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What Works in the ELT Classroom? Using Robust Reasoning to Find Out

English teachers are known for asking a lot of questions. One of the questions we ask ourselves every day is, “Did my students benefit from what happened in class today?” If the answer to this question is “yes,” we can start preparing for our next day of classes. However, if it is “no,” most of us try to determine how best to remedy the situation. We usually carry out this daily evaluation of the effectiveness of our teaching privately, unless we feel the need to ask a sympathetic colleague or supervisor for help with a particular teaching issue.

Sometimes, however, this evaluation is public. This happened to me during my first year of teaching, at a university intensive English program in the early 1980s. The communicative approach was becoming popular, and many of us teachers were experimenting with what were then new methods and activities. Terminology such as “authentic materials,” “Natural Approach,” “communicative language teaching,” and “learner-centered teaching,” could be heard in the staff room every day. We debated whether using these new methods improved the language proficiency of our students. We all had students who participated eagerly in any communicative activity, but showed very little improvement on tests. We also had students

who preferred teacher-fronted instruction and participated reluctantly in any form of learner-centered activity, but who did better on tests than their more enthusiastic classmates.

Because of this problematic relationship between the new methods that we were trying out in our classes and the progress our students made, some of us began to wonder if the claims made about the effectiveness of the new methods could withstand major scrutiny. Most of us found the concepts that underpin the communicative approach attractive, and the activities that were recommended effective in motivating students to use English in interactions resembling real communication outside the classroom. However, we were not very confident that this approach, or any other approach, would "work" in our classrooms.

English teachers all over the world have been engaged in similar debates in staff rooms and in private soul searching at the end of a day of teaching. At times it can feel as if we are caught in a perpetual cycle of questioning the effectiveness of anything we try in our classrooms. I believe that most of us engage in this questioning process throughout our careers because we feel responsible for the effectiveness of our teaching. We are motivated to look for the best language teaching method that will provide our students with the English language skills they need.

This article is not intended to resolve anyone's search for an ideal method that will work in all teaching contexts. Instead, my purpose is to explain the benefit of using "robust reasoning" (Johnson 1999) to discover what "works," that is, what is effective and appropriate in our classrooms.

A plethora of methods

In the past, the definitive answers given to teachers' requests for something that "worked" were specific approaches and methods. Now, there are almost too many approaches and methods to choose from. Richards (1999:34) points out that there are concurrent models of effective teaching, each with "specific assumptions about what the essential knowledge base, skills, and attitudes [for effective teaching] are." Following Zahorik (1986), he classifies these models, or conceptions, and their underlying assumptions into three categories: science-research, theory-philosophy, and art-craft.

Science-research conceptions

Science-research conceptions of teaching, according to Richards, "view teaching as a type of scientific activity… that is formed and validated by scientific research and supported by experimentation and empirical investigation" (1999:34). He presents the audiolingual method (Fries 1945) as an example. Proponents of this method considered it a scientific system of teaching foreign languages based on the incorporation of behaviorist learning theory and structural linguistics. They actively discouraged teachers who used the audiolingual method from modifying the recommended instructional activities in any way, so as not to interfere with this scientific process of teaching.

Task-based instruction and learner training, according to Richards, are two current science-research conceptions of teaching. Task-based instruction, or the use of interactive tasks to encourage language learners to negotiate meaning in the target language, is, according to Long and Crookes (1992:27), based on "second language acquisition research, particularly descriptive and empirical studies comparing tutored and naturalistic learning." Learner training relies on research in the learning styles and strategies used by successful language learners both to develop learner training techniques to be used in the language classroom (O'Malley and Chamot 1990) and to raise learner awareness of the importance of these styles and strategies in their own learning processes (Oxford 1990). These two conceptions are based on the assumption that what "works" in the language classroom has already been identified by researchers. The job of language teachers, then, is to use these findings in their own classrooms.

Theory-philosophy conceptions

Theory-philosophy conceptions of teaching, in contrast, are "built not on empirical research, but on generally data-free theories and principles…justified on logical, philosophical, political, moral, or other grounds" (Richards 1999:38). Richards claims that communicative language teaching, possibly the most influential approach in our profession today, is a theory-philosophy conception of language teaching. Because so many studies have been done, and articles written, about the relationship between CLT and language learning, it is often assumed that the effectiveness of this

approach in language classrooms, regardless of their context, has been proven by research. Richards points out that the development of the communicative approach was only indirectly related to formal research findings. Theorists such as Widdowson (1978) and Savignon (1983) drew upon Hymes's theory of communicative competence (1971) and theories of second language acquisition, such as Krashen's (1981), in their development of new definitions of language proficiency that were not based on the mastery of a specific set of grammatical and phonological components. Instead, they defined language proficiency as the ability to use the grammatical, discourse, functional, sociolinguistic, and strategic components of the target language appropriately in order to communicate effectively.

This new definition of language proficiency led to the development of new language learning objectives as well as new classroom activities and techniques that would enable students to meet these objectives. Teachers were no longer required to lead students in lock-step fashion through textbook exercises designed according to principles of behaviorist learning theory or structural linguistics. It was assumed that a language learning environment that encouraged students to "engage in the pragmatic, authentic, functional use of language for meaningful purposes" (Brown 2001:43) would facilitate development of communicative competence. Therefore, teachers were expected to replicate this environment in their classrooms. In other words, students were to be encouraged to interact with each other freely through activities that were motivating and resembled language use outside the classroom. The primary responsibilities of the teacher in this environment became monitoring on-going student interactions and providing feedback to students on the effectiveness and appropriateness of their interaction.

Richards (1999:45) observes that both science-research and theory-philosophy conceptions of teaching have a strong top-down perspective. These conceptions view teachers as the recipients of research findings and theories about effective language teaching that have been developed for them by researchers. Teachers are expected to understand the implications of these findings and theories and to develop lesson plans and activities that incorporate them. However, they are not necessarily encouraged or held responsible for doing their own research or determining what is effective in their own classrooms.

Art-craft conceptions

Art-craft conceptions of effective teaching, in contrast, do encourage teachers to determine what "works." These conceptions, according to Richards, place great emphasis upon the skills and personality of the individual teacher. They avoid prescribing particular approaches or methods, but instead promote processes of self-discovery that enable teachers to develop our own definitions of effective teaching. They also encourage us to discover our own strengths and weaknesses through professional development activities and reflection (Fanselow 1987).

Art-craft conceptions of effective teaching frequently use metaphors and analogies to help teachers develop their own perspectives as to what "works" in their classrooms. This use of metaphor and analogy is based on the assumption that giving teachers tools to help them reflect on what constitutes effective teaching is more productive than having them consider the implications of research results or theory. One recent teacher training course, using the art-craft conception of effective teaching, asks course participants to reflect in writing on the simile of "teaching as an art" (Adams and Brewer 2001/2:15).

Having the freedom to develop our own definitions of effective teaching can be exhilarating, because it credits us with having valid perceptions of what "works" in our own classrooms. However, most of us have little time or energy to engage in active reflection. A heavy teaching load, a crowded curriculum, and the pressure of standardized final exams leave many of us with limited time in a typical day to thoroughly prepare our classes, let alone reflect on them. This problem is compounded if we work in an environment where sharing insights with colleagues is not encouraged.

In addition, some of us may find this freedom a little frightening. If we have been told for years that only the researchers have solutions to problems we encounter in teaching, we may find it difficult to trust our own instincts. Others of us may be interested in developing our own definitions of effective teaching, but don't see how reflection activi-

ties, such as journals, can contribute to that goal. We hope to see more concrete results from our efforts, such as increased student achievement and higher test scores.

"Robust reasoning" and effective reflection

Reflection on one's own teaching is much more than an amateur form of personal therapy. It is actually a logical extension of the question, "Did my students benefit from what happened in class today?" Reflection is an effective way of fine-tuning our evaluative skills to the point that we feel confident in our own ability to define what "works" in our own classrooms. Its effectiveness increases if it is done critically using a focused set of questions. Johnson (1999:1–2) defines reflection as "reasoning…[that] represents the complex ways in which teachers conceptualize, construct explanations for, and respond to the social interactions and shared meaning that exist within and among teachers, students, parents and administrators, both inside and outside the classroom." Although each teacher's reasoning is based on informal knowledge and personal beliefs, Johnson makes a clear distinction between teacher reasoning that focuses solely on subjective perceptions of teaching and "robust reasoning…when teachers expand their understandings of themselves, their teachings, their classrooms and their schools" (1999:139).

To ensure that our reasoning is robust and not just a rehashing of our own personal concerns, Johnson (1999:139) encourages us to repeatedly ask ourselves the following guiding questions:

- Who am I as a teacher?
- Who are my students? How do they experience my teaching?
- What do I know about my teaching context?
- What do I know about the subject matter content that I teach?
- Why do I teach the way that I do?
- What are the consequences of my teaching practices for my students?
- How do I make sense of theoretical knowledge?
- Who is my professional community?
- What sort of change do I see as fit for my own teaching?

Johnson encourages teachers to ask themselves these questions "again and again throughout [their] professional careers. By doing so, teachers remain lifelong students of teaching... [and] are able to articulate why they teach the way they do" (Johnson 1999:139). Taking a closer look at how best to ask and answer these questions can enable us to see how each is intended to help us develop robust reasoning.

Who am I as a teacher?

As teachers we need to look closely at all of the teaching and learning experiences we have had. Which of these experiences has had the strongest impact on how we teach today? For example, does the way we teach strongly resemble the way we were taught, or have we consciously tried to teach in a different way? Thoughtful and honest answers to these questions can provide insight into how past educational experiences have had an impact on one's identity as a teacher.

Who are my students? How do they experience my teaching?

Most of us ask ourselves a version of this question every day. However, our answers often tend to focus more on the response of our students to our teaching, and less on broader issues such as the learning styles of our students. Johnson urges us to "focus less on what you are doing as a teacher, and more on what your students are experiencing in your classroom…determining what causes difficulties for them, what challenges them... what they get out of participating in your instructional activities" (1999:140).

To avoid relying solely upon their subjective impressions of what "works," many teachers involve their students in this evaluative process. Students can give us helpful feedback on their perceptions of different aspects of our teaching, such as the purpose or effectiveness of certain class activities. Some teachers obtain this information by distributing evaluation forms to students at the end of a course, but student feedback on a particular aspect of a course can be done whenever we feel the need for more formal feedback.

Murphey (1998) outlines a journal activity that provides a way for students to give ongoing

feedback. Unlike free writing journal assignments, the primary focus of his journal activity is to ask students for feedback on a daily basis about what they perceive the objective of the lesson to be and their overall reactions to it. Students are asked to write a short description of and comments about the class every day in a notebook. These descriptions can be general, a simple outline of what happened that day, or they can include detailed observations about a task or activity that the teacher has asked them to complete. The teacher collects the logs from the students each week and reads them, writing only short appreciative comments in response and perhaps saving particularly relevant student comments for later reference during lesson planning.

Students can also help us determine which language learning methods are most effective for them, what motivates them to study English, which learning styles they use to process language input, and the strategies they use in class and at home to promote their own learning. Reid (1998) has a collection of surveys that can be administered in class to help students investigate how they learn languages and which classroom techniques would be most beneficial to them. Before passing out these student surveys, teachers should first lead a group discussion about learning styles and strategies to help students understand why an awareness of one's own styles and strategies can make language learning easier. Some textbook series, such as *Tapestry* (1992), incorporate language learning style and strategy awareness activities into each unit. Using these or similar activities throughout the course can motivate students to exploit their language learning styles and strategies.

What do I know about my teaching context?

For Johnson, this means being aware of the relationship between the courses you teach and the larger educational environment (including administrators, other teachers, and parents), as well as the expectations that are placed upon your students. One component of this awareness concerns school politics, both overt school policy and the chain of command, and the decision-making processes that determine how things really function in a school. Holliday (1994:130), in his discussion of English language project management, calls these two sets of administrative and decision-making behaviors "surface" and "deep" action. He defines surface action as the official, documented elements of any educational institution, such as "official agreements, contracts, job descriptions and official responsibilities, attendance registers, textbooks, teaching hours, examinations and students assignments" and deep action as the "tacit rules…unspoken recipes... traditions…[and] micro-politics" of that same institution (1994:130). Teachers who are unaware of the effects that institutional deep and surface actions have on their students are much less likely to develop courses that are relevant to their students' needs.

A caveat about context

Holliday (1994) outlines a sociocultural distinction that has a tremendous impact upon the effectiveness of language teaching methodologies in various educational contexts. He divides all language teaching contexts into two categories: *BANA* (private or university-based British, Australian and North American) and *TESEP* (national Tertiary, Secondary and Primary). The overriding distinction between these two categories of teaching context is not geography, cultural background of the students, or teacher comfort with the communicative approach, but the function of the language course in the view of the educational institution that offers it.

The primary function of a BANA institution, according to Holliday, is to provide English language training to clientele who are either paying for the course themselves or are funded by another institution to learn English. The purpose of the courses a BANA institution offers is to provide clients with the English language skills they need to fulfill personal or professional objectives that they themselves have identified, or that have been identified for them. TESEP institutions, in contrast, have a very different function because they are governmental. Graduates of these institutions are expected to find their place in society, so the purpose of courses offered by TESEP institutions is to socialize students in the national norms and mores of the educated populace of their country or region. The ability to use English well is often considered a sign that this process of socialization has been successful, but other knowledge and skills are also con-

sidered important. Therefore, English language courses in TESEP institutions are normally just one component of a larger educational whole, instead of the primary reason for the institution's existence.

The type and amount of educational resources available to teachers in BANA as opposed to TESEP institutions also differs substantially. Because many BANA institutions are self-supporting, they can afford to provide students with a state-of-the-art language learning environment. This environment is intended to meet the professional needs of individual clients, so every student is given individual attention. In practical terms, this means that BANA students are often assigned to small classes where instructional techniques that promote frequent small group interaction in the target language are used. In addition, BANA teachers are often given the training and resources they need to teach effectively in this environment. Holliday (1994:54) calls this the establishment of a "learning group ideal…[with] conditions for a process-oriented, task-based, inductive, collaborative, communicative English language teaching methodology."

Many classrooms in TESEP institutions, in contrast, suffer from a lack of adequate resources. This is compounded by the fact that English departments in TESEP institutions are frequently forced to compete with other departments for limited educational resources. In addition, TESEP teachers are much less likely to have access to the professional materials and training that their BANA counterparts receive. Frequently it is impossible for TESEP teachers to replicate a BANA learning environment and "learning group ideal" in their classrooms.

Another look at the learning group ideal

Is the BANA learning group ideal truly the most effective environment for learning English, regardless of the context in which the language is taught? Holliday (1994:96) notes that the learning ideal is often promoted as more "democratic" because of its focus on students as individuals. The activities of a typical BANA classroom appear to give students more individual freedom than traditional teacher-fronted methods, which seem to promote uniform student behavior under the watchful eye of the teacher. But, as those of us who try to implement the learning group ideal in our classes know, ensuring that small group interaction among students is effective actually requires more control over student interaction than does traditional teacher-fronted instruction.

During group work, if the teacher does not check how successfully the groups complete their tasks, some of the groups or individual students within groups are likely to go off-task. If a number of students are permitted to remain off-task for even a short period of time, group work becomes less focused for the entire class. When this happens, the lesson plan and any follow-up activities that are dependent upon the group work run the risk of suddenly becoming irrelevant. Then the teacher is forced to improvise alternative ways to keep the entire class focused on the point of the lesson, which was not covered successfully during the group work. If the teacher is unable to do this, the lesson itself loses its purpose, and everyone, including the teacher, may feel that the entire class was a waste of time. In short, maintaining the BANA learning group ideal requires that the teacher constantly strive towards the continuous involvement of all students in all of the activities selected for the lesson.

What TESEP teachers can do

Holliday argues that, because TESEP and BANA teaching contexts (including teacher responsibilities) are so different, it is imperative that TESEP teachers be allowed to develop methodologies that are appropriate to their educational institutions. These methodologies may incorporate some modified BANA techniques, such as group work and learner-centered interaction in English, while retaining culturally appropriate roles of TESEP teachers and students. Such methodologies could develop out of the answers that teachers provide to the nine questions of robust reasoning.

Holliday's distinction between the BANA and TESEP teaching contexts, while very useful, is still an overgeneralization. There are ESL classrooms where the language teaching philosophy parallels those of many TESEP institutions, and many private EFL language schools throughout the world offer their students BANA-style English language instruction. Perhaps the differences between BANA and TESEP contexts reflect the economic and cultural differences between the public and private educational sectors. Nevertheless, the

recognition that such a difference does exist is the first step for teachers to be able to develop their own definitions of what really "works" in their teaching contexts and why. It will lead us to recognize that the effectiveness of using methods developed for private schools in a public school teaching context will be contingent upon how well these methods have been adapted to the new context. A direct transfer of private school methods into the public school context is likely to lead to ineffective teaching.

What do I know about the subject matter that I teach?

Answering this question involves more than being able to recite the rules of English grammar. We need to consider what content we teach and how we present it to students. If we emphasize one aspect of the content, we may exclude other aspects. Critically analyzing how we presented the lesson content is more useful than asking a question such as, "Why was today's lesson so terrible?" because it focuses on what we actually do in class, rather than how we feel after class. Questions about subject matter and lesson content can motivate us to develop alternatives to teaching choices we have made in the past, which is an essential step in the development of context-appropriate methodology.

Why do I teach the way I do?

After the prior questions of robust reasoning have been addressed, this question, which concerns the decisions a teacher makes every day, will be much easier to answer. In fact, the answer is a personal justification for why we teach the way we do. In paraphrasing the question, Johnson asks, "What instructional considerations figure most prominently in your reasoning?" (1999:141). One way to answer begins, "The way I teach on any given day depends on...." This shows that you take into account all of the factors that have an impact on your teaching when you plan lessons.

There is an additional advantage to having a sound justification for why you teach the way you do. Once you have articulated the reasons for your day-to-day teaching decisions, explaining those decisions to other interested parties such as students, their parents, colleagues, and supervisors or school administrators will be much easier. A well-thought out explanation of your teaching practice is often enough to convince others that both the day-to-day and long-term decisions about what should happen in your classroom are based on your best professional judgment.

The final four questions focus on broad personal and professional issues that affect a teacher and her students.

What are the consequences of my teaching practices for my students?

The purpose of this question is to focus on how a teacher handles her students' personal problems and conflicts among students. Academic concerns, such as competitive exams, and social concerns, such as unemployment, can have a major impact on students and their relationships with each other. Sometimes these issues will have a direct impact on the teacher as well. Planning how you will respond to these issues and developing supportive ways to handle classroom relationships and conflict before problems occur will enable you to demonstrate that you respect your students as people and that there are parameters for appropriate behavior in your classroom. It is impossible to prevent classroom conflict, but it is important to be prepared for it.

How do I make sense of theoretical knowledge?

Some of us have fond memories of our student years, when we were preparing for a teaching career. We may have had comparatively few responsibilities at that time, so we were able to enjoy the opportunity to learn about and discuss theoretical issues related to the English language and language teaching. Others may remember those years as an extensive period of probation, when our academic abilities were under constant scrutiny. We may have been forced to take examinations in a multitude of subject areas, some of which, in retrospect, were only distantly related to the skills we needed to teach effectively.

Whatever our memories of our pre-service training are, they are likely to come to the fore whenever we attend in-service training or a professional conference, and when we discuss language teaching trends with our colleagues. We are not in school anymore, and no one will be evaluating how current our theoretical knowledge of the English language or language teaching is. As practicing teachers, our relationship to theoretical knowledge should

be that of consumers. Before buying anything, wise shoppers learn as much about the available products as they can. Wise consumers of theoretical knowledge should learn as much as possible about new theories, approaches, and methods before deciding whether to incorporate them into their teaching.

Many of us, however, are not given the option of choosing which approach or method to use in our classrooms. Our educational institution or a larger government authority makes this decision for us. Despite this, it is still our responsibility to find out as much as we can about the approach or method that we are required to use and to determine ways to make it relevant to our classroom context. This suggestion is not revolutionary because most methods and approaches are implemented in very different ways in actual classroom practice. Richards and Rodgers (2001:157) note that "the wide acceptance of the Communicative Approach and the relatively varied way in which it is interpreted and applied can be attributed to the fact that practitioners from different educational traditions can identify with it, and consequently interpret it in different ways." Our own interpretation of a method may be perfectly acceptable. However, we need to become familiar with its components so that we can show a clear relationship between the method and what we do in our classes. Again, if we can explain to ourselves why we do what we do, it will be much easier for us to articulately explain our decisions to others.

Who is my professional community?

Answering this question involves looking closely at how colleagues within your department and throughout the school view their work and their students. Johnson points out that "the underlying values, norms, and expectations shared by the teachers and other professionals with whom you work will shape, in part, the way you understand and respond to the actions and interactions that go on around you" (1999:142). Your relationship with your professional community may be productive and cooperative, or polite but distant, or overtly antagonistic. No matter what the relationship is, it will have an effect on what you do in your classroom. Reflecting on the quality of your interactions with colleagues may lead you to recognize how and why your views and theirs differ substantially. It will also help you define in what ways your teaching "works" for you and your students, regardless of how others see it.

What sort of change do I see as fit for my own teaching?

This question cannot be asked or answered until you have answered the previous questions. Once you have defined the elements that have an impact upon your teaching and how you typically respond to them, you are ready to change what you do in your classroom so that it "works" more effectively for you and your students. As Johnson points out, "The process of change occurs when teachers articulate to themselves and others what they want to change and why, when they identify the factors that inhibit change, and when they develop strategies to implement change over time" (1999:143).

This holds true regardless of the magnitude of the change that you are contemplating. For example, if you have used robust reasoning to determine why your afternoon classes don't respond well to pair work, you may uncover one of these possible situations:

- The seating in the room where you teach in the afternoon makes pair work difficult.
- The pair work tasks you have selected for your afternoon classes are boring and need to be modified.
- Students who come to your classes in the afternoon are exhausted after a full day of school work and can't concentrate on pair work.
- Students in your afternoon classes are worried about final exams and don't see pair work as relevant.

No matter which of these causes is the most pertinent, there is probably more than one way to handle any of them. Continuing to engage in robust reasoning to determine the most appropriate solution will enable you to decide on which changes to make and how these changes can be implemented.

Conclusion

Robust reasoning involves much more than keeping notes in a diary on how well classes go. It involves looking at the past, present, and future of every component of your work in the classroom, plus evaluating new research and methods in terms of whether or

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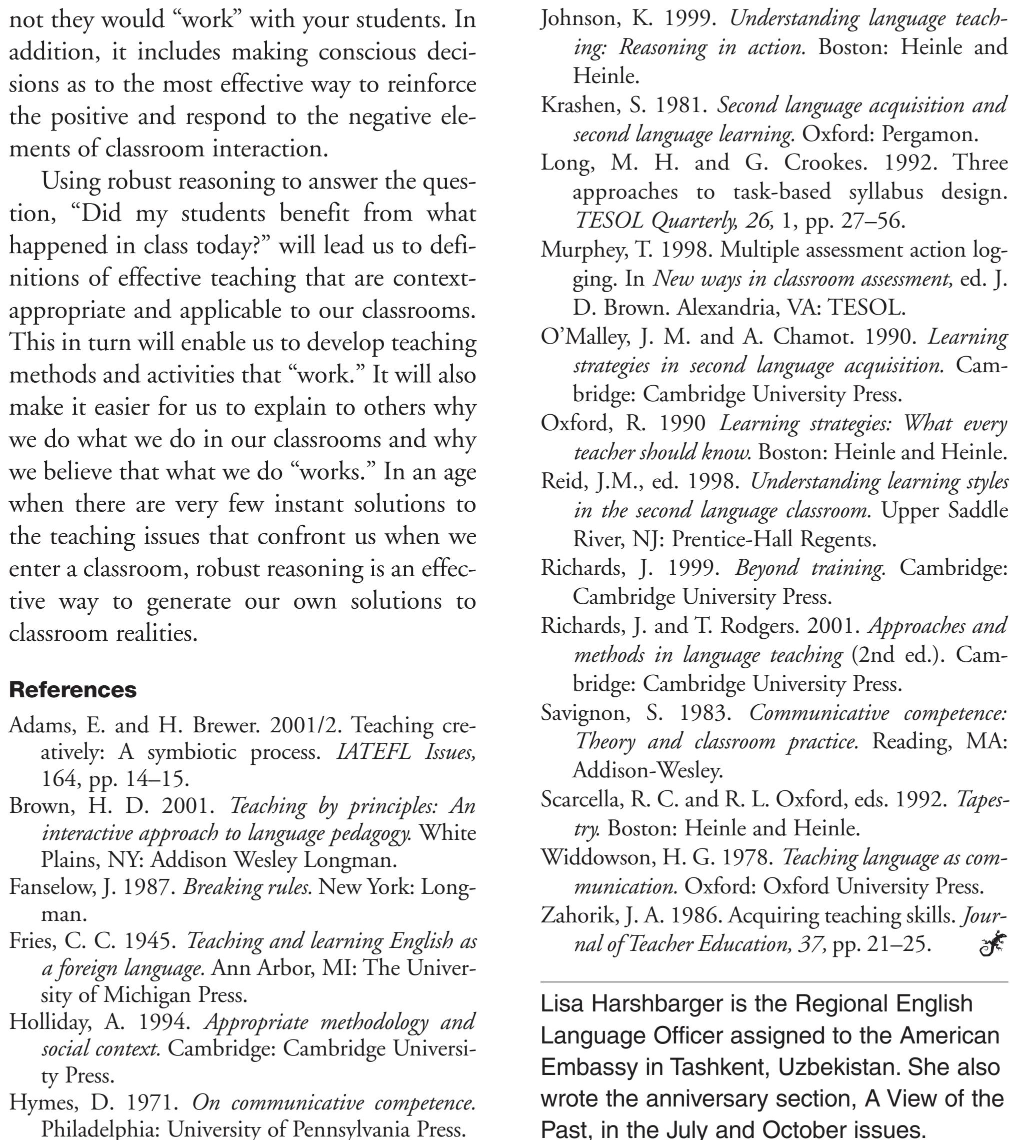

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not they would "work" with your students. In addition, it includes making conscious decisions as to the most effective way to reinforce the positive and respond to the negative elements of classroom interaction.

Using robust reasoning to answer the question, "Did my students benefit from what happened in class today?" will lead us to definitions of effective teaching that are context-appropriate and applicable to our classrooms. This in turn will enable us to develop teaching methods and activities that "work." It will also make it easier for us to explain to others why we do what we do in our classrooms and why we believe that what we do "works." In an age when there are very few instant solutions to the teaching issues that confront us when we enter a classroom, robust reasoning is an effective way to generate our own solutions to classroom realities.

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