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Community Language Learning

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Introduction

The method we will examine in this chapter advises teachers to consider their students as ‘whole persons.’ Whole-person learning means that teachers consider not only their students’ intellect, but they also have some understanding of the relationship among students’ feelings, physical reactions, instinctive protective reactions, and desire to learn. The Community Language Learning Method takes its principles from the more general Counseling-Learning approach developed by Charles A. Curran. Curran studied adult learning for many years. He found that adults often feel threatened by a new learning situation. They are threatened by the change inherent in learning and by the fear that they will appear foolish. Curran believed that a way to deal with the fears of students is for teachers to become language counselors. A language counselor does not mean someone trained in psychology; it means someone who is a skillful ‘understander’ of the struggle students face as they attempt to internalize another language. The teacher who can understand can indicate his acceptance of the student. By understanding students’ fears and being sensitive to them, he can help students overcome their negative feelings and turn them into positive energy to further their learning. Let us see how Curran’s ideas are put into practice in the Community Language Learning Method. We will observe a class in a private language institute in Indonesia. Most of the students work during the day and come for language instruction in the evening. The class meets two evenings a week for two hours a session. This is the first class

Principles

- 1 The teacher greets the students, introduces himself, and has the students introduce themselves. Building a relationship with and among students is very important.
- 2 The teacher tells the students what they are going to do that evening. He explains the procedure for the first activity

and sets a time limit. Any new learning experience can be threatening. When students have an idea of what will happen in each activity, they often feel more secure. People learn nondefensively when they feel secure. 3 Students have a conversation. Language is for communication. 4 The teacher stands behind the students. The superior knowledge and power of the teacher can be threatening. If the teacher does not remain in the front of the classroom, the threat is reduced and the students' learning is facilitated. Also this fosters interaction among students, rather than only from student to teacher. 5 The teacher translates what the students want to say in chunks. The teacher should be sensitive to students' level of confidence and give them just what they need to be successful. 6 The teacher tells them that they have only a few minutes remaining for the conversation. Students feel more secure when they know the limits of an activity. 7 Students are invited to talk about how they felt during the conversation. Teacher and students are whole persons. Sharing their feelings about their learning experience allows learners to get to know one another and to build community. 8 The teacher accepts what each student says. Guided by the knowledge that each learner is unique, the teacher creates an accepting atmosphere. Learners feel free to lower their defenses, and the learning experience becomes less threatening. 9 The teacher understands what the students say. The teacher 'counsels' the students. He does not offer advice, but rather shows them that he is really listening to them and understands what they are saying. By understanding how students feel, the teacher can help students gain insights into their own learning process as well as transform their negative feelings, which might otherwise block their learning. 10 The students listen to the tape and give the Indonesian translation. The students' native language is used to make the meaning clear and to build a bridge from the known to the unknown. Students feel more secure when they understand everything.

Reviewing the Principles

Let us now review the principles of the Community Language Learning Method (CLL). In answering our 10 questions, some additional information about the method will also be provided.

1 What are the goals of teachers who use the Community Language Learning Method? Teachers who use CLL want their students to learn how to use the target language communicatively. In addition, they want their students to learn about their own learning, to take increasing responsibility for it, and to learn how to learn from one another. All of these objectives can be accomplished in a nondefensive manner if the teacher and learner(s) treat each other as whole persons, valuing both thoughts and feelings.

2 What is the role of the teacher? What is the role of the students? The teacher's initial role is primarily that of a counselor. This does not mean that the teacher is a therapist, or that the teacher does no teaching. Rather, it means that the teacher recognizes how threatening a new learning situation can be for adult learners, so he skillfully understands and supports his students in their struggle to master the target language. Initially, the learners are very dependent upon the teacher. It is recognized, however, that as the learners continue to study, they become increasingly independent. Community Language Learning methodologists have identified five stages in this movement from dependency to mutual inter-dependency with the teacher. In Stages I, II, and III, the teacher focuses not only on the language but also on being supportive of learners in their learning process. In Stage IV, because of the students' greater security in the language and readiness to benefit from corrections, the teacher can focus more on accuracy. It should be noted that accuracy is always a focus even in the first three stages; however, it is subordinated to fluency. The reverse is true in Stages IV and V.

3 What are some characteristics of the teaching/learning process? In a beginning class, which is what we observed, students typically have a conversation using their native language. The teacher helps them express what they want to say by giving them the target language

translation in chunks. These chunks are recorded, and when they are replayed, it sounds like a fairly fluid conversation. Later, a transcript is made of the conversation, and native language equivalents are written beneath the target language words. The transcription of the conversation becomes a 'text' with which students work. Various activities are conducted (for example, examination of a grammar point, working on pronunciation of a particular phrase, or creating new sentences with words from the transcript) that allow students to further explore the language they have generated. During the course of the lesson, students are invited to say how they feel, and in return the teacher understands them. According to Curran, there are six elements necessary for nondefensive learning. The first of these is security. Next is aggression, by which Curran means that students should be given an opportunity to assert themselves, be actively involved, and invest themselves in the learning experience. One way of allowing for this in the lesson we observed was for students to conduct their own conversation. The third element is attention. One of the skills necessary in learning a second or foreign language is to be able to attend to many factors simultaneously. To facilitate this, especially at the beginning of the learning process, the teacher helps to narrow the scope of attention. Recall that the teacher in our lesson asked the students not to copy the transcript while he was writing it on the board. Instead, he wanted them to attend to what he was writing and to add what translation they may have recalled in order to complete the transcript. The fourth element, reflection, occurred in two different ways in our lesson. The first was when the students reflected on the language as the teacher read the transcript three times. The second was when students were invited to stop and consider the active experience they were having. Retention is the fifth element, the integration of the new material that takes place within the whole self. The last element is discrimination, sorting out the differences among target language forms. We saw this element when the students were

Reviewing the Techniques

We will review the techniques described in this CLL lesson and provide a little more detail. You may have agreed with some or all of the answers to our 10 questions and might like to try to incorporate some of these techniques into your own approach to language teaching. Of course, there may also be techniques you are currently using that can be adapted so that they are consistent with the whole-person approach we have explored here.

- **Recording Student Conversation** This is a technique used to record student-generated language as well as to give the opportunity for community learning to come about. By giving students the choice about what to say and when to say it, students are in a good position to take responsibility for their own learning. Students are asked to have a conversation using their native language or a language common to the group. In multilingual groups with no common language, other means will have to be employed. For instance, students can use gestures to get their meaning across. After each native language utterance or use of a gesture, the teacher translates what the student says or acts out into the target language. The teacher gives the students the target language translation in appropriate-sized chunks. Each chunk is recorded, giving students a final recording with only the target language on it. In the lesson we observed, a tape recorder was used; however, these days, other teachers might use a digital voice-recording device, such as an MP3 player, a cell phone, or a computer. Such recording technology allows for instant ‘repeats’ without rewinding. Also, a teacher can burn a CD or send an MP3 (or other) file to students electronically, which allows students to listen to the recording in their own time. After a conversation has been recorded, it can be replayed. Since the students have a choice in what they want to say in the original conversation, it is easier for them to associate meaning with a particular target language utterance. Being able to recall the meaning of almost everything said in a first conversation is motivating for learners. The recording can also be used to simply listen to their voices in the target