

## Self-reflections of an English language teacher in the Palestinian Territories

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### Abstract

This paper examines through self-reflection the characteristics of what makes a good English language teacher. Through the application of defining principles and questions of communicative language teaching, the author reflects on his perceived failure to meet the needs of his students. However, he concludes that the demarcations imposed by the conditions of living and working within the Palestinian Territories, circumscribe what is and what is not possible, and therefore his self-addressed label of 'failure' is not warranted.

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## Introduction

I have never actually been asked directly: “Are you a good teacher?” I have received comments alluding to the quality of my teaching: “I have heard very favorable reports about your teaching” (the Vice-President of the university). “Doctor Fennell was my teacher and he is a very good teacher” (graduate student and university employee). So, if I were to be asked directly: “Are you a good teacher?” I would answer, “Yes”. Yet recently I have felt a particular unease with my teaching. Self-reflection (a characteristic of a good teacher) has led me to question the degree to which my belief in communicative language teaching has been compromised. In recognizing this compromise, is there then the possibility of redressing it when it is rooted in the reality of military occupation? I conclude that this is not cause for a self-addressed label of ‘failure’.

## Principles of good language teaching

There is a plethora of academic and intuitive based definitions of what makes a good teacher. Certainly, there are some that I do not meet. For instance, if having clear, organized board work was one of the defining specifics then I would be far wide of the mark. It is for this reason that I have decided to focus on the wider, more general descriptions of what makes a good teacher.

Being a good teacher, in essence, is a balance between what you feel is right, and feels comfortable with the needs and wants of your students (Hadfield and Hadfield, 2008).

As a language teacher, the guiding principles that lie behind the successful attainment of such a balance are fourfold: Firstly, learning language is about natural, meaningful and useful communication. Secondly, the individuality of our learners should be respected and this is reflected in varied and appropriate activities and materials. Thirdly, lessons should foster a positive learning experience where there is interest, motivation, and enjoyment. Fourthly, being a good teacher involves encouraging and challenging our learners to seek out and make the most of their learning opportunities and thus to reach their full potential (Hadfield and Hadfield, 2008).

If one were to overlay the principles of communicative language teaching (CLT) there would be the need to add: “What are we using language for? Who are we communicating with? What feelings do we want to show”(Baker and Westrup, 2000, p. 15)? It is in the answering of these questions within the context of the already stated principles of a good language teacher that I realise is the source of recent disquiet over my teaching and which through further self-reflection has come to be resolved.

## Anecdotal self-reflection outside of lectures

After four years of working at the Arab American University Jenin, Palestinian Territories, I have become aware of how the students’ lives are shaped by the occupation. Particularly, because as Practicum Supervisor, I have made over 200 classroom observations to 49 different schools during which I have witnessed and heard much.

A busy day of classroom observations was planned, and I was waiting for my taxi, a little impatiently. I was new to Palestine and the phenomena of flying checkpoints and lockdowns. My phone rang. It was my assistant supervisor calling in to apologise that he would not be able

to make his observations. In fact, he would not be able to make it out of his house – the army were in his village. Wondering what to do, my phone rang again. This time it was my taxi driver ringing to say he would be late. The army had closed the main roads and he had to go round the hills and across the fields. Another morning, driving out with the Ministry of Education Supervisors, we received an urgent radio message from the Directorate ordering us to return immediately. It was too dangerous to travel. We succeeded in setting out the very next day but had to make our way slowly through streams of pupils pouring out of the town's schools. They were striking in sympathy for the family who had lost a son that morning, shot in his home, in the early hours. Such strikes were not sanctioned I was told because it meant yet more school days lost but the Ministry was powerless to stop the pupils and would again ask the teachers to hurriedly cram through the missed material. Later that day, coming back from the surrounding villages, high on the hillside cemetery we could see the male mourners gathered to bury the boy. On another day, in a hot and crowded classroom with windows open level with the local mosque, the loud speaker clicked on, the teacher paused and the students' listened to the names of young men taken.

In the classroom observations themselves, I would give the students the opportunity to practice their English. Fully expecting, to deal with questions about where I was from and my likes and dislikes, I was initially disconcerted when the secondary school students would ask: "How do you find life in Palestine? Do you agree with the war in Gaza?" "What do you think about the occupation?" "Have you learnt any Hebrew?" "Do you feel safe in Palestine?" Then, there were the comments and corrections. "The foreign media sees us all as terrorists which is wrong. We want to live in peace." After observing a reading lesson about the Aral Sea, I remarked that Palestine is without rivers or a sea. No, I was told, that is not true. The River Jordan and the Dead Sea, though both in the Israeli military exclusion zone, were indeed part of Palestine.

The occupation meant students were often late or absent, and I had to check whether the university regulations permitted such excuses. "Sorry I am late, Doctor Fennell. There was a

road block and the bus was held up for an hour." "Doctor Fennell, I am sorry I missed the class, we were ordered off the bus and told to stand in the sun for two hours." "Doctor Fennell, I couldn't reach the university as our village was under siege." At other times students asked to be excused in advance for reasons relating to the occupation. A young male came up to me breathless with excitement. "I am visiting my brother in prison – the first time in eight years so I won't be in class tomorrow!"

It was not just individual classes that were missed. An older male student who was struggling in class explained that he had missed two years of university because he had been in administrative detention. A female student wanted to reschedule the mid-term exams as the date coincided with her monthly visit to see her brother, on a permit valid only for that day. Later, three more female students came to ask whether I would change the date of the exam. "The day before the exam I have to visit my father in an Israeli prison", said one, "It will take me all day from four in the morning until eight at night. It is only an hour and a half away but we have to wait." I remembered watching a TV documentary on the Al Jazeera channel where a student exhausted by a similar journey had had to sit her end of year exams the next day – emotionally and physically drained she had fared badly. I offered my sympathies but the girls looked at me

askance: “Oh, don’t worry Doctor Fennell, this is our way of life here in Palestine. Everyone has a brother, or an uncle, or a father, or a cousin in prison.”

### **Anecdotal self-reflection inside of lectures**

This all took place outside of my lectures. Within the classroom I heeded the words of the Chair of the Modern Languages Department, himself a Palestinian: “Do not talk about religion or politics especially as you are an *ajnabe* (foreigner).” At times the students’ experiences touched on the occupation. For instance when I asked about the need for English in today’s society – the answer came back: “To speak with our enemy. We will not use their language so we speak in English.” Then I would give a non-committal response such as “Yes, OK” and hasten on with the lesson – in effect changing the subject.

However the inadequacy and indeed the inanity of such a strategy of response was made clear to me in an elective course. In the Introduction to Communication and Culture course, I had the students engage in a warm-up activity which led into the topic of long winter nights in Northern Scandinavia. “Get into groups of four and tell each other about a time when you were afraid of the dark,” I instructed. Fairly innocuous, I thought and in the feedback I fully expected to hear tales of seeing monsters in the shadows of the wall, of hiding under the bed covers, or of being alone in the house when the electricity was cut. Most indeed were, but one student and his story put an end to the activity.

The student stood and solemnly told of how in the middle of the night, he was woken by armed soldiers. Hauled from his bed he was taken through the dark and deserted streets to the city hospital. There, in the basement morgue, he was asked to identify the body of his cousin - a bullet wound in his head. In the long and heavy pause that followed, I recall feeling totally inadequate, my usual ability to think on my feet and adapt to the situation, having deserted me. I was at a loss for words and or action. I must have mumbled something because the lesson did not end there – it went on, other tasks engaged in and completed. Afterwards in my office, still feeling uncomfortable about the inadequacy of my response, I

asked myself why I had been unable to respond appropriately. This tale of tragedy, though not common, was certainly not one that would have been unfamiliar to the students.

After some thought, I decided to utilise this aspect of the students’ lives. However, so as to still heed the warning never to discuss politics or religion, I asked students to write a short sketch about their experiences of the occupation but ones which rather than being damning in nature were instead, encouraging and hopeful. Stories which showed that despite the stringencies of occupation, the students were where they were. They had successfully completed their compulsory education and now were studying in Higher education. Each day they came in to university was testament to their surmounting unique political, social, and economic conditions – their culture contributing to their stubbornness to overcome.

The day arrived for the students to perform their sketches and I invited the Chair of the department to join us, more in confidence that he would be impressed and less as backup in case it all went wrong. It did go well, in that the Chair was impressed, particularly at giving students such an opportunity to use their English in front of their fellow students. Indeed, he asked one particular student to take on the organisation of the students’ celebratory graduation party at the

end of the semester. I, though I did not admit it, was disappointed -not in the students' performances but rather in the failure to produce positive personal accounts.

The sketches, apart from one depicting the life of Steve Jobs (Co-founder of Apple Inc.) with a loose connection made to a model of inspiration, were ones which depicted the brutal realities of life under occupation. Where were the uplifting stories, the ones that said yes, this was so but look what we have achieved; the enthusiasm of youth in thinking that yes there was a future and they were it? Instead, the students played the parts of frightened school children telling to their Headmistress stories beyond their age; of what had befallen their families and why they had been absent from school. Then, there was a sketch of school children, excited and eagerly awaiting a day trip to the wonders of Jericho, but having faced the ordeal of numerous checkpoints, they return in a state of distress. Foremost of all, vividly supported with props, power point slides and You Tube videos, there was the enactment of a family home being first surrounded and then stormed by soldiers, a younger brother arrested and taken from his bed, not allowed to dress, the subject of an administrative detention order.

### **Concluding reflections**

As such, I did not achieve what I had hoped. Furthermore, the nature of the failure that it was overtly political has meant it is unlikely I will repeat the activity. Yet, this aside, further reflection led me to question my failings as a teacher. The reason why the performances did not go to plan was perhaps because I had failed in providing the students with the opportunity to discuss (through English) their life experiences as shaped by the occupation. I had not met those principles that characterise a good teacher. For in an area so significant to my students' lives, I had deprived them of learning language that was natural, meaningful and useful. I had not respected the individuality of students by providing varied and appropriate activities through which to explore and use such language. Moreover, unable to draw students away from the negativity of occupation, I had failed to provide a positive learning experience. Finally, I had failed in encouraging and challenging my students to make the most of their learning opportunities and so reach their full potential.

Furthermore, with regards to the occupation, if I were to ask my students the three questions indicative of CLT, in their answers I would also be seen to be lacking. What are we using English for? "To communicate with Israelis, get through checkpoints and be able to travel." Who are we communicating with? "The outside world so they understand that we want peace and an independent country." What feelings do we want to show? "How the occupation is affecting us as human beings."

However, that said, I was providing them with language and the opportunity which while not specific to these particular needs, did enable students to talk about them outside of the classroom, to take responsibility for their own learning, and to work towards achieving a just and comprehensive peace. Thus, within the demarcations imposed by the conditions of living and working in the Palestinian Territories, I was perhaps, after all, providing effective and communicative English language teaching.

**About the author:**

**Michael Fennell** gained his PhD from the Institute of Education, University of London. With his thesis on the construction of the teacher-self, he has long been interested in teachers' lives. For the past five years he has been working at the Arab American University Jenin, Palestine as Assistant Professor (TEFL) and Practicum Supervisor.

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