

Teacher-learner Dynamics from a Transactional Analysis Perspective. Examples from a Language Classroom

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to illustrate how the application of Eric Berne's Transactional Analysis theory to teacher-student interactions in the foreign language classroom can provide useful insight for teachers. This paper will provide examples from the monolingual language classroom at university level in Italy within a non-compulsory educational setting. It is argued that an increased awareness of how teacher discourse affects student engagement in the learning process can, in turn, lead to more effective teaching. The analysis will examine a string of typical teacher-learner interactions that occur over a specific period of time using Berne's PAC (Parent-Adult-Child) transactional model. In addition, by illustrating the complexity and potency of classroom interactions, the examples aim to provide a greater understanding of the implications of classroom dynamics in terms of learner development in general through the ongoing activation of learner autonomy, critical thinking and pro-active behaviour. The outcomes of the analysis are considered to be relevant to the theoretical fields of Language Awareness and Learner Advising in Foreign Language Education and to intersect with the broader field of Learner Counselling in education. While this paper is based on dynamics of the foreign language classroom, the analysis can be viewed as being relevant to teacher-student interactions in a variety of educational contexts as well.

Keywords: language teaching, learner counselling, learner advising, language awareness, learner autonomy;

1. Transactional Analysis and the Ego states

Transactional Analysis (AT) as defined by Stewart and Joines [1] is an approach to psychology based mainly on the observation of the behaviour of people within the context of their human relationships. Human behaviour is analysed principally through "transactions". With the term "transaction, AT refers to the verbal and non-verbal communication that takes place between individuals. The AT approach to human communication makes use primarily of what are known as the "Ego states" to explain the relational dynamics within different contexts (psychological, educational, social and organisational). AT recognises three Ego-states: the Child, the Adult and the Parent. The term "Ego-state" is used to refer to all of those thoughts, emotions and behaviours which are typical for the specific state. A person who is considered psychologically balanced will demonstrate ongoing internal communication between the three states and will activate one state rather than another according to the situation and the demands of the external world.

1.1 Transactions

Transactions are at the centre of the TA approach. *Complementary transactions* are those transactions that take place between two complementary Ego-states: Adult to Adult; Parent to Child; Child to Parent. The main characteristic of complementary transactions is the fact that they are predictable.

Crossed transactions are considered less predictable and occur in general when the speaker receives a reply from a different Ego-state than the one addressed in the transaction. An example may be when I address the Adult state of my interlocutor who responds from his Parent state to my Child state.

2. The educational setting

The educational context this paper reports on is that of an Italian university Language Centre which caters for foreign language education for the entire university. Some courses are also available to the general public and as such the Centre can also be considered a Centre for Adult Education. The examples of classroom transactions that are the focus of this paper represent a selection of

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transactional interactions from the foreign language classroom at the B1-B2 level of the *European Framework of Reference for Languages*. At this level, one of the teaching aims is to provide the learner with the communication skills required to become what the Framework of Reference refers to as “an autonomous user”. The main teaching approach used within the classrooms whose transactional dynamics are the focus of this paper is *Communicative Language Teaching*. This approach is also integrated with several important language teaching approaches such as those that are advocated by the fields of *Learner Autonomy*, *Learning to Learn*, *Learner Advising* and *Language Awareness*.

3. Transactional Analysis in the foreign language classroom

If we look at the foreign language classroom within the context described above from the point of view of TA we can argue that:

The Parent Ego-state is represented on the one hand by the teacher and by all the norms, educational requirements and teaching best practices students come into contact with. The foreign language itself, in so far as it represents a “norm”, can be viewed as part of the Parent Ego-state.

The Adult Ego-state can be seen to emerge as the students become increasingly aware of their learning process within the classroom community (made up of peers and the teacher). Here they are able to start to reflect as an Adult on their learning needs in relation to the learning contexts. In other words, there is a strong connection between cognitive involvement and the Adult.

The Child Ego-state, on the other hand, is represented by the emotional dimension in which students have to necessarily expose themselves by taking an active part in classroom activities (i.e. role play, speaking). Indeed, the Communicative approach to language learning allows for all kinds of communicative activities and games. Such is the nature of games that students are forced out of the Adult state into the Child state.

3.1 The ego states in the classroom and teacher intervention

It can be argued that the student whose Adult Ego-state is capable of activating both the Child and Parent Ego-state according to the activities and different demands of the learning context is ideally equipped psychologically to make the most of the learning experience. The teacher's role in relation to this kind of student can thus focus on language development and input as the learner is sufficiently equipped to act independently towards his or her learning.

The student that does not activate the Adult

A student who is not able to activate the Adult risks remaining in a situation of stagnation or immobility in which he or she is not able to make the most not only of the resources of the learning context but also of his or her own cognitive resources. Students who tend to remain mainly in the Child Ego-state often display excessive dependency on the teacher and anxiety towards the learning process. Teacher intervention will include helping the student to become less dependent on the teacher by providing, for example, support in making decisions about their own learning process and needs.

The student that excludes the Child

Students who exclude the Child generally have an Adult Ego-state which has a strong connection to the Parent. Students who belong to this group will tend to display a normative and rigid approach to their learning. The teacher's approach when faced with a student who is not in contact with his or her Child needs to take into account providing the student with a feeling that they are safe and that it is ok to make mistakes.

TA also makes the distinction between the *Free Child* state and the *Adapted Child* state. The so-called Free Child displays a direct and fluid connection with his or her emotions and feels free to respond to his or her emotional needs and to be creative. The so-called Adapted Child expresses through his verbal and non-verbal behaviour that he or she does not feel totally free to respond to his or her needs and often adapts them to the needs and demands of others or of the contexts as he or she perceives it to be.

The student that does not activate the Free Child

Often the student that does not activate the Free Child is nevertheless in contact with his or her Adapted Child. Unfortunately, the physical layout of many university language classrooms does not provide much support for the teacher who needs to attempt to activate the Free Child in terms of movement. However, the teacher can encourage the student to be creative through a variety of activities and ongoing support and encouragement.

The Free Child in the language classroom

The student who is able to make use of his or her Free Child is undoubtedly in an advantageous position as he or she will be responsive to the more ludic yet fundamental aspects of language



learning such as play, games, creativity, association of sounds, musicality, word-play, role-play and acting, improvisation, improvisation and risk taking. The Free child is also an important “member” of the classroom learning community insofar as those students who are able to express their Free Child positively energize the learning environment both for the teacher and the other learners.

3.2 Communication in the classroom from an AT perspective

There are a number of transactions that can take place in the foreign language classroom and teacher intervention, as outlined in the section above, is observable through these transactions. It needs to be pointed out that we cannot speak of “good” transactions or “bad” transactions. The focus in a TA approach of the language learning classroom dynamics is on the learning and educational outcome that can be triggered by the deployment of a specific transaction. The following is a sample of some of the transactions that may take place.

Student Child vs Teacher Child

When a teacher either responds to the Student Child via his or her own Child, this may have a liberating or modelling effect on the student. Too many interactions of this kind, however, might lead to student to losing sight of the teacher as “authority”.

Student Child vs Teacher Parent

This type of transaction may be useful when a student needs to perceive the teacher as an authority. This may be useful in helping the student to feel safe, contained and reassured. However, if the classroom dynamics only make use of this type of transaction, the risk might be that the students will not develop as autonomous learners and will become over dependent on the teacher. It also might be the case that this transactional dynamic does not allow for students to fully access their Free Child.

Student Parent vs Teacher Parent

This transactional dynamic may be useful initially when a student has a very normative and traditional approach to learning. However, ongoing use of this dynamic by the teacher runs the risk of reinforcing the learner’s approach to learning and may limit the learner’s access to his or her personal learning resources and those of the environment.

4. Conclusions

To conclude, this paper is to be understood as a preliminary exploration and exemplification of how TA may be useful in providing educators with greater awareness of how we interact in the classroom with our students and of the power these interactions carry in terms of learner development.

References

- [1] Stewart, I. & Joines, V. “L’analisi transazionale. Guida alla psicologia dei rapporti umani”, Milano, Garzanti, 2000.