Away from the "Me, the Teacher" and towards "Them, the Students": Language Lesson Plan Redefined

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Recently one controversial online post showing a handwritten message, presumably by a discontented student, has been a hot topic of many discussions. The caption that stirs public attention read, "Anyone can teach if all they have to do is reading a PowerPoint out loud." (See fig. 1)
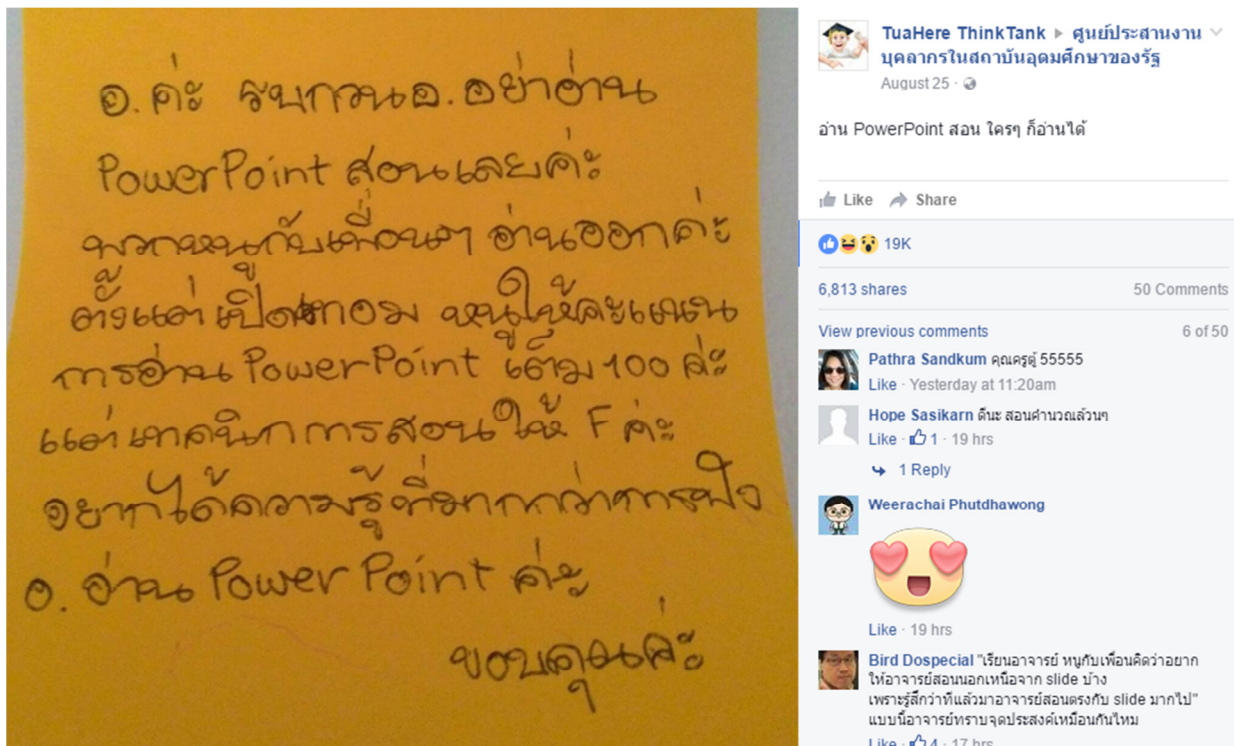

Figure 1: a student message of recent discussions about PowerPoint usage in a classroom

Ouch. That was quite a bold remark, and a hurtful one if you happened to be a teacher and PowerPoint was your go-to teaching tool. Did I get hurt? Well, not nearly as much as it got me reflecting on my teaching approach and the way it was received by the students.

Before I started my career as a university English language teacher, if someone asked me what a lesson plan for a language classroom looked like, my initial response would probably involve phrases like "what kind of activities I will use, "what I'm going to do at various points during the lesson," or "what I need to say to keep students engaged." A PowerPoint slide would act more like a play script that helped me achieve class goals (or so I thought) and nothing more. My original idea of a lesson plan revolves one particular being: me, the teacher. No space for the students in there (and why would there be?) Who else is going to see the plan beside me, right?

Never have I been so wrong.

Later when I looked back at what I thought was how a lesson plan worked, it began to hit me that most of it was defined primarily through the teacher's perspective. In other words, what "I" as a teacher will do so that the students will understand a specific lesson "I" think they need to know. Everything was arranged based on a teacher's learning experience. What worked for me must also work for my students. Lesson planning was like a storyline with me as the director who also plays the main protagonist. And the students were probably mere minor characters. This whole play was all "about me," and "for me." And seeing from the message from the student earlier, the feedback is not what I (and also other teachers like me) hope for and that it's about time a new approach be formulated.

What does a re-formulated approach I was talking about look like?

Largely informed by several courses I took during my Master and multiple classroom teaching experience and observations, my lesson planning has gone from entertainment-or-whatever-please-me-driven to one that is framed in a set of specific operationalized language goals, both linguistic (what students will say) and metalinguistic (realized in the students' self-corrections and tell-backs). The lessons are advanced by carefully-determined sequences of activities with built-in assessments. The goals I set for my students are derived from a diagnostic test I give out on the first day of class (or earlier), which will give me baseline information that facilitates the curriculum design, classroom implementation, and later assessment. More importantly, these goals must be made transparent to the students. According to Loewen et al. (2009)[1], the importance of learner beliefs lies in the fact that they underlie learner behavior to a large extent. By making the goals explicit, the students not only become aware of their own performance but also put more effort into their own learning provided that the plan is strategically implemented.

When it comes to content delivery, teachers must resort to both explicit language knowledge and applied pedagogical knowledge. When a student asks if the word data should be used with 'is' or 'are,' for instance, stop yourself from saying out the answer immediately. Rather, ask them first what they think the answer is and remember to ask them why. The correct answer is good, but it's not enough. The students need to know why it is correct and your job as a teacher is to

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[1] Loewen, S., Li, S., Fei, F., Thompson, A., Nakatsukasa, K., Ahn, S. & Chen, X. (2009). L2 learners' beliefs about grammar instruction and error correction. Modern Language Journal, 93(1), 91- 104.

be able to give them some good explanations. If you don't have one already, be sure to have them prepared next time as this kind of question will always come up time and again.

Now, going back to the PowerPoint issue, can a teacher use it? My answer would be a yes, but with a footnote. Delving more deeply into the phenomenon of teacher-centered lesson plan, it is possible that PowerPoint slides might function as some sort of coping mechanism we use to deal with stage fright or excitement that happens having to stand in front of the entire class and getting all the attention. Turning the focus "inward" seems to be working more effectively as it helps us channel all the anxiety into "what-I'm-gonna-do-next" mental activity and therefore leaves some room for us to breathe and to feel more secure. However, instead of focusing on us as a teacher, we should probably re-channel the attention to the needs of the students, to the kind of language we want them to "be able to speak" by the end of the class. With this in mind, we will gain the confidence not only in ourselves but also in our students' potential to reach the goals.

A lesson plan should be crafted not through the teacher's perspective, but that of students'. It is not "what the teacher will do" (TWD) but "what students will be able to do" (SWBAT). It's not a to-do list you tape on the refrigerator door. Rather, it is a why-I-do-this magnet you stick firmly in your mind.