

Helen Strong reports on the Global Issues SIG's Pre-Conference Event which took place in the Hilton Hotel in Liverpool on Monday 8 April 2013

Not having attended a GISIG event before, I was drawn to the theme of this PCE and to its curious title of "Unlearning learnt helplessness". This is the concept that we are not *born* helpless – rather, we learn our helplessness through parental, societal and educational conditioning and that, once we recognize this, we can take action to "unlearn" it. Although it would have been naïve of me to assume that I would leave this event with the ability to change the world through my teaching, I believe that I did leave with some idea of how to "shake off learnt helplessness and to start believing that [I and my students] can make a difference", as was promised in the event brief.

From the first "getting to know you" activities it was clear that this event would be very much one of open dialogue and sharing. GISIG Coordinator **Margit Szesztay** opened the session by asking each participant to stand up and give a 10-second introduction which included their name, their main professional work, where they were based, where they were from and a greeting in their local language. This was an excellent and extremely efficient way of finding out very quickly a little bit of information about the approximately 40 participants from 22 different countries who attended the event.

Our second GTKY activity involved organising ourselves in concentric circles and discussing the following points with our partners before moving on to the next partner:

1. *Why are you here?*
2. *What is "learnt helplessness"?*
3. *"Creativity is what you are born with and what you lose when you go to school." Discuss.*
4. *"Common sense is the collection of prejudices acquired by age eighteen." (Einstein) Discuss.*

Margit then moved on to some **activities** which we can use with our students to encourage them to break traditional classroom rules. The first was a chain of events: some of the participants were given instructions, such as "When one person goes to the front of the room, ask everyone to stand up" and "When everyone stands up, ask them to sit down" and so on. Aside from being a useful language exercise, this activity gives control to students and allows them to connect with each other flash mob-style.

The second classroom activity that Margit demonstrated was based on the telling of the story "The philosopher and the ferryman," about a philosopher who crosses a river and quizzes the ferryman on his wisdom. However, it was not so much the story itself that was important, but what the audience was asked to do afterwards – to think of 20 questions to ask about the story. The questions came thick and fast: "What was the boat made of?" "Was the philosopher a man or a woman?" "Did the philosopher drown in the end?" "Who is the better person?" and so on. I was amazed at the quality and inventiveness of the questions being fired from the audience and we reached 20 in no time. Margit's point, of course, was

to encourage us to encourage our students to continually ask questions at any point in the lesson and avoid developing the syndrome of students being passive receptacles of teaching texts. It was also interesting to note that the questions you ask are a reflection of your own mind.

The third and final classroom activity that Margit showed us was one she had often done with her students in which they were asked to choose a country, research it and give a visual presentation on it. But Margit took this activity further by then getting the country to “choose” the student. This is different from a teacher-led activity in which students are told to give a presentation on Country X, since the country names are written on cards and the card “chooses” the student. Margit cited an example of a student who researched and presented on Mali and who later said that he was very thankful that he had learned so much about a country he would otherwise not have considered researching. Margit encouraged us to use this method regularly with, for example, famous people or concepts, to try to push our students outside their comfort zone.

Margit finished the first session by showing us a YouTube video on Global Issues made by the University of Prince Edward Island in 2008 (<http://tinyurl.com/coazl2p>) in which one particular teacher evidently *did* encourage students to think outside their comfort zones.

Demand higher

The second and third sessions of the day were given by **Jim Scrivener** and **Adrian Underhill**, who, together, are developing and promoting the concept (or “meme”), which they refer to as “Demand Higher”. I won’t say too much about the meme here as I couldn’t possibly do it justice but full details can be found on their blog at demandhighelt.wordpress.com.

Jim Scrivener’s session was titled “Demand Higher: Unlearning helplessness” and he began by asking us whether teachers and parents are partly to blame for developing helplessness in children. With the aid of short video clips of his own children, Jim explained that infants don’t have the capacity to believe that anything is impossible and that humans have a natural impetus to learn and develop. Children continually push their limits and only stop when told (by adults) not to do something. Once children start to believe that things are not possible, they give up trying, which results in a self-fulfilling prophecy and a vicious circle of failure.

Jim advised us to learn to relinquish control in our lessons (“*Restrain yourself from being the power of authority*”) to allow students to believe that they *do* have control over what happens to them. He says we should constantly be giving students choices, guiding them to do something challenging but not too difficult and praising them for taking that step. When students give up too easily, teachers should encourage them by rewording negative

statements (“I can’t do anything about my situation”) into positive ones (“I *can* do something about it”).

Drawing on established management theory, Jim applied Douglas McGregor’s Theory X and Theory Y model to the language classroom. Theory X workers are described as inherently lazy, disliking work and responding only to coercion and strict control. Theory Y people see work as play, are self-motivated and actively seek out responsibility for achieving their own set goals. Naturally, we would all like to think that we are encouraging the development of Theory Y students in our classes, but perhaps what we’re really doing fits more into the Theory X model. For example, a “Theory Y teacher” would not try to motivate students with fun activities but would assume that students were already motivated. Responsibility for tasks (what, when and how they should be done) in a Theory Y classroom would be shared among everyone and not dictated by the teacher. The Theory Y teacher would not offer praise or reward but would instead offer encouragement in the form of accurate evaluations. Learners would view the Theory Y teacher not as a figure of authority, but as someone with experience, ideas and opinions.

Jim concluded his session by explaining a 21-step approach to learner centredness, reminding us that a learner-centred classroom is not only about interaction patterns. He says that the teacher aiming to develop a Theory Y learning environment should start small by offering binary choices (“Do you want to do this first, or this?”). Over time, more important decisions should be handed over to the students. At the same time, it is crucial to avoid using classroom language that implies that the teacher is someone who needs to be pleased (“Can you do that for me?”). The final step to a learner centred classroom is to ask “very big questions”.

Adrian Underhill then said a little more about the *demandhighelt.wordpress.com* site, the main premise of which is to question whether we are making full use of learners’ capacity for learning; if so, how do we know and if not, what can we do? If a learner is being constrained in a class, what does it feel like?

Adrian mentioned *engagement* as being one strand of learned helplessness and that we all have a yearning to be engaged in learning in order to experience ourselves fully. Learning is a meaningful activity (not just WHAT is being learnt but the process of learning itself) and it is the responsibility of the teacher to “see the learning moves” that are taking place in the classroom. For example, when we correct we are only treating the symptom and not getting to the root of the problem (*Has the penny dropped? Why has that student made that mistake? What insight has the student gained from the correction?*).

On the other hand, discussing the learning processes leads to better understanding as well as making students feel more valued. Therefore, activities should be constructed in such a

way that the teacher can “see” what is going on in the heads of the students. Some of the activities that Adrian demonstrated were:

1. Kim’s game. We’ve probably all played Kim’s game in class (show students a number of items or words, then take one or more away and ask students to remember them). However, Adrian suggested that, rather than simply playing the game, an extension activity should be to ask students to discuss what was going on in their heads both while they were studying the words or items and also while they were trying to recall them. This means that learners are discussing learning *strategies* rather than settling only for the end product.
2. Ask students to choose their “best” mistake and to interview it. They should ask the mistake where it came from in order to encourage them to find out what caused it and therefore how it can best be dealt with.
3. The teacher says a word and asks students to listen to it internally, then to analyse the word in detail, then to make a sentence of five words with the word, then extend the sentence to eight words, then rehearse it, adding intonation, then deliver it to their partner. Ask one student to write the eight words from the sentence on the board in random order, then get students up to the board to make different sentences from the words. Add a full stop, an exclamation mark and a question mark. Drill the newly-formed utterances. This activity enables students to work with their existing knowledge but also to push themselves into discovering whether alternative combinations could also be correct.

There are more activities as well as classroom observation tasks on the *demandhighelt.wordpress.com* site.

Finally, at the risk of throwing a spanner into the works of the Scrivener-Underhill team, where Jim had previously talked about ways to promote the learner-centred classroom, Adrian finished by stating that our classes should be less *learner*-centred and more *learning*-centred, i.e. where the learning *process* takes centre stage and becomes a visible component of what goes on in our lessons.

Stepping into unknown shoes

After the lunch break, **Paul Shaw**, founder of the Disabled Access Friendly campaign (www.disabled-accessfriendly.com), challenged us to raise the issue of mobility disability in our classes. Paul acknowledged that, unless you personally have a mobility disability, or know someone close to you who does, you will most likely be dealing with a subject in which you are helpless yourself, hence the title of his talk: “Stepping into unknown shoes”.

Paul says that coursebook writers could be accused of reinforcing old prejudices about mobility disability and that teachers should be working to try to break down their own assumptions about the issue so that they're not merely passing those assumptions on to students. Handled sensitively in the classroom, mobility disability need not be a ghastly subject that leaves students depressed.

Paul demonstrated one way of putting students into the shoes of someone with mobility disability by getting a participant to carry out actions while moving slowly or carrying their chair. Paul highlighted problems that ATMs often present for people in wheelchairs by inviting one participant to "be the ATM" and another to sit on a chair and try to withdraw money.

Paul stresses that, when introducing the topic in class, the power of the impact is crucial – simply saying "Today we're going to be talking about mobility disability. Now read this text." is not the way to capture attention and raise awareness. Paul suggested doing role plays on accepted etiquette when speaking to people in wheelchairs (a pdf of wheelchair etiquette in easy English is available on the Disabled Access Friendly website).

Paul also mentioned that empowering students to talk about sensitive issues helps them to raise their social and emotional awareness. When students have something to say, they then want the language to be able to say it. The ELT classroom can be a place where we can empower students and help them become more aware and to work for the public good.

The Disabled Access Friendly website contains free lesson plans and videos to use with students to raise awareness of disability issues and Paul encouraged us to visit the website and make use of the materials. He says that not only are the issues we decide to bring into our classrooms a political choice, but so too are those we decide to leave out. Both have an impact. Granted, teachers may feel uncomfortable covering such issues in class but only by doing so, can we break down barriers and create a better society in which to live.

Peace linguistics



For the final session of the day we were treated to an audience with IATEFL patron **Professor David Crystal**. Margit Szesztay posed questions to Prof. Crystal, who answered them in his typical humorous yet enlightening way, interspersed with personal anecdotes.

Once Margit had explained what we meant by the concept of learnt helplessness, Prof. Crystal posited that the condition probably comes from having confidence, or lack thereof, in your own knowledge. He said that most people know what they know and know what they don't know (think Romsfeld's *known*

knowns and *known unknowns*) but that we tend to become unsettled with the *unknown unknowns*, i.e. when we realise there are issues that we didn't know we didn't know. These issues make you feel uncertain and you start questioning not only why you didn't *know* about them, but why you've never yet *thought* about them, i.e. why you've never thought about your helplessness before.

Margit then asked about the movement "peace linguistics", ¹ which Prof. Crystal has been involved in for many years. This term developed in the 1990s and was originally concerned with the way in which aggressive-sounding language is used in everyday speech – what subconscious message is being passed when we speak like this? Is the language that we use a factor in fostering peaceful relations? More recently, the peace linguistics movement has become concerned with endangered languages (a language dies every two weeks) and the preservation of identity (there is no declaration of human linguistic rights). Prof. Crystal stated that, although the peace linguists are still very much a disparate group and a lot of basic research is lacking, unless we make a radical change we are heading for linguistic disaster. Doing nothing is not an option.

Prof. Crystal then went on to explain that the reason many languages are dying is not only because of the demise of the civilisations that use them, e.g. due to natural disasters or illness, rather that the vast majority of language deaths are due to languages being played down or given less importance. For example, in Wales, the Welsh culture continued to thrive but the language started dying out. Fortunately the Welsh language is on the radar again because people are doing something about it. Doing nothing is not an option.

In order to preserve a language, according to Prof. Crystal, three factors need to be present:

1. a bottom up interest from the people
2. a top down interest from governments, UNESCO, etc.
3. money (not a lot comparatively-speaking) for schools, dictionaries, media, research, etc.

Margit then invited questions from the floor. One of them was: "Should IATEFL still be called IATEFL? What does the "Foreign" mean nowadays in *English as a Foreign Language*?"

Prof. Crystal's response was that, although there are many varieties of internationally-relevant Englishes in the world today, it's too soon to say what the future of these Englishes will be until they become institutionalised. A language becomes institutionalised when a local literature evolves. Many communities operate in a situation of diglossia (where two dialects or languages function side by side in one community). The concept of World Englishes (in the plural) has only been under discussion for the past twenty years and we are still in a transitional stage so it's not possible to say yet what the new global English will be.

Prof. Crystal's advice to teachers of English is that, unless you respect the current trends in usage and highlight to students those deviations from standard English, you are putting

yourself in a helpless situation and risking your own credibility. He stresses that EVERYTHING has changed linguistically in the last 50 years – on both a global level (e.g. due to the internet) and at a local level (e.g. due to political correctness).

On the topic of political correctness, interestingly, Prof. Crystal stated that it's not the norm for language to influence attitude and that the feminist movement was the only successful one there's been in terms of the impact on how language affects attitudes. Normally attitudes have to change before people start using language to reflect those attitudes. This final comment of the day brought us full circle to the purpose of the GISIG PCE – to “shake off learnt helplessness and to start believing that [I and my students] can make a difference.”

¹See pages 158–165 of **The Handbook of Conflict Resolution** at books.google.de/books?isbn=1118046900

Helen Strong is a business English trainer and CELTA tutor based in Germany. Her website is www.helenstrong.de