**Carlos Yorio**

# THE OTHER SIDE OF THE LOOKING GLASS[1]

Once upon a time, there was Alice, who having stepped through the looking glass, encountered all kinds of adventures and wonderful revelations about the world she lived in and which she was only able to experience because she was a child, eager, wide-eyed, and open-minded. At some point, "She came upon a large flower-bed, with a border of daisies and a willow-tree growing in the middle.

"'Oh, Tiger-Lily' said Alice, addressing herself to one that was waving gracefully about in the wind, 'I wish you could talk!'

"'We *can* talk!' said the Tiger-Lily, 'when there is anybody worth talking to.'

"Alice was so astonished that she couldn't speak for a minute: it quite seemed to take her breath away. At length, as the Tiger-Lily only went on waving about, she spoke again, in a timid voice—almost a whisper. 'And can *all* the flowers talk?'

"'As well as you can, said the Tiger-Lily. 'And a great deal louder'" (Carroll, 1960, 138–139).

In the section that follows, Alice discovers that flowers can not only talk but, in fact, express definite opinions about her looks and manners and about each others' attitudes, personalities, and behavior. The flowers are articulate, opinionated, passionate, and

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**Editors' Note:** With deep regret, we wish to announce that Carlos Yorio died on January 23, 1989 after a short illness. This article now stands as one memorial to an esteemed and respected colleague.



DOI: 10.37514/JBW-J.1989.8.1.04 

surprisingly vulnerable. They do not always agree with each other but they have a clear sense of community. This little walk through the garden, on the other side of the looking glass, turns out to be quite an eye-opener for Alice, a true learning experience.

In this paper, I will suggest that we, as classroom teachers and program designers, need to take Alice's magical step. Our students, like Alice's flowers, *can* talk; they have opinions about what we do and what we make them do. Like Alice's flowers, our students will not always agree with each other and may not always be right or even sensible. But, I will argue, they cannot be ignored. Native language, culture, social behavior, and previous experiences both in educational and noneducational settings have shaped them as people and as learners. They are not a tabula rasa. The students' existing learning strategies may or may not be adequate or appropriate for the task of second-language learning, but they are a reality. At some level, we all know this. And yet, over and over again, my own students and those of other colleagues amaze me with comments, questions, and complaints which clearly show that some of them, at least, do not agree with what we are doing and feel a terrible sense of frustration in classes where techniques are used which they consider a waste of time.

One point needs to be made clear. I will not argue for doing whatever our students want. But I will try to show that much of our students' frustration and unhappiness is a result of their rejection of techniques that we use in class and which they perceive to be useless. I will suggest that we listen to our students, that we try to find out what they think and how they feel and, above all, that we make them understand why we do what we do. I will also suggest techniques for accomplishing this so that we can maintain a harmonious affective climate in the classroom while we introduce our students to new teaching techniques and learning strategies. Although most of the comments and examples in this paper refer to adult students in second-language classes, the general principles clearly have wider application.

Although there isn't much specific research in the area of student opinions about teaching methods and techniques and the correlation of those opinions with the students' success or failure, research shows two issues that are clear: 1) Students have definite, strong opinions; 2) Students' opinions are based on previous and current experiences and clearly have a bearing on the way in which they see their learning and our teaching. Several studies deserve mention. Beatty and Chan (1984) studied and compared the perception of needs by Chinese students who were preparing to leave for the United States, and Chinese students who had been in

the United States for six months. The differences they found between the two groups are interesting and show that students are not necessarily "correct" in their perception. The "experienced" students showed much more awareness of the real, everyday needs of graduate students in the United States (writing research proposals, personal resumes, participating in seminars, and negotiating personally with the university bureaucracy). These skills do not appear to be crucial in Chinese universities and, in consequence, were not perceived as valuable by students in Beijing. Our experience seems to shape our perception of need in addition to developing our learning strategies through exposure and practice. What this means is that the experiences that students bring with them are important in their learning and should, in consequence, also be important in our teaching. This is particularly true in second-language classes where we deal with students of varied social and cultural backgrounds and where what we do as teachers might be socially and/or culturally alien to the students.

Many years ago, when I was at the English Language Institute of the University of Michigan, we always got complaints from our students about our program because, in their eyes, we did not emphasize vocabulary in our classes—which was by and large true. They perceived vocabulary to be their major problem in reading (Yorio, 1971) and in scoring acceptable levels on the Michigan Proficiency Test, which was a university entrance requirement. As part of a program of institutional research, Jack Upshur and I studied over 300 Michigan tests and we found that some of our students were right and some were wrong in what they perceived as their greatest language need. The Japanese-speaking students, at all levels of proficiency, scored significantly lower in vocabulary than they did in grammar. However, for the Spanish speakers, the reverse was consistently true—their grammar scores were always lower than their vocabulary scores. Contrary to the general perception, then, vocabulary was not everybody's main problem.

In a recent paper (Yorio, 1986), I advocated that we should view language learners as consumers and that, with a marketing approach in mind, we survey, formally or informally, the students' perceived needs, opinions, and views of the product or service that we offer—language teaching. My fairly extensive survey noted significant differences among proficiency levels and language background groups. Let me cite a few points: First, students do have opinions. In the more than 17,000 questions answered by all 711 subjects, the "I don't know" alternative was chosen *less than two percent* of the time. Interestingly, and these data were not included in the 1986 paper, the thirty-three teachers (of the 711 students) who also

responded to the survey, chose the "I don't know" answer *over four percent* of the time. When you ask teachers and their students their opinions on various methods and techniques and you get clearer, stronger responses from the students, you obviously have consumers whose concerns you cannot ignore.

Here is another piece of comparative data from the same study. When asked whether memorizing vocabulary lists was "very important, useful, or unimportant," almost 60% of the teachers said it was *unimportant* and only 2 (out of 33) thought that it was *important.* The students' responses show exactly the reverse picture: 60% of the students chose the most positive answer (important) whereas 8% chose the most negative answer (unimportant). If we look at language background tabulations, the picture is even more dramatic: 65% of the Chinese and 71% of the Japanese thought that memorizing vocabulary lists was "very important." Talk about the other side of the looking glass. Although classroom research has given us many insights, researchers never tell us what José thinks of rewriting yet another draft of his composition, what Kumiko feels about a peer reading her composition and openly criticizing it, what frustration Mohammed experiences when he is told that "we are not here to learn grammar but writing," nor are we here "to learn vocabulary but reading." These real questions about real students can only be investigated by these students' teachers. Teachers must become researchers and, like researchers, need to approach the task objectively and with an open mind.

Writing is an area in which there have been radical changes in teaching and the conflict between student expectations and faculty practices is particularly acute. Although Zamel (1987) thinks that classroom practices have not, by and large, changed much as a result of recent developments in process-oriented studies of writing, I think that it is fair to say that in many classrooms, and this is certainly true of my school, the activities with which students engage in composition classes are very different from ten years ago. Brainstorming, freewriting, journal writing, systematic peer reaction, extensive revising, and the ways in which we approach, for example, the teaching of grammar and organization today vary greatly from past practices. It should be clear at this point that I am making broad generalizations. Some classes have changed radically while others have not changed at all, and most classes probably fall somewhere in the middle. Although I realize that some of the statements that I will attribute to "teachers" cannot be attributed to *all* teachers, they are, nevertheless, statements that I have heard some ESL teachers make and are being used here for the sake of the argument.

At Lehman College, my own institution, we have five levels of ESL. The highest level, 005, prepares students for the Writing Assessment Test of The City University of New York, a 50-minute essay required of all CUNY students, which is read and rated by two, or in the case of disagreement, three readers trained in holistic evaluation. Having passed this test, students can enroll in regular English composition classes and become totally mainstreamed into the College. All sections of this level are taught by instructors aware of current writing theory and teaching practices and familiar with the urban student population that we have. Despite our increasing success over the past three years, there are some students who are not happy with what is gong on in those classes. In addition to the five hours of actual class each week, students are encouraged to work at the ESL Resource Center where there are tutors available and where they can do various kinds of self-study programs, particularly grammar and editing.

In order to find the source of the students' unhappiness, I thought that I would do a survey or questionnaire to see what their opinions were. After trying unsuccessfully to formulate a questionnaire that wasn't too "leading," I decided that I would start by asking students to engage in a little role reversal. I asked all 005 instructors to give students the following in-class composition, and I asked them not to hold a discussion in advance: "If you were an ESL writing teacher at Lehman, what kind of course would you design? What kinds of materials would you use and what kinds of activities would you and your students engage in?"

It seemed to me that by trying an "open" composition, I would get a fairly good idea of what was on the students' minds, what they thought was important and why.

I collected 165 compositions varying in length from one page to several pages. Some were well-argued essays, others mere listings of important points. After reading two dozen or so compositions it became clear to me that certain themes were apparent and that it was possible to isolate "issues," ranging from relatively general methodological ideas to very specific classroom techniques. In order for something to qualify as an "issue" it had to be clear that the student thought it was important for writing and that he/she would incorporate it into his/her teaching. Using color coding and labeling, the entire corpus was read over and over again, always working with two or at the most three "issues" at a time. When this analysis was done, a frequency analysis was performed to see which issues had been mentioned most often.

Table I (see Appendix) shows that three issues rank above all others: reading, grammar, and intensive writing practice. The

highest frequency (58%) was for reading (the importance of reading for writing and the necessity of having a good reading program alongside the writing program); the second highest frequency (48%) was for the teaching of grammar (students who mention grammar describe, in no uncertain terms, how lack of grammatical accuracy is holding them back). The third most often mentioned issue (45%) is "frequency of practice," particularly in class, simulating the conditions of the test the students will have to pass. There were 14 other issues mentioned ranging from peer group work to the analysis of model compositions. Most of the issues were mentioned by fewer than 20% of the respondents.

What does this global, cross-sectional view tell us about the ways in which the students in this study see the teaching of ESL writing and how close is the students' vision to what actually goes on in their classrooms? This is not easy to answer from the analysis of these compositions because the students' views appear so "scattered." With the exception of a reading program (which we have) and a grammar program (which we do not have at this level), there appear to be no other "burning" issues (and even these were mentioned by only half of the students!). What about those activities which are *pivotal* to the way in which we teach writing today, activities which all of our students have been exposed to or have had experience with? Group and peer-group work was mentioned by only one-third of the students (34%), clear feedback (one of the students' most frequent informal complaints) was mentioned by 27%, individual conferences with the teachers by 17%, homework (which they must do every single day) also 17%, rewriting (which they do with almost every piece of writing they produce, except journals) 10%, tutorials (an activity in which they are encouraged to participate and in which most of them spend one or two hours a week) 9%, and journal or diary writing (which students are familiar with although only some of the 005 instructors require) also 9%.

Why are these activities, which we do most often in class and encourage our students to do, *not* among the activities they would use if they were writing teachers? In relation to the task required of the students in this study, we can only guess at the reasons: they may simply have forgotten to mention them; they may not have had enough time and if they had been given more time to write their compositions they might have mentioned them. There is, however, another possible explanation: students do not think these activities are useful despite the fact that their teachers make them do them day after day.

I was troubled by this. In an attempt to get a clearer picture by "forcing the students' hand," I designed a task that provided

students with *all* the alternatives. I made up a randomized list of the seventeen issues that the students themselves had mentioned. Actually, there were two lists with the items in reverse order which were randomly administered to all 005 students. The instructions asked students to rate the 17 issues from (1)—not important at all—to (5)—very important—in relation to the teaching of writing. They were also given an "I don't know" choice. I did not expect, and did not get, any correlations between the rank orders of the two tasks. In tasks of this sort, students tend to respond "very positively" (Yorio, 1986). For that reason, I did not expect a large percentage of low ratings for any of the variables; that is why I only looked at percentages of *high* ratings. Since students tend to rate "positively" rather than "negatively," it is the high ratings that are better indicators of what they think. The openness of the composition task, in contrast to the rating task, evokes a more "personal" or affective response. I was particularly struck by difference in the rank of the variable about the affective rapport with the instructor—4 in the composition task and 14 in the rating task. Even more remarkable is the difference in the rating for the importance of a reading program—1 in the composition task and 15 in the rating task! Table II (see Appendix) shows that intensity of practice, clear correction and feedback, and grammar instruction (the only stable variable) were given the highest rating by 94, 86, and 85 percent of the students respectively. In this second task, the rewriting of compositions, tutorials, and homework fared better than in the composition task, receiving the highest rating of 5 from about two-thirds of the students (about 70%). At the very bottom of the list are "discussion and group work" and "keeping journals or diaries."

The data generated by both of these tasks is confusing and they are very difficult if not impossible to compare to each other. Perhaps the most interesting questions are raised by the students' negative responses to classroom practices that most instructors would rate extremely positively. In the composition task, for example, why is it that 90% of the students *failed to mention* homework and the rewriting of compositions as important when they are the two most pervasive tasks they all have to engage in their real classes? Why is it that working in small groups, *the* single most common classroom technique of the 1970s and 1980s in language classrooms, fares so poorly in both tasks, being considered "important" by less than half of the students? These are significant findings for the teachers of these students because it means that *half* of the students in any given class do not consider what they do relevant, or at the very least, are not convinced that it is doing them any good.

But that is the cross-sectional view. Classroom teachers also

need to know what individual students think. If we look at what individual students said, we find a similar picture of contradiction, misunderstanding, and frustration. Here are two students *from the same class:*

*Student 1:*

> My teachers believe that getting a class to break into groups helps them to improve their vocabulary, spelling and grammar. How can the teacher believe that getting students into groups can help to improve their vocabulary, spelling and grammar when all of the students are in the same boat and there is no land around them? Students with the same problem cannot help others, when they are not sure themselves what the answer is. How can other students believe what their mates are saying when they are not sure of the knowledge of their mates? Group consulting is a big waste of time!

*Student 2:*

> The way I would help students with their writing problems is by making students work in groups. I feel that students tend to talk more about a subject when they are in groups than in the normal regular class. When students are in groups they express themselves better. They are also more talkative.

Here are two students in the same class with apparently opposing views: Student 1 feels that the group contributes to his/her insecurity whereas Student 2 finds security and support among his/her peers. Notice, however, that these students are *not* talking about the same thing. Student 1 talks about vocabulary and grammar; Student 2 talks about discussing ideas. The problem here is that when these students engage in group work, they are not seeking the same kind of help, they are not working toward the same goal. They are, in consequence, likely to be frustrated by the experience.

The following two students, like the previous ones, are also in the same class:

*Student 3:*

> If I was an ESL teacher, I would be very strict. I spent ten years in _____ school (in my country) and I say school over there is very hard. Teachers over there are very strict and because of that students have to study. Therefore, if I was a teacher I would bring similar rules of teaching. By being strict, I would probably make students do their homework.

*Student 4:*

> If a teacher is too strict, then you just might scare the student into dropping the class in just a week. Try to put yourself as a student and if you see a strict teacher you would think twice about taking the course again. If there is a teacher like yourself who is easy-going, understanding and is not too serious, then you make the atmosphere comfortable for the student to breathe.

Once again, we have two students in the same class who see the world differently. Student 4 calls the teacher "easy-going, understanding" and seems to think that that is what a teacher should be like. Student 3, on the other hand, thinks that teachers should be "strict" and is, subtly but unequivocally, criticizing the teacher for *not* creating an atmosphere that, in his/her view, is conducive to learning.

The following opinions, from students in various classes, are interesting because they show how profound the differences can be between what they think is valuable and what the program or the teachers consider valuable:

*Student 5:*

> Many ESL teachers just base their teaching on writing lessons forgetting all about grammar, which is the biggest problem for many ESL students. Therefore, I would focus my teaching more on grammar and then go ahead with writing. Also, I would assign my students two books: one for grammar and the other for writing improvement and would divide the class time in two lessons, grammar and writing.

*Student 6:*

> I will also give them in each class ten vocabulary words. This will increase their vocabulary which is one of the biggest problems in ESL students. To be sure that they learn the vocabulary words, I will give a quizz every one or two weeks.

*Student 7:*

> Every morning I would also use the method of writing verbs and vocabulary words on the board with definitions and pronunciation . . . After that the next day students would be tested on those verbs and vocabulary words, giving of course the definition or using it in a correct sentence.

*Student 8:*

> I'll find compositions or essays that are well-written and share them with the class. Then, they'll get essays with several mistakes so they could find the mistakes and understand the proper way to do an essay. I'll explain every mistake and explain the proper way to do them.

It is clear that these students (5, 6, 7, and 8) are keenly aware of their *language* difficulties (vocabulary, grammatical errors, etc.) and feel that these must be dealt with by using direct, overt techniques (error explanation and correction, vocabulary lists and quizzes, etc.) Some of the teachers may feel, more or less strongly, that those techniques are inappropriate or ineffective and that they do indeed teach vocabulary when they read and discuss reading, or brainstorm in preparation for writing, and that they do deal with grammatical problems when they discuss the various drafts of a composition and certainly when they do final editing. The problem here is that our students do not see it that way. We give them the forest and they need to see the trees! We must find ways to make our teaching strategies more "accessible" to our learners either through discussion or through "principled compromise" or both. But we cannot ignore the fact that unless we bridge those gaps, frustration and helplessness will continue to hinder learning.

Research in the area of second-language-learning strategies by O'Malley, Rubin, Bialystok, Chamot, Oxford, Wenden, and others has clearly shown that we cannot assume that second language input is taken in or can be taken in by all our students in the same way (Oxford, 1986). Although taxonomies and inventories have been devised and tests have been designed for the classification and identification of learner strategies, it is unrealistic to expect that classroom teachers will be able to use them in order to implement individualized pedagogical plans. As is the case with the notion of eclecticism in language teaching, the learning strategy literature should help the classroom teacher understand in much more than an affective sense, that students are *not* all the same and should not be treated and taught as if they were.

As we have seen, much of the students' frustration is the result of either misinformation or lack of information concerning the techniques that teachers use in class. When these techniques "suit" their learning strategies, there is no conflict, although unfamiliarity with the techniques might require some minor adjustments. When these techniques do *not* suit them, however, much more training will be required in order to get the student to accept the technique and profit from its use. The use of small peer-group discussions is a

good example of this. As we saw above (Student 1), some students feel very uncomfortable with this technique because they feel that the other students in the group do not know any more than they do and have, in consequence, nothing to offer them. These students are looking for "answers" in a technique that, in the teaching of writing at least, is best for raising "questions" or, at its most supportive, for offering suggestions. Unless these students understand the purpose of the group discussions and the kinds of contributions that peers can make, this technique will not only seem a waste of time, but also *add* to the students' insecurity. As teachers, we must not forget that a technique that we take for granted, is not necessarily taken for granted by the students. They may never have been exposed to it or, if they have, they may never have felt comfortable with it.

Every time that we introduce a technique in a class, particularly at the beginning of the term, it is essential that we discuss it with the students. This is particularly true of a technique that we feel is important and that we intend to use on a regular basis. We should first describe the technique and ask students if they have had any experience with it, what they think, what they think the goals, the difficulties, and the advantages are, etc. After students have had a chance to actually experience the technique, go back and see how they feel, what questions or suggestions they have, etc. They should do this orally, in a class discussion, and they should later write about it. These informal written reactions are often very telling. Students who did not voice their opinions in class can be more candid in writing.

This kind of "learner training" takes time but, in my view, it is time well spent. Getting a student to profit from the strategies that you are using is beneficial affectively and pedagogically; it makes the students more comfortable and less frustrated and it helps them develop new learning strategies.

After this initial stage, during which students are introduced to a teaching strategy and have a chance to experience it and react to it, we must monitor the use of the strategy to see if, in fact, it is being used correctly, or is being "subverted" by lack of understanding or acceptance. We must not simply think that because we "talked about it," a strategy will readily become part of the students' repertoire. Like any other kind of training, strategy development takes time and practice. W. Powel and C. Taylor (personal communication) talk about "transitioning" students, slowly "unfolding" new strategies in a subtle, yet continuous plan of instruction and persuasion.

It seems to me that in the teaching of writing certain techniques which we consider important for the students' development as

writers have to be introduced, discussed, and given an opportunity to become part of the students' repertoire. Brainstorming, writing a first draft and rewriting other drafts later, incorporating other people's suggestions, learning to read objectively and critically what we have written, etc., are all strategies that we are going to have to develop in our students. It is unlikely that many of our students already have them, or understand them and can use them profitably.

The notion of principled compromise can make us more eclectic by opening up classes to more varied techniques and by offering more options for the students.

Beyond the calm surface of every ESL program there is a certain amount of frustration. I am certain that if we were all willing to step through our own looking glass, we would find similar pictures. Alice's visit to the garden of Live Flowers was not an easy one. It was hard to find the way and much of what she learned was fascinating but disconcerting. We should all take the magical step. It is an experience that we owe our students and ourselves.

## Appendix

### Table I (Composition Task)

| Rank | Issue | Frequency of Mention % |
|---|---|---|
| 1. | A good reading program | 58 |
| 2. | Grammar Instruction | 48 |
| 3. | Intensive practice | 45.4 |
| 4. | Affective rapport with instructor | 36 |
| 5. | Work in groups | 34.5 |
| 6. | Vocabulary instruction | 30 |
| 7. | Work on "content" | 28.4 |
| 8. | Clear correction and feedback | 27 |
| 9. | Oral work/pronunciation/conversation | 19.3 |
| 10. | Clear assessment of student needs | 17.5 |
| 11. | Individual interviews with instructor | 17.5 |
| 12. | Homework | 17 |
| 13. | Work on organization of ideas | 14 |
| 14. | Rewriting of compositions | 10.3 |
| 15. | Tutorials (and self-study) | 9.7 |
| 16. | Writing of journals/diaries | 9.7 |
| 17. | Analysis of good models | 6.6 |

**Table II (Rating Task)**

| Rank | Issue | Frequency of highest rating % |
|---|---|---|
| 1. | Intensive practice | 94 |
| 2. | Clear correction and feedback | 86 |
| 3. | Grammar instruction | 84.5 |
| 4. | Work on organization of ideas | 82 |
| 5. | Analysis of good models | 77 |
| 6. | Work on "content" | 75 |
| 7.* | Clear assessment of student needs | 73 |
| 8.* | Re-writing of compositions | 73 |
| 9.* | Tutorials | 73 |
| 10. | Homework | 72.4 |
| 11. | Oral practice/pronunciation/conversation | 70.3 |
| 12. | Vocabulary instruction | 70 |
| 13. | Individual interviews with the instructor | 64 |
| 14. | Affective rapport with the instructor | 63 |
| 15. | A good reading program | 62 |
| 16. | Work in groups | 45 |
| 17. | Writing of journals/diaries | 32 |

*Equal ranking

## Note

[1] The original version of this paper was an invited address presented at the 1988 International TESOL Convention in Chicago. I would like to thank instructors in ESL 005 at Lehman College for their help in this project. I would also like to thank Dean A. Rothstein for her advice on the analysis of the data and P. Kreuzer, A. Raimes, and J. Reid for their comments.

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