Putting the 'learning' back into English Language Teaching

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Little pitchers to be filled so full of facts...

"NOW, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them."

Hard Times, Charles Dickens (1854)

Transmission Model

- Learners are 'empty containers', waiting to be filled with information

- The teacher's job is to transmit information (naturally, they will teach what they know)

- The syllabus can be comprehensively described (as a list of items to be 'taught')

- Evaluation determines the extent to which the knowledge transmitted has been retained

Constructivist Model

- Learners are actively involved in constructing *personal meaning* from their experiences

- The teacher's job is to *facilitate learning* by creating ideal learning conditions in the classroom (analyzing needs; selecting appropriate 'rich' input; designing tasks to exploit materials effectively; creating a positive learning environment).

- Teacher's role will vary: instructor; language model; language resource; facilitator; motivator; assessor

Constructivist Model

- The syllabus can be planned to some extent, but is best described retrospectively

- Evaluation becomes much more complicated: Are we testing knowledge, skills, or both? Are we testing students' current levels of communicative competence or only changes brought about by participation in the course? Is it fair to prescribe exactly what students should take from a course?

Sociocultural Theory (SCT)

- Higher order functions develop out of social interaction

- Cognitive development can only be understood by examining the social world in which it takes place

- Learning is embedded in social events

- Zone of proximal development (ZPD): The challenge of a task is just beyond the learner's level of competence & can only be achieved with support

(Lantolf 2011)

Are students working in their ZPD?
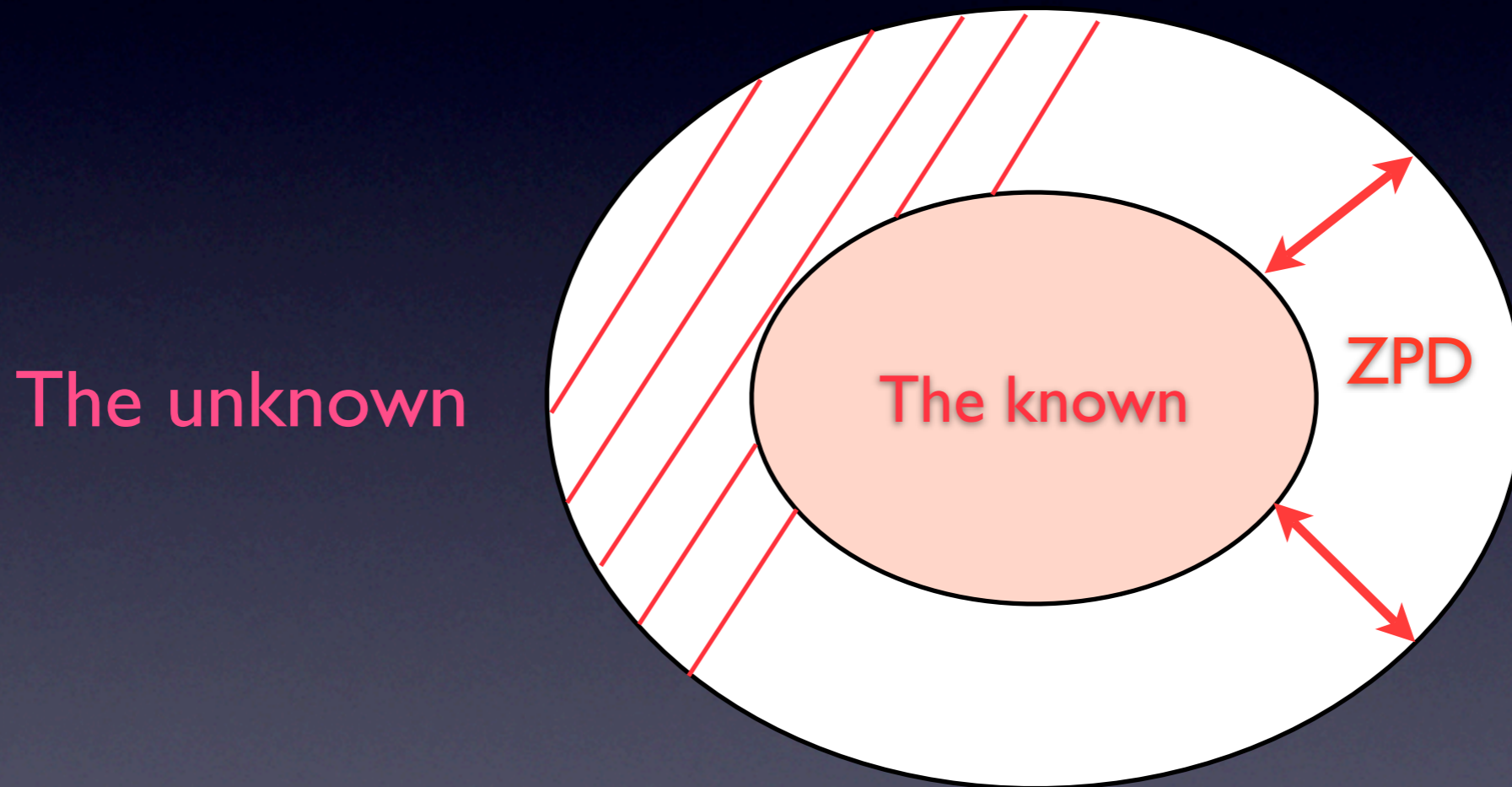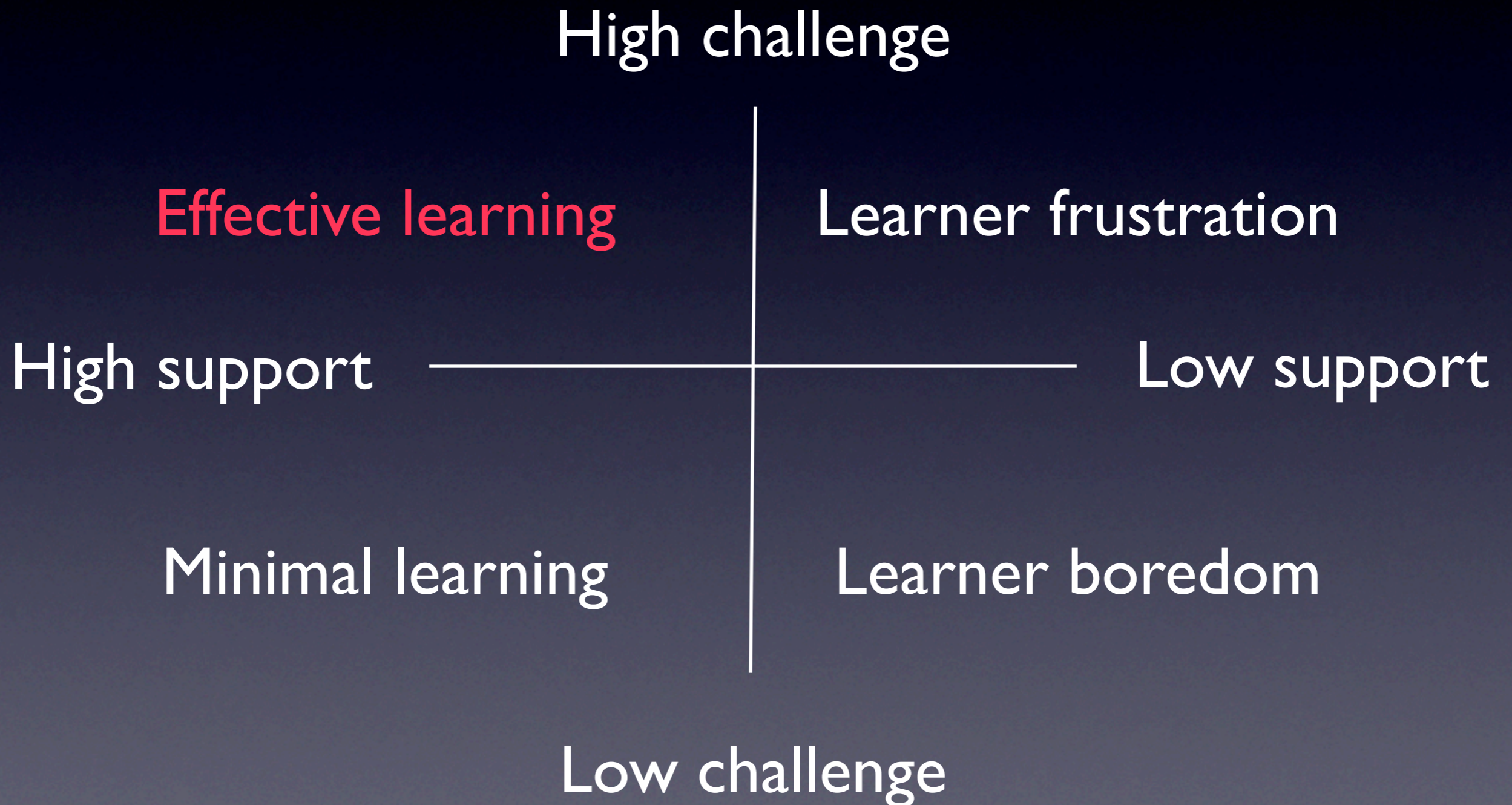
Forbidden colours task

- Participants of different ages (4, 7 & 12-years old) are asked questions & instructed to avoid using a specific colour in their responses (e.g. Describe your house- forbidden colour is white)

- Researchers provide pieces of coloured paper as external mediational tools for thinking

Forbidden colours task

- 4-year-olds unable to use the mediational tool & continue producing forbidden colours

- 7-year-olds use the tool, placing coloured paper nearby as a reminder

- 12-year-olds have no need for external support to successfully avoid forbidden colours

- Conclusion: Children gradually develop the ability, first to use external mediation, and then to internalize it

(Vygotsky 1986)

Challenge & support in the classroom (Mariani 1997)

High challenge

Effective learning   Learner frustration

High support   Low support

Minimal learning   Learner boredom

Low challenge

Changing metaphors for learners

'Empty vessels' ➡ 'Scientists' ➡

➡ 'Socially-bound scientists'

Learning models & syllabus design

- **Transmission model**: Structural syllabus with predetermined linguistic items (vocabulary and grammar); typically involves 'PPP' (presentation-practice-production)

- **Constructivist model**: Task-based language teaching (TBLT); syllabus is not predetermined; L2 is learned through learners' efforts to communicate with the language

Task-based language teaching (TBLT)

- The primary focus is on meaning

- There is some kind of 'information gap'

- Learners rely largely on their own linguistic or non-linguistic resources to complete the task

- There is a clearly defined outcome (other than merely the use of target language)

- Explicit focus on forms often still occurs, but at the post-task stage

(e.g. Willis 1996)

TBLT vs. 'traditional' classes

Beretta & Davies (1985)- Evaluation of the 'Bangalore Project'

- Task-based learning produced significantly different learning from traditional form-focused instruction

- This reflected task-based learners' superior acquisition of structures not explicitly taught

- Task-based learners more able to deploy what they had learned (productive skills)

Sample lesson: Presentation Course (Tokyo University)

- Previous class: Focus on the language of presentations (clarity; defining jargon; signposting language; rhetorical questions; dramatic structures; use of anecdotes or analogy)

- Mini presentations in groups of 4 or 5

- Students assess each others' performances based on rating criteria (which counts towards final grade)

- Groups provide feedback to presenters (strong points & points to work on)

- Teacher provides overall feedback

Sample lesson: Mini presentations

Student discourse

1 **S1**: *ha he ho ho nani ni shiyoka* A piece of paper
ha he ho ho what shall we do?
2 **S2**: A piece of paper
3 **S1**: *sou nanka omoshiroi hanashi wo tsukurashite morauyo*
Yes I'll make an interesting story
4 **S2**: *so omoshiroku shiyo omoshiroku naruka* (laughs) *konna shinkokuna kore ga omoshiroitte iunara*
Yes let's do that make it interesting?   I don't understand how we can make
5 *ore wa rikai dekihin* we don't understand what why this is funny
this serious story interesting
6 **S1**: What do we now here it's my it's my it's my car (S2 laughs) I'm sorry and I want to ride ride pato
7 car once finish (pato car = patrol car)
8 **S2**: (laughs) Oh really oh that's terrible
9 **S1**: *Patokaate nihongo patroruka ka?*
Is 'pat car' Japanese? Is it 'patrol car' in English?
10 **S2**: *Ah pata* Patrol car [**S1**: Patrol car]
Oh that's patrol car
11 **S1**: (Checking dictionary) Be available patrol car *rashii chuuka*
patrol car-ish or
12 Police car *no hou ga iissu*
Police car would be better
13 **S2**: Mm police car sq squad car
14 **S1**: *nani sore* squad car
What's squad car?
15 **S2**: *iya soo ya issho ni kangaete*
Can't we think about this together?
16 **S1**: *Pair yaro*
We're working as a pair aren't we?
17 **S2**: Pair *detan yaro kangaetekure*
If you're my partner please think of something
18 **S1**: B work in pairs
19 **US**: *Omoshourokusuru*
Are you making it interesting?
20 **S2**: *sou sou sou*
          Yeah

References

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