Towards Awareness: Professional Growth as a Language Teacher

The purpose of this research project is to investigate the process of teacher development utilizing effective motivational strategies for increasing students' self-esteem. This paper focuses on the following research questions: 1) What are the effective motivational strategies for enhancing students' self-esteem?, 2) How does a teacher's awareness affect his/her development as a professional?

For teenagers, in the midst of building up their identities, it is a very difficult task to develop on their own accord. However, the path could be simplified if teachers guide and assist them in heightening their self-concept in class. If a teacher aims for collaborative interaction between the teacher and students, it requires the need for the teacher to develop as a professional in order to make use of effective strategies.

This project was based on five-months of practice conducted in a Japanese senior high school. A total of 33 students (10 males, 23 females) and their teacher (Mr. A) participated in this project. The basic structure of the research for the teacher is: 1) giving a lesson, reflecting on the lesson through the checklist (composed of motivational strategies), 2) watching the DVD recording of the lesson, completing a second reflection, 3) the interview/conference, and completion of a third reflection. Questionnaires (10 questions from self-esteem scale and 17 questions from motivational strategies scale) were administered to the students at the beginning and the end of the research. In addition, there were three meetings in the research period with Ms. B, his supervisor. As the project progressed, the researcher came to face the dilemma between her pressure of conducting the research properly and her uncontrollable urge as an experienced teacher to give Mr. A some advice. Mr. A, on the other hand, also needed some support especially when he was stuck and just could not succeed in carrying out the strategies. In order to break an impasse on this situation, they came to agree that the name of the session would have to change from interview to conference, in order that the researcher could give him advice and they all could discuss freely. With this decision, the researcher's stance changed from outsider to insider.

In order to address the first research question and to explore whether the motivational strategies in practice were effective or not, PRE and POST questionnaires composed of a self-esteem scale and a motivational strategies scale, were administered to the students.

Paired t-test was then applied to the results of the questionnaires. Four items (one from the self-esteem scale and three from the motivational strategies scale) displayed significant difference. As for the item from the self-esteem scale, it was revealed that self-esteem should be nurtured over a period of many years in every aspect of the school context. With respect to the three items from the motivational strategies scale, the first one relates to acceptance, the second, feedback and the last, praise. By analyzing these one by one, the strategies that Mr. A applied in class were considered to have reached almost every one of the students and therefore the teacher-student relationship in the latter class (in time of POST test) became much closer than it used to be. To this end, it is self-evident from the findings that the three major strategies used for developing students' self-esteem in class were acceptance, feedback, and praise.
In exploring the second, but main research question: How does a teacher's 'awareness' affect his/her development as a professional?, three sub-questions were considered: 1) What was happening in the teacher when he practiced the strategies?; 2) What affected the teacher's awareness?; and 3) What lies between awareness and critical awareness?

In regards to the first sub-question, the results of all the strategies on the checklist were initially discussed. The strategies were categorized into five groups according to the commonalities of the checks appearing in each lesson. Even though there were different traits demonstrated by the teacher mastering the strategies, his progress was clearly visible in each category. In the latter part, all the teacher's statements were thoroughly explored in each of the three strategies which indicated significant differences. In order to perceive the teacher's awareness level, van Lier's four levels of consciousness model (1998) interpreted by Bailey, Curtis and Nunan (2001) was utilized. In the first strategy on acceptance, Mr. A at first expressed his uncertainty about the actual utilization of it, implying that he is as of yet in Level 2. However, in the next period, having deeply resonated with the advice, the teacher realized the impact of acceptance indicating that he reached Level 4. As to the feedback strategy, he was at first in Level 2 and he admitted that he had not been able to utilize the strategy. He stayed in that level for a while, but in the very last lesson, he seemed to have passed through the threshold and to have made a great progress to the final level, as observed from his voluntary action: he had his students compare two parts of the textbook, feel their progress and gave them rich feedback. In the last strategy: praise, he was conscious of using it and initially thought he used the strategy and was in Level 3, then through the process of searching for the precise definition of the strategy, he seemed to have finally reached Level 4 with his demonstration of voluntary action.

As for the second sub-question, all of Mr. A's statements containing awareness were carefully chosen and analyzed for the purpose of exploring the decisive factors which may influence Mr. A's awareness. They were grouped into four: awareness by supervision, by the DVD of his lessons, by students' comments and behaviors, and by the result of the questionnaires. In these four categories, the teacher obtained awareness of various teaching aspects such as presenting the students with a variety of tasks and their benefits, the actual pace of teaching, the difference between "what he thinks he did" and "what he really did," and the necessity of paying full attention to all the students. Consequently, it was concluded that these four external factors helped produce powerful effects on the teacher's awareness.

With respect to the third sub-question, any of the teacher's utterances including acceptance, feedback, and praise were specifically selected to be analyzed for determining the substantial threshold between Level 3: awareness and Level 4: critical awareness. After thorough interpretation of the statements, three categories emerged: interpretation of students' demeanor, retrospect, and transformation. Each of these was connected to mindfulness, reflective processes, and voluntary action respectively; therefore, these three were confirmed to be the key components of critical awareness, as van Lier (1998) asserts. Mr. A's remarks vividly illustrate that internal dialogue (e.g., asking questions to oneself) appears to be the crucial factor in reaching critical awareness: mindfulness, reflective processes, and voluntary action. There are enough grounds to assume that internal dialogue plays a pivotal role in raising critical awareness and therefore contribute greatly to teachers' development.

The conclusion summarizes the findings and the limitations of the present study. Referring to the message from one of Mr. A's students, this chapter stresses the importance of this line of practitioner research, aiming to contribute to a participant teacher, his students, his colleagues as well as the researcher herself, which has been out of the mainstream research in the existing literature of SLA or TEFL in Japan.

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