

What English Language Teachers Can Teach IR about Pedagogy

Written by Daniel Clausen

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DANIEL CLAUSEN, MAY 9 2021

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The discipline of International Relations (IR) is frequently one where a professor—often treated as a “master” or “virtuoso”—lectures and students listen. The teacher-centeredness of the IR classroom is often taken for granted. After all, the professor is the “star performer” who has mastered the nuances of the subject matter. When teachers do utilize active learning techniques, the activities are too often limited by class size or the teacher’s inexperience using them. For this reason, the opportunities for students to find their voice within the discipline of IR are usually stunted. In contrast, the discipline of English language teaching has developed teaching approaches to limit “teacher talk time” and enhance the role of the student. An English language classroom “lecture” is more likely to feature elicitation, brainstorming, and speculation than an IR classroom. An English language classroom is a place where students are more likely to be moving, interacting, and speaking. The teacher’s role is more likely to be a conductor than a performer, and if he or she performs this role well, increasingly the students may even begin to take over the role of conducting the class. Thus, the ultimate aim of an English language teacher is to have an ever-diminishing voice. Both the idea that a teacher’s role should be limited and that English language teaching can “teach IR a thing or two” will be explored in this chapter. In addition to the staples of active learning (role-plays, games, presentations, student polling, and debates), English language teaching offers an even deeper challenge to IR’s pedagogical tenets. Should IR make sure the voice with the most authority and wisdom is heard? Or, should it maximize the opportunities for each student to find the version of their voice that has the most authority and wisdom?

The IR Teacher as Professional Talker

For those who imagine the classroom as a collaborative space full of rich conversation, experience, and activity, the IR classroom can sometimes be a depressing place. I speak as someone with an early background in the humanities. As an undergraduate major in English literature, my typical classrooms were places where class discussions and Socratic methods were taken for granted. After my undergraduate degree, I went to Japan as an English teacher. During my four years in this role, I progressively learned how to quiet my own voice so that students might find theirs. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that when I started as a graduate student in International Relations, in classrooms and in conferences, I often found myself in noisy cacophonous spaces. What may have seemed normal for students with social science backgrounds seemed to me places full of the obnoxious posturing, ego-driven monologues, and discussion monopolists. In short, it was a place full of teacher talk—and students practicing their own version of teacher talk.

Perhaps this is an oversimplification, a caricature of IR at its worst (or, perhaps its best). But even in its exaggerated form, it represents my experience of the classroom coming from a place of quiet students (Japan) in a profession where teachers are encouraged to be quiet and listen (English language teaching). Is the teacher-centered classroom a necessity in IR? Should one of its signature pedagogies continue to be the teacher-focused lecture? Or, perhaps, English language teachers can teach IR teachers how to embrace a better model, one that includes a greater role for simulations, debates, interactive lectures, and the negotiated curriculum. Little by little, the classroom

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can become a place where students speak more and the IR teacher speaks less. Perhaps English language teachers can teach IR how to destroy the teacher.

Teacher Talk: Modeling an Essential Professional Skill?

Shulman (2005) writes, “We all intuitively know what signature pedagogies are. These are the forms of instruction that leap to mind when we first think about the preparation of members of particular professions” (Shulman 2005, 52). The signature pedagogy I will explore has many names. I have heard it referred to as “pontificating,” “punditry,” and “expounding.” In my own frustrated moments, I have referred to the culprit as the “discussion monopolist”—a label that could apply to assertive students as well as teachers. Positive labels might include “the maestro,” “the master,” or “the expert at his/her best.” A generic label would simply be “lecture” or “talk.” Because of my experiences prior to IR—both as an English major and as an English language teacher—and because this essay is sympathetic to the perspective of English language teachers, I will refer to this signature pedagogy as “teacher talk.”

In defense of IR teacher talk, I would like to state that there are real-world implications involved in using and promoting this technique. Shulman writes that a signature pedagogy has three dimensions, “a *surface structure*, which consists of concrete, operational acts of teaching and learning... a *deep structure*, a set of assumptions about how best to impart a certain body of knowledge and know-how. And it has an *implicit structure*, a moral dimension that comprises a set of beliefs about professional attitudes, values, and dispositions” (Shulman 2005, 54-55). Focusing just for the moment on the “teacher talk” approach to IR, I think we would find a *deep structure* that takes the effectiveness of lectures for granted and an *implicit structure* that values expertise and authority. Thus, we may say that IR scholars, in their will to dominate a conversation, are actually performing an important function. They demonstrate how to marshal expertise and knowledge to make authoritative presentations. And in the places where IR scholars might function in the real world, these authoritative presentations are greatly valued.

In the real world, IR experts are often called on to give authoritative talks on important issues to decision-makers, some of whom might not be sympathetic to the message of the speaker (usually for political, bureaucratic, or ideological reasons). These arenas of talk can be highly competitive. Some might be negotiations over the allocation of scarce resources, such as money or attention. If a practitioner were to demonstrate excessive empathy—the kind that is often found in the humanities and arts—that empathy might be used against the speaker and his or her interests. Thus, turn-sharing, empathetic listening, or actively empowering other speakers might be the wrong model for students who will need to function in debates, budget and policy meetings, briefings, and other competitive settings where important and often contentious decisions are made. As Shulman (2005, 16) writes, “pedagogies must measure up to the standards not just of the academy, but also of the particular professions.” Therefore, there may be good professional reasons why IR classrooms lack the kind of pedagogical approaches that are found in the humanities. There may also be good reasons why regard for hierarchy based on expertise needs to be protected. Perhaps in IR, as in the real world, one must earn the right to speak.

English Language Teaching: The Fine Art of Destroying a Teacher

And yet, one need not look far to find vehemence for the narrating teacher. The deep moral challenge to teacher talk is represented by such classics of education philosophy as Paulo Freire’s (2005, 72) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which challenges the “banking” system of education, where students are seen as empty vessels ready to collect the gifts bestowed on them by narrating teachers. In a similar vein, the education classic by David Kolb (1984), *Experiential Learning*, places student experience at the center of a cycle of learning. The “Kolb’s Learning Cycle,” as it is known, has students make sense of their experiences, form their theories, and actively experiment with them (Kolb 1984; Brock and Cameron 1999). In both of these classics of education, the student is treated as the center of the learning experience. The teacher acts as a partner, an assistant, or even a consultant, rather than as a boss or lead performer.

Though elements of IR share this aversion (especially outside the mainstream of IR), the revulsion is reflected even more in the realm of English language teaching. In English language teaching, when it comes to teacher talk, less is more. One should avoid essentializing English teaching techniques too much. The body of research and theory that

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informs English language teaching has gone through many changes. From the largely passive techniques of the early days (grammar-translation and audio-lingual approaches) to more experimental approaches (such as the silent way, suggestopedia, and total physical response) to communicative language approaches, to say nothing of the split between Applied Linguistics and practical teaching research (see Ariza et al. 2011, 63–74; Richards 2008). It is hard to generalize too much about the totality of English language teaching.

And yet one generalization, I believe, is not unfounded: active learning techniques are the norm in English language teaching. Whether they are task-based, competency-based, or communicative approaches, English language teachers are encouraged to get their students speaking through role-plays, discussions, projects, and tasks. The key insight behind all of these active approaches is that English is not just a body of knowledge to be taught, but a tool to get things done. The value of giving students time to use their English in meaningful contexts is so taken for granted that almost no English language teacher would dispute it. And yet, there is an even more radical approach to creating a communicative classroom. I have come to refer to this as the doctrine of “destroying the teacher.” This approach is detailed in Alan McLean’s (1980) short article “Destroying the Teacher: The Need for a Learner-Centered Teaching.” In his article, McLean (1980, 16–17) proposes five principles for organizing a better English language classroom:

1. reduction of coercion
2. active learner involvement
3. experience before interpretation
4. avoidance of oversimplification
5. the value of silence

To these five principles generated by McLean, I would add two more suggested by David Nunan (2013, 60) in his body of research.

- Encourage students to become teachers
- Encourage students to become researchers

For various reasons, some of these principles might not apply to the IR classroom. For scholars with a focus on critical perspectives (for example, feminist, neo-Marxist, postcolonial, and postmodern approaches), the reduction of coercion and avoidance of oversimplification are often key aspects of the classroom. However, in mainstream IR, the ability to make complex phenomena simpler is often highly valued. Additionally, if students feel they are being coerced into studying things that are irrelevant to them, then they are free to take other classes. For practical reasons, experience before interpretation may not be possible. A short trip to the UN headquarters or an active combat zone is typically not feasible. Though, when we examine the active learning literature further, we will see that there are times when fieldwork is possible.

While all seven principles mentioned above can be useful for IR, two are particularly relevant: active learner involvement and the value of silence. Active learner involvement (a technique that also usually reduces coercion) can improve motivation and increase student autonomy. In an English language classroom, often the richness and fluency of a student’s speech improves when they are discussing topics about which they are passionate. Allowing students to choose some of their own content increases their motivation. Involving students early and often also increases their autonomy and makes them rely less on the teacher.

Though active silence on the part of the teacher is a key component of English language instruction, from my experience, it is not enough. Not only must a teacher control his or her own ego, but he or she must strive to constrain the other egoists—the excessive-talkers-in-waiting—among the class. In my experience, this problem is significantly larger in an IR classroom, a place where egoists seemed to be attracted and where ego-driven discussion monopolists can sometimes be encouraged. When the egoists dominate, the class is usually deprived of the insights of the thoughtful introverts who have been developing their ideas through long periods of quiet reflection.

Active Learning: An IR Perspective

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Thus far, I have discussed active learning and student-centered learning as if they were the sole domain of English language classrooms. However, the tradition of “destroying the teacher” is also alive and well in the political science and IR literatures, especially in the pages of *International Studies Perspectives*, which regularly devotes issues to the subject of pedagogy. In this IR, active learning not only includes presentations and discussions, but also role-plays, simulations, and experience-based learning. This version of IR also realizes the benefit that active learning brings to learner motivation (Mikalayeva 2016; Lüdert and Stewart 2017; Oros 2007; Simpson and Kaussler 2009).

Murphy and Reidy (2006) stand out as two early scholars who examined the signature pedagogy of political science and found teacher-centric approaches, such as lectures, wanting. Much as I am imploring IR scholars to learn from English language teachers, they implore teachers to borrow from the humanities and physical sciences. Lüdert and Stewart (2017), reflecting on their own classroom experiences, have found benefits to using debates, simulations, one-minute papers, creative presentations, and the creation of posters, flipcharts, and PowerPoint presentations, as well as using perspective-taking activities within the framework of a case study.

Games, role-plays, and simulations—the staples of English language teaching—are also frequently utilized by IR teachers. The tradition of using games and simulations has a long tradition (Arnold 2015; Asal 2005; Mikalayeva 2016; Newman and Twigg 2000; Simpson and Kaussler 2009). Though using games in the classroom can be time-consuming, Arnold (2015) finds that playing classic board games like *Diplomacy* can stimulate both enthusiasm for the subject matter and familiarity with its core concepts. Whether an instructor uses an established board game (Arnold 2015) or designs their own simulation (Newman and Twigg 2000), the use of games tends to make classroom experience richer and more memorable.

Of course, there is no teacher quite like experience. Incorporating real-world experience into IR lessons can be difficult, but not impossible. Kachuyevski and Jones (2011) have used short field studies abroad to help teach key concepts in minority rights and ethnic conflicts in the Ukraine. Others, such as Barber and Battistoni (1993) and Harris (2012), have made the case for incorporating service-learning into the curriculum. The recommendation that students serve their community adds an important element that is hard to duplicate in the classroom: real-world experience.

Digging Deeper: The Negotiated Curriculum

In addition to the active learning techniques discussed above, other ideas that can improve IR pedagogy include *learner-centered teaching*, *learner-needs surveys*, and the *negotiated curriculum*. Increasingly, English language programs are de-emphasizing a complete mastery of the English language (an unrealistic goal) and using learner-needs surveys to try to understand what aspects of the English language are most valuable to students (Nunan 2013, 16). This approach is frequently referred to as learner-centered teaching (as opposed to subject-matter-centered teaching). The approach is driven partly by pragmatism: it is impossible to teach the entire English language, and typically learners have a better knowledge of what aspects of the language are most useful in their lives.

A similar approach could be used in IR classes, even in levels as low as introductory courses. At the moment, student choices are usually restricted to a few key aspects of the course, such as what topics to write papers on or what books they might review. Learner-needs surveys could be used to make more fundamental changes to the curriculum, such as what assignments to include and whether to include topical elements, such as articles from respected newspapers and foreign policy periodicals. The following is an example of a question that might be included in a learner-needs survey.

As a part of this course, you are required to do a project worth 20% of your grade. Which of the following projects would you prefer to undertake?

1. Create and present a poster (15 minutes) on a key topic.
2. Write a five-page paper on a key topic.
3. Create a short ten-minute video on a key topic to present to the class.
4. Write your own idea here: _____

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At the core of this approach is the assumption that the curriculum needs to be negotiated and renegotiated with students (Nunan 2013, 57). Allowing students to continue to make meaningful choices about their curriculum throughout the semester helps keep their motivation high, and (in the vein of McLean's (1980) article) reduces coercion. Learner-needs surveys, too, might turn up surprising findings. Students, might, for example, value lectures over the active learning techniques described in this chapter. Whatever choices students make, the rigor of the course can be kept consistent by allowing students to choose from a menu of activities that represent approximately the same commitment of time and energy.

Digging Deeper: One Model for How to Destroy the Teacher

A common rejoinder from those who prefer narrative methods of instruction is that students are not ready to take on more active roles in the classroom. My reply is that "destroying the teacher" can be conceptualized as a process. The "destroyed teacher" is the product of a teacher successfully identifying where students are in their learning and guiding them to higher stages of learning autonomy. The following is my attempt to present McLean's idea of "destroying the teacher" as a process with various levels.

Level 0 – The Narrative Approach

In this essay, I have identified this level as the one to be avoided. At this level, there is a clear hierarchy of who speaks. The teacher speaks and the student is the recipient of that speech, collecting what knowledge they can. This level is often negatively referred to as the "banking model" of education (see Freire 2005).

Level 1 – Moving Away from Narration

In this first step, the teacher moves away from teacher-talk in gradual steps. Students are encouraged to participate in lectures in limited ways. For example, they are urged to *speculate* about the meaning of key terms, and *Socratic questioning* and other *elicitation* methods are used to get students speaking. At this stage, the teacher points out student errors but encourages students to *self-correct* when possible.

Level 2 – Highly Structured Activities

At this stage, students are given activities to do in groups or pairs. Discussions, projects, role plays, and simulations are utilized more often. However, the teacher provides abundant structure in the form of outlines, prompts, examples, and desired outcomes. At this stage, following Nunan's (2013) guidance on the negotiated curriculum, students are also given more input over the curriculum, typically through A/B choices.

Level 3 – Activities Take Center Stage

At this stage, role-plays, simulations, games, presentations, group/pair work, and discussions are a regular part of the classroom. The activities have less structure than before and students have more freedom to choose their own desired outcomes. The teacher spends less time lecturing and more time providing feedback. At this stage, students regularly make decisions about the curriculum.

Level 4 – Peer Teaching and Student Research

At this stage, in addition to active learning methods, students regularly take over "teacher" roles, such as setting up activities, generating class content, and providing feedback. Students present more of their own research during class and engage in peer-teaching. At this stage, the teacher serves as a safety net or support system when students falter.

Level 5 – Students as Peers

Success! The students have reached a level where they now feel comfortable making informed decisions about the

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curriculum, can give feedback to their fellow students, and can teach each other meaningful content. The student has now become something close to a peer to the teacher.

The model above should not be seen as a program to be implemented in every teaching situation in every classroom, but rather as a rough guide. While the “students as peers” level may be unrealistic for first-year undergraduates, it is helpful to remember why this is a valued end-state. The model can be seen as a heuristic for how every classroom can become a more active space, regardless of a student’s current level of learning autonomy. The key point is that except for level 0—which rejects the idea of the active student to begin with—there are methods at each level to make classrooms more active and engaging.

Shall We Always Destroy the Teacher? Reservations, Hesitations, and Open Questions

Having stated my case for a more active classroom, I now feel it appropriate to explore some of the lingering questions and my own reservations surrounding the idea of “destroying the teacher.”

Safe or Unsafe Spaces?

Typically, in an English language classroom the teacher attempts to create a “safe space” where errors are okay or even encouraged. After all, how do you learn a language without making errors? In contrast, an IR classroom can often feel like an “unsafe space,” where nonsensical utterances or ideology-based editorializing are discouraged. Even many role plays, such as those that involve international negotiations, are assumed to be competitive. Their value often comes from the sense of competition that would exist in the real world. Perhaps, then, it makes sense to maintain this sense of danger in the IR classroom. It may even be productive to import this sense of danger to the English language classroom when the stakes of misspoken language could have severe real-world consequences (for example, when role-playing an emergency call). My sense is that pragmatism should drive your decisions behind how much to make spaces of discourse safe or unsafe in the classroom. Perhaps the closer the student is to the professional world, the more he or she should be made to feel that (simulated) danger.

The Knowing/Doing Gap and its Relevance to IR

In melding the pedagogical conversations of IR and English language teaching, one of the hardest problems I have had to deal with is the knowing-versus-doing problem. In the field of English language teaching, the original impetus for the switch from passive forms of study (such as translation, grammar exercises, and listening exercises) to active learning approaches was a recognition that many graduates of English language programs knew quite a bit about English without being able to use it (Nunan 2013, 65–66). In IR, there has been a similar debate between how IR is studied and how IR is performed in the real world (see, for example, Weiss and Kuele, 2013). However, since researching IR can also be a form of “doing IR,” it is questionable whether this gap exists in the same way it does for English language students. While it is clear that English, or any language, is of little use without the ability to use it in meaningful contexts, it is not clear that the same is true for IR. Knowing the subject matter of IR, even if one’s opportunities for using this knowledge are limited, could still be seen as an important part of a well-rounded liberal education. At the very least, I would suggest that IR teachers should think about what meaningful skills—critical thinking, theory development, writing, presenting, debating—can be developed through their courses. Even if students of IR will only be doing IR in a limited way once they graduate, they should still be practicing skills they will be using throughout their life.

When Not to Destroy the Teacher?

My contention is that IR classrooms have more in common with English language classrooms than IR teachers realize. Much like English language students, I believe IR students at all levels want to be active participants in their own education, negotiating what is taught, engaging in what is said, and practicing what is learned. And, they typically want these roles to grow over time. And yet, there are times when the teacher should not be destroyed. The role of the teacher is important when motivation is at its highest. When students have ambitious goals and need all the help they can get to achieve them, they may not have the patience for slower Socratic methods. This is the same

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whether it is an English language student preparing for a rigorous test or an IR graduate student hoping to finish an ambitious research project. The student needs the teacher's expertise directly and in a hurry.

Ironically, the teacher also needs to be preserved and strengthened when motivation is at its lowest. In dire situations—usually when students have been coerced into class, such as student-athletes or non-majors who need a particular credit, or when there is simply a lack of student maturity—the teacher needs to be both the master of conversation and an autocrat. Unfortunately, active teaching methods in these environments usually just lead to students goofing off.

The Cost-Benefit Analysis of Active Learning Methods: The Dubious State of Statistical Evidence

Active teaching approaches can be costly in terms of preparation time, especially if a teacher is developing tools for the first time. Does this preparation time pay off in terms of learning and student satisfaction? Thus far, I have found very little statistical evidence to support this point. More interestingly, I have found a controversy surrounding a commonly quoted statistic that is used to support active learning methods. The statistic is associated with Edgar Dale's "Cone of Learning" and other variations of this model. It states that learners remember 10 percent of what they read, 20 percent of what they hear, 30 percent of what they see, 50 percent of what they hear and see, 70 percent of what they say and write, and 90 percent of what they say as they perform an authentic activity.^[1] The statistic and its variants (since often the numbers and labels change depending who is citing whom), while intuitively appealing, seems to be the product of a kind of academic hearsay and circular referencing rather than any experimental study of learning. For those interested in unraveling the mystery behind these magical numbers, I recommend reading an investigation by Deepak Prem Subramony (2003) or conducting your own investigation. Regardless, scholars should be skeptical of those trying to use statistical evidence to suggest unambiguous confidence in the superiority of any one method or set of methods over another, active learning or otherwise.

Expand the Toolbox Slowly

Finally, there is no need to rush to embrace new methods. For those who are used to lectures, who have mastered their lecture notes, and can keep their students enthralled with speech, active teaching will not fix something that is not broken. And a rush to replace tried methods with the unfamiliar will most likely lead to catastrophe. My own experience has shown that—just like a lecture—the use of role-plays, games, and simulations improves with each iteration. Thus, teachers should not give up on active teaching methods too soon. In addition, teachers should focus their efforts on resources that can be re-used and improved over time. And so, I suggest the magical rule of 10 percent. Devote 10 percent of class time to experimenting with something new. Expand the methods that work well for you and throw out those that are holding you back. Ten percent is not revolutionary if only tried once; but done consistently, it will revolutionize your teaching.

The Deeper Challenge to IR

Now that I have revealed all my hesitations, let me return to English language teaching pedagogy—in particular, its deepest challenge to IR. The deepest challenge comes not from its use of active teaching methods (surface structure) or even the repeated mantras that inform its practices (the deep structure), such as its injunction to "destroy the teacher." Rather, its deepest challenge comes from its implicit structure, where the moral core of the discipline is found. At their core, English language teachers (and their IR active learning compatriots) believe that more people should be empowered to speak. They believe a teacher's authority comes from his or her ability to diminish the ego in the service of helping others find their voice.

In IR classrooms, where the discussion monopolist dominates, authority comes from the ability to marshal knowledge and expertise to make sure the most reasoned argument prevails. The deep and implicit structures of this approach are grounded in the real-world struggles IR practitioners face when they leave the classroom, and the value and prestige IR training should bestow on expert voices. Rather than try to reconcile these opposing views—opposing values are rarely so easily reconciled—I will instead appeal to the pragmatism of the professional talkers, since it is often pragmatism that informs their practice. Meager though these arguments might be, I urge you to ponder them

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deeply. (And, if you are so disposed, to debate them actively in class.)

The first argument: many of your students will be non-native speakers. It is possible that you too are a non-native speaker, teaching in a language strange from your own. Try to think of the delight your student will feel when they are encouraged to speak and rewarded for speaking, despite their imperfections. Think of the boost of motivation a student will feel when they speak out for the first time and are rewarded for their contribution.

The second argument: in this tumultuous 21st century, there is no guarantee that the monologuer or discussion monopolist will be the wisest person in the room. (Spoiler alert: often they are not.) There is no guarantee that students will always have access to wizened experts. In the age of social media, expertise is often confused with exposure, and authority comes from approval in the form of “likes,” recirculated hashtags, and viewership numbers. That should give teachers added motivation to see the classroom not as a place for wonderful performances of expertise, but as a place to develop the student’s critical faculties as a bulwark against an uncertain future. Certainly, exposure to the wizened voices of experts will be an important component, but not a sufficient one. Students will also need to overcome the habits of passivity. They will need to be encouraged to make choices, evaluate information, form their own opinions, and join conversations, all in a context where teachers provide feedback in a way that enhances their growing learning autonomy. In building this critical faculty, a healthy suspicion of those who would monopolize discussions or try to dominate others in speech—whether they have advanced degrees or not—may also be the most useful tool a student takes out of the classroom.

Notes

[1] This statistic has been encountered in a few articles reviewed for this essay and has been experienced by the author in several different contexts that span teaching seminars to casual conversations. I have refrained from citing authors or naming individuals in order to spare embarrassment or stir controversy.

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