

Teaching and Learning versus “Covering the Book”

John Pint
Associates for Creative Learning
Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico
RanchoPint@hotmail.com

I doubt if there is a teacher anywhere in the world who would disagree in theory with Caleb Gattegno's principle for quality education: teaching must be modified to fit the demands of learning (“The Subordination of Teaching to Learning”). Impressed by the extraordinary mental powers displayed by babies learning—through experimentation—to use their bodies, cope with their environment and even to decode the language spoken around them, Gattegno dedicated himself to devising tools and strategies for efficient learning in the fields of math, reading and foreign language study. His games, his charts and the colored rods which he made world famous are all multi-purpose tools that a teacher can use in endless ways to spark awareness in students and help them resolve complex problems creatively and joyfully.

As the years go by, we language teachers learn how to “read” a new group of students to discover in them aspects of pronunciation, grammar and syntax to which they have been exposed but which they have failed to grasp. After a short period of interaction, the observant teacher might make a mental list of notes, such as:

- Most of these students don't understand how to use *do* and *does* to make a question.
- Half of them are not adding an *s* to third-person, present-tense verbs.
- They habitually use the present tense to talk about the past.

Likewise, over the years experienced teachers have discovered exercises, games or demonstrations which are highly effective for “unconfusing” students about key points of the language being taught. The years also teach us that applying these strategies may take much longer or shorter with one group than with another. We inevitably reach the conclusion that we have to give our students all the time they need to work their way through what at first seems confusing, until the light of awareness dawns.

This way of working focuses the teacher's attention on the reality of the students in front of them and on what they need as learners. It is teaching subordinated to learning.

This is easy to do if you are tutoring privately, but what happens if you have been hired by a school or an institute?

You are, of course, handed a book and told which units you have to cover.

In many places, covering the book is an absolute requirement and teachers may even be told which pages must be done during which period. I have seen cases where teachers

doggedly press on, flipping page after page even though half the students in the room are hopelessly lost. At the end of the course, those students typically fail the exam and drop out, convinced that they are “too dumb” to learn the language...

Unfortunately, textbooks are wonderfully convenient for administrators of language schools. Hundreds, even thousands of students can be tested and then assigned to a certain level, where they will study certain chapters of The Book. During subsequent years, students simply move along from level to level, like clockwork. This is, in fact, a clockwork approach and like the famed clockwork orange, it is contrived and unreal.

The friendly-to-learning approach would be for a teacher to sit down with students assigned to level X and work with them for a while. Only then would a responsible teacher consider using these or those materials or this or that chapter and even then the teacher might have to revise those decisions two or three more times as the weeks pass.

I realize that few administrators would give up the comforts of a book-dominated curriculum, but I do think they might accept a slightly modified plan. They could run a number of remedial courses in parallel with those following the book. Students in the book courses who are too slow, too fast or simply don't fit in, could be shifted to the remedial courses where experienced teachers could use materials and strategies most suited to them—and move at a pace mandated by the students' needs.

Textbook publishers should not object to this as they could then produce all sorts of ad-hoc materials from which the remedial teachers could pick and choose.

For these remedial classes, materials writers might, with a little guidance, prepare open-ended games and exercises similar to those devised by Caleb Gattegno, activities which cater to students of mixed abilities and experience and which help the weaker learn from the stronger.

At present, the world's schools are filled with students who spend several years “studying” a foreign or second language only to end up thoroughly confused and unable to speak it, read it or write it. Are school administrators unable to see the connection between this fact and their policies of forcing teachers to “cover the book” instead of focusing on what their students really need?