

Minimizing Perceptual Mismatches – Re-Arranging the Lens

Jacqoline J. Austin, Forman Christian College (A Chartered University), Pakistan

The North American Conference on Education 2014
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Miscommunication or being misconstrued is indeed an old story of the English language classrooms. Chances of miscommunication further escalate when the learner is the second or third language speaker of a target language. Mostly, teachers and learners don't look at the same classroom event as a potential learning event and mismatches exist between teacher perceptions and learner perceptions of the lesson objectives. These mismatches increase the gap between teacher input and learner intake and the desired learning outcome is not achieved. This is common in monolingual classrooms with minimal diversity and becomes more challenging in diversified multilingual classrooms. However, the nature and degree of mismatches vary in monolingual and multilingual classrooms and can't be used as a scale to consider either better than the other. The focus of studies done earlier have been perceptual mismatches and 'learning gap' and the emphasis in this paper is the 'learning map.' Also, more than a gap there is a 'disconnect' between a teacher's theoretical approach to a lesson/lecture and his/her practical implementation of it – 'planned' and 'practical' teaching. The discussion here is threefold - from theory to practice to perception. Small steps need to be taken, if maximum learning is the goal, including well-defined and well-explained specific learning objectives for each lesson; methodology, even if sometimes it means to choose from what is termed as 'conventional teaching methodologies' and teachers and students preferred styles. Well-defined learning map and eclectic and innovative teaching approaches and techniques maximize learning opportunities thus minimizing the mismatches.

Keywords: perceptual mismatches, learning gap, learning map, styles, eclectic teaching approaches and techniques

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Introduction

Human interaction has the potential to contain ambiguities and mismatches. Misinterpretations and mismatches are part of everyday teaching and learning. The gap created due to these mismatches between teacher's input and learner's intake has kept the pedagogists on a go to investigate and experiment with new techniques in order to maximize the learning opportunities for the students thus minimizing the mismatches. If we look through the history of teaching and in particular language teaching in the past century, we get interesting and varied interpretations of 'the best way' of teaching a foreign language. The exercise of teaching and learning cannot be categorized into set rules, methods, trends or techniques – we can neither categorize it nor limit its scope. In fact, 'The best way' of teaching is a myth and probably will remain so in the years to come. The teachers need to develop an approach based on the classroom needs and use techniques that best suit the learning needs of the students. According to Brown (2000), a teacher's choice of selecting designs, materials and techniques for teaching a foreign language in a particular context largely depends on his/her approach. When we talk about choosing an approach or a technique, we must keep in view the 'theory' and the 'practice' map– one is not divorced from the other but certainly, most of the times there are 'disconnects' that create a gap between a teacher's theoretical understanding of the lesson objectives vs. the actual practice of teaching and also, between students' perceptions of the lesson objectives. The two important questions included in this research paper are:

- 1) How can we maximize the learning opportunities in our classes by minimizing the mismatches?
- 2) What is a 'learning map' as compared to a 'learning gap' and what should it include?

Most of the studies done earlier have focused on the 'learning gap' and the main objective of this study is the 'learning map.' The focus of studies done earlier has been the learning gap, and in this paper, the significance of a 'learning map' in the context of a learning gap and perceptual mismatches have been highlighted.

With the advent of communicative language teaching in the 1970's there has been a reasonable shift in the pedagogic world – teachers don't stick to one particular method to teach a foreign language as previously it was believed and practiced. Though in communicative language teaching (CLT) the focus is on communication 'the meaning' rather than individual grammar items 'the form/s', still it has helped language teachers a great deal in shaping their perceptions towards language teaching. CLT is not a 'teaching method' but is usually characterized as a 'teaching approach' in the broader sense. The CLT approach has certain features. The most recognizable of these features are David Nunan's (1991) five features of CLT:

1. An emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language.
2. The introduction of authentic texts into the learning situation.
3. The provision of opportunities for learners to focus, not only on language but also on the Learning Management process.
4. An enhancement of the learner's own personal experiences as important contributing elements to classroom learning.

5. An attempt to link classroom language learning with language activities outside the classroom.

Our main emphasis is on the ‘learning management process.’ How and what do students learn? What goes into learning and teaching a specific item? How best is the task done or an item learned? What lesson can be derived from a specific task and how it can be implemented, improved, improvised, adapted and customized while preparing similar and other tasks in order to gain maximum learning out of it? While it is important for the students to focus on the process, it is equally important for teachers to keep track of the classroom events.

Many studies have been conducted on perceptual mismatches (e.g., Trigwell, Prosser, & Waterhouse, 1999; Peacock, 2001; Sanchez, 2000; Rao, 2002 and Ford & Chen, 2002). The writers in these studies have mainly focused on the mismatches between the teaching styles and learning stages. The most famous studies on perceptual mismatches have been conducted by Kumaravadivelu (1991), Slimani (1989), Block (1994, 1996) and Barkhuizen (1998). All of their studies confirmed that mismatches occur between teacher perceptions and learner perceptions of what is available to learn.

Nearly twenty-three years ago, Kumaravadivelu (1991) conducted a research study in order to investigate the perceptions of the learners of a language learning task in an ESL context. The subjects of his study were low intermediate level ESL learners in the US. Based on his study, he identified ten sources that have the potential to contribute to the mismatch between teacher intention and learner interpretation. The ten sources that he identified are: *cognitive, communicative, linguistic, pedagogic, strategic, cultural evaluative, procedural, instructional and attitudinal mismatches*. Kumaravadivelu’s study is one of the pioneer studies on the identification of perceptual mismatches. According to Kumaravadivelu (1991), “the more we know about the learner’s personal approaches and personal concepts, the better and more productive our intervention will be” (p. 107). There is no doubt, that mostly the classes are comprised of mixed ability students irrespective of monolingual or bi/multilingual classes. The teachers almost are encountered with similar problems in different classroom situations. According to Haritha (2014), “In the 21st century language classrooms, there have always been contradictions between the learner’s understanding of the content and the teacher’s perception of teaching the content” (p. 502). The degree of perceptual mismatches varies depending on multiple variables related to the background and nature of the students, teachers and class. However, it cannot be decided that language learning in monolingual ESL classes is better than bi/multilingual ESL classes and vice-versa, what might appear the strength in one class could be a challenge in the other one.

There is no such thing as an ‘ideal’ classroom, but there certainly could be ‘better’ classrooms. Mismatches can’t be avoided; they are inevitable. Teacher’s perspective aligned with the student’s perception/s will keep learning and teaching less challenging and more rewarding. In the words of Lee (1960), “... You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view” (p. 30).

People think different because of differing experiences--not everybody thinks alike. Experiences and missed and availed opportunities play a great role in shaping our

mindset and our attitude; therefore, learning agendas vary. Within one classroom students are different and so each student has his/her own learning agenda (McDonough, 1995, p. 121). Students come to class with a different mindset which is not according to their teachers assumptions (Nunan, 1995, p. 140). Shohamy (2006) draws an analogy between a teacher and a soldier where teachers like soldiers carry out orders of the system without questioning the policy and agendas behind it. The aforementioned claims show that already a perception barrier exists. The teachers struggle with the notion of 'carte blanche' and because of this confusion, some understanding and learning is hampered; this indicates that objective mismatch between the teacher and the taught maybe inevitable. The gap created because of these mismatches between the teachers' perceptions and the learners' perceptions of the lesson objectives, also impedes the language acquisition (LA) process, thus affecting it adversely. Studies conducted by Green & Oxford, 1995 and Littlewood, Liu & Yu, 1996 show the adverse affects on the LA process due to these gaps.

The theory and practice of learning and teaching go hand in hand. Theoretical underpinning, whether implicit or explicit, is the basis of all classrooms teaching practice. This understanding of the theoretical knowledge of the classroom practices might be a result of a teacher's professional education, personal experience and observations, robust commonsense or a combination. One cannot be divorced from the other. Theory and practice should inform each other, and should therefore, constitute a unified whole (Kumaravadivelu, 2003, p. 18). However, O'Hanlon (1993) explains a distinction between 'professional theory' and 'personal theory.' According to him:

A professional theory is a theory which is created and perpetuated within the professional culture. It is a theory which is widely known and understood like the developmental stages... Professional theories are generally transmitted via teacher/professional training in colleges, polytechnics and universities. Professional theories form the basis of a shared knowledge and understanding about the "culture" of teaching and provide the opportunity to develop discourse on the implicit and explicit educational issues raised by these theoretical perspectives... A personal theory, on the other hand, is an individual theory unique to each person, which is individually developed through the experience of putting professional theories to the test in the practical situation. How each person interprets and adapts their previous learning particularly their reading, understanding and identification of professional theories while they are on the job is potentially their own personal theory. (pp. 245 – 246)

The aforementioned implies the traditional assumption, which is also a false dichotomy that professional theory is the theorist prerogative and personal theory is the teacher's domain. Besides, it also implies that based on their experience and understanding, teachers are not empowered to practice their own theory, instead they should use the theories presented by the theorists who are not actual teachers but outside experts. This shouldn't always be the case because it takes power from the teacher and the whole enterprise of learning and teaching is affected by it and results in lesser learning opportunities.

According to Can (2008), based on the knowledge of methods and, more significantly their experiences and frameworks, instructors can construct their own methods and

thus, act as evaluators, observers, critical thinkers, theorizers and practitioners. A teacher is an expert of his/her own class and in the field per se. The teachers have the right to have their own personalized theories that come from the practicalities and realities of classroom events that they deal and live with on a day-to-day basis. Taking this privilege away from them definitely puts the learning at stake. 'Empowered' learning and teaching includes both the teacher and the taught. It is always good to have the privilege to exercise theories both by the 'outside expert' the 'theorist' and the 'in- class expert' the 'teacher.' Critical pedagogists are strongly against this artificial divide. Such an approach makes teachers faithful executors of established theories and gives them little or no room to self-conceptualize and self-construct their personal theories (Kincheloe 1993). A teacher is both a privileged theorist and practitioner and this should be acknowledged and accepted across the board. These restrictions create a gap between teacher input and learner intake on one hand, but a closer look will help us understand that such a mindset is also an important factor of the disconnect between a teacher's theoretical approach and his/her teaching practice in the classroom.

In order to maximize the learning opportunities in the class it is vital to understand that mismatches are not only the results of gaps but also 'disconnects' between the teacher's theory and practice. In other words, sometimes what is identified as a gap between teacher input and learner intake is actually a 'disconnect' between a teacher's theory and practice in teaching. A study conducted by Wong (2011) at a secondary school in Hong Kong show that the teacher's teaching practices largely determine whether the students are able to discern the learning objectives correctly or not. The learning objectives should be clearly stated before the lecture begins. This will help students better understand on what to be learnt and will expedite the learning process by making the students more proactive. Another study conducted by Khany & Darabi (2014) was carried out in order to investigate teachers' performances teaching at a high school level in an ELT Iranian context on the application of principles-based and post-method pedagogy in their teaching. The results of the study show that principles-based and post-method pedagogy practices are not highly applied in the classroom by teachers in their teaching practice.

We are indubitably people of different percepts, but finding ways in order to align our agendas with the majority to create a win-win situation is a matter that deserves serious attention. The ways the lessons are planned play a significant role in achieving maximum learning in the classrooms. What might appear neat and organized on a paper as a lesson plan might not appear and work the same way in practical teaching. This indeed is a thwarting experience for both the teachers and the students. Lesson planning is indeed a vital component of the teaching-learning process, but what goes into it is what really matters. As mentioned earlier, theory informs practice and "theory to practice" has been tremendously emphasized in research studies. However, a teacher is both the practitioner and the theorist, but the important question is, what makes a teacher a theorist? A simple answer might be, a teacher who theorizes his/her own practice. In doing so, a teacher does an 'action research' in which s/he carries out research 'with the people' and not 'on the people.' This brings us to the kernel of the whole discussion – the emphasis here is not 'theory to practice' rather it is 'theory for practice.' The discussion here is three-fold: theory, practice and perception. According to Burns (1996), "Theories for practice, as distinct from the theories of practice typically taught in teacher education programs, construct the cognitive

structures for planning, decision making and teaching behavior in the language classroom” (p. 174).

There is no doubt that even meticulously planned lessons don't give us the desired output. It is important then for a teacher to revisit his/her lesson planning and look for some missing connection/s or disconnect/s. The approach should be praxis-driven:

practice —→ *theory* —→ *practice*

The main focus in the post-method era is the use of eclectic approaches and choosing teaching materials from eclectic sources. According to Bigelow and Cushing (2014), “For teachers utilizing principled eclecticism, language acquisition inhabits a space where risk taking and mistakes are supported (and often modeled), informal assessment of learning occurs on a regular basis and informs next-steps in lesson planning, and goals for success remain student-driven” (p. 249). However, this doesn't undermine the use of traditional methods when and where required to maximize learning opportunities. In fact, the whole concept of *eclecticism* in language learning and teaching is incomplete if traditional methodology is not part of it – it completes the picture – in other words, traditional teaching methodology is not divorced from it. Nunan (1989) found that students found traditional learning activities better than communicative activity types and in some cases preferred the former over the later. What matters is the context in making informed choices as also, noted by Arikani (2006) that within the use of traditional methodology the focus should be on how teachers construct and implement methods rather than how methods work for teachers. It is important to keep the context in mind because content divorced from the context has greater chances of producing less desired results. Contextualized learning is vital; according to Berns and Erickson (2001) contextualized learning is the “conception of teaching and learning that helps teachers relate subject matter content to real world situations” (p. 2). The classroom students are also part of the ‘real world situation’, and they should be included while designing lessons and defining lesson objectives – the student should lie at the very heart of lesson planning. Active student centered learning is a main component of contextualized instruction (Dowden 2007).

There is no doubt that we have mixed ability students in our classes. A study conducted by Rauf and Iqbal (2008) on the struggles and challenges faced by Pakistani immigrant students while learning English in American schools. They found that students who are hesitant to speak and communicate in English feel left alone in the language learning process. It is the instructor's responsibility to take these students on board who otherwise become ‘silent’ and ‘passive’ fighting with their own language deficiencies (p.57), and also hinders their academic growth on the whole. Generally students are divided into three groups according to their academic/learning strengths and caliber: good, average and below average. The important question is how do we determine their strengths? Learning that doesn't take into account the learner is disintegrated learning. In many EFL/ESL contexts, students lag behind because they lack in the English proficiency skills to survive and succeed in the English medium context of education. “The language teachers, policy makers, syllabus designers and the teacher trainer should strive hard in order to bridge the gap between what majority vernacular medium schools deliver to language students and

what should be the actual required level of language proficiency” (Rauf & Iqbal, 2008, p. 58).

In many academic institutions students are screened; they take standardized tests and accordingly are placed in different levels based on their test scores. These standardized tests actually don't take into account the “actual learning strength” of a student, and therefore, ultimately it is the instructor's duty to identify it. The pioneer study done in this area is Howard Gardner's study on multiple intelligences (MIs) in the late 1970's and early 1980's. The MIs theory by Gardner, posits that each individual possesses a different kind of mind and therefore learn, remember, perform, and understand in different ways; they possess eight or more relatively autonomous intelligences. Individuals draw on these intelligences, to solve problems that are pertinent to the society in which they live, either in individual capacity or corporately (Gardner, 1983, 1993, 1999, 2006b & 2006c). This also goes with the universally accepted truth that each individual is unique; we can be similar in many ways, but not the exact identical. Multiple intelligences also determine the learner's preferred style/s of learning. Akbarzadeh and Fatemipour (2014) conducted a study in which they investigated the preferred style/s of Iranian EFL language learners at the upper-intermediate level and also the teachers' preferred style of teaching. The results of the study show a mismatch between teaching style preferences and learners' learning style preferences. They found that the teachers have their own fixed style of teaching based on the requirements of the course/s and not on the students' learning style preferences. Despite the fact the teachers were aware of the theories of learning styles; they did not take those into account while designing lessons and/or lectures. This also highlights the significance of having more teacher training forums and more projects on the English language teaching reforms, so that we can better equip and train our teachers to face such kind of challenges. According to Oxford (2001):

One image for teaching English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL) is that of a tapestry...woven from many strands...the characteristics of the teacher, the learner, the setting, and the relevant languages (i.e., English and the native languages of the learners and the teacher)...to produce a large, strong, beautiful, colorful tapestry, all of these strands must be interwoven in positive ways...the instructor's teaching style must address the learning style of the learner, the learner must be motivated, and the setting must provide resources and values that strongly support the teaching of the language...if the strands are not woven together effectively, the instructional loom is likely to produce something small, weak, ragged, and pale—not recognizable as a tapestry at all. (p. 1)

Prior to setting lesson goals, one main goal for all the classes is and should be ‘maximum learning.’ The teacher is definitely on a higher pedestal than the students and therefore, should make informed choices for the students by taking them on board and by making them understand that both teachers and students are in a joint enterprise of teaching and learning.

Theoretical Framework of a Learning Map

A classroom lesson should be designed in a way that take into account the following learning map where the student is an integral part, and the teacher is also an important

part of the language learning and teaching process in order to maximize the learning opportunities in the class, thus minimizing the mismatches. The teachers need to get involved in their teaching by reflecting on it. This means to do an in-depth analysis of the classroom events, lessons, material/s used and draw meaning from those experiences and later testing that knowledge to make better and informed choices. Below is a framework that can be used by teachers as they plan their lessons and class activities:

- 1) Clearly define and communicate learning objectives and goals.
- 2) Keep in mind, the preferred learning and teaching style/s of teachers and students. The learning strength/s of a student; the way they learn better, keeping in view their multiple intelligences. Incorporate (visual and audio aids etc) in the lessons to make it more interesting.
- 3) Keep students in mind besides the content of the lesson while designing lessons plans.
- 4) Use multiple authentic sources by giving open choice to the students to select one according to their preferred style.
- 5) Use tiered tasks with mixed ability students in the same class (level) for the same task/lesson.
- 6) Use the wider community as a resource for learning by finding a relationship between the real-world and pedagogic tasks.
- 7) Invite guest speakers for talks and lectures. The institution's administration could be consulted for this.
- 8) Carry out an ongoing assessment and observation through action research.
- 9) There should be synchronization between a teacher's theoretical approach to a lesson and his/her teaching practice.
- 10) Make students write one goal at the beginning of each lesson and ask them to reflect and evaluate that goal in terms of why and what has been or has not been achieved.
- 11) Get feedback at the end of each lesson from the students. This is a good starting point to involve the students in lesson planning. This will help teachers and students get more insight and will also help them better understand how things can be learned and taught by reducing the input and intake gap.
- 12) Employ multiple methods, techniques and approaches and make students aware of the various teaching methodologies.
- 13) Evaluate each lesson by having post - discussion sessions on how much learning has been achieved and also discuss possibilities of preparing future lesson objectives and plans. This will aid students in decision making, taking ownership of their learning, and reflecting upon their learning.
- 14) Have pre-discussion sessions on a lesson and ask students to communicate their interpretations about it. This will help instructors define clear lesson objectives that will be more aligned with student interpretations.
- 15) Design rubrics that clearly communicate the focus areas of a lesson. Discuss the rubric before the lecture begins. It would be great to keep one or more areas open (depending on the nature of the lesson) and ask students to fill that up – how would the students like to be evaluated?
- 16) Bolster the morale of the students by making use of 'positive notes' during the course of the course. It is important to motivate students!
- 17) Share different kinds of perceptual mismatches and make them aware of it.

- 18) Make students confident of their knowledge. Help them know what they know; this is a good way to gauge student interest.
- 19) Involve students in exploratory projects.
- 20) Allow students to prepare tests/question papers in groups and later collate those with yours and have an open discussion about it. This will help them understand the significance and nature of tests and being tested. You might also pick questions prepared by different groups and make one test out of it and give it to the students.

Conclusion

On the basis of the literature reviewed and the teaching experiential knowledge, including classroom observations, in this paper, a small effort has been made to present an illustrative framework of a 'learning map' that can be used by teachers to maximize learning opportunities in their classrooms by minimizing perceptual mismatches. The framework of the learning map presented above can be used, applied and adapted both by experienced and inexperienced teachers in order to facilitate them in their professional development both as a researcher and practitioner. There is a dire need that teachers become directly involved in the process of theory and practice by conducting action research in order to gain more insight on the learning and teaching perceptions and practices.

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Contact email: jacqolineaustin@gmail.com