

LET THE FELT SENSE SPEAK IN ENGLISH

Experiential Learning and Teaching of English as a Second Language

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1. INTRODUCTION

I encountered Focusing by accident. After working as a translator for 6 years, I decided to go back to school to study clinical psychology. When I went into the counseling class, I met Dr. Ikemi, a Certifying Coordinator in Kobe, who was the lecturer of the class. He had just been transferred from Okayama University, and I became one of his first graduate students in Kobe College. I had never heard anything about Focusing, nor about Gene Gendlin or his experiential theory. In the counseling class, Dr. Ikemi taught us Focusing, and we read Gendlin's articles. That was the beginning.

One of the reasons I quit my job as a translator and became a graduate student was that I wanted to explore: *Why our feelings change when we talk about the feelings...* Therefore, I was immediately fascinated with "The Theory of Personality Change" (Gendlin, 1964). However, I had difficulties in following the 6 steps; it felt so clumsy and awkward for me. I wondered if I might not be able to practice Focusing, even though I was attracted by Gendlin's theory.

In the first two or three years of the graduate course, I had two problems. The first one was about Focusing. I found Gene's papers fascinating, but was still unwilling to practice Focusing. I was reluctant to get into the Focusing world because I mistakenly believed that the 6 steps were the prerequisite to practice Focusing. In the meanwhile, as I worked as a translator, I was often asked to translate workshops offered by Focusing trainers from English speaking countries, including Elfie Hinterkopf, Kye Nelson and Kevin McEvenue. In those workshops (I was then just a beginner in Focusing), I got acquainted with people who were very active in the Japanese Focusing community with long and extensive Focusing experiences (they were then called "Core Members" of the Japan Focusing Association). They seemed to be enjoying their lives with Focusing; I admired the way they lived their lives, which made me feel that "something" about Focusing was meaningful to me, but the "clumsy" feeling around Focusing still prevented me from devoting myself to Focusing.

The other problem was communication in English. I had been learning English since I was 13, and I used English as a tool in my job for several years. Even so, I did not feel as if I was "communicating" with people in English. I could make myself understood in English and I could understand what English speakers were saying. I was a professional translator — yet I did not feel that I was talking to a human being. It felt like there was a thin membrane barrier between me and the person I talked to, and I could not reach the person. I felt like I was playing a role, or the communication was not real or alive.

2. FOCUSING AND ENGLISH: SPEAKING FROM THE FELT SENSE

Around the time I entered the doctoral program, I came to notice that using the 6 steps was not the only way to do Focusing. It was simply a way to explain or teach Focusing, but there was ‘more’... it was not ‘*the whole thing*’... Focusing is a process or the interaction happening within and between people. It is not something that is used or happens only in psychotherapy, but also in everyday life, and in many forms.

Acknowledging that Focusing is applicable to anything — and is something that happens in every moment of my life — I came to appreciate “*how I feel*” more than “*how I should be*”; I became more flexible and more accepting with others. That means I became less “structured” or “6 steps-bound” (Gendlin, 1964).

As I gradually noticed that I could do Focusing without the 6 steps, my communication problem in English started to change, as well. I have been attending the Focusing International Conferences and Focusing workshops offered in English, as both a participant and a translator. To my surprise, I found myself feeling that “I am talking to a living person” in those conferences and workshops. After more than 20 years of using English, I could feel that my communication was alive and the communication was heart-to-heart, where I could touch the immediate and subtle feelings occurring between us.

This change in communication opened a whole new world for me. I had believed (for me) that English could not be more than a “tool” to convey the “colorless contents” and almost gave up the hope of making “friends” with English speakers. I was able to understand the content of what people were saying, but I could not ‘*relate*’ to how they were feeling, nor could I touch the texture and color of their feelings. That was one of the reasons I did not try to study abroad. I did not think I could stand living in a foreign country with a transparent membrane barrier between me and others. Yet with Focusing, the communication suddenly turned ‘colorful’, and for the first time in my life, I could feel that English speaking people were also human beings and had feelings that I could actually relate to. Focusing worked to lift up the transparent, persistent membrane barrier that had prevented me from reaching the person: the English communication gained a whole new life and brand new colors.

What brought about this big change? It was that I now knew how to speak *from the felt sense*. Speaking from the felt sense and trying to feel the felt sense of others has given *life* to my English communication.

3. EXPLORATION OF A NEW WAY TO APPLY FOCUSING INTO ENGLISH/ SECOND LANGUAGE TEACHING

From this new understanding that speaking from the felt sense led to real and meaningful communication, plus the feeling that I was ‘allowed’ to do Focusing in my own way, I started to notice that I could easily make some new combinations. I started to apply Focusing to English (i.e. a second language) teaching (Doi, 2008a and 2008b). I have been teaching English to undergraduate students.

My class is called “English Workshop”, the aim of which is to offer students opportunities to do something in English that might enhance their motivation to study English; however, it was difficult to run the class. I was shocked on the very first day of the class to discover that most of my students DID NOT like English AT ALL! Almost 80% of them hated English. They took the class because the class was compulsory. They were very reluctant to learn English in the traditional way: learning grammar, memorizing words, or reading English texts. This was not a happy situation — either for me or my students. I wanted to make the class happier, not only for the students, but also for myself to enjoy teaching.

In order to find a new way to enhance the motivation of the students, I decided to put Focusing *essence* into my teaching. We started with the non-verbal and less-verbal exercises to decrease the students’ reluctance and fear of English. One of the exercises was NARABI (Takeuchi, 1990). NARABI stands for “standing or queuing side by side”. In this exercise, students are paired up and invited to explore the best way of being together without using words. They were asked to try various postures and distances between them. Every pair found a beautiful way of being together.

For example, in one pair, they found that “standing” felt uncomfortable, so they sat down side-by-side very closely, their shoulders touching the other’s shoulder, and their smiling eyes looking into the other’s eyes — from time to time. Another pair chose to stand, but each of them moved together slightly to the right keeping about one meter distance between them, and intentionally not letting their eyes meet directly. Although each pair showed different ways of “NARABI”, they all looked satisfied and settled, and most of them were smiling. The classroom was filled with a quiet, warm and caring atmosphere.

Another exercise was the Approach Exercise, developed by Janet Klein (Klein, 1995). The Approach Exercise is an exercise to find a right relational distance with a partner, by paying attention to one’s own body sense. The students were paired up, standing face to face. One person stood still, while the other began to approach, very slowly. The person who was standing still was asked to notice their *body-sense*, while the approaching partner carefully moved forward. When he or she felt that the approaching person had come too close, the standing person immediately said, “STOP”, and the standing person was asked to notice how his/her body sense changed. Then, the approaching person stepped back a little, and approached again. When the bodily-felt-sense said, “It felt *too close*” to the standing person, s/he said, “STOP” again. In this way, the person standing was much more aware of how precisely the body sense *knows* what the right distance is to the approaching person — and how the body knows ‘*more*’ than just cognitive understanding. I also had the students read *How to Teach a Workshop in Focusing: A Two-Hour Script that can be Amended for Day-Longs, Classes, or Presentations of any Length* (Klagsbrun, 1999). After they read the explanation of the Approach Exercise, I invited them to try it. It was easy for them because the only English they had to use was “stop”.

After trying those non-verbal/less-verbal exercises, I felt the students relax, and their fear of using English was decreased. I then proceeded to introduce exercises that required more English, such as Clearing A Space, along with drawing and collage making. For both exercises, I prepared worksheets highlighting some Focusing-oriented questions. By answering those questions, they learned how to *be themselves* with a Focusing Attitude, e.g. caring,

respect, listening, non-judgment, and by sharing their answers, they experienced how each of them was different.

These Focusing exercises, with their playfulness, grabbed my students' hearts. At the beginning of the course, my students seemed to hate even English dictionaries, but as I used Focusing, they became so eager to consult the dictionary because they really wanted to "communicate" with each other. They wanted to share what was happening within themselves to their classmates. With the help of Focusing, they found a completely new way of relating from within themselves to English. Some of the students told me that they had never imagined that they could learn English with such playfulness. For them, studying English always required discipline, and nothing more than that. However, in my class, they found a way to learn and communicate freshly from their felt sense. That is the advantage of Focusing-oriented teaching and learning.

4. HOW HAS KNOWING AND USING FOCUSING MADE A DIFFERENCE IN MY ENGLISH/SECOND LANGUAGE TEACHING

Another advantage of Focusing-oriented teaching is that the teacher's Focusing Attitude can offer a "safe atmosphere" for the class. The teacher with the Focusing Attitude accepts anything that comes from the students, waits for and appreciates the spontaneous interactions among students. With the help of the teacher's Focusing Attitude, students are motivated to learn English, and more importantly, are far less worried about making errors.

With the Focusing Attitude, the teacher also feels safe, allowing him/her self to be free from clinging to the syllabus. The teacher can decide "What to Do" in class based on the felt sense at every moment of the class. In addition, Focusing-oriented teaching leaves a margin where everyone is allowed to be different — and it is *OK* — again contributing to the creation of a safe atmosphere in the class.

What was important in this Focusing-Oriented way of teaching English was that all of the students came to feel deeply connected with each other. The class became a naturally-formed "home group" or felt community. It was, to tell the truth, beyond my expectations. Each student spontaneously learned to respect and appreciate each other's felt sense and enjoyed the differences in how they felt or experienced.

I believe that this was a much more precious experience in their lives than simply memorizing new English words or just gaining the textbook, paper-and-pencil knowledge of English. Teaching students that there are ways to access their own body's inner wisdom is a wonderful gift that a teacher can give in the classroom.

4. WHOLE-PERSON LEARNING: HELPING STUDENT TO AVOID BECOMING "TOURISTS"

Another important aspect of Focusing-Oriented teaching is that it enables what Rogers and Freiburg (1994) called "whole-person learning" (Doi, 2008a). According to Rogers and Freiberg, whole-person learning is defined as follows:

“Significant learning combines the logical and intuitive, the intellect and the feelings, the concept and the experience, the idea and the meaning. When we learn in that way, we are whole: we use all our masculine and feminine capacities” (1994, p.37).

However, as Rogers and Freiberg (1994) point out, there are often too many “tourists” in the classroom. The tourists in the classroom “rarely get called on by the teacher and seldom raise their hands to volunteer information”, and “Given the opportunity, they sit in the back of the room and try to be invisible when it’s time to participate.” They are “never involved, never excited, never chosen . . . simply here” (Rogers and Freiberg, 1994). Unfortunately, in many classes, we see those “tourists”.

The Focusing-oriented English teaching was an attempt to help students avoid becoming “tourists”. Not only did I pay attention to maintaining a safe atmosphere, I also emphasized that the “process” was more important than the “content”. The students did not have to worry about the evaluation made at the end of the semester based on what they achieved. Rather, they were encouraged to enjoy the process, and explicate the process. In other traditional classes, they were always worried about how the teachers tested them, but in my class, they felt safe and free to express what was going on within them. As a result, the students became active and spontaneous.

Rogers and Freiberg (1994) also indicate that whole-person learning requires “soma”, namely, *body and mind*, feelings *and* intellect. With the help of Focusing, students can experience not only the cognitive aspect of learning, but also the learning that comes from their *own experiences* and *felt senses*. Bodily-based learning is more precious than the merely cognitive learning because “our heads forget, but our bodies remember” (McEvenue, 2007). The true learning is brought about when students study spontaneously, relating to their *whole body* learning. Focusing-oriented teaching can lead students to *whole-person* learning!

6. CONCLUSION

Looking back at my experiences of Focusing-oriented English teaching, I realized that what was most important for me was not teaching English itself, but creating *possibilities*... I could support and encourage the students to start communicating with one another to form a *felt-community*. Of course I was happy to hear that some students commented that their English skills had increased; however, I was much more touched when they remarked that they could make new friends and feel connected to one another.

Focusing worked as a “non-structural structure” in the class. Because of the nature of Focusing, the teacher did not stick to the syllabus; however, *Focusing itself was a structure* that supported the class. The safe and free atmosphere was nurtured because the teacher did not cling to the fixed structure (for example, the 6 steps); rather, an atmosphere was created between the teachers and students by being faithful to their own felt sense. As a result, Focusing allows the students to touch down inside and to interact, based on the bodily experiences. Focusing helps the whole-person learning to happen in classrooms.

Focusing is a way to encourage people to learn English as a second language. It offers the safe atmosphere as well as increases the motivation to communicate “more” because people are aware that they have “something” inside of them: their own felt sense. When they allow their felt sense to speak, they can exceed the mental barrier created by the worries of making errors.

Focusing assists a teacher to sense “what is needed most here” and “what is the right way” to work with students based on the teacher’s felt sense. The class can be dynamic, and both the teacher and the students can wait for next steps to emerge. One of the students told me how thrilling it felt to her to be taught in this way.

The real communication happens when we speak from the felt sense. Studying grammar and vocabulary builds a basis for language, but to give a life to our communication we need to speak from the felt sense. When we speak from the felt sense, English becomes alive; in other words, languages, when used without a felt sense, seems dead.

Focusing opened a whole new world for me. It showed me a new way of relating to others in English, which then gave me new ideas of Focusing-oriented English teaching. Let us speak from our felt sense. The felt sense allows our concerns about making errors to disappear when we speak in our second language. Most importantly, the felt sense facilitates heart-to-heart communication.

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