Teachable moments (TMs) provide rich learning opportunities in the Holistic approaches - such as communicative and experiential language teaching. Though you may know the term in general usage, research into the implications and effects of the TM has both expanded its potential and addressed concerns about how to fit unplanned material into formal curriculums.

Teachable-moment-oriented curriculum practice has been developed as a methodology for early childhood education - as young children are critically dependant on contextualized, naturalistic learning (Hyun & Marshall, 2003). The methodology requires the teacher to develop skill in evaluating student input through several filters to determine what is “learnable” and how to facilitate impromptu learning. Though adults’ prior conditioning often leads them to expect a stricter adherence to lesson plans, they also have strong needs for pertinent, contextualized, affectively appropriate learning experiences (Diamond, 1991)

Definition

TMs have been described by Dutro and Moran (2003) as opportunities to fill a specific, unanticipated need for a new word or a way to express a thought or idea by departing from the lesson plan or workbook. To fully utilize these opportunities is to give students authentic, contextualized language that provides them with the next phrase, word, concept or cultural fact they need to carry out a task or respond to an impromptu event. For example, you might pause during a thunderstorm to have a discussion about
weather terms and idioms. Or while discussing libraries, you might stop and give
directions to your city library.

**Rationale**

The following descriptions of the two main second language acquisition methods that embody Holistic language learning theory both use TMs extensively:

**The Communicative Classroom:** Since the 60’s and 70’s, ESL classrooms have been progressively rearranged to produce more learner-centered and democratic activity. The content (examples, idioms, outcomes) has been brought into line with learners’ authentic needs. In other words, the gap between the classroom and the real world has been partly minimized Today’s language classroom viewed as a pragmatic, interpersonal context - the overarching objective being to promote authentic communication. (Tudor, 2001).

**Experiential learning:** This approach was fostered by the work of Piaget and Vygotsky. Piaget (1952, cited in Hyun and Marshal, 2003), believed that the learner constructs knowledge through his or her own actions, and these personally meaningful actions are necessary for real learning. Vygotsky (1978, cited in Hyun and Marshall, 2003), also believed that children construct knowledge but that their knowledge cannot be separated from its social context – it is always socially mediated. A teacher needs to interpret and respond to a TM in a way that builds (“scaffolds”) upon the student’s interest, readiness, and affective state. (See mini module: Scaffolding). Tudor (2001) states that most experiential approaches rest on the following five principles, which I will briefly define and relate to the use of TMs:
1. **Message focus** – Language learning activities should focus primarily on the exchange of messages.

   To practice the message (such as “I’m probably going to be late for dinner tonight”) while staying in context, you can describe further uses for the form, pertinent anecdotes, or alternative wording. Think of how students might encounter this message in real life situations and give scenarios to practice.

2. **Holistic practice** – Normal communication is multi-dimensional and often digresses from its original content. It is productive to intertwine as many communicative skills as possible in practice activities. (See *Integrated Skills modules*.) TM’s can add to related language skills and content to an activity to extend the language practice and make it more interesting or relevant.

3. **Use of authentic materials** – authentic materials contextualize language practice and learning in essential ways. (Krashen 1985, as cited in Tudor 2001). Use anything in the room, the building, or seen through the windows as well as any “realia” you may have from previous lessons.

4. **Use of “communication strategies”** – Experiential learning often confronts students with unexpected language needs, both for input and production. Strategies such as negotiating meaning from existing knowledge, making good guesses, and choosing reference sources, can be modeled and explained during TMs, when students are eager to understand the current lesson.

5. **Use of collaborative learning** – This can draw students into task-based, interactive situations, and provide an opportunity for interaction and connection with authentic
material. Many TMs can arise. These opportunities help you promote an authentic language experience while they motivate and engage the students.

Choosing and Managing TMs

As you notice a TM, ask yourself about this moment: Why has one student raised this question at this time, in this way? What is he/she looking for/ready for? How can I use empathy here? (Hyun & Marshall, 3003). If the issue seems important for this student(s), it may be worth pausing to plant a seed, clarify some confusion, or build relationship or relevance. Then consider also how your own attitudes, pedagogical ideas and personal beliefs may be influencing you. Hyun & Marshall (2003 p.123) found that when teachers control the moment through their own conscious/unconscious perspectives exclusively, a “hidden curriculum” can come into play and heavily influence the result. So try to notice the origins of your impromptu examples or exercises and consider the attitudes and implications they carry.

Challenges

There are several challenges to address if you intend to use “TMs” frequently:

1. Adult ELLs may be unaccustomed to teachers using student input to determine the content or direction of the lesson - especially impromptu. They may resist departing from the plan or the script. (Ian Tutor (1996), devotes a chapter to “The Contextual Dimension”, addressing ‘the ethnography of autonomy’, power distance issues, and the contextual learning process in depth.)
2. Hinchey, Adonizio, Demarco & Fetchina (1999) both promote TMs but acknowledge how you must stay accountable to parents, administrators and students alike. These pressures can make it important for you to account for class time and measure the results of spontaneous activity somehow. Holistic teachers using “TMs” frequently need to be diligent in adjusting plans to cover the necessary and standard material, while keeping some flexibility to contextualize language instruction through TMs. This might be an issue especially in the K-12 setting.

3. Incidental learning: small details such as incidental vocabulary can be forgotten if you don’t revisit them in some way (Hansen, 1998). This is where a teaching journal can be effective; try to reintroduce material from past TMs and relate it to future discussions, examples, role-plays, or warm-up comments.

Further Implications for practice

- For new teachers, it may be wisest to start with small asides in order to build skill and confidence in departing from lesson plans and finding segues back. Review your journal retrospectively and imagine how you might have seized a situation, turned it into a TM, and segued back to your plan.

- Design some flextime into your lesson plans to allow for TMs.

- Ask students what they learned from a TM and let their feedback help you evaluate its productivity and show you how to develop future ones.

References


