Overt Teaching

Putting learners at the centre of their learning discussion

David Byrne and Mark Heffernan

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Today we are going to:

Use this section

So that we can:

Thank some people

Thank you to Gill for giving us the encouragement and opportunity many moons ago to first talk about Overt Teaching.

Thank you to Jess R. for suggesting the "Today we are going to / so that we can" framework all those years ago. Genius!

Thank you to Sandy and Kate for helping us edit our ramblings.

Looking back, there have been so many moments in my career that have gradually led me towards writing this book. When working as a manager, one of the most common conversations I used to have was teachers coming to me after an observation and saying 'You should have stayed until after the break - we did an amazing activity where everyone was up and moving around.'

Initially, I couldn't work out why this frustrated me. In itself, this is a completely normal reaction by a teacher who had planned a fun, engaging activity and wanted feedback on it. I know that in my career as a teacher, I had done the same many times. Gradually, however, I began to realise where my frustration stemmed from. In our industry, there tended to be a focus on task over achievement. Completing the task was the end in itself, as opposed to discussing what had been learnt.

I didn't want to see a task in which learners were just moving around, switching groups and working with realia for the sake of it; I wanted to see learners going into a task knowing why they were doing the task, what success looked like as a whole, what their individual success looked like. I wanted to see time dedicated to discussing success after the task. I wanted time given for learners to repeat the task and upgrade their language. I wanted more teachers coming into the staffroom talking about the successful reflection task they carried out and not the running dictation they did.

It was around this time that I was introduced to the work of John Hattie, whose research will feature in this book, and I was able to see clearly the true impact that these pre- and post-task discussions can have on learning. It was then that Mark and I began leading workshops on this topic, which eventually led to the writing of this book.

David Byrne

When I was a younger teacher, there was lots of discussion about the negotiated syllabus, the idea that we should discuss with our learners what they wanted to learn. I always thought this was a good idea, but it tended to end up with learners demanding increased grammar input. As I became a more experienced teacher, I realised that whilst learners may think they want to study grammar more, it wasn't necessarily going to help them improve their fluency or receptive abilities.

The fact is our learners don't necessarily have the learning skills or curriculum knowledge to be choosing what exactly they should be learning in class on a day-to-day basis. What I think we can achieve with a more overt approach is to give our learners better tools which they can then use to make better decisions about exactly what they need. In this way, a negotiated syllabus might actually be possible, because only if learners know why working on a particular skill is important, how it is important and where they might use it, will they have a reason to desire its inclusion in their lessons.

Through an overt method, we can bring the learners along with us and in turn be better guided by their own more informed learning needs.

Mark Heffernan

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Introduction

We have always loved being in the staffroom. As a Director of Studies, David always maintained that his place was, for the most part, in the staffroom working with the teachers, with the idea that happy, supported, effective teachers lead to happy, supported, effective learners. Staffrooms can be entertaining places, they can be collaborative, they can be cathartic; you might find yourself having a debate about the accuracy of 'if I were you' compared to 'if I was you' or discussing an incredible fact you found out about a learner's culture; you can find teachers helping each other with last-minute planning or suggesting this coursebook or that resource book.

No staffroom is entirely the same but one commonality we've encountered in all the staffrooms we've been lucky enough to inhabit over the years is the variety of teachers and teaching styles that make up the room. We all have the same aim but approach it in a variety of ways. And what is this aim? To help our learners become more effective communicators of English. Teachers, especially English language teachers, did not get into this career for financial gain. Almost every teacher we have ever worked with would say they have their learners' best interests at heart, that they want to help their learners make progress.

We all have the same goal but the techniques and approaches we employ to achieve this goal can be very different. Is grammar input the key to communicative competency or should we instead focus on lexis? Should we present all our input first and then practise it, or should we help learners to notice gaps in their knowledge by setting a task first? Should we present language to our learners or help them to discover it within a text? For a new teacher coming into our industry, there are so many opinions and so much evidence to sift through, much of it anecdotal evidence or teachers' own experiential evidence, which while subjective, should nevertheless not be ignored.

The aim of this book is not to answer all the questions posed in the paragraphs above. It is not to dictate how a teacher should teach, but rather to embrace that diversity of teaching styles. Instead, this book will allow you to choose how best to teach your learners, which material to use, which warmers to choose, whether to focus on grammar, lexis or both. Those decisions are completely your own. This book aims to give you the tools you need to engage your learners in the discussion of their own learning around these teaching decisions.

We believe that whatever your approach to teaching, when it comes to discussing learning, there are two types of teachers: Overt Teachers, who discuss learning explicitly with their learners, and Covert Teachers, who focus on input and avoid discussions of learning. In the next section, we will examine both in more detail and suggest why you might want to move from being a more Covert Teacher to a more Overt Teacher. We will provide practical steps and ideas to help you to do this.

Before continuing, you may wish to assess your current position on the Overt Teaching spectrum with the questionnaire on the next page.

Reflection questionnaire: how much Overt Teaching do you do?

Use the questionnaire to reflect on each of the major areas of Overt Teaching. This will help you to decide which areas of the book you wish to focus your attention on. You can return to this questionnaire periodically to reflect on your development.

1. Knowing why:
a. I make classroom management decisions (e.g. grouping, monitoring) but I don't know why I make them.
b. I know why I make some classroom management decisions.
c. I know why I make classroom management decisions, but I never communicate this to my learners.
d. I know why I make classroom management decisions. I discuss my decisions with my learners so they understand my process.

2. Setting aims and objectives:
a. I do not know the aims and objectives for my lessons.
b. I know what I want to achieve in lessons but don't think in much detail about how.
c. I have a clear real-life objective for each lesson, but I'm not always sure how I will achieve it.
d. I have a clear real-life objective for every lesson, and I know how I will achieve it.

3. Communicating aims and objectives:
a. I do not know how to communicate my aims and objectives to learners.
b. I display the aims and objectives but do not discuss them.
c. I tell learners what the aims and objectives are.
d. I involve learners in a discussion about the aims and objectives.

4. Discussing success:
a. I do not know what success looks like in most major speaking or writing tasks.
b. I remind learners what language they should use before an activity.
c. I tell learners what success looks like before an activity.
d. I negotiate success criteria with learners before an activity.

5. Feedback and repetition:
a. I do not give learners feedback after speaking and writing tasks.
b. I give feedback after speaking and writing tasks. It usually focuses on error correction.
c. I ensure learners know what they need to do to improve.
d. I ensure learners know what they need to do to improve next time and make sure they have the opportunity to do so.

6. Overtly discussing sub-skills (e.g. listening for gist, writing effective paragraphs):
a. I do not know how to talk about sub-skills with my learners.
b. I practise sub-skills but I do not talk to my learners about them.
c. I practise sub-skills but I am not sure how to discuss them with my learners.
d. I develop sub-skills and discuss with my learners how they can apply the skills to their lives.

7. Reflection:
a. I do not know how to encourage learners to reflect.
b. My learners do not reflect on what they have learnt.
c. My learners reflect on the language they have learnt in the lesson.
d. My learners reflect on what they learnt in the lesson and how they can apply it outside the classroom.

> **Interpreting your results**
>
> Your answers will help you to decide which sections of the book would be most useful to you.
>
> a. In this area you are unaware of how best to overtly discuss the learning process. Part A of this book will give you the background knowledge you need while Part B will give you practical tasks to try out in your lessons.
>
> b. In this area, you are a Covert Teacher. You have an awareness of this area but do not openly discuss it with your learners. Part A of this book will make the case for taking a more Overt Approach in this area and share the research that supports it.
>
> c. In this area you have some background knowledge but are not sure how best to apply it. Part B of this book will give you tips and practical ideas on how best to apply Overt Teaching in your lessons.
>
> d. In this area, you are already an Overt Teacher. For further tips and ideas, read Part B, especially the 'Take it further' sections. For tips and ideas on how to apply Overt Teaching to other contexts, check out Part C.

What is Covert Teaching?

In its simplest form, Covert Teaching is **not** discussing learning or the lesson with learners. It is the belief that the aim of a lesson and indeed the aim of the many tasks that make up a lesson are the domain of the teacher alone. The Covert Teacher does not discuss these aims in detail with their learners, they do not expect to be questioned as to the reason for an activity and they expect their learners to trust them and to follow the lesson blindly from one exercise to the next. The Covert Teacher is constantly chasing that *Ah-ha* moment at the end of the class where the intricate threads they have woven throughout the lesson come together for their learners. As a teacher this can be quite rewarding, but it is perhaps less so for the learners.

The Covert Teacher focuses on input (especially of language) as its own end, as opposed to discussing what has been learnt from that input. In a language class, the emphasis is on **covering** language as opposed to **discovering** if it has been learnt. When writing about the origins of Demand High teaching in 2014, Jim Scrivener wrote

> "
> I am beginning to wonder if there is actually any real link between completion of tasks and learning – or if learners having fun with games and quizzes and running around is anything more than what it appears to be on the surface: having fun with games and quizzes and running around. The learning is incidental, random, unpredictable – and unaddressed.
> "

We would add to this list that the learning is not just unaddressed but unknown. Unfortunately, this approach means Covert Teachers are making uninformed decisions, as they are unlikely to know the impact of their teaching overall or their input specifically.

As Hattie and Zierer say (2018, p3):

> "
> When you walk into a classroom and say to yourself, "My job is to evaluate my impact," then learners are the major beneficiaries.
> "

Without knowing and discussing our impact, teaching a language can become more like ticking off items on a long list of acquisition. This was something we were both guilty of when we first started teaching. In his early teaching years in Ireland, David was teaching a pre-intermediate (A2/B1) group and the phrase 'to be into' appeared in an audio. When one of the learners asked him what it meant, David was slightly shocked as it had come up the week before in a lesson on hobbies and interests and he had explained it then. He opened the question up to the rest of the class but nobody else knew. He said to the learners: 'But we covered this last week. Can nobody remember it?' His initial reaction was that his learners were at fault, that they were not revising or taking effective notes or even paying attention. In reality, some or all of the blame lay on his shoulders. He had covered the lexis during a lesson but had no idea what impact his explanation had had, if any.

> **Reflection**
> ▸ What could David have done differently?
> ▸ What might you have done in David's situation?
>
> Read on to check your ideas.

Here are some options David could have considered.
▸ He might have discussed with the learners whether *to be into (something)* was a key piece of lexis for them, and their lives.
▸ In the lesson, there had been a number of ways of discussing hobbies that you like or don't like. Perhaps some of the learners felt *to be into* was too colloquial for them or wouldn't be as understood as *to be interested in* in their contexts, and had therefore ignored it. The learners could have talked about which words or phrases they would use.
▸ He could have discussed with them how they might use this specific piece of lexis outside the classroom.
▸ He could have given learners the opportunity to use it again in a final activity at the end of the class and given feedback on whether or not it had been successfully used by his learners.

Had he carried out (some of) these discussions, David would have been better able to say how effective his teaching had been, how his learners had engaged with the lexis, and whether this piece of lexis was relevant for them and their lives. Without any of these discussions around learning, it was just another piece in a long list of language that had emerged during the lesson and in this instance had not been retained. While we acknowledge that there are many factors at play when it comes to retaining lexis such as the number of times the item has been encountered, the fact was that in his early years of teaching David was unaware of the impact of his teaching. In general, lexis was being encountered at best but rarely engaged with. His board was often full of new language that had emerged during the lesson and often it was dutifully written down by the learners but rarely discussed in any meaningful way.

Another example of Covert Teaching happened when we were working in a school in London. One of our co-teachers came out of a lesson visibly distressed and when Mark asked what had happened, the teacher replied that his lesson had failed completely. They sat down and discussed it; Mark asked how he knew it had gone badly, and if he had discussed the lesson with his learners. The teacher replied, 'No, I knew it was bad, I could see their faces. I didn't want to talk to them about it.' We can of course understand the teacher's point of view, but avoidance of this conversation means the teacher is depriving themselves of key evidence as to how the lesson really went. In a way, they are hiding potential news, whether good and bad, from themselves and choosing to judge the lesson based on their own perception without involving the other stakeholders, the learners. Leaving the lesson without this knowledge can lead to teachers making uninformed decisions in the following lessons.

Avoiding discussions like the ones in these two lessons means that the Covert Teacher is often quite uninformed about what learners take from their teaching. The teacher views lessons through a single lens, their own interpretation of events, and therefore makes uninformed judgements about the effectiveness of their lessons. We've all left lessons feeling that they went terribly, only to find out in the next lesson that the learners had actually fully grasped everything we had taught them. On the other hand, we've all left lessons that we felt were unsuccessful and

it turned out we were right. The reality is that without measuring impact and discussing it with learners, teachers can never truly know how effective their teaching is.

In a covert classroom, it is not just the teacher who remains uninformed. Learners will make their own judgements on the success of the lesson. These may be based on how much they spoke, what they felt they learnt or how often their errors were corrected. Without actual evidence of attainment or discussions on learning, however, they have no real evidence as to what they have actually learnt. This can unfortunately lead to learners believing a lesson was unsuccessful and blaming themselves, the teacher or the school. Over the years as managers, we have often spoken to learners who said they had learnt nothing in their lesson or in a week or lessons. Our general belief is that it would be next to impossible for a learner to consistently attend lessons without learning anything at all, but the fact remained that these learners had come to this conclusion, and it was their firm belief that it was true. While the reality might be different, those learners had no evidence to the contrary because the impact of the lesson and the teaching had neither been measured nor discussed in an overt manner.

Covert aims

We believe that not knowing what has been learnt begins with not knowing what you were supposed to learn. After all, how can you measure your success if you don't know what you are trying to achieve? We mentioned above that a lack of discussion around aims and objectives is a key example of Covert Teaching. Sometimes this can be a conscious choice on the part of the teacher, as for many teachers it might not seem like a beneficial use of valuable lesson time. When discussing the importance of aims and objectives with our teaching teams and at conferences, we have noticed that teachers' attitudes to aims and objectives tend to fall into the three categories below:

1. I always have aims but I don't communicate them to my learners.

2. I put aims on the board and communicate them because I was told to.

3. I don't know what my aims are.

Category 1 is the Covert Teacher, who believes that knowing the goal of the lesson is the domain of the teacher alone. By not discussing the intended lesson aims and objective, learners are left uninformed as to the direction of the lesson.

Category 2 is what we would describe as being 'unintentionally covert'. Aims have been put onto the board and therefore communicated to learners, but they haven't been discussed overtly. A box has been ticked, but in reality the result is the same as if the aims had been hidden from the learners entirely. This situation often comes about because well-meaning managers or accreditation bodies have understood the importance of communicating aims to learners and have set this requirement for teachers, but without effectively explaining their importance. They have only scratched the surface by explaining the 'what' and not the 'why' of aims.

Category 3 is perhaps the most problematic, as in this situation even the teacher is not aware of their aims and objectives. Very often when working with materials provided by institutions or with coursebooks the 'aim' of the lesson might be considered covering everything in the materials or getting from point A to point B in a specified period of time. Teachers in these situations focus on how much of the material has been covered as opposed to how much has been learnt.

The issue is that in all of these situations, teachers are relying on learners to:
▸ have good learning habits;
▸ interpret the stages of the lesson;
▸ understand the reason for these stages;
▸ know the aims of a coursebook or particular piece of material;
▸ and (most challenging of all!) judge their own attainment.