ELICITNG STUDENTS' VOICES IN THE THAI CONTEXT: A ROUTINE OR A QUEST?

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Abstract

The elicitation of a response from students by a teacher is a very traditional part of the teaching process but in recent years it has tended to be ignored in favor of a more learner-centered approach. This paper suggests that the neglect of this method may be the result of a too narrow view of the nature and function of elicitation. Rather than merely a means for testing the student's understanding elicitation can be, as it is in the Socratic method, a means of allowing the student to explore and expand knowledge.

In practice, are the acts of teaching and elicitation basically synonymous? The Western practices of English Language Teaching (ELT) come out of the Greek ideas of Socratic dialogue: teachers and students ask and answer questions in order to search for the truth. Even when we only teach the test or teach by testing, we are still practising a form of elicitation. While different teachers in different cultures may define the verbs "to teach" and "to elicit" in different ways, they all seem to agree that the two actions are related.

However, over the last decade, at least, there seems to have been a tacit de-emphasis in the literature on the role of elicitation in the teaching process. This may be a by-product of the increased interest in learner-centredness and in the later stages of learner language production. And to be sure, we have learned much from looking at such areas of teaching. My concern is that we are forgetting or ignoring what we already knew – we may be throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

This point may be illustrated by the presentation of elicitation in two texts that between them would form the backbone of most English Teaching Methodology courses. Jeremy Harmer (1991) mentions elicitation several times without actually spelling out how

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to practise it. It is seen as the initiating phase of introducing new language that will lead to student creativity. As such, its primary value is to provide feedback to the teacher regarding the student's prior knowledge of the particular language point being presented. This trend of de-centring or de-emphasising elicitation techniques continues when Penny Ur (1996) only addresses elicitation explicitly as a testing technique. Neither writer stresses the development of the skill of asking questions as a communicative act. It is almost as though the skill of asking questions is seen as so rudimentary and natural that it does not need to be discussed in depth or deliberately practised. However, when it comes to teaching, nothing can be too simple for discussion: we ignore the simple practices at our own risk.

This downplaying of elicitation is understandable, given its role in the literature as a form of one-way or passive communication. If its only value is to prompt students to respond, so that a teacher can check their knowledge of grammar or vocabulary items, then such a practice would rightly be seen as not a form of Teacher-Student communication, and as having only limited application potential in an <u>interactive</u> classroom.

When we elicit language from students to check their understanding or to evaluate their command of a particular linguistic feature, we are, at the same time, perhaps only subconsciously, judging that student's performance by assigning a truth value to the student's "answer"–it is correct or an error, a mistake (wrong). But in the Socratic form of elicitation, there is a broader educative purpose to dialogue about propositions and beliefs. Such dialogue motivates us, the dialogue partners (teachers and students), to think. The exchange of elicited thoughts (or feelings) is at the heart of what most of us would say we mean by communication.

These faulty practices are not the only barriers to effective interaction between students and teachers in communicative situations. In non-Western cultures such as in Thailand, there are many pedagogical practices that could impede effective Socratic dialogue, but that could very easily fit in with "dialogue" of the Q&A routine format:

● It is rude for a student to ask a question of a teacher. By asking a question, the student implies that the teacher is not doing a good job in imparting or giving knowledge. As such, a student's act of questioning challenges the teacher's competence.

● A student who voluntarily answers a teacher's question is "marked" by most of the class as a show-off or a crawler. To do this is called *gra sadang awk*.

● A teacher is assumed to already know all there is to know. So the teacher and the student alike see no need for the teacher to ask questions, let alone to give an open mind to answers.

● It is impolite for a student to express an opinion, especially when that opinion is not in agreement with the teacher's opinion. The student, if pushed to express an opinion, will want to know what the teacher's opinion is first. Examination questions that require agreement or disagreement with a proposition rarely elicit disagreement in the response papers. However, such questions are rare.

● Knowledge is found in "the book". There is no need to search for it anywhere else. To ask a question means one does not know the book and is therefore a weak student.

● Classroom activities consist of the teacher reading the book to the students and asking them to complete the exercises in it. Any questions asked by the teacher are usually given as prompts in "the book". Such questions are for "display".

● Teacher-student interaction seems to be catechismic. The emphasis is not on

finding out what the student knows, but on whether the student knows what the teacher and "the book" know. One would be hard pressed to find a Thai teacher who asks students why they think something. One would be even harder pressed to find a Thai student coming out of the Thai school system who is willing to attempt to answer that question. Given the rarity of such responses, the idea of engaging a class in an open discussion cannot lead to anything other than a display exercise in which the forms of discourse are "presented" and rehearsed. The smoothness and speed with which such "interactions" are performed indicates to the teacher and the students whether the "task" has been carried out successfully.

Such cultural practices, reinforced by Q&A routines and the underlying mechanistic views of teacher-student talk, make the successful implementation of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in places such as Thailand problematical. Even admirable communicative texts such as *Headway* or *Reading between the Lines* are "subverted" in real classrooms when the content **is** the final examination, and when students do not voice their own questions or perform the follow-up activities. Attempts to elicit responses in warm up activities more often than not don't work in most classrooms or are not even made. Such activities are usually presented by the teacher as display routines before the students complete the "exercises" on "page 16."

Implicit in such activities there may be an assumption that works against actual communication between the textbook writer and the teacher: when the teacher is "provided" with a "Teacher's book" or manual, with all the answers to the "activities", as well as with follow-up or extra "activities", that teacher is not being expected to think for himself. This "guidance" may simply be selling the teacher short. Or, it may be read as an admission of a lack of faith in the teacher's ability to think for himself. Another possibility is that the powers-that-be know the teacher's own English is not strong enough, and that his confidence and education is not up to the independent exploitation of such texts.

What has happened to the EFL teacher when such "friendly" texts become props or substitutes for teacher or student generated activities?

1.   The teacher has been denied the position he is accorded in the L1 (Thai) culture as the giver of knowledge. His fellow teachers seem to have retained their traditional, powerful role. This gap leads to the devaluation of English teachers.

2.   The teacher's English is implicitly treated as not up to the standard of English evinced in the textbooks. Nor is it a primary need to make the teacher's English commensurate with the English of the textbook.

3.   The teacher is being controlled more, not less, by the overwhelming packages being provided for him.

In practice, the "book" is becoming once again the source of all knowledge. Only, this time, the book is centralised by accident, through the back door. In other words, the book is becoming the teacher – albeit in a reified form. Instead of introducing more voices into the classroom, such "reforms" actually tend to remove one voice – that of the Thai teacher. And in his place, we find the reified "interactive," *moderne* "voices" of the cassette, videotape or CD Rom. The resulting classroom environment is less interactional. By not having to be responsible for understanding the students' voices, the teacher is left out of the "meaningful communication" nexus: the teacher, the only person the student has been culturally conditioned to listen to, has been denied a

meaningful voice. This does not seem to be a state of affairs that CLT practitioners would explicitly advocate or condone.

Methodological Issues

Where, I think, CLT advocates have erred is in their narrow definition of elicitation. They seem to have implicitly assumed that the act of elicitation is a simple Q&A routine. They have, in other words, taken the definition from prior, audiolingual, pedagogy. This oversight (or silent assumption) may stem from prior pedagogy. It may also stem from the act of elicitation being at the core of pedagogical culture – it **is** what it **is**. What is closest to us is often forgotten or hard to recognise.

But, if CLT really is based on fundamental humanistic principles, then such an oversight may prove contradictory if not debilitating. If we are serious about placing emphasis on the learner, then we should be developing more methods for the teacher / course developer / textbook writer to understand each learner. Only when CLT practices are commensurate with the foundation principles of CLT's dialogical beliefs and goals will there be meaningful teacher education. The solution is not to impose such beliefs and goals on non-Western teachers. Instead, such principles need to be negotiated in culture-specific discourses. And one place where such discourses are possible is in the liberal arts framework – not as this framework is currently set in most schools or universities, but in debates and dialogues that seek the truth about what is teaching and what language is. This discourse needs to be predicated on our awareness than neither the West nor the East holds a monopoly on truth in either area.

Until we revaluate elicitation, the teacher, and the student's voice, we are not really fulfilling the promises of CLT. Instead, the silent presence of a mechanistic and non-humanistic assumption that elicitation is just a Q&A routine remains a Trojan Horse in CLT methodology by undermining the daily teaching practices of non-Western teachers who are operating under the assumption that they are using a CLT approach because they are following Harmer, Ur or some other Western experts. Much of the good work achieved through this approach as it is now constituted in the literature and practised in some Western classrooms is limited, if not undermined, by our failure to understand elicitation as of fundamental importance as a humanistic practice that leads to the search for the "truth" about our students as human beings. We are in danger of losing touch with sound teaching practices that give dialogue between teachers and students a prominent role in communication.

We may, however, regain an understanding and appreciation of the art of teaching through dialoguing with each other. We may round out our understanding of the potent promises of CLT. This will make our practices more logical, consistent and effective. As a result, research into classroom interaction will have a more clearly defined empirical domain in which to develop a methodology commensurate with the tenets of CLT.

Models of Voices

If we as teachers are frequently, if not always, using elicitation techniques with our students, then we should look at what exactly we are trying to elicit. What counts? One answer to this question is that the student voice counts – the spoken and written voice through which communication takes place. By looking at how this voice is actually elicited in the Thai (a non-Socratic) context, we may be able to

develop better ways of interpreting and appreciating the voice. By revaluating the student's voice in the dialogue between teacher and student, we may then move the emphasis toward a more open and explorative dialogical practice. And this could be Socratic in spirit. The teacher's voice would also be revaluated as a result. But only if we get rid of the preconception that a question is only asked to check for mistakes. We need to begin with the idea that we ask a question to motivate our students to use their voices to speak to each other and to us. We need to put the voice in the centre of our pedagogy.

But what exactly is this voice? How many voices are there? Even if we hear only one voice, problems arise. There are at least two voices in a conversation or in a question/response routine that need to be understood by both the participants (and by any outside observer/researcher). Whichever way we approach the issue of identifying the voice, we find more than one voice speaking at the same time.

If we want to understand what is happening in a teacher's or a student's voice, then we should be clear about what voices we are hearing or using. Until we can disentangle these voices, we will be treating material that is de-humanised and de-contextualised. Data treated in that way is categorised at the expense of mechanical and simplistic reductions that don't evince any deep respect for the participants as members of a cultural linguistic community.

When we approach elicitation as content-based (to check whether or not a student's answer is right or wrong,) then we all too often impose a homogeneity on these voices that is not discernable in a classroom where actual communication is occuring. A routine-focussed model assumes communication is teacher-centric and rationally imposed insofar as the model-builders look for evidence from the interaction between the top (the teacher) and the student (the bottom). The resultant top-down model of communication is by definition authoritarian and one way in practice ¾ the teacher asks a question and a student answers it either correctly or incorrectly.

While such models may seem neat or convenient, the variables they isolate bear little resemblance to the actual voices of the participants. Data gained from such techniques is characteristically synthetic and monologous – it tells a single story in a single abstracted voice. And that voice bears little resemblance to the students' voices that we need to hear and understand.

At the creativity end of the continuum we say that our students' language is free of lexicogrammatical and rhetorical errors and is, therefore, effective communication. That this is a faulty syllogism may be illustrated by asking whether most educated native speakers of English are effective communicators. Many speakers are not very creative in their L1. They could only be called effective or creative if we modify our definitions of effectiveness and creativity.

I remain unconvinced that any but an insignificant percentage of EFL students have ever believed that just by fixing their mistakes they have become creative communicators in English. I am unaware of any evidence or any logically stated argument to the contrary. A researcher or theoretician wishing to make this argument would have to either ignore or overturn the basic tenets of communication theory and to assert that effective and creative communication is a universal human endowment. Such a researcher would also need to argue that lexicogrammatically error free language equates with good language.

What follows is an attempt to describe the student's voices in any student/teacher exchange by looking at the quest aspect of language elicitation. The methods of elicitation can better be honed from a clearer understanding of both the voices and the art of their elicitation. By looking at these voices in this way, the environment of learning and teaching may be made effective from communicative and elicitational viewpoints.

The Student Voice

What is the voice we should be listening for in our students? To argue that this voice is polyphonous insofar as there are many different voices that "comprise" this voice, one needs to identify and describe each voice. For the purpose of argument, we may suggest that there are several voices in our students.

● the visual voice in our student's written work. This could be part of body language or hand language studies. But it has not been treated as such in the literature.

● the outer voice. This voice is at present the domain of phonology. This is the voice we hear when our students speak to us.

● the voice in the head. This has been approached by Delueze and Guattari as well as by Vygotsky. Until now it has been the domain of psychology. It is related to the reading voice.

● the reading voice is the sound of reading either aloud or "silently." This voice responds to the written voices we are capable of identifying in any text we read.

● the written voice. This is the voice of rhetoric and literary criticism. It is the personal voice, the narrative voice, the dramatic voice or the personae we look for in poetry and fiction.

● the non-verbal voice. This is the domain of body language theorists.

This outline of the various types of voice is not presented as a taxonomy of the voice. Nor is it an exhaustive list. It is not that clear cut. Many of these voices are in each other. Sometimes each one of them is comprised of myriad voices. At least the outline does not represent each voice as a totally separate catagorical entity. The point is that with these levels/types/ characteristics of voices, it would be too simplistic to study them as a single voice. Such a conceptualisation would open the researcher to a monologic fallacy – that the student's voice has a single or unified body and meaning. This fallacy in turn leads back to mechanistic one-way communication models in the study of classroom interaction and discourses that have been discussed above. The danger in such conceptualisations is that the teacher or researcher selects one voice – a dominant or characteristic voice – through which all the other voices are filtered. Such a selection in practice would probably emphasise the phonological voice, and even then, only an idealised form of it, and it would usually be shaped only by considerations of errors and mistakes. It is simplistic to argue that such a disembodied voice can be labelled as Thai or English, or that it can be evaluated as good or poor. Such labelling is characteristic of unreflective approaches to classroom conversation/dialogues. Such approaches construct a monologous voice that is prone to mystification if not reification of the voice as a meaningful or effective mechanical thing that can be measured and judged solely in terms of rationalistic, objective criteria that are imposed as standards or norms of behaviour.

When such a "voice" is used as the basis on which to evaluate areas of communication such as written work, then our definition of the voice ends up as a filter which leads us to disregard or at least to downplay differences or contradictions between the conceptualised mechanical "voice" and the

other elicited voices of language. In other words, it is a voice in name only.

Such filtering could be misleading. We don't know enough about the development of the various voices to be able to say with any confidence that one of them precedes the others in acquisition or in value. If these voices are approached affectively by the student, and if the teacher/researcher listens to them together in a heteroglossic dialogue, then an approach to communication as a group of practices may be established as a suitable research method.

By being open to the possibility of recognising and accepting differences and even contradictions in the various voices of our students, we may deepen our understanding of our elicitation practices by focusing our attention on what each student is thinking or feeling. And given the beliefs of CLT, this new richness of communication could broaden and deepen our pedagogical practices.

Research that could add to or come out of such practices would be different to the research that currently characterises our profession. It would be more multi-disciplinary, expressivist, and open-ended. This richness of a heteroglossic framework would be, at least, another (different) perspective. It may also result in a new understanding of "thick" data. The primary value of such "thickness" would be to pre-empt hasty and mechanistic assertions that simplistically talk of Teacher Talk and Student Talk. The many different voices actual communication practices thus encourage would provide a useful and effective perspective on what we can do as communicative language teachers and learners.

By listening to the voices of our students, in the different ways I suggest, as pragmatic indicators, a richness of interpretation and understanding of our students' voices may be developed. With such an understanding, we can reformulate the goals of elicitation in terms that seem more consonant with our beliefs and methods of teaching. There is no "order" to this discussion as I do not want to suggest that, hierarchically, one voice has precedence in any way over others.

The following discussion focuses on my experience with Thai learners – they are currently my most important and influential dialogue partners.

The Visual Written Voice

Our students do try to communicate with us, their teachers, when they write. Their diaries are quite often startlingly frank. They sometimes tell us things that they would not tell their parents or closest friends. This has something to do with the revered and trusted position of the *ajarn* or university teacher in Thai culture.

Admittedly, this openness is not always the case. We have read diary entries that start, "Today, I woke up and go to class." But even here there is a voice to be heard – the voice of avoidance, boredom or insecurity; or the voice of literal description. How we understand this, to a large extent, is dependent on how good we are as readers. Such sensitive reading is more likely from a teacher with a degree of literary (critical) competence. Such skills are not often taught in EFL/ESL teacher training programmes.

We also see their voices when they write in class – exercises, notes, text construction. Leaving aside the role of literary critical evaluation or interpretation, there are many other indicators of their voice:

● the neatness of their script

- the packaging or layout of the work – its cover, illustrations, charts, etc.
- the paragraphing
- the visual balancing on the page
- the use of "white out"
- the avoidance of crossing out words
- the marking of rest points with fullstops
- the use of Thai L1 script flourishes
- the space between letters that fluctuates depending on their confidence with the use of a particular word or structure
- the over-use of contractions
- the reluctance to leave margins or spaces for comments
- the filling of every line on the page
- the writing of say "451" at the end of an essay that asked for 450-500 words in response to a question or task
- the choice of a book in which to write

All of these practices are attempts by our students to send messages to us. These messages are at least in part transfers from Thai L1 practices that they have been taught or trained to exhibit. Such practices indicate a concern with presentational values that puts paramount stress on neatness and face. If this is achieved, then it is meant to encourage only a superficial reading of the text. To explore too much beyond this presentational face, and to mark it in red ink, is to de-face the text. When a student receives back such a de-faced (de-valued) text, he or she quite often throws it away. Many students do not keep essays or exam papers for long. And understandably so – if one's voice has been ignored or disfigured, one naturally would not like to keep an ugly reminder of it.

These marks of written work are pragmatic, culturally influenced attempts to communicate with the teacher. We ignore their meaning at the risk of insulting our students. As indicators of how the student conceives of his or her own voice, such communication can tell us a lot about a student's use of words and grammar: a word or grammar rule has not been internalised or is not part of the student. By keeping things mechanical, a student can keep the alien voice of the L2 at bay. The one word/one meaning syndrome also stems from mechanical views of the L2.

The Spoken or Outer, Uttered Voice

Leaving aside the need for a correct pronunciation of vowels and consonants, and a correct syllabic stress, there are pragmatic qualities expressed by our students when they speak English. Many of these qualities are transfers from L1 behaviour:

- The softness of tone and volume is the primary aesthetic value in spoken Thai. It denotes deeply held Buddhist values of a cool heart, non-confrontational positioning, *decha* or detachment, smooth *sanook* interaction, and an evenness or tranquil presentation of "face". Politeness without this tone is inconceivable in Thai.
- The absence of any deep emotion or feeling in the voice. This, too, comes from Buddhist attitudes.
- The obsession with sounding "correct" by having an American/English accent. This is the primary aim of many students. The Thai accent is devalued to the point of being ridiculed. The outer form is the face – and the face is the respository of significance and value. Many students who try to copy their *farang* teachers produce an amalgam of accents – at least as an interlanguage.
- The voice is unheard by people up the social scale. The Thai value of *grengjai* dictates whispers, short responses and silence

when being talked to by a teacher or older person.

● The L2 voice is not, despite the above mentioned cultural forces, considered as an intrinsic part of the student's being. It is kept at a distance by being worked on at the presentational level as a constructed aspect of face. As such, it can function as a mask. Such strategies have positive learning outcomes. But only if the teacher and the other interlocutors respect this voice and do not confuse it simplistically as a total refection of the student's actual personality. To listen to and through this voice simultaneously requires a teacher who is sensitive to the status of the voice in L1 culture.

● The teacher's voice, as another spoken voice, is being received by the student. In Thailand, the prevalence of the microphone in small classrooms can be partly explained as the teacher wishing to maintain his or her voice's face – in English or Thai. Any emotional intensity signifies a lack of control or *jai ron*. This is a sign of a "bad" teacher. Students can freeze up when a teacher uses a loud or intense voice. The resulting violation of presentational equanimity leads to a "traumatic" blocking out of the voice as an unpleasant and embarrassing thing.

● The sound of the speaker's voice inside the listener has not been addressed in communication theory. The messages carried in the vibrating air will be listened to and remembered – often in a physical way. We sometimes can "hear" our teachers years after we have last seen them.

● Our students put a high value on the aesthetic quality. An American or English accent is aesthetically pleasing to them. The voice is a musical instrument – probably even more so for speakers of a tonal L1 such as Thai – that has paralinguistic attraction. The pitch and velocity of the spoken voice are aspects of this aesthetic interpretation. Together with tone, stress and volume, these characteristics embody more than lexicogrammar or phonological exactness.

My point is that many teachers do not learn how to listen for these qualities of students' voices. Many of us are actually poor listeners who often unthinkingly respond, "I speak naturally. Everybody speaks naturally. Some speak better than others. That's all."

But if our students are thinking about their voice in other ways, we may be ignoring information that could indicate more and even better ways of listening to and speaking with them. Without these skills, the voice, the primary factor of all language, is sold short and/or gutted of any "real" qualities.

Other pragmatic indicators that need to be considered in an interpretation of the uttered voice would include:

● politeness
● confidence
● relevance
● repetition of sounds
● individuality
● interest
● flow/smoothness

These features of a voice deserve to be taken into account or heard and seen by our interlocutors. They all indicate meaning and can function as barriers or bridges to development. Insofar as these factors are meaningful, attainable, measurable and actionable, they need to be addressed by every teacher as part of a broad range of elicitation strategies.

The Voice in the Head

Most of us have said, "A little voice told me…", or "I can just hear him now…", "Something told me…". Given the circumstances, we can even find ourselves talking to ourselves. Usually, we don't feel

threatened or ashamed by reporting these voices to others. In other conditions, talking to oneself may be interpreted as, "The first sign of madness." We may also plan certain anticipated exchanges; "I'll say 'this'. He'll say 'that'. Then I'll say 'something else'." In difficult circumstances we may even debate with ourselves, "Should I or shouldn't I…" All of these voices in our head are our own.

But, sometimes, the voice belongs to someone else. We can recall what was said to us in the voice of the person who said it – usually this person is someone with whom we have a strong affective attachment; our parents, a teacher, a close friend, a lover, an enemy, or someone we find highly amusing or unamusing (ridiculous).

When these voices speak to us in cacophony, some of us feel unbalanced or disturbed. We try to block them out. But that is more easily said than done. Like the refrain from a song, these voices buzz around "in our heads."

The stimulus for these voices to come back to life by being recalled or remembered is less the lexicogrammar trigger, and more the emotional connections we form in our thinking. One of the most effective means we have for storing and recalling language is to activate the voice we listened to it in. The extremeties of the beautiful or the ugly, the idiosyncratic, the remarkable, the novel – these are the hooks we most often feel when these voices are activated.

But what about one's own voice? How do we hear ourselves? Many people find the sound of their own voice on tape embarrassing. When someone talks too much we might say, "He likes the sound of his own voice." It can almost be rude or vain to like one's own voice. Maybe this is why we don't often listen to our own voice when we speak. Then again, we may be told, "Listen to yourself" when we are saying something that an interlocutor finds ridiculous.

It would seem that on balance self-consciousness about one's own voice is discouraged; at least, in English. But, we all break the taboo. We all have this voice whether we like it or not – and it is usually more pleasant in our head than it is on a tape.

As teachers, we need to be aware that our students have these voices too, and that these voices quite often have a life of their own – even during a lesson. We should remember that our disembodied voice is one of those voices in our student's head – our voice is possibly different in each student. In this sense, we teachers have myriad (legion) voices. These voices may vary simply by how close or far away from us the student sits.

The problem for research is that we cannot access these voices in our students' heads directly. But we do know how these voices get there, and we can listen for them as they partly shape the student's uttered or spoken voice. Being aware of this polyphony is surely better than ignoring it. The "trick" may be to encourage our students to access these voices in a dialogic way – much as novelists or dramatists may work. They can do this by keeping a "Discussion" journal where they talk to themselves and respond to passages they put in the journal from their reading. By reading literature, the students would see such dialogues in written language. First person narratives have this double voice built in where the writer is the narrator talking directly to the reader and to other characters in the story. The resulting variety and richness of discourse should foster more reflective writing and conversation.

Until now, no pedagogical research has been done in this area. It remains a tantalising, though to many an esoteric, area of study – Vygotsky, Deleuze and Bakhtin have worked in the area in their different ways. But their ways seem remote to the EFL situation.

The Reading Voice

This voice is largely neglected in the literature on teaching reading skills. If touched on at all, it is in relation to the debate as to whether or not we should get students to read aloud alone or in chorus. But the issue of the reader's voice is more far-reaching and important than that.

Many students read aloud poorly. For L2 students this lack of skill is a reflection or an indicator of how they are constructing the input they get from reading. When we hear a student stumbling in pronunciation, phrasing and word-recognition in a deadpan voice, we really should wonder how the reading experience could be pleasurable – assuming the student does the same thing when reading to himself. Such poor reading indicates problems experienced by the student who struggles with "unfamiliar" words, "difficult" syntax, "strange" phonemes, and "vague" ideas.

Not that reading aloud is only a matter of fluency. Many L1 speakers read aloud poorly. But there is a difference between being boring and being in pain – at least sometimes.

Our role models are our parents, who may have read aloud to us in our cots (though this is not a common practice in Thailand), our teachers, the tapes we may be asked to listen to, and other students in class (whom we may choose to block out of our hearing as bad models.) The most common competent and/or comprehensible input should be from the teacher. However the teacher may not be trained to use the voice as an aesthetic instrument when reading aloud to a class. Also, if that teacher is insecure about the sound of his voice, he will be reluctant to demonstrate his skill. The result can be a neglect of this practice and the attendant loss of options for pronunciation work, reading attack skills, and real communication. (I might not listen to a fellow student talk about John running up a hill. I will be more likely to listen to an interesting story he reads to me.) Another threat to the teacher's voice is the mechanicalisation of vocal role models in many textbooks and support materials.

Our reading voices can be elicited in a broad and deep way, depending on which genre we are reading in. There is more than the writer's own register and tone involved in this voice, though sensitivity to the writer's voice is a large part of understanding any text. The many different voices we find in drama and fiction demand an awareness of the characters' individuality. And the way a novelist dialogues with characters (his material, his own voices in his head) is an important aspect of communicative reading and writing practices.

Can we understand such texts without recreating these voices in our heads? Where do we draw the sound of these voices from? They are the voices that bring a text to life and provide the reader with motivation to read on – hopefully, even to start his own dialogue with the characters and/or the writer. These are the fundamental steps of critical reading. These are also the practices of good readers. (Descartes, Bacon, Castiglione, Donne, and Machiavelli have all stated that this conversation between the reader (themselves) and the writers they read was the point of their reading – it was their definition of reading.)

The only way that the teacher may hear anything of the student's reading voice is for the teacher to listen to the voice as that student reads aloud. To listen well, the teacher will need some proficiency at reading aloud. We need to encourage both these voices if we are to enrich this voice in the student. The best way to encourage these voices is to listen to them well.

Insofar as the elicitation technique of having students read aloud, either into a tape

recorder or to one another, is frowned upon in mainstream CLT practice, we are denying an important area of communication that probably is less threatening and more common than we think – the student using his reading voice and communicating through it with the other voices that may be in his head. After all, being in tune with oneself is an indicator of a good language learner and communicator.

As an echo or reverberation of the "silent" voices with which our students communicate (probably frequently), the reading voice offers the teacher insights into a student's interior monologues or dialogues that may give profound feedback. This may be a case of there being more to communication than is dreamed of in mainstream CLT practices.

As teachers, we should be working to open more pathways or channels of communication for our students; not blocking them off. The reading/interpretation and listening skills required for working on our students' reading voices are, admittedly, subtle and sometimes even esoteric. But it does not have to be this way. If we are willing to listen to voices outside of CLT – say in literary criticism – we can learn to sometimes take a step back from controlling/shaping our students' voices. Then we may appreciate the voices we hear in other ways. The resultant polyphonous richness of "material" to be interpreted by our students in each other's reading performances makes their language experience richer – and, I would argue, more grounded in their own minds and experience.

The Written Voice

One way of encouraging our students to listen to other peoples' written voices is to teach them how to identify these voices when they read. There is probably a symbiotic relationship between the development of the student's reading voices, the voices in his head, the voices he is sensitive to when he reads other writers, and his own written voice – his persona or personal voice. The ability to make a reader relate to himself as a writer is often only addressed in terms of advising a student to take an audience into account. What is often missed is that a large part of this consideration is the ability to see oneself through one's readers' eyes. I would suggest that to a student or a teacher not familiar with literary critical values, the idea of a reflection of the self does not enter his mind. How many students find journal writing the most difficult activity? How few actually re-read their own journals?

If we are committed to communicative language teaching, we should be addressing in detail how a student converses with his readers and the writers he reads, as well as with himself when he writes.

One reason for this issue being neglected could be that when we read our students' essays we all too often can't identify our students by their writing – unless we are familiar with their script or writing voices. It could be argued that if our students don't have individualised personal voices when they write, then what is the point of trying to read them that way. The rebuttal to this point could be:

1) They may have voices in their heads struggling to get out onto paper. So, we should help them to do this.

2) If we don't make the search for these voices a priority, we are sending a negative message to our students that we devalue the need for these voices.

3) Even a flat or nondescript persona is still a persona – just a boring one.

4) It seems to be an anti-communication response to abandon or deny a search for our students' voices.

5) The downplaying of such reading may be more a sign of a teacher whose own communication skills are lacking, and who may be in need of some literary awareness activities.

The presence or absence of these voices in our students' writings is a strong indicator of writing and reading -- communicative – development. These voices are teachable. Literary critical courses have been teaching them for centuries – at least since first century Roman schools of rhetoric. (See the "beginning" of Petronius' *Satyricon* for how this was done.)

Put another way: If I can see or hear a writer as a person while I am reading him or her, then I am probably reading good writing – and I will enjoy it. Without this voice there can be only poor communication in the activity, and only dead prose. Do we really want to make corpses? Do we really want to teach our students to write badly?

An English teacher, who has to read mountains of essays every week, has a vested interest in the students writing lively prose. The job of evaluating these essays would actually be pleasurable. Such readings would lead to better evaluations.

How many teachers actually bother to read all their students' essays in the way such writings deserve to be read? They either skim the writings once, thereby sending negative feedback to the fledgling writer, or, in despair, resort to red ink over grammar mistakes. Neither of these practices deserve to be called reading. They are all too often indicative of the teacher's own shortcomings as a reader and writer.

The ability to incisively comment on a student's written work is not often addressed in the literature of teacher education. Clearly, it should be. As far as I know it is not even taught.

Cultural Responses

One possible explanation for the student's voice in ELT not being addressed in the literature may be that we have the cultural context all wrong. While CLT remains a metropolitan methodology underpinned by inconsistent theoretical attitudes that fail to take adequate account of the voices from other cultures - the distant voices - then we will continue to lack a model of engagement with which to re-voice the students and teachers working in the East who are alien to the philosophical underpinnings of CLT as much as they are estranged from the concrete practices demanded by the new textbooks.

But such distancing of the Asian teacher and students need not be the case. If we can offer a frame of reference that would allow the ELT practitioner to engage the voices of the students in ways that would develop new and exciting dialogues with issues and practices that in the West have long since taken for granted, forgotten or ignored. Such dialogues may result in a new balance between the expert and the practitioner, the student and the teacher, the theorist and the teacher, the West and the East.

One immediate result of such a dialogue would be the way we conceive of SLA studies. The shortcomings of SLA ways of thinking about the voice become focussed when we look at the lexicon of the psycholinguists who talk of "the intrinsic properties of the word" (Laufer: 141). Such language offers the possibility of the researcher establishing a "familiarity with all its [the word's] features" (Laufer: 141) and hence the possibility of rationalistically breaking down the "parts" of words and indentifying "the" factors that impede or assist acquisition as:

*phonological

  *orthographical
  *morphological
  *lexical
  *parts of speech
  *semantic (Laufer: 142-153)

But what of the aesthetic or sensuous feel of a word in the mouth or the ear? The affective power of words must have some impact on a student's willingness and ability to learn them. There is more to a word than its disembodied parts (of speech). Such material parts may add up to less than the whole word. There may be more to language than those parts that are recognised in the philosophy of SLA.

The voices that have been discussed in this paper need to be elicited in culturally supportive environments and in ways that make sense to the minds of the students and the teachers involved here in the classrooms in Asia. For this pedagogical reason, the need to relate the concerns expressed about the shortcomings of the current mainstream theorists of the word should be recognised as important.

Once a case has been made out for different ways of hearing the voice, then the dialogue about praxis may take on new and more powerful relevance to all the stakeholders. But at present, the playing field is not level. The voices of Buddhism and neo-Confucianism hardly dare to raise themselves in debate with the powerful and perhaps miopic and short-of-hearing voices of the dominant practices of CLT.

Not that such engagement is necessary to begin with. In fact, one appropriate response in keeping with Buddhist and Confucian practices would be to step back from the current confrontational dialogue partner – the metropolitan SLA specialist/theorist. Such a movement is *viraga* in Pali - the disentanglement

of the non-self from current thinking. Such a movement away from what is now thought is made possible by *dukkha* "a disillusionment with what is what now. Such *dukkha* is possible when we resist the forces of *padana*, forces that encourage us to cling to established beliefs and practices which are only illusory.

One way we can make the gesture of *viraga* a culturally sympathetic one is by looking back to the past beliefs of Buddhist or the Confucian which have been silenced in the onslaught of the Western pedagogies that claim legitimacy in an often unexpressed way as belonging to the target language. To dismiss such Eastern beliefs as irrelevant is to dismiss the culture of the students and teachers in an attempt to replace it with the target language culture. Such a transplantation is just poor pedagogy - and explains why much CLT is resisted "often passively, but sometimes in Gandhian tones of civil disobedience" by the Thai teacher, student or administrator.

The move back is directly related to ways the teacher is understood: "He who by reanimating the Old can gain knowledge of the New is fit to be a teacher" (Confucius: II, 11). Through these Eastern eyes most CLT theorists would probably be disqualified due to their incapacity to reanimate the Socratic dialogic principles in their methodologies. The move away from the present is one of *viraga* for the Buddhist. By no longer clinging to what we think we believe now, we may disentangle ourselves from what blinds or deafens us in CLT and hear distant voices – voices from other lands and other times.

The move back is a precursor to a move forward. Such double movements are rhythmic in a tidal way. In neo-Confucian arguments, this double move has been called the *hsin-hsing* by Mou Tsung-san, Tang Chun-i and others (Liu Shu-hsien: 110-111). The

move back makes possible the move forward " the Old makes the New possible.

When we go back to Vedic thinking about language we find ways of concretising the voice and placing the voice at the heart of our lives as students. In the *Rg-Veda*, the self, Atman, is the "breath or vital essence" (*Rg-Veda*: X.16.3). This soul or spiritual essence is a pneumatic state " the breath of meaning. The *Chhandogya Upanishad* expresses it as:

> Speech is the essence of man
> Rig-Veda the essence of speech
> Om is the essence of Rik
> (Sri Aurobindo: 349)

The divine lovers Rik and Sanna cling together as Speech and Breath in the eternal spoken syllable of assent, OM. This is quite literally breathtaking thinking. I am not confident that many in the West can get their heart around what seems to be demanded in this spirit – that we are to meditate the word Om by chanting or singing the syllable to achieve spiritual ascension or understanding. What make these voicings are the vibrations of sound which in the Vedic practices of the Mantra seems to conceive of such vibrations as creative of langue formations. The *Kena Upanishad* expresses this layering of vibrations as the Brahman:

> That which one hears not with the ear, that by which the ear's hearing is heard, know that to be the Brahman and not that which men follow after here. (First Part, Section 7)

Sri Aurobindo explains this double voice as:

> …a vibration of sound on the material plane presupposes a corresponding vibration on the vital without which it

could not have come into play; that again presupposes a corresponding originative vibration on the supramental at the very root of things. (Sri Aurabindo: 126)

Beyond the mind is an ontological belief from which Buddhism springs:

> Mind and body are not our real self; they are mutable formations or images which we go on constructing in the drive of Time as a result of a mass of our past energies. For although those energies seem to us to lie dead in the past because their history is behind us, yet are they still existent in their mass and always active in the present and the future. (Sri Aurobindo: 120)

This seems close to the Confucian response to the Old – the past has never past away and is always to be made relevant to the Now. In the vibration of the voice there is a past, present and future embodied in an impermanent way. The power of breathing is the practice of meditation defined as a physical experience or awareness of the spiritual breath of meaning. People who are tuned into hearing our voices may hear in them what our language and meaning feel like as vibration and physical sensation. These perceptions are physical sensations or feelings. The physivcal and the mental, the spiritual and the material are not expereinced necessarily as dichotomies in the Upanishads. They are only presupposed to be totally separate to our apparently unresponsive Western ears. This seems to lie behind Michael McCallion's claim that "…the breath is responsive to the shape of the thought we are trying to express and to the emotion that goes with the thought (McCallion: 40).

If one's voice cannot be seperated from one's self, then one's self cannot be seperated

from one's voice. But this is precisely what psycholinguists seem to want to do when they anatomise the words into mechanistic attributes of rationalist analysis. Such dismembering of the voice goes against the spiritual underpinnings of much Eastern thinking about the voice. Is it any wonder that SLA studies cannot hear these vibrations in the dissection of the breathless corpse of language that seems to be required for knowledge to grow. Such necrocentric thinking cannot countenance the vibrating voice of the student or the teacher as a fit subject of scientific study. The vibrating sound as a means of accessing the mind or spirit of the student, as a physical touching of the mind or spirit is not acceptable to Western science that seems to require the subject to beexamined only in autopsy. Such linguists like to think of themselves as practitioners of syntagmatic, clinical, clean and unapproachable scientific method. But it simply is not true. The silencing of the voice is a fiction invented by twentieth century linguists who have forgotten what their "spiritual father", de Saussure, actually said. And they have forgotten what he said as they have stopped reanimating the Old. Such aural amnesia is not good science.

The practices of linguists who base their science on such silencing of distant voices makes them deaf to new thinking, forgotten thinking, distant thinking from other times and places. The resulting monovocal or one-sided monologue has been predicted by Karl Popper when he explains the need to communicate with others who do not necessarily speak like us if we are to have a rigorous scientific method:

> Among the many methods he [the philosopher/scientist] may use - always depending on the problem in hand one method seems to me worth mentioning. It is a variant of the historical method. It consists, simply, in trying to find out what other people have said about the problem in hand: why they had to face it; how they formulated it; how they tried to solve it. This seems to me important because it is part of the general method of rational discussion. If we ignore what other people are thinking, or have thought in the past, then rational discussion must come to an end, though eacg of us may go on happily talking to himself (Popper: 16-17).

The dialogues between the past and the present, the East and the West, and the spiritual and the material are all necessary and clearly denfensible as sound scientific method. Without such debates we are reduced to futile monologues that seem to lack any reverberating resonance for those who are the often unsuspecting benificiaries of our benevolent scientific CLT practices.

Such dialogues need to actually give voice to the dialogue partners. By having this dialogue in the classroom context, and not in Aristotelian clinical theoretical domains, we may put all the stakeholders on an even playing field. What happens when the students' vibrant voices, not the artificial voices that are in the heads of the metropolitan theorists or textbook writers, are the focus of ELT practices may best be studied in the actual environment where the voices seem to co-exist – in the classroom. We need to understand, to hear, and to feel how the students conceive of their own voices and the voices of those they read, talk to, and write for. For us to understand the voices of our students, we need to develop ways of eliciting their voices. And if we really are interested in the student as the centre of our pedagogy, then we should try to create ways for the student to be a round not a flat presence with a voice of his or her own. Before we can do this, we have to stop thinking that these voices can be mechanically trained or given by simple textbook or language lab exercises. Voices cannot be

"given" or assigned to students – they must be **created** in actual communicative dialogues. Without sound elicitation techniques and meaningful dialogue, our science and our pedagogy will remain in danger of being irrelevant, if not culturally damaging, to our endeavours as students and teachers.

We need to find or develop ways of creating or transforming voices in our classrooms. If we are incapable of doing this, then we should resign our positions as agents of change, openness or dialogue in the classroom.

Actions

Much of what we can do to find ways of eliciting, responding to, and evaluating student voices comes from the use of literary texts in our classroom practices ar every level and at every opportunity. In such texts the voices of the writer, characters, the past, other cultures, the creative spirit, are all present and user friendly – they want to be re-voiced by the reader or the speaker. Poetry and drama require developed passionate voices; novels are filled with many voices that compete with the writer's voices to be heard; journals only seem to make sense as the record of our most personal voices a we dialogue in silence with ourselves and others.

It seems that we can only make these things happen if we are committed to encouraging our students:

- to listen to their own voices
- to feel their own voices
- to respect their own voices
- to encourage their own voices in extreme shapes as memorable, beautiful, scarey, crazy, funny, silly, confident, sexy, angry, confident, interesting

We also need to accept the voice asa physical and spiritual presence in our experience and in our pedagogy. To do this, we need to regain the sense of written language as a spoken voice – and this may be best done by re-voicing the written language from our own past and the past of our students. When we can demonstrate a willingness and capacity to practise these responses to language, we may be able to get our ears around our discourse as a "concrete living totality" (Bakhtin: 181) and to develop our voices and our hearing to concretise our language practices. This concretisation seems close to what Kramsch talks of as the "particular" voices we experience in artistic literature of any sort (Kramsch: 130-131).

As teachers we need to develop certain skills that seem to be best practised in conjunction with other literary activities. We could improve our classroom environment by:

- Re-recording the tapes that often accompany texts in the publihing packages. These recordings are too often poorly performed or produced – they are in unrealistic accents, monovocal, unsupported by conextual or background sounds, insincere in tone, too fast, and flat.

- Reading aloud to our students and having them read aloud too. This makes the language communicative in feel. It also allows for voice-switching in a variety of genres such as stories, comics, dramas, novels, advertising jingles and slogans, newspaper or television reports and interviews, poems, and songs. The role play would be that of a reader and the audience.

- Encouraging yogic and Taoist breathing exercises, trance meditation, positive aural imaging, vocal chord strengthening, vocal self-awareness.

● Using the imagination to picture the shape of sounds in the breath or the body/mind.

● Helping our students to see and hear language as a performing art that relates their own cultures and bodies to what they are trying to do in class.

● Utilising journals as spaces where the students' voices can be developed with some privacy.

● Respecting our students' vocal behaviour insofar as it comes from their own deeply held cultural beliefs and practices.

● Wanting to dialogue with distant voices because we need to grow and develop. We do not want to cling to what we already have.

Many of these practices only seem possible if we change the way we are educating ourselves as teachers. Some of the areas that need to be focussed on are:

● Reintroducing courses on voice training

● Reintroducing literary sensitivity studies

● Including performance work in the education process for all language teachers

● Reevaluating SLA, Testing and Evaluation, Methodology, and the skills courses we offer in teacher education to include materials that address the blind spots identified here

Concluding Observations

With all these voices shaping his language, the student needs to sort them out.

By making a student aware of the presence of and interplay between these voices, a teacher is eliciting many different voices. Put on paper or expressed out aloud, these voices are externalised and, therefore, discussable. We need to somehow put them together to make them talk to each other, to open more dialogue channels.

The dialogue concerning these voices is also an ongoing process of elicitation. In other words, elicitation does not stop with the students' initial answer to a question. It is the student's struggle to come to terms with his own voices that the teacher should be monitoring and evaluating.

To listen only for the confirmation of a grammar point or a vocabulary item in a routine way is to miss much of this. The students' voices tell us much more. But are we listening? Or, are we cutting these voices off by calling them only correct or incorrect answers to our questions? We seem to be discouraging our students from answering their own questions when we fail to elicit their voices and ignore their elicitation of their own voices.

When we think of elicitation as only a Q&A routine, we are thinking of answers as feedback about the clarity of our code, not of what is "in" the code. We are missing a vital opportunity to send positive messages to our students that will encourage them to explore their voices – the voices' constitution, meaning and purpose. Without a critical awareness of what we are actually doing, and of what we should be doing as teachers of communicative language, we are not really communicating with our students very well at all.

By leaving all these voices swimming around in our students' heads, we are compounding their difficulties and, even, their traumas in coming to terms with their voices. Is

it any wonder that students so abandoned fail to get in tune with themselves as learners?

We need to encourage our students to produce or develop their voices, and to engage those voices in dialogue with each other. And as we are doing this, we need to realise that often the mistakes made in answer to our questions are not just "right" or "wrong" in the simple lexicogrammatical sense. Such "mistakes" are often expressions of another voice intruding on the student's intended voice. It may be the voice of another teacher who has taught an "incorrect" point, or it may be the transfer of an L1 feature "inappropriate" to the L2. Such interference is not so much an indicator of <u>an</u> interlanguage as of dialogue between languages. And these languages are not monological. Within a student's L1 are myriad voices, and within the L2 are a growing number of others.

There are so many discourses going on in and with our students that need to be shaped with the help of teachers who are aware of what is happening. When we design tasks, set assignments, write examinations, ask questions in class, read student writing, set up role plays, evaluate a student's language, we need to focus on the fact that what we are actually stimulating thought that is shaped and expressed largely by our voices. These are all acts of elicitation.

As teachers, we need to think about what we are doing. To do this, we need to be open to different, other voices (ideas), and to enter into dialogue about our practices. Without such dialogue, our classroom communication is in danger of becoming closed and unreflective. If this happens, then the possibilities for our students to develop effective discourse become slight.

But when we see such problems more as indicators of communication difficulties or weaknesses in our teaching practices, and when we discuss these indicators within the framework of a liberal arts endeavor, then such "barriers" may become challenging opportunities. We need not measure the success of our discourse by making a final decision. Instead, we may find that success can be measured by the quality of our discourse. This quality, if open and on-going, would in turn suggest that at least we are talking about our talk, and listening to each other. In itself, such activity would be educative. It would be meaningful insofar as it would make our professional practices more commensurate with our stated pedagogical strategies as practioners of CLT. This new clarity would in turn help to shape the way we theorise and research our language and our students.

By being willing to look at ourselves as others see us, and by being willing to go back to examine our first principles about communicating and teaching, and to see whether we are behaving consistently with them, we are being prudent and reflective. These practices can re-affirm our foundations and our practices – but only if we are willing to examine our own behaviour and address any major inconsistencies or contradictions in it.

What we may gain from emphasising the students' voices is a classroom that is in itself a stage for a work of art – the English class. On this stage, the performers will be empowered and productive. The inherently artistic aspects of teaching, course materials, evaluating, and the language being learned should all work to foster an environment in which the students will be able to voice themselves in significant cultural contexts. Such a transformation of the classroom seems to be a logical extension of student centred pedagogy and the communicative ideas we are currently debating.

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