Teaching for Understanding in ESL/EFL

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I would like to start this discussion with some questions.

• What percentage of the topics that you have covered so far this school year have your students truly learned?

First, it might be a good idea to define "learn". To learn is to internalize information, to adapt knowledge as part of how we understand the world, and to be able to use the knowledge to do something new (not simply repeat it for a test). Do your students learn 100% of what you teach? Probably not. 80%? 60%? Less?

• Whose fault is this lack of learning?

The students themselves? The teacher? The school and administration? The text book? Probably none of these elements alone is the culprit. The main problem is that the model used for most teaching focuses on TEACHING, not on LEARNING. Think for a moment about the average five-year-old child entering kindergarten. The child is excited about school and is happy to go. But what about a 10-year-old child? A 15-year-old? Are these children still excited and happy about school? What happened? A focus on *teaching* made the child bored about

"learning." Many children feel they are wasting their time. Because of their students' attitudes, many teachers end up feeling the same way. They feel they are wasting their time "teaching" something that the students do not care about or do not "learn".

How can we change this attitude? One way may be to adopt a "Teaching for Understanding" approach. Teaching for Understanding is a relatively new approach promoted by professors of the Harvard University Graduate School of Education where Howard Gardner works and does research about Multiple Intelligences. This approach is student-centered and focuses on the creation of knowledge within the students also known as a constructivist approach. Students create their own knowledge instead of transferring knowledge through the traditional system of education where the well-informed teacher dominates the class and "passes" them information that they simply memorize (but generally do not internalize).

So what is " Teaching for Understanding" and how can it work for us as teachers of English as a Second or Foreign language? First of all, Teaching for Understanding is

continuous learning, not teaching. This concept is orientated towards understanding the material by using a variety of multiple intelligence influenced, student-centered activities. The teacher is a guide who helps students discover meaning. Teachers constantly look for ways to give authentic, contextualized feedback.

The proponents of Teaching for Understanding have provided a number of key stages to achieving understanding. First, they recommend organizing our courses using Generative Topics (GT). For example, in a language course, some GTs could be traveling or greetings or talking about family. In a traditional language class, lessons are organized by grammar; almost all books, no matter how "progressive" they claim to be, start with the verb "to be" in present tense. Teaching for Understanding reflects some of the concepts of Notional/Functional syllabi or Task-based learning (see Nunan, 1989, for example).

GTs should be interesting to both the teacher and the students. For example, a unit on travel, which includes descriptions, directions, and questions about where we have traveled, is interesting. To enhance interest, it is important to bring together many different authentic subject areas and to highlight language in realistic situations. In contrived situations, the grammar item to be learned is stretched to its limit through boring, repetitive activities, which do not allow that item to become absorbed by the students.

What are some possible Generative Topics

and their related language items?
• Food (vocabulary, polite requests, buy/sell, sequencing and instructions)
• Natural disasters (past tense narration, conditional, modals, prepositions of place, etc.)
• My family/me/identity (family vocabulary, descriptors, narration in past and present, etc.)
• Change (prepositions of time, modals, cause-effect relationships, etc.)
• Life (all sorts of vocabulary, past tense narration, cause-effect relations, processes, etc.)
• Pets (animal vocabulary, likes/dislikes, etc.)
• Stories (past tense narration, time structures, story patterns, etc.)

To better define our Generative Topics, we can ask the following questions when designing a course: What are the topics that offer the panorama of experiences that I want the students to learn? What topics will the students want to explore with me? What are the ideas, themes, or concepts that I want my students to understand? What do I really want to teach? What are the areas or objects that will help my students get involved in the topic? What does the school/institute really want the students to learn? What can help my students take control of knowledge and apply it in their lives? What will help them become creative and competent in the future? These questions were posed at the "II Seminario Internacional de Inteligencias Múltiples, Bogotá, 2001."

After deciding on the Generative Topics that will guide your course, it is necessary

to define goals and throughlines. Unit Understanding Goals are goals that we have for the students for each unit. "Throughlines" are goals we have for the students for the entire course. The basic goals will be established by the teacher, but details need to be negotiated with the collaboration of the teacher and students at the beginning of the course and each unit. The teacher knows more about what he or she wants the students to achieve and should come to class at the beginning of the course and at the start of each unit ready to discuss and negotiate what the students will accomplish during that period. But since the students will do the learning, they deserve to have a say in what they want to learn during the course. It is a good idea to write the goals and throughlines on poster boards and put them on the walls so that students are constantly reminded of what they are working towards. This strategy might be difficult for many teachers. Student centered approaches to teaching may be hard to accept because the teacher feels he or she is not in control. But if we truly believe that the students should understand what we teach them, we have to let go a little and give them the opportunity to explore and discover knowledge.

It is important to remember that these goals are not static. As the course progresses, the students or the teacher can propose changes in the goals, depending on how the course is developing. The issue is not one of "covering" or completing a specific number of units. It is a matter of helping students to truly understand and internalize the topics proposed for the

course.

Throughlines are goals that are clearly and publicly expressed. They focus and direct the instruction and learning. Examples of throughlines that correspond to the generative topics presented earlier.

* Food (How do I describe things to eat? How can I get food from someone? How do I buy food in a restaurant/grocery store? How do I make a cake?)
* Natural disasters (How can I know about a natural disaster? What would happen if there were a natural disaster? What can I do to protect myself? How can I identify where things happen?)
* My family/me/identity (How can I talk about my family? How can I describe personal characteristics? How can I tell stories about myself and my family?)
* Change (How can I talk about things changing? What reactions happen when something changes?)
* Life (How can I talk about living beings? How can I tell about things that have happened in my life? What happens after an occurrence? How do things happen?)
* Pets (How can I describe animals? How can I talk about things I like and don't like?)
* Stories (how can I tell a story? How can I describe things in time?)

The day-to-day classroom activities can be varied and definitely should include activities that incorporate multiple intelligences. The important thing about these activities is that they need to be student centered so that the students can

discover the knowledge that should be acquired.

The final element of Teaching for Understanding is the way students perform and the way teachers evaluate them. This may be the hardest part for most teachers to accept. Many teachers are willing to try new techniques for presenting information or knowledge to their students, but they are not always willing to give up the "power" or control of traditional testing methods. Personally, I have not given a test in years. But I feel my students are leaving my classes with much more knowledge now than when I made them take tests. It all depends on what the teacher's goal is: have power over the students or help the students learn.

Classes should be made up of cycles of analysis, reflection, and feedback. While this is happening, instead of being at the front of the room lecturing, the teacher moves about the room, encouraging students to make their thinking visible so that the teacher and students can see what is understood.

Each unit should have three stages: A) exploration of the topic, B) guided research, and C) personal projects/synthesis (II Seminario Internacional de Inteligencias Múltiples, Bogotá, 2001).

Exploring the topic: This stage makes the students interested in the Generative Topic and makes them ask questions. For example, with the Generative Topic about travel, to start the unit the teacher could bring in pictures of different (famous and not-so-famous) places in the country and in the world. The teacher encourages conversation about the pictures (in their native language if the students are beginners) and asks students to talk about their travels and where they would like to travel in the future. The students should begin asking questions about what they would like to learn. For example, the future tense, or vocabulary to describe the rain forest and water conservation would be a good place to start. The teacher can provide some suggestions of what students may like to learn. Distances, time zones, customs and immigration in different countries, the process to get a passport and visa, travel timetables, currency exchanges, foods, customs, and clothes, etc. are authentic topics to present. The idea of this stage is to interest the students in what they will be studying and to give them some ideas of topics to research.

Guided research: During this stage, the students should begin researching the topic. Language elements can be included in classroom activities as discovery tasks (see appendix for an example). Students can go to the library, a travel agency, or the internet to seek information. Students should be giving ongoing informal reports about what and how they have discovered information. This allows the teacher and other students to give constant feedback. For each class, the teacher should start with goals for that class period and should provide materials and activities and the appropriate atmosphere for students to achieve those goals. It is not a free-for-all with each student doing something different. The teacher must prepare daily

activities that are interesting and that help the students discover the answers to their questions while encouraging them to acquire the language elements. Students show their understanding through their productions and the process.

Personal Synthesis Projects: As a group, the students decide on a project, and each individual chooses a part of the bigger project to study. During this time, class time is dedicated to individual work and consultations with peers and the teacher. Students coordinate efforts so that the entire Generative Topic is covered. Students prepare presentations or written reports or multiple intelligence demonstrations.

Ongoing assessment: The teacher is constantly observing the process as well as the product of learning, and giving constructive criticism. It is important to develop explicit criteria or standards for student performance. The purpose is to help the students improve and understand more, not to feel bad about their effort. This assessment takes place throughout the unit and not just at the end. It is extremely important to have previously established the evaluation criteria with the students so that they know what they are working for and what to expect.

Implementing Teaching for Understanding is not a simple task (see Unger, 2002, for example). However, it is highly profitable in terms of true student development, as many teachers and researchers have indicated (Unger, 2002; Perkins, 1993; Wasley, 1993; Seceda, 2002; Cushman, 1994, etc.). Although it takes an initial

effort from the teacher and the institution, building momentum makes it easier and easier as time passes by. The ultimate goal of producing well-prepared students who are able to use language independently and creatively will be met more successfully than with traditional *teaching* methods.

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Appendix

The following is an example of a discovery activity for intermediate students.

Understanding in-on-at

Prepositions of Time

1. Read the following story about Jane.

Jane had an appointment for a job interview with Ms. Smith on the 12th of April at 10:00 in the morning. She got up early on that day and arrived on time at Ms. Smith's office. The secretary told Jane that Ms. Smith was out of the office because she had an emergency meeting in the afternoon. Jane rescheduled for Tuesday of the following week at 3:00 in the afternoon. On the day of the interview, when Jane arrived the secretary told her that Ms. Smith was not in again because her father had a heart attack in the night. She asked to reschedule, and when Jane returned, the secretary told her the job had already been filled.

2. Underline all time phrases using in, on, and at.

3. Looking at the context of each preposition, write the use of each below.

In:

On:

At:

Write your own short story using these prepositions of time.

Prepositions of Place

1. Read the following story about Bill and Mary.

Bill and Mary had plans to meet on the corner of Amazonas and J. Washington. Mary got there first and while she was standing on the corner she asked someone where she could develop a roll of film. That person said that on the next street there was an Ecuacolor. When Bill arrived, they went to find the store, but they could not find it. Someone else told them that it was in the middle of the next block, but they couldn't find it anywhere. They looked in a telephone book and found that the store was located at 45N-27. While they looked, Mary stood in the street and almost got hit by a car. Bill pulled her back on the sidewalk, and then they found the store. They stayed in the store for a long time.

2. Underline all place phrases using in, on, and at.

3. Looking at the context of each preposition, write the use of each below.

In:

On:

At:

HOW

Write your own short story using these prepositions of place.

Additional example:

One day I was at school in my class when my books fell on the floor. I got out of my chair to pick them up and somebody else sat in my chair. I picked up my books and put them on another desk and tried to sit in another chair, but there was gum on the seat. Fortunately, it didn't get on my pants.

I looked up when the teacher came in and had to find another desk to sit . Above the clock there was a sign that said that students couldn't have food in the classroom, but I saw that a classmate had a bottle of Coke on his desk. The teacher was at the board explaining some boring concepts when I fell asleep in class at my desk.