

# A Tutorials: A WAY OF BUILDING COMMUNITY IN THE CLASSROOM

W

HEN TEACHING A FOREIGN OR SECOND LANGUAGE, WE WANT OUR STUDENTS TO BE able to use the language communicatively to express their ideas in speech and writing and to understand what they are hearing and reading. As teachers, we all know that there are optimal conditions for a learner to acquire the target language. Savignon (1983:122) has identified a “sense of community” as one of the factors that enhances language learning:

Communicative language teaching requires a sense of *community*—an environment of trust and mutual confidence wherein learners may interact without fear or threat of failure. Good teachers have long recognized the value of community in all learning environments and have found ways to encourage group cohesiveness and responsibility. Communicative language teaching depends on these traits. Without community there can be no communication.

Shaw points out that what teachers have known intuitively, research results have shown consistently: “where there is a strong sense of community, trust, high self-esteem, and good instruction, students have higher achievement” (1992:2).

---

As teachers, we want to create a sense of community in our classrooms among students and between students and ourselves. In many ESL/EFL classrooms, a student community develops to a certain extent, but a bond between the teacher and students does not happen, despite our desire to include ourselves as a member of a cohesive and supportive community as well as a guide. We feel that tutorials are a way to develop and enhance the classroom community and make it a better environment for language learning.

Many teachers think they do not have the time or the energy for student tutorials. We admit tutorials take time and effort to organize and carry out. However, we feel they are worth the extra work because they can help to create a learning community and help classes live up to student and teacher expectations. This article shows how EFL classes at the University of Macao have used tutorials to help build a motivated and enjoyable learning community.

### **Impediments to communicative language teaching**

Several factors can impede creating an environment of trust and mutual confidence in the classroom and a sense of community for communicative language teaching and learning, in particular, large classes, poor classroom design, and reluctant students.

Large class sizes make it extremely difficult for students to get to know one another and for a teacher to get to know all of the students, an obvious deterrent to building a sense of community.

Many classrooms are teacher-fronted, with immovable desks facing the front of the room. If students are to engage in communicative language learning activities, they need to be able to see each other and the teacher needs space to move around the classroom to be able to interact with students and hear what they say. Also, many of us struggle with inadequate lighting, poor ventilation, and noise, all of which make it difficult for students to listen to and talk with each other.

Even though English is now seen as a language of international communication and many people say they want to learn it, we still encounter reluctant learners. One reason for their reluctance is that they feel too much anxiety about language learning. They are not

accustomed to a communicative classroom and feel insecure about speaking in English. A second reason is that they think they won't need English when they graduate; thus, it is not relevant to their future. Third, they have poor skills in English; they may have studied it for many years or may know English grammar backwards and forwards, but they still have trouble composing sentences and holding a conversation in English. Fourth, cultural differences may exist between foreign native speaker teachers and their students, both in communication styles and in classroom practices. Finally, teachers and students often have different expectations of what a language class should be. On these last two points, recent research in China gives us some excellent insights into the differing expectations for language classes held by teachers and students.

Jin and Cortazzi (1998), through their research in China and Britain, have developed a schema for comparing the expectations of Asian language learners and Western teachers. They examined three activities in the language classroom in which conflicting expectations lead to confusion: group discussion in class, asking for help, and student questions. Students they interviewed saw discussion as "fruitless"; they thought it wasted their time and that they risked learning and reinforcing errors from their peers. They also found asking for clarification or help embarrassing; they felt it created a burden for someone else. Finally, students reported several reasons they did not want to ask questions during class: "foolish" questions make the questioner look stupid; "smart" questions make them stand out from their peers; and questions for which the teacher may not know the answers make them and the teacher lose face.

Flowerdew and Miller (1992), in their research with Hong Kong students, show that students may not feel comfortable asking a question in front of a large class because of their anxiety and insecurity using English. For all these reasons, and others, it is often very difficult initially for students to actively participate in their English classes.

### **Tutorials at the University of Macao**

Although we encourage our students at the University of Macao to participate actively in class by asking questions and engaging in

discussions, we also offer tutorials so that language learning can continue while students and teachers overcome the classroom barriers set up by any clash of expectations and classroom cultures. We have found that community building is easier to accomplish in tutorials because they offer students a more informal, supportive environment. The word *tutorial* is used in many different academic settings to describe a variety of situations. At the University of Macao, a tutorial refers to a meeting of either one teacher and one student (an individual tutorial) or one teacher and a group of up to twelve students (a small group tutorial). We feel that through these two formats for tutorials, students can get the information and assistance they need while they work on language skills.

Because Cantonese—a dialect of Chinese—is used by the majority of the population in Macao every day at home, school, and work, students do not view learning English as an important endeavor. (Portuguese is the other official language of Macao, but only two percent of the population speaks it.) However, this view is misguided. English is considered sufficiently important to be offered at schools in which Chinese is the language of instruction, and a few private secondary schools have sections that are taught in English. The University of Macao is an English-medium university, and students who want to enroll must pass an admission exam and are required to have good proficiency in English.

At the University of Macao, our students exhibit many of the characteristics of reluctant learners in other EFL settings, including anxiety about learning and using English, the view that English is irrelevant, poor English skills, cultural differences with their English teacher, and differing expectations of the language classroom. Students enter with varying levels of proficiency; some need more class hours in order to cope with the curriculum requirements of an English-medium university. We have two types of students taking English classes. Most of them take general English classes, in which they work on reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills as needed in an academic environment. The other students are English majors, who must take a year of English composition.

Our teaching situation is similar to that of many other universities. We teach large classes in small rooms with immovable furniture.

When we begin new courses, we try to determine how a tutorial can be incorporated into each course. First, we meet with the class and observe how well the students function as a community. How easily do they talk to each other and to us as teachers? How much do they share about themselves? Initially, we usually discover that students do not easily talk to each other or to their teachers, and they do not share much about themselves in classes. It is often difficult for them to give more than a one-word response.

We have developed two types of tutorials, compulsory and non-compulsory, for our general English classes and our English composition classes in order to build the sense of classroom community so essential to language learning. We have found tutorials helpful to students enrolled in both kinds of classes.

### **Rationale for tutorials**

Even though tutorials require more time and effort from teachers, the benefits they provide to students and teachers alike make this work worthwhile. We have found that students in classes with tutorials are more confident and achieve more. Because teachers get to know their students' needs better, they can try more accurately to meet those needs.

First-year students in our general English classes use tutorials as a time to talk to a teacher about their studies and life in general. In their first year in an unfamiliar environment, students—especially those from Chinese-medium secondary schools—are too often viewed simply as “quiet” classroom learners. The truth is that many of them are finding it difficult to adjust to an English-medium university where they have to rely on their limited English proficiency to find their way around. Through individual and small group tutorials we have discovered how important trust is as an element of language learning, and how ideal tutorials are as a way of building trust.

### **Compulsory tutorials for individuals**

Compulsory tutorials for individuals are those tutorials that students must attend as part of their work for the course. These are scheduled by a sign-up sheet. For some courses, they are held during class time, and for others, they are held during a time mutually agreeable to both the teacher and the student. These tuto-

rials generally occur two or three times during one term. Compulsory tutorials for individuals are not lengthy; students are usually given 15- to 20-minute time slots. If a student or teacher wants more time, the tutorial can be lengthened or another one can be scheduled.

It is very important that individual tutorials take place in a private, quiet place. Since faculty share offices at the University of Macao, we do not hold tutorials in our offices. Instead, we book a conference room or classroom for that purpose. We want each tutorial to be a time when teacher and student can meet without interruption and can concentrate on the conversation they are having. With only the teacher and student in the room, students are more comfortable talking and asking questions if they don't understand something. As teachers, we can easily see whether or not the student has understood what we have said and can clarify our words if they are met with a confused look. Our first-year students often ask questions about the university, course requirements, study habits, and other more personal topics. Tutorial time gives them the opportunity to ask about anything.

We set a specific focus for tutorials. Other questions will come up, but students need to know clearly what the purpose of the tutorial is, especially if they are being asked to come to a tutorial outside of regular class time.

The focus of compulsory tutorials for general English classes is to discuss student essays. In fact, the grade given on an essay will not be finalized until the student attends an individual tutorial to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the essay. Students are asked to look at the mistakes they made and consider alternative ways to correct them in order to instill an awareness of the types of mistakes they commonly make, rather than simply to provide the correct answers. Essays are used because they may reflect a variety of language problems and help demonstrate how the student's first language may be interfering with his or her use of English. Students usually appreciate the opportunity to discuss why they wrote what they wrote.

In composition classes for English majors, compulsory tutorials are held after students receive back a draft of their research essays. At this stage, the focus of tutorial sessions is to work with students on incorporating others'

ideas into their own writing and examining discourse problems, such as unclear reasoning, in their writing. We have found that research skills can be taught in a composition class, but students often experience confusion when they begin to use sources in their own writing. Tutorials provide an environment in which the teacher can focus on a student's paper and give specific guidance.

We often notice that after our first round of tutorials with both kinds of classes, students come to class more at ease with the teacher, the assignments, and each other. The conversational tone of a tutorial helps students become more comfortable using English. An extreme example occurred at the beginning of a term when a student came to the teacher's office with a classmate to ask a question. She asked her classmate her question in Cantonese and the classmate translated her question into English for the teacher, who did not speak Cantonese. Because the student was extremely shy, the teacher answered her question in English and allowed the classmate to translate the answer into Cantonese for the first student. What bothered the teacher was not the use of Cantonese, but the first student's fear of speaking to the teacher in English. During their first individual tutorial, that student had to speak with the teacher in English. It was very difficult for her, but she saw that the teacher was patient and allowed her all the time she needed to phrase her sentences. After the first tutorial, the student was able to speak directly to the teacher in English. The student also was able to participate more fully in class discussions. Without the individual tutorial, this student may never have found her voice in English nor become part of the English-speaking community within the class.

### **Non-compulsory tutorials for small groups**

Non-compulsory small group tutorials are those that students in general English courses may attend. They are not mandatory, but participating in them can help students improve their English. The majority of students usually participate in these tutorials because they realize that more opportunities to use English will help them with all of their classes.

Students in an EFL environment usually benefit from more exposure to the target language. Non-compulsory small group tutorials

are designed with this in mind. They can be understood as a “ring of discussion” involving a maximum of 12 students in a small meeting room. The tutorials occur two or three times per term. The meeting room is booked for two hours at a convenient time. This may be in the late afternoon after class, on a non-teaching day, or on a Saturday. Students may enter and leave the ring of discussion as they please. Some stay for only 30 minutes; some leave for a while and come back; some stay for the entire two hours. The discussion is focused on a topic the students have chosen or on something they have read. There are no set rules about how the discussion is to be carried out.

The objective of these tutorials is to give students more exposure to English and more opportunities to express themselves in English. Students can read whatever they want, but if they have trouble finding material, a suggested reading list is provided. The list contains mostly articles from newspapers and magazines. The idea is to have current material easily accessible and to allow some group reading and discussion without the threat of performing for grades in the regular classroom. Having the tutorials scheduled outside of class time emphasizes the informal nature of the gathering and discussion that takes place there.

The teacher’s role in these tutorials is simply as a facilitator. The group reports on what they found interesting in their reading. At this point most of the students are enthusiastic about what they have read and the shyness they usually have in the classroom setting does not affect them any more. They give a short summary of a news article they have read, others who have read it also comment on it, and the group discusses issues raised in the article. Last year, one tutorial was held just after the U.S. military airplane was grounded on the island of Hainan. Students read news articles and discussed this situation. Sometimes the discussion is not connected to a text at all, but is based on something of interest to the students. One recent tutorial discussion centered on whether or not students should have part-time jobs. The power of a good discussion topic spurs them to speak English and express themselves freely.

In this small setting, most students have enough confidence to share with other students what their reading is about and even to

add a sentence or two on how they feel about what they read. Weaker students are helped by better ones in their choice of vocabulary and their sentence constructions.

Sometimes a weaker student may discuss what she wants to say in Cantonese with a neighbor in the ring, and the neighbor will help her phrase it in English. There are many different views regarding the use of the mother tongue in EFL classes (Homolova 2002; Flowerdew, Li, and Miller 1998). In our tutorials, the teacher does not use Cantonese, and English is the medium of the tutorial. However, students are free to confer with each other over how to say something in English. In this way, students provide scaffolding for each other, and all learn new and varied ways to use English. Helping each other within the tutorial provides the basis for a sense of community, which often carries back to the classroom and students feel more at ease speaking up in class.

Perhaps the most important benefit of these tutorials is that students get to know one another, including their likes and dislikes. In building a classroom community, teachers need to structure “opportunities for students to present who they are to their classmates” (Shaw 1992:3) and the ring of discussion is one way to give them this opportunity. The tutorials also enable the teacher to learn more about the students. Finally, students are able to see their teacher as one more participant in the discussion, rather than as a force in front of the classroom.

## Conclusion

Palmer (1993:74) discusses the role that hospitality has in classrooms: “A learning space needs to be hospitable not to make learning painless but to make the painful things possible, without which no learning can occur—things like exposing ignorance, testing tentative hypotheses, challenging false or partial information, and mutual criticism of thought.”

Our tutorials express our hospitality and invite students to show what they know as well as what they don’t know, to experiment with language, and to learn to agree and disagree with each other. The types of discussions that occur in our tutorials, among students and between the teacher and individual students, create an environment of trust and confidence, which Savignon (1983) has pointed out is necessary for successful communicative language

teaching and learning. In addition to language learning, in the trusting environment of tutorials, true communication can occur.

### References

Flowerdew, J., D. Li, and L. Miller. 1998. Attitudes towards English and Cantonese among Hong Kong Chinese University lecturers. *TESOL Quarterly*, 32, 2, pp. 201–231.

Flowerdew, J. and L. Miller. 1992. Student perceptions, problems and strategies in L2 lectures. *RELC Journal*, 32, 2, pp. 60–80.

Homolova, E. 2002. What every EFL teacher should know about using the mother tongue. *English as a Foreign Language Newsletter*, 21, 2, pp. 1–2.

Jin, L. and M. Cortazzi. 1998. The culture the learner brings: A bridge or a barrier? In *Language*

*learning in intercultural perspective: Approaches through drama and ethnography*, eds. M. Byram and M. Fleming. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 98–118.

Palmer, P. J. 1993. *To know as we are known: A spirituality of education*. San Francisco: Harper and Row.

Savignon, S. J. 1983. *Communicative competence: Theory and classroom practice*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.

Shaw, V. 1992. *Community building in the classroom*. San Juan Capistrano, CA: Kagan Cooperative Learning. 

---

Kirsten Schaetzel is an assistant professor at the National Institute of Education in Singapore.

Chan Ho is a lecturer in English at the University of Macao.