"Try to describe the main point of your lesson.":
Student perception and identification of learning objectives in English lessons

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ABSTRACT

The students in an effective EFL classroom will perceive and understand a lesson's learning objectives in essentially the same way that their teacher intended to teach the objectives—indeed the objectives as taught and learnt will be very similar. However, in the many less successful classrooms, this will not be so. This paper will investigate whether there are gaps or 'disconnects' between a teacher's learning objectives and what students identify as the learning objectives and why. Eighty-minute English lessons were studied in four classrooms at one Hong Kong secondary school. Then four stimulated-recall teacher interviews and four post-lesson student interviews (N = 4 to 6) were conducted in order to ascertain whether students were able to correctly identify their teacher's intended objectives, along with effects from certain variables. Furthermore, implications for teaching practices were drawn to shed light on EFL classroom pedagogy and thus close the gap between perceptual mismatches—what is taught, and what is learnt—or sometimes, unfortunately, not learnt.

Introduction

Ideal language education requires that there be no perceptual mismatches between a teacher's learning objectives and what a student sees as the learning objectives. The ultimate quality of what is learnt is also affected by each teacher's understanding of exactly what, and how, to teach. Strong theoretical support exists that indicates gaps between a teacher's objectives, and what learners thought were the objectives, adversely affected the language acquisition process (see Green & Oxford, 1995; Mantel-Bromley, 1995; Cotterall 1995; and Littlewood, Liu & Yu, 1996). However, objective mismatch between teachers and learners may be inevitable, as McDonough (1995) claimed that students "have their own learning agendas" (p. 121). This is also supported by Nunan (1995) who believed that students often came to class "with different mindsets" (p. 140) than assumed by their teachers.

Many studies have been conducted to assess potential perceptual mismatches between what is taught and what is learnt. However, most of this research only

focuses on mismatches between teaching styles and learning stages (e.g., Ford & Chen, 2002; Grow, 1991; Peacock, 2001; Rao, 2002; Sanchez, 2000; and Trigwell, Prosser, & Waterhouse, 1999). Eslami-Rasekh and Valizadeh (2004) found that there were mismatches between teacher and student preferences in language learning, and that instructors were not aware of differing student preferences regarding communicative learning activities. The most relevant studies were conducted by Kumaravadivelu (1991) and Block (1994; 1996). Kumaravadivelu (1991), who found that there was a gap between teacher intentions and learner interpretations on language learning tasks because learners naturally interpret, what is taught in their own terms—thus inevitably there are gaps. Block (1994; 1996) also found that teachers and students adopted different methodologies to perceive the purposes or objectives of a given task.

To this point, a study has not been conducted that would determine whether students can correctly identify the learning objectives of their teachers. Neither have potential reasons for, and sources of, gaps between pedagogy and student perceptions been assessed; hence this study.

Purpose of study

This study will first investigate whether students are able to correctly identify the various learning objectives of their English classes. On one hand, this paper will try to investigate whether or not there is a direct relationship between student's performance in English learning in class and ability to identify learning objectives. On the other hand, this paper will focus on discovering which kinds of learning objectives can be correctly identified by students and which cannot. By examining any gaps between what is taught and what is learnt, this paper will endeavor to draw pedagogical conclusions and suggest which classroom teaching methods would better close any revealed gaps.

Research questions

This paper aims to address the following research questions in order to shed light upon, and ultimately improve, EFL classroom teaching practices and pedagogy.
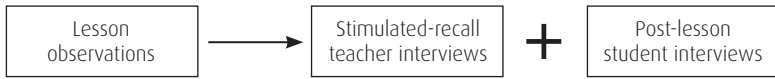1. Is there a relationship between a student's performance in learning in class and ability to identify learning objectives?
2. Can students correctly identify the teacher's learning objectives?
3. Which learning objectives are students able to identify?
4. Which learning objectives are students unable to identify?

Methodology

Design

This study adopts the qualitative paradigm principles (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2001) which help to capture the fluidity of an English teacher's

Figure 1
Work flow of study

| Lesson observations | → | Stimulated-recall teacher interviews | **+** | Post-lesson student interviews |

classroom style. The researcher conducted four lesson observations, each of which would be followed by a stimulated-recall teacher interview and post-lesson student interviews. The number of students to be interviewed ranged from 4 to 6. The study's design is presented in Figure 1.

In short, data was collected from four observed lessons, four stimulated-recall teacher interviews and four post-lesson student interviews.

Participants

One researcher observed and collaborated with one particular English teacher for the duration of this study, whereupon the researcher observed four of the teacher's lessons. The participating teacher was randomly selected by the principals of the partner school, which itself was located close to the researcher's place of work.

The participating teacher, Rose (pseudonym), had been teaching English as a second language for seven years. Also an assistant panel chairperson in the English Department of her school, Rose graduated from a Hong Kong university as an English major and is considered a well-experienced teacher.

Before each lesson observation began, Rose was able to randomly select students for post-lesson interviews because of her familiarity with each student's performance in learning in English class. Each student would be invited for an interview only once. The number of students ranged from 3 to 6, and their English proficiency varied (low, medium and high).

Procedures

Each lesson to be researched (approximately 80 minutes each) was observed and video-recorded, during which time the researcher would also take notes. Which lessons chosen for observation were based upon convenient times for both teacher and researcher. The time lapse between each observed lesson was approximately one month.

After observing each research lesson, the participating teacher was asked to reiterate the learning objectives through stimulated-recall interviews, during which the researcher would replay the recorded lessons that the teacher had just finished. The teacher would then take the initiative to pause the tape and recall what she was thinking at that point during the lesson. The researcher could also pause the video at any time and ask the teacher what she was thinking at that point in the lesson.

Simultaneously, a research assistant would give semi-structured interviews to the randomly chosen students, who were asked to itemize what was taught in the lesson. The research assistant would not provide any help to the students as they endeavored to recall the learning objectives as they perceived them.

Data analysis

Data collected from the four lesson observations, four stimulated teacher recalls, and student interviews, was first transcribed and translated in full (from Cantonese to English) by a research assistant, whereupon the researcher analyzed the data qualitatively and thematically.

All stimulated recall interviews were conducted in each teacher's mother tongue, i.e., Cantonese, with which they naturally felt most comfortable. All these interviews were audio-recorded then also transcribed and translated into English by a research assistant. All analyses followed the thematic approach in order to discover overarching themes that might emerge from the data, both data from individual participant teachers and across all participant teachers (Daly, Kellehear, & Gliksman, 1997). The process involves the identification of themes through "careful reading and re-reading of the data" (Rice & Ezzy, 1999, p. 258). It is a form of pattern recognition within the data, where emerging themes can be categorized for analysis.

Summary of lessons

Four lesson observations were conducted in this study. Table 1 summarises the teaching steps of each lesson.

Results

Table 2 summarizes the results of this study.

Table 1
Summary of lessons

Teaching steps	Lesson 1	Lesson 2	Lesson 3	Lesson 4
Start	T reviewed the differences between the use of 'there + be' and 'have' by demonstrating examples. Individual Ss gave answers. T pointed out some mistakes and emphasized the use of the present and past tense	Lead in with the announcement of the arrangement of the lesson—T introducing words and Ss making salad afterwards Ss moved and assembled into groups	Lead in with the announcement of the target grammar item of the lesson—comparing amounts T explained the meaning of 'comparing amounts'	Lead in by requiring Ss to take out their English textbook
Pre-task	***Task 1:*** T required Ss to work in pairs and describe a shopping centre by using 'there + be' ***Task 2:*** T asked Ss if they liked the shopping centre described in the textbook and the kinds of shopping centers they liked T listened to a survey—the reasons for liking a shopping center ***Task 3:*** T played a video about a shopping mall in Canada. T demonstrated the methods of designing a shopping centre on the computer	T introduced the format of a recipe, the sentence pattern—imperative sentences, and words used in a recipe—verbs, food.	***Task 1:*** T taught the use of comparatives and superlatives by comparing the number of fans of football players, the amount of money owned by rich people, etc. (in the form of Q&A) ***Task 2:*** T required Ss to count the number of their personal belongs based on several given prompts (e.g. coins, exercise books, etc.) ***Task 3:*** T showed three students' photos and asked them to tell other students the number of objects they had. Other Ss compared the amounts.	T checked answers of the guided questions with Ss, which they should have done at home—Jackie Chan's early life and his success. T distributed three pieces of unfavourable news about Jackie Chan to Ss. Ss read them individually and T summarized the news by Q&A

Table 1 (*continued*)
Summary of lessons

Teaching steps	Lesson 1	Lesson 2	Lesson 3	Lesson 4
Task	*Task 1*: Ss worked in pairs and three pairs presented afterwards *Task 2*: T played an audio CD about an interview. Ss identified the reasons for which the interviewee liked the shopping center and T corrected mistakes *Task 3*: Ss worked on the worksheet individually. T explained the methods for designing posters. T asked a student to share the name of the shop he had designed	Ss made salad in groups. Ss wrote recipes for making salad in groups Some groups instructed (by reading their own recipe) other groups to make salad	Ss works in groups Ss compared the number of their own belongings based on the topic of the worksheets in groups and wrote the answers on the worksheets Two groups presented their work	T explained the meaning of 'ups and downs' and plotted a chart of the ups and downs in Jackie Chan's life on a slide by Q&A. Ss plotted their own charts of ups and downs individually and shared the work with their friends in groups. Two Ss shared their work in front of the class
Post-task				T shared her ups and downs in life
End	T assigned a task to Ss—to design their own shopping center and posters	T announced homework would be assigned the following day	T noticed S's weakness in using 'few/little/much'—and their comparatives and superlatives—and would explain it again the following day	T assigned homework

Table 2
Summary of results

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	Lesson	Teaching components	Items student identified additionally	N	% of students identified	Performance in learning in English class	Student verbal response
A	1	Describing a mall by using There + be with the correct tenses	—	4	100%	Strong, Medium, Weak	I have learned the methods of using the sentence patterns there be, such as the use of appropriate tenses.
B		Get ideas through listening (CD and video)*	—		0%	—	—
C		Creative writing (design a poster and a shopping mall)—applying previous knowledge*	—		0%	—	—
D		—	Vocabulary: Level		50%	Strong, Weak	I have also learned the word 'level'.
E	2	Action verbs related to cooking	—	3	100%	Strong, Medium, Weak	I have learned methods of talking about cooking in English. I have learned the English words for the ingredients, such as 'pineapple' and 'banana'.
F		Names of food ingredients	—		100%	Strong, Medium, Weak	I learned the methods of writing the procedures for making salad.
G		Format of a recipe	—		33%	Weak	—
H		Imperatives*	—		0%	—	—
I		Apply what they have learnt by writing up recipe and giving instructions on making salad verbally*	—		0%	—	—
J	3	Comparing amounts	—	4	100%	Strong, Medium, Weak	I have learned 'comparing amounts'. I have learned grammar items. I have learned to use the sentence pattern '...than...' I have also learned the methods of using 'the most' and 'the least/fewest'.

Table 2 (*continued*)
Summary of results

1		2	3	4	5	6	7
	Lesson	Teaching components	Items student identified additionally	N	% of students identified	Performance in learning in English class	Student verbal response
K		Doing a group task to find out who has the most/least of certain items*	—		0%	—	—
L		—	Name of soccer players		25%	Weak	I have learned the English names of some soccer players. I learned the methods for comparing things in English.
M		—	Discussion with classmates		25%	Weak	I have learned the concept of 'amount'. I practiced discussing with my classmates in English.
N	4	Format of writing a profile (Jackie Chan) *	—	6	0%	—	—
O		Synthesising data and plot chart*	—		0%	—	—
P		Describing and presenting one's life in an informed way	—		16%	Strong	I have learned about the events that happened to Jackie Chan. I also learned to describe my life experience in English.
Q		—	Jackie Chan's life		83%	2 Strong, 2 Medium, 1 Weak	I have learned about Jackie Chan's life. He changed his name many times.
R		—	Vocabulary		50%	1 Medium, 2 Weak	I have learned about Jackie Chan's life experience. I also learned some new words, such as 'skillful'.

* *Nil students could recall*

RQ1: Is there a relationship between a student's performance in learning in English class and ability to identify learning objectives?

The results show that it is erroneous to assume that strong performance in learning in English class will have a positive correlation with ability to identify learning objectives or vice versa—there is no correlation. For example, P6 (Row P, 6th column) from Table 1 shows that only the student with strong performance in learning in English class could correctly identify the learning objective, "to describe and present one's life in an informed way". However, G6 shows that only the student with weaker performance in English learning in class could identify the learning objective, which was the format of a recipe. In fact, students with weaker performance in learning in class observed additional learning items—although these were not the core learning objectives of the lessons (see L6: names of soccer players, and M6: discussion with classmates). Therefore, student performance in learning in English class is not a factor which affects student understanding of learning objectives.

RQ2: Can students correctly identify the teacher's learning objectives?

The table above clearly exhibits gaps between what the teacher intended to teach and what students identified as such. In the first lesson, students were only able to discern one of three learning objectives. In the second lesson, only two of five learning objectives could be pinpointed by all students. In the third lesson, only one learning objective (out of two) could be correctly identified. Finally, no learning objectives were identified by the students in Lesson 4. Table 3 summaries these results.

RQ3: Which teaching objectives are students able to identify?

Table 4 shows that the learning objectives which could be correctly identified by students were primarily knowledge-based and form-focused language. The learning objectives include, "describing a mall by using 'there + be' with the correct tenses", "action verbs related to cooking", "names of food ingredients" and, "comparing amounts."

To further investigate why students were able to point out these learning objectives so well, it is necessary to review what actually transpired in the classroom. Two representative excerpts are presented below (Excerpt 1 and 2).

Table 3

Summary of learning objectives could be correctly perceived

Lesson	Number of objectives stated by teacher	Number of learning objectives which all students could recall correctly
1	3	1
2	5	2
3	2	1
4	3	0

Table 4

Summaries of learning objectives students were able to identify correctly

Lesson	Learning objective	% of students identified
1	Describing a mall by using there + be with the correct tenses	100
2	Action verbs related to cooking	100
2	Names of food ingredients	100
3	Comparing amounts	100
2	Format of a recipe	33
4	Describing and presenting one's life in an informed way	16

Excerpt 1 (Lesson 1)

T:	0:15	So in this exercise, you are asked to use the terms, "there is",	25
		"there are", "there was" and, "there were" to form sentences.	
		Do you still remember what the difference is between "there be"	
		and, "have." (Wrote "***There BE***" and "***HAVE***" on the	
		blackboard.) What's the difference? Do you still remember?	
		When I say I can possess that thing, okay, like this" (picked up a	30
		CD from her desk.) I say, I 'what?' a CD? I …	
ST:		Have.	
T:		I said I have a CD. Can I say the desk has a CD?	
ST:		No.	35
T:		Why not? Do you still remember what I taught you?	
ST:		Yes.	
T:		Yes. Okay. Because the CD just exists there. Okay? The desk	
		cannot possess the CD. All right? It just exists. That's why we	
		don't use the word "have", but we use "there + be". (***Pointed to***	40
		"there be" on the blackboard.) So when it is present tense,	
		it is …	
ST:		Were.	
T:		Present tense. There …	
ST:		Is.	45
T:		Is, there are. All right. (***Wrote "is/are" on the blackboard***.)	
		How about past tense?	
ST:		Was.	
T:		Was.	
ST:		Were.	50
T:	2:48	Were. (***Wrote "was/were" on the blackboard***.) Very good.	
		Okay. So in this exercise, you will use that to form sentences.	
		The first one, okay, the girl said. Okay. When the center first	
		opened, there were only a few shops. Why do we use "were",	
		"there were"? Why? Why?	55

Judging from Excerpt 1, the use of meta-language and the repetition of the target sentence pattern were effective in helping students identify the learning objectives. In the first two minutes of this excerpt, the teacher repeatedly mentioned "tenses" and the target terms "there is/are" and "there was/were." This helped students gain a better understanding of what the learning objectives were going to be.

Meanwhile, the use of visual support also played a crucial role in helping students correctly identify the learning objectives. In Excerpt 1, the teacher wrote the learning targets on the blackboard and referred back to them several times in order to reinforce student understanding (four times in two minutes).

When students were asked to identify what they believed their teacher intended to teach them, they responded correctly (see Excerpt 2).

Excerpt 2 Student interview (Lesson 1)

> I have learned the methods of using the sentence patterns "there be", such as the use of appropriate tenses.   A7

Excerpt 3 taken from Lesson 3 also echoed the results found above—repeating the learning objectives, along with visual support, helped students better understand the learning objectives. The teacher wrote "comparing amounts" on the board and mentioned the topics in different forms at different times to draw student attention to the main learning objective (see highlighted and underlined terms).

Excerpt 3 (Lesson 3)

> T: 5:15 Today we are going to learn one new thing in grammar. We   16
>   say that is (**wrote 'comparing amounts' on the blackboard**)
>   comparing amounts, comparing amounts. Okay. At the very
>   beginning of this term, in fact, we learned something about
>   comparing. Okay. For example, I will say that Miss Lau is the   20
>   most beautiful teacher in the school. Okay. So this is making
>   comparison. All right? I will say that Frank is more handsome
>   than Tommy. All right? I am making comparison. So this is
>   comparing. (**Pointed to the word 'comparing' on the
>   blackboard**.) But this time we are going to make comparison   25
>   about amounts. Do you know what is 'amounts'? Do you
>   know what is 'amounts'? No? You don't have any idea. Okay.
>   That means something like in numbers. Okay. So I say, 'How
>   many books do you have?' In fact, I am asking the amount of
>   6:23 books you have. Do you know what I mean?   30

RQ4: Which learning objectives are students unable to identify?

Table 5 summarizes the learning objectives students were unable to identify. Looking at the nature of the learning objectives, there are several features of the learning objectives which are harder to discern. They are: a) uncommon meta-language (e.g. Imperative); b) language application (e.g. design a shopping mall, writing up a recipe and giving verbal instruction, and doing a group task); and c) text-type, i.e. format of a recipe.

The results found in RQ2 show that visual support, along with repeating the language items or learning objectives, helped students to understand learning objectives. A review of research lesson transcripts reveals that none of the teaching strategies shown above were employed when the learning objectives listed in Table 5 were introduced.

Table 5
Summaries of learning objectives students were unable to identify

Lesson	Learning objective	% of students identified
1	Get ideas through listening (CD and video)	0
1	Design a poster and a shopping mall—applying previous knowledge	0
2	Format of a recipe	0
2	Imperatives	0
2	Apply what was learnt by writing up a recipe and giving instructions on making salad verbally	0
3	Performing a group task to find out who has the most or least of certain items	0

Discussions & implications

At least within the small scale of this study, results show that students with higher English proficiency did not better identify what the teacher was intending to convey. That is, there was no correlation between English proficiency and correct identification of learning objectives. However, certain *types* of learning objectives were easier for students to comprehend, while some other types were relatively difficult for them to see. This study reveals that those learning objectives based on language-knowledge or that are form-focused are more easily understood, and there is greater difficulty with those language-based learning objectives involving the *application* of language knowledge, text-types or meta-language rarely used by the teachers in daily classrooms. This result is supported by Horwitz (1985) who believed that Chinese students thought that language learning consisted merely of learning grammar rules and vocabulary. Christison and Krahnke (1986) also believed students thought communicative tasks had low immediate and specific benefits.

There are three ways to facilitate effective teaching and learning and thus better help students to discern a lesson's learning objectives. The purposes for students' being able to discern learning objectives are two-fold: 1) to enable teachers to evaluate classroom practices and to generate techniques and activities for realizing teaching goals; and 2) to help scaffold student's second language acquisition process. Teachers should: *Ensure that learning objectives are clear to students prior to teaching; Use meta-language where possible to help students identify the learning objective; and provide a learning context for students to perform tasks.*
To elaborate:

1. *Ensure that learning objectives are clear to students prior to teaching. By doing so, students will have a better focus on what they are supposed to learn by the end of the lesson. Students may also become more autonomous in learning by checking their understanding against the learning objectives throughout the lesson.*

This study found that teachers were not explicit enough about what students were supposed to learn at different stages of the lesson. For example, in Lesson 1,

students were able to identify the learning objective because teachers repeatedly drilled students on the target language ("there + be" with the correct use of tenses). In later stages of the lesson (listening task and designing a poster), students were simply following the teacher's instructions without really understanding *why* they were doing so, or how the first part of the lesson linked with the listening task and the creative writing task. Neither did the teacher explain how the three stages of the lesson were linked, nor how drilling them on sentence patterns would lead to the final objective of the lesson. Results from the student interview in the present study prove that students could only identify the first learning objective of the lesson. Therefore, stating all learning objectives prior to teaching will help students follow the instructions well and learn with a clearer purpose.

2. *Use meta-language where possible to help students identify the learning objectives.*

Results found from the student interview show that students were not able to identify the learning objectives because of the limited meta-language used by the teacher. Take one lesson as an example to illustrate this point: Imperatives (Lesson 2): students were not able to identify "imperatives" as one of the learning objectives because the teacher did not mention it throughout her lesson. What the teacher did do was to provide examples of the sentence pattern of writing a recipe, but without mentioning the use of "imperative" in a recipe. This inductive method was simply preferred by the teacher as stated by the teacher in the teacher interview, but in post-lesson interviews, none of the students were able to identify "imperative" as one of the learning objectives. The reasons for teachers' avoidance of using meta-language in class seems highly worthy of further research.

3. *Provide a learning context for students to perform tasks.*

Students were found unable to identify learning objectives which were 'task-based' or related to application of language. Examples would be B2 (Get ideas through listening to CD), C2 (Design a poster and a shopping mall), I2 (Apply what students have learnt by writing a recipe and give verbal instructions to peers), K2 (Doing a group task to practice using the target language item), and O2 (synthesizing data and plotting a chart). In a past study, Nunan (1989) found students preferred traditional learning activities over communicative activity types. With the use of a textbook, students can easily identify learning objectives because it is clearly stated in the topic and chapter structure. Without the presence of textbooks, both teachers and student will have greater degrees of flexibility—especially when performing tasks—however learning objectives will also be less observable and identifiable. It is therefore recommended that teachers provide a context for the students at the beginning of the lesson by stating learning objectives, showing how the lesson will be structured (procedures), and indicating what is required as a result of the lesson (product). Providing students with this type of 'learning map' will enhanced learning.

This study also revealed that teachers employed several strategies to improve learning identification by students. The first was repetition of learning objectives or the target language items in the classrooms while teaching. Consolidation of learning is often enhanced by repetition of instruction or performing a task. In

this study, the teacher mentioned the target language items ("there + be", with the correct use of tenses) for many items by direct instruction as well as 'question and answer' method. Students were drilled repeatedly on the same sentence pattern.

Furthermore, visual support also helped students to recall directly-related teaching objectives. In the research lessons, teachers wrote the learning objectives on the black board and referred to them frequently so that students were clear on the lesson's focus. This process helps students understand what the teacher intended to teach and what their ultimate learning destination is.

The present research into how students correctly identified learning objectives revealed that students found it easier to understand the lesson's focus if it contained a maximum of two learning objectives. Table 3 shows that students were only able to see one or two learning objectives, regardless of how many the teacher intended to cover. Thus, for high-quality results, each lesson should contain only one or two objectives, enhanced by consolidation or repetition through various teaching strategies.

Conclusion

This study has found no direct relationship between student performance in learning in English class and ability to identify leaning objectives. There are certain types of learning objectives which are easier or harder to identify. Whether students can correctly discern learning objectives largely depends upon a teacher's teaching practices. Recommendations were made based upon results found (see Table 6).

Any teacher seriously desiring to help facilitate effective learning should, at the start of each class, state the learning objectives, teaching steps and what precisely students are expected to do and know at end of the class. If the above-mentioned components are overlooked before the lesson, students will only blindly follow the teacher's instructions, not gain a helpful focus on what is being taught, learn less, and also become passive learners in the long term. If students are provided with the learning objectives prior learning, students will have a better focus on what to be learnt by the end of the lesson hence become more autonomous and proactive in the process of language learning. Teachers should be reminded that

Table 6
Summary of results and recommendations

Results	Recommendations
Cannot identify task as learning objectives	Make learning objectives clear to students prior to teaching
Cannot identify text-type learning	
Can identify language knowledge-based learning objectives	Students are good at recalling language knowledge they acquired
Can identify learning objective if there is only one or two	Teachers should only set one or two learning objectives for students, depending on the students' skill level

their role in student language acquisition is mainly to facilitate and act as scribe. As for student responsibility, they should be encouraged to take an active role in their own learning processes. Informing students what they are expected to do and know before each lesson will help them develop a greater sense of learner autonomy. By adjusting and aligning to a student-oriented teaching pedagogy, language learning can be made more effective. As Kumaravadivelu (1991) said, "the more we know about the learners' personal approaches and personal concepts, the better and more productive our intervention will be" (p. 107).

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