for teaching a language new to four or five people in the group. They temporarily change, in her eyes, from being the trainer and colleagues into her pupils. One person who took on the role told me afterwards that she found me oppressive as a trainer and she wanted to get her own back by having me as her student. [When I tried to jot things down in her language lesson, she took my biro away.]

The DOS/teacher-trainer/senior teacher person continues in role at first and her hierarchical position is publicly respected, but she has to carry out her supervisory task in an odd, new way, a way that makes her completely dependent on the information the teacher gives her. She can only 'supervise' in so far as the teacher trusts and accepts her. [It would be foolish, on the trainer's part, to offer this task to a senior teacher who was likely to fail: the experience should be a mutually positive one for teacher and supervisor.]

The supervisor is often very surprised when asked to tell the whole group how the lesson looked to the teacher. She finds herself facing these colleagues as the teacher's alter ego/mother/sister and describing something they saw and which she did not physically see. In this role some people feel very close to the person they are speaking for. For many supervisors it is an eye-opener to realise that you see the lesson more clearly from the teacher's point of view precisely because you do not have a chance to witness it through your own biasing eyes.

The learners escape from their trainee-teacher role and show their paces as language absorbers/phobics/top-of-the-class-students or whatever.

There are people whose self-images as language learners are stronger and more positive than their view of themselves as teachers and teachers-in-training. This gives spice and excitement to the observers who are sometimes seeing long-time colleagues in a new light. Maybe the most dramatic change of role is for the trainer. Here I am speaking personally - in this exercise I have dived into the language learner role with a feeling of thrill and freeing - for 15 minutes I can sniff at a new language in whatever way I want, and for 15 minutes I forget about my responsibility to the whole group. I leap from the listening, absorbing, mentally role-reversing mindset of the trainer into the joyous "eating" of a new language. Other trainers may work this role-switch very differently and so cause quite different eddies and thoughts in the group - hence my appeal to you at the beginning of the article to share how this frame turns out in your hands.

The observers come to their task after previous exercises on trying to see what is there, rather than what should be there, or what they imagine interpret as being there. They may have observed an ambiguous mime and had to compare the disparate things each person focused on. They may have done animal behaviour observation exercises in which it is relatively easy for people to separate out projection of their own feelings from what they actually heard or saw. If you observe a particular duck at feeding time and your duck annoys you by being non-assertive it is clear that you are observing yourself more attentively than the duck!

As they observe the lesson, colleagues are applying their insights from previous non-teaching observation to their own central concern: language teaching. The powerful part of the exercise, for the observers, comes when they compare what they heard and saw with their partner and when the teacher and the learners counter the observations/interpretations with their own subjective reality. Exchanges like this go on:

Observer: Jean-Claude, when the teacher did X, you looked out of window - you were bored.

Trainer: J.C., when you looked out of the window what was going on in your head?

J.C.: I knew I know the German word for 'table'. I was searching for it.

It is very rare for a teacher, in her role as observer in her own class, to have the chance to check whether her interpretations of another's behaviour are accurate or a fantasy. The exercise offers her this useful luxury.

For teachers working as observers the exercise is a role-reduction rather than a role-switch. They are given a chance to observe and check out their observation with the subjects, rather than having to do all the other things that occupy the teacher's mind when she is teaching.

Practical procedures suggested by the exercise

From what has been said already it is clear that a lot of psychological learning goes on in the course of the exercise and probably in informal discussions among participants for some time afterwards.

The exercise also proposes procedures that can be integrated into normal teaching and school life.

Observation windows in lessons

In order to carry on learning to observe more accurately teachers are recommended to organise a part of the language lesson when they are free to 'reduce' their role to that of observer, free of classroom management or teaching/correcting duties. A teacher might decide to observe a small group of learners without being able to hear what they are saying, she might decide to listen to another group but without complicating the input with visual information, etc..... "Blind" supervision.

A DOS might decide to alternate observing lessons directly, with observing them only through the ears and eyes of the teacher. The gain in trust and understanding is considerable. This might lead the supervisor to try other modes: observing the lesson through the eyes of one student - asking the teacher to do this on her own etc.....
Teaching the trainer.

A useful teacher training procedure to stem from the exercise is the idea of one trainee giving the trainer a one-to-one lesson in the language the latter does not know with the others working as observers. Because the trainer is the learner, the micro lesson has a role-reversed intensity. The lesson could last ten minutes and the debriefing session twenty. You could do this every other day over a month's training course.

The advantages of this procedure are: - intensity
- a one-to-one lesson is a much more reasonable chunk to observe than the jungle of happenings in even a small class
- the trainer shows her 'listener' face.

The main disadvantage is that some trainees find the public limelight of teaching the trainer too much for them.

Unforeseeable effects of the exercise

When you think ahead to a TT course you may well hope to achieve certain things - this leads to planning. What happens in reality in the conscious and unconscious minds of the trainees may be very different.

I have used the exercise described above with the conscious aims listed in the introduction. But each time I used it the really memorable things to spring from it were unforeseeable and therefore exciting - when I say memorable I mean memorable for me. I cannot possibly know which were the key moments for each individual in the group. Much too much is happening at once.

Let me share some of my 'high-points' with you.

Learner jealousy

The teacher was a male of about my age. The language was Flemish. My co-students were two women in their twenties who knew almost no Flemish because they taught French in the German speaking corner of Belgium.

The lesson was pitched at a slightly post-beginner level that left me gasping for breath. One of the two girls knew a tiny bit of Flemish already and the teacher began targeting her, so I felt, as the main recipient of his lesson. I was left thrashing around on the sidelines, wondering what I could do to come in on the act. I began doing things to attract his attention, to make him attend to my plight. He responded and I felt less bad in the second part of the lesson.

When the time came for learner feedback I surprised myself by speaking very vigorously about how I had been angry with the "couple" one of the French speaking girls and the teacher had formed, which annoyed me and stopped me learning. This was what I needed to talk about, not the linguistic difficulty of the work proposed. I was amazed at the well of jealousy within me.

Observation as aggression and affection

M was one of the colleagues I had, I reckoned, had a fairly strong positive relationship with over the previous days of the course. He had been the teacher or 'knower' in a four session CLL mini-course in Spanish. I liked his openness, warmth and spontaneity.

In the exercise he was an observer. When his turn came to feedback to the whole group he gave a six minute, brilliant, accurate description of the behaviour of the learner group with the spot-light on me. He had really observed and kept well away from interpretation or hallucination. I felt he had somehow put me under the microscope, like the cross-section of a worm. I sensed his excellent observation as a sort of brotherly mixture of affection and aggression. This incident led me to think back over previous interactions with him and see them in a new light. Until this point I had not realised the strength of his feelings towards me.

Fury with learners

There were two of us and for my co-learner the task of learning language X had started in earnest that week. She was a Brit. Starting a two years contract in the country. Her motivation for learning language X was strong and serious.

Our teacher, Z, was a person who I had noticed having problems with the workshop over the week. She had started in my group, gone over to the parallel group, run by another trainer, and then come back to mine.

She taught us in a lively, structured way, using regalia, and was determined that we should learn what she presented. She was unhappy with a number of things in my behaviour:

- taking notes
- being dismissive about items presented that seemed easy
- attempts to generalise about grammar from her examples.

I could feel her unhappiness during the lesson: I was not a “good student” for her. When her supervisor reported to the group on her lesson, he confirmed that she had been unhappy with me. She then expressed a little of her own anger towards me, accusing me of wanting to learn in my own way and disrupting her lesson. Some of the observers clearly agreed with her (nodding and mumbling assent). Some said they felt I was being obstreperous on purpose. When the time came for learner feedback I told them I had simply acted as I felt in that situation.

My co-learner then told Z, the teacher, that she had felt constrained in the lesson - she had not felt free to explore the language in her own way. At this point Z’s colour changed dramatically, tears began to prick and she looked intensely angry / unhappy. She refused to speak about what was happening inside her, both when asked to by me and by people in the group. This was not the time to speak.

The feedback continued but most of people’s attention was inevitably on Z.

I attempted to speak to Z privately that afternoon but she did not want to.

The next day, the last day of the course, we finished with a country walk for an hour or so, to allow people to round off the week by talking to the people they most wanted to. Z picked me and spoke of many things, including her feelings during the week, relationships to people outside teaching and relationships with students. (It would be wrong to go into greater detail here as, within a given circle, Z is identifiable.)

This powerful contact with Z was provoked by the exercise. There is no way I could have foreseen such an effect, but on this particular occasion a main outcome was that one person managed to express things that would otherwise have stayed bottled-up. One hour’s talking and listening does not solve serious problems, usually. It may have been one link in a chain leading to some kind of solution.

A particular philosophy of training

The work outlined above has to be seen in the context of a philosophy of teacher training that sees human relations as the core of both teaching and training. If you espouse this view then all the other components of a training course become subsidiary. Of course you have to work on what Ephraim Weintraub from Israel calls the “ologies”, phonology, methodology etc., but the main focus is on how the trainee teacher relates to her / his students. (Weintraub himself does fascinating exercises in which the trainees recall the ‘ghosts’ of former teachers of theirs, good and bad, and try to come to terms with them.

Weintraub’s contention is that these “ghosts” are the trainees’ real trainers and the only way to exorcise them is to bring them into the light of adult consciousness.) what I want to do is to contextualise the exercise described here as being one of many that bring problems of human relations in the classroom to the fore. It needs to be seen in this context, not as a kind of set-piece one-off.