

Standing Room Only - Posture, Space and the Learning Process in ESL Classes

Thor May
South Korea

Abstract : This article explores the role of posture in the language learning process, and concludes that it is sometimes critical for learning success. Principles of learning and moving are outlined. The history of physical movement in study is briefly traced. A Korean case study is presented of "failed" tertiary students who learn to learn on their feet. The paper is a practical guide for teachers who wish to experiment with physical movement and location in their own ESL/EFL classrooms .

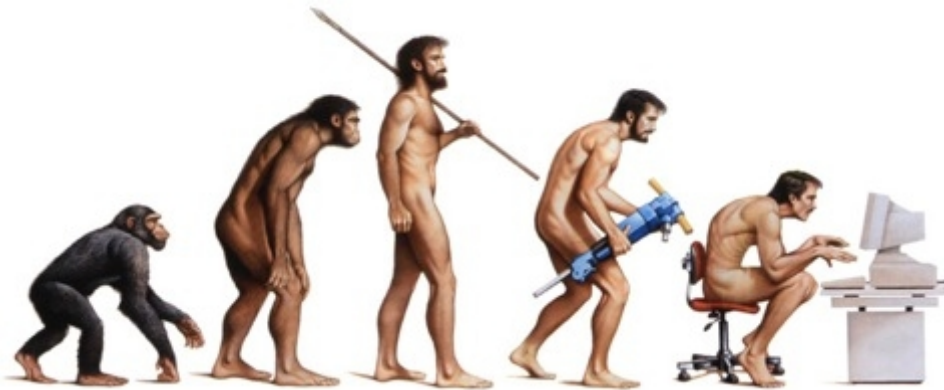


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Do we learn best sitting down or standing up? What follows is an answer to that question, at least in some situations. The answer came (as most good answers do) out of a kind of desperation : how to handle classes of not terribly smart, thoroughly discouraged students who were required to "learn English" for two hours a week in a South Korean private university. Almost by accident I discovered that the location of those student bodies in space could have a marked effect on class participation and learning.

A. SOME PRINCIPLES OF MOVING AND LEARNING

Most TESOL teachers are familiar with James Asher's Total Physical Response techniques (Asher 1965-2004), and most probably incorporate some element of TPR into classes, especially with beginners and children. The technique is popular because it has intuitive appeal, actively involves students, and is easy for the teacher to choreograph at an elementary level. Many complain about its limitations at more advanced or abstract levels, and with more self-conscious kinds of students. Given imagination there are ways around this, as Asher with an energetic eye to marketing his product has argued. TPR storytelling (Marsh, after Blaine 1990) greatly extends the scope of basic TPR.

Theories of multiple intelligences have lent support to the TPR idea, and they doubtless have some validity. It is not surprising, but still important to recognise, that certain students will have more "kinesthetic intelligence" than others; (i.e. respond better to TPR. For example, see AtKisson 1991). For our purposes here however, we don't need a very fancy theory. In truth, the first sergeant major who had to train a bunch of sulky army recruits probably invented TPR. That sergeant would have discovered the powerful effect of raw body movement on the brain function of everyone. Once this connection between brain and body movement is accepted, we can extract a few very elementary principles :

1. Every living body is ALWAYS moving, however minutely.
2. The amount of movement can be voluntary or it can be externally imposed, or both.
3. Body movement can assist mental functions such as learning and recall, or it can inhibit them.

4. The calibration of body movement is important in any classroom :

a) Organized learning (as in a classroom) requires some degree of self-control, both of movement and of mental activity.

b) When the control of movement is out of harmony with the control of mental activity, then learning will suffer.

5. A sitting body normal has more imposed constraints on its movement than a standing body

6. When body movement is excessively constrained, the brain tends to go into standby mode.

7. When a body is relatively free to move, the brain which controls it is likely to remain alert

8. The individual who sits is by default an observer. The individual who stands is by default a participant.

B. OTHER STUDIES OF BODY MOVEMENT IN LEARNING

There is an extensive literature on the role of body movement in early childhood education (e.g. Pica 2004, Scheuer & Mitchell 2002). For example, it has been recognized for a long time that young children lacking the ability to co-ordinate gross body movements will probably struggle to master the fine motor movements of writing, and perhaps more subtlety, the complex eye movements involved in reading. Well managed physical activities turn out to be

an important correlate of successful early classroom learning.

Perhaps closer to our direct interest in this paper, a Leeds Metropolitan University study (Merry, Nuttall & Ragsdale 1998-2000) on the effect of posture on learning in British primary schools is leading to a rethink on the long term influence that classroom furniture can have on the actual educational process. Undersized chairs and tables were a serious distraction to the children, affecting their learning habits negatively. Similarly, the crowded sitting-in-the-floor-together pattern in many literacy classes was a source of common complaint amongst the kids.

The question of standing while learning was discussed in ancient times, but seems to have received little attention in the modern era. It is the main topic I will be dealing with in the body of this paper. The *peda* in 'pedagogy' implies to stand and teach. Thus teachers are normally expected to stand. How about students? The general image we have of Plato and Socrates' other students in classical Greece is that their very animated learning took place while strolling. I was also surprised to discover that early Jewish scholars 2500 years ago had some fierce argument about whether the Torah (the body of Jewish law and teachings) should be studied standing or sitting (Ravi Lipman, online) :

"Our Rabbis taught: From the days of Moses up to Rabban Gamliel, the Torah was learned only standing. When Rabban Gamliel died, feebleness descended on the world, and they learned the Torah sitting; and so we have learned that 'from the time that Rabban Gamliel died, [full] honor ceased to be paid to the Torah.'" (Babylonian Talmud).

For most of us, sloth has won out everywhere ever since.

Nevertheless, "activity" and posture have occasionally been associated with learning, even in modern times. There are some good ideas for sale in America which do bear on our main topic. I have already mentioned James Asher. America is a land of messianic movements, so these are often the place to find the important currents of thought in American culture. This is supremely true in American education. From John Dewey and earlier, a steady stream of prophets have found fame and fortune in peddling one magic spell or another to capture the sacred chalice of knowledge. Indeed, packaging an idea for cash based reverence is one way to give it value; (shall this little paper blossom into The Standing Miracle TESOL Method?).

John Dewey, the acknowledged father of American mass education, was himself an enthusiast for the Alexander Method, which promoted a relaxed, balanced posture as a key to mental and physical well-being (Dewey 1918). Alexander recognized the implicit link between mental activity and physical activity.

A more recent contribution has come from popular book by Carla Hannaford (1995) *Smart Moves: Why Learning is not All in your Head* :

"The notion that intellectual activity can somehow exist apart from our bodies is deeply rooted in our culture. It is related to the attitude that the things we do with our bodies, and the bodily functions, sensations, and emotions that sustain life, are lower, less distinctly human. This idea is the basis of a lot of educational theory and practice that make learning harder and less successful than it could be.

Thinking and learning are not all in our head. On the contrary, the body plays an integral part in all our intellectual processes from our earliest moments right through to old age."

The catchy "Brain Gym" movement also draws some longstanding ideas of mind-body coordination together, and claims major benefits. One of its promoters, Tom Maguire (2000) explains the underlying philosophy :

"Brain Gym is different from many other learning support programmes in that it prepares learners to learn. It enhances, rather than replaces other programs or curricula. Until now schooling has been based on the premise that learning is a mental activity. The physical components of learning - the visual, auditory, fine motor, and postural skills - have been almost entirely ignored by educators. A student who has difficulty in the early grades rarely does better later unless the physical cause of the stress is somehow addressed. Moreover, since learning is measured by results rather than process, stressful compensations are often acquired and carried throughout a learner's life."

Maguire goes on to recount that

"In 1990 Azasha Lindsey set up a Brain Gym programme in Camp Gonzales, a young offenders detention centre in California. She was in charge of 23 young men whom the centre described as "unable to stay out of solitary confinement." Over a period of weeks she worked with the group teaching them a Brain Gym class. Although the class was only once a week, they showed remarkable improvement in their academic learning. What most impressed the learners themselves was their growing self-control, especially increasing command over temperamental outbursts. By the time Azasha had finished her course with them none were in solitary confinement and all but two of them were home."

(Hmm, maybe they wised up to California's penal practices). He cites another inspiring example of a losing football team which goes on to win the grand final with the help of Brain Gym activities. Yet another quoted study by Cecilia Freeman and Joyce Sherwood (1999) on Brain Gym and its effects on reading scores of elementary students showed a huge improvement over a control group. What is this magic? The commercial product claims 23 critical exercises. The crux of it appears to be three kinds of physical exercise designed to stimulate cross-neuronal activity between left and right hemispheres: cross crawls (crossing the arms to touch the knees), brain buttons (applying pressure on specific points near the neck to stimulate blood flow to the brain) and hook-ups (crossing the arms and legs in a way that automatically induces calm).

The relevance to TESOL of techniques such as those found in Brain Gym is obviously open to experiment. I await your reports with interest.

TPR aside, out-of-chair activities have found a niche in many modern TESOL language curriculums. Role play and ESL drama are obvious examples, but a range of other communicative activities can involve some natural physical movement. Information-seeking tasks may require movement around the room; language games may have a movement element; presentations require at least one student to be on his feet ... and so on. Standing up and movement in a classroom is hardly revolutionary then.

C. STANDING TO LEARN

If there is something new in this paper, it is not the concept of classroom movement itself. The fresh proposals here for TESOL are that a) the relationship between physical movement and mental activity pervades ALL classroom work; b) that this relationship can be calibrated to maximize

learning; and c) that some areas of classroom learning traditionally done sitting down can be improved by having the students stand.

I will now turn to an explicit example of c), learning while standing. I have taken some space to set the context below since it defines the test bed for an idea under fairly extreme conditions.

The example is from the "university" which first set me thinking about the potentials of physical movement in learning a language. "University" is put in quotes here because the market niche for this place was to fill the need of every Korean to have some kind of diploma. These unlucky students had failed most exams in a lifetime of exam oriented schooling, and therefore had a problem. The deal now was, they would pay their money and the diploma was more or less guaranteed. They could hang out for a few years, make the friends that were needed for future survival, maybe meet a wife or husband. It was a nice break before what might well be a dreary lifetime of thankless work.

In such a university, form is infinitely more important than substance. The professors persuaded themselves that they were indeed professors, and went through all the motions. The ceremonies were solemn, the graduation photos correct with all the proper gowns. The foreign language requirement, marketed together with genuine foreign instructors, was part of the package. As a component in this package I was faced with the dilemma of whether indeed to be a happy alcoholic, stumbling in for the pro forma appearance at allotted hours, or to somehow follow my vocation as a real teacher.

I decided to be a teacher, as I had been for almost three decades. Foolish perhaps. Getting it right with these clients took a while. The first time they would all come to rubberneck the foreigner. They came, that is, to the back of the room, as far away from trouble as possible. A quick check of each class

always yielded that same statistics : English level 0+ , mobile phones 100%, pen & paper 5%, dictionaries 0% . Being Korean they were thankfully more or less polite. ... I did my best. The retention from week to week, or minute to minute, was abysmal. Attendance went into a decline, even given that putting a bum on a seat was 30% of the grade. Clearly there was a pedagogical challenge here.

Anyone can learn a language. Everyone does, at least one. Most cultures on the planet are in fact multilingual, which suggests that everyone can learn more than one language. My own experience teaching immigrants supports this. However, foreign language learning in countries like America and South Korea is mostly a failure (not for everyone of course, but as a productive outcome for the percentage of those who attempt it). The students in my Korean university were therefore not exceptional. The trick was to create a physical and mental context for learning. What was the existing classroom context for these students ?

- the context was failure. It had always been failure for them;
- the context was sitting (slouching!) while the teacher stood;
- the context was physical, cultural and emotional separation from the teacher. This was perfectly expressed by their location at the back of the room;
- the context was sheer incomprehension of the lesson content. They did not understand English, and did not expect to understand it;
- the context was transitional. This was a ritual to be endured, a rite of passage, and a public performance like the Korean bow of respect which carried no implication of real personal commitment.

I decided to pursue three objectives with the Korean students :

- to provide them with meaningful language for comprehension
- to engage them at some emotional level in that language
- to break the psychological associations between classroom spaces and failure

Meaningful English language for comprehension is a tough ask in the Korean context. By 'meaning' here I include the concept of conveying significant information. Languages succeed in multilingual communities because each language has a job to do. English had no job to do in my Korean university except provide an examination vehicle, and these students had no faith in examinations.

Very few language learning textbooks themselves are objects of interest. They have no compelling story to tell, and rarely provide information of current value. For that reason, I usually give text books short shrift. I substitute dialogues, brief stories etc. which are likely to be of some interest to the students (maybe with a bit of selling). They have to match the language level of course, but as coherent scripts they are much more likely to be recalled than the fragmented sentences usually found in text books. Normally I have this material available on handouts, which are re-collected at the end of the class. Students are then referred to my web site for access to permanent copies. The listening/motor activity of taking dictation is another way for them to acquire hard copy ; (in real academic environments dictation is also pre-training for lecture note taking skills). This usually works fairly well after a bit of socialization.

In the case of the Korean university, I had developed a good collection of dialogues, many of them supported by illustrations from "Composition Through Pictures" (J.B. Heaton 1966) or "Storylines" (Fletcher & Birt 1983). Both of these slim volumes are brilliant : the pictures really do tell stories without words; (very few publications since have managed that). With picture stories of this kind, students spontaneously construct and recall the events in Korean. Much of the material contains an element of humour as well. In other words, a context is created, about which I can introduce the English language component. I act out the material, model the classroom furniture into an imaginary "street location", or do whatever else is necessary to make it comprehensible for the students. Vocabulary and structure may be similarly pre-taught in the classic TPR way by acting it out.

Well, none of this was going to cut any ice with these particular Korean students until they became personally involved, and stopped being couch potato spectators at the back of the room. I had to take some risks to shake them out of that. First time around it was sergeant-major mode : "Everyone stand up !". This had the necessary shock and awe impact. The next step was even more radical. "Leave your desks ! Go to the edge of the room. No, not crowded together! Spread out !" I hustled them into pairs, strung right around the room. They clutched the dialogue sheets and picture pages. We had been through it, so most knew the drift of the dialogues. I told them in Korean that they had five minutes to memorize the stuff. The predictable reaction was incredulity and disbelief. The foreigner was crazy. I marched up to the first pair, snatched away the papers with a smile and said "talk!". That was silly of course, but they got the message. Something quite astonishing happened. They all began to work very, very hard to memorize the material.

The dynamics of the stand and learn routine surprised both the students and me. As I walked from pair to pair, the interaction was extremely personal, quite

unlike the distant relationship with the teacher they were accustomed to. Because it was personal, they quickly came to know me as an individual, and they were eager to please. All the other pairs knew that I would be reaching them soon, to test their achievement, so the level of concentration around the room was remarkable. Working one to one, I could offer help and advice which just wasn't possible when dealing with the class as a whole. Above all, the task turned out to be achievable for these "failed" students. They actually liked memorizing the dialogues. Reaching that finite goal gave them a sense of security, and a sense of success which I could immediately reinforce. Once the novelty of standing wore off, they expected it as part of the classroom routine, and became conditioned to associating standing up with speaking English. Speaking English ! They had never done that before. It is certainly unlikely that great success could have been achieved with these learners sitting at desks.

No doubt, the standing environment can be used for a wide variety of tasks. I chose memorization and dialogue performance, but other teachers will choose according to their priorities. Why did I select a memory task? There is much more to mastering a language than memorizing some dialogues. However, East Asian students have a long tradition of memorization, often under uninspiring circumstances. They readily accept the requirement, so it is foolish not to use memorization as a tool. Information in a book is of no value to anyone. Once it takes up residence in a person's brain, there is some possibility of playing with the material further, and giving it a more organic presence.

No learning technique is a magic bullet. However, varying the physical distribution and the posture of students within a classroom period can be an important tool for maintaining mental alertness and participation. Is this surprising? In daily life we are moving around constantly, and our movements are commonly associated with some communication task. Sitting still is almost invariably linked to passive reception : listening to TV, listening to sermons, listening to speeches etc, and listening to teachers. The information received in

all of these contexts is mostly discarded, and an active response is certainly not normal.

It is true that a large part of language learning is also receptive, but to be usefully absorbed it must be an active reception. This is where I see value in having the students on their feet, focused on taking in the dialogues, then interacting with a partner to give them some semblance of life. Performing in a group of two for an audience of one is pretty safe, and it was pleasing to see how often my "failed" students were able to inject a bit of mischief or humour into the English exchanges.

It is unlikely that many of the Korean students in the pseudo-university I have discussed here will go on to become fluent speakers of English. However, most left the course with a positive attitude towards the language - a big turnaround - and a familiarity with the sound of their own voices using it. If a foreigner approached them on the street to ask directions, most of them would no longer be too embarrassed to have a shot at answering.

D. AFTERTHOUGHTS ON THE PERSONAL EFFECT OF STANDING TO WORK AND LEARN

Teachers spend a lot of time standing. It goes with being the active party in a classroom, sometimes the sole participant among a crowd of sitting observers. At the first opportunity though, we are also apt to sink into a chair. We rarely think of reading or writing, working on a computer, or planning our ideas while standing. I have begun to experiment with this, and now find that much of the time I actually prefer to spend some of the time doing these things on my feet. I am not alone. There is evidently a growing market for adjustable computer tables, and from one report (Lang 2004) up to 80% of computer users find it more productive and comfortable to spend some of their day standing at these things. An Internet search revealed that the Amish (USA)

have a tidy business in selling "standing desks", which are after all not such a new idea. Maybe our forebears in Dickensian England knew something, for the clerks with their quills always had to stand at their desks !

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Bio: Thor May has been teaching English to non-native speakers, and lecturing linguistics, since 1976. This work has taken him to seven countries in Oceania and East Asia, mostly with tertiary students, but with a couple of detours to teach secondary students and young children. He has trained teachers in Australia, Fiji and South Korea. The present paper was written in South Korea. Thor's PhD is on language teaching productivity. Many of his papers, essays and stories may be seen on his website at <http://thormay.net> ; e-mail thormayATyahoo.com .