

Professional paper

THE PROBLEMS WITH ESL IN TEACHING COLLEGE STUDENTS

UDK 378.147:811.111

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Abstract: When it comes to theories involved with the learning of language, with a particular reference to the learning of a foreign language, there are several issues involved. In many countries in this day and age, it is necessary for students to learn at least two languages, namely, their national language and inappropriate foreign language. Thus, no one can doubt the importance of improving language skills, and, in particular, a second language. But language acquisition is also an important area of scholarship, a subject with significant socio-linguistic, cognitive, and psychological dimensions. We have a lot more to learn about the mechanisms through which individuals acquire a second language, and how adults, or in this case, college students, learn foreign languages, and the most effective methods and approaches. One way of learning this is to review the most common problems in the ESL classroom in the Belgrade-based College of Sports and Health.

Key words: language learning, foreign languages, second language acquisition, motivation, common problems.

INTRODUCTION

What is it that we do know about second-language acquisition among college students? First, most college students want to achieve a level of oral proficiency, with fewer interested in developing reading or writing skills, though speaking is in fact the hardest skill to acquire and thus, many students bring unrealistic expectations to the classroom. Second, often the goals of students are practical or commercial, as most of them believe that a language will be useful in their careers. However, some of them have never studied

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the language, and the varied levels can present a problem. Third, there are a great many college students who have a second language phobia, and thus, they may have negative expectations and a less than positive attitude. Also, many students are convinced that language learning mainly involves the study of grammar, and believe that only children are capable of learning a foreign language, and thus they set upon themselves a barrier. Fourth, student success in acquiring a second language rests largely on the teacher's preparation, commitment, and enthusiasm. And last, today, the dominant approach to language instruction is eclectic, with drills giving way to language use in a real communicative context, more emphasis being put on modern culture and audio-visual materials, as well as personalizing instruction, and a growing need for diversity in learning styles.

Consequently, it can be said that teachers have moved away from the traditional grammar method, and now ESL teaching involves initiating a variety of contemporary and engaged topics by the teacher, responses by the students, and evaluation or assessments which aim to give students a feeling of confidence and competence. Also, teachers are bringing multiple texts into the language classroom, including placing greater emphasis on student engagement and participation - including small group activities, conversation, and written and oral presentations, as well as "real world" activities. Similarly, there are different testing methods, as well as tests and assessments that provide insights into what students are learning, as well as offering opportunities to modify pedagogical techniques. In addition to quizzes and exams, there are other kinds of performance reviews, including one-on-one conversations.

There are, however, still a variety of problems in the ESL or EFL classroom.

GENERAL THEORIES OF THE LEARNING OF LANGUAGE

From a historical perspective, foreign language learning has always been an important practical concern. Whereas today English is the world's most widely studied foreign language, some 500 years ago it was Latin, the dominant language of education, commerce, religion, and government in the Western world. Second language learning has always tended to follow in the footsteps of first language acquisition and, in fact, throughout the history of language teaching, there were many attempts to make second language learning more like first language learning. The importance of meaning in learning, and the interest on how children learn languages as a model for language teaching were the first approaches to a language learning theory. However, toward the

end of the 19th century, the interests of reform-minded language teachers and linguists coincided and first attempts to language learning theories were to be taken into consideration. There are a series of modern theories of second-language acquisition about how a second language is learned. Research in second-language acquisition is closely related to several disciplines, including linguistics, sociolinguistics, psychology, neuroscience, and education, and each of these theories sheds light on one part of the language learning process. However, no one central theory of second-language acquisition has yet been widely accepted by researchers.

Present-day approaches

Regarding the learning of languages, there are three main theories about how language is learnt. Thus, behaviorism emphasizes the essential role of the environment in the process of language learning whereas mentalist theories give priority to the learners' innate characteristics from a cognitive and psychological approach. A third approach reviews relevant concepts such as a comprehensible input and native speaker interaction in conversations with students to acquire a new language.

Linguist Noam Chomsky emphasized the role of mental processes rather than the contribution of the environment in the language acquisition process. This so-called 'Chomskian revolution' initially gave rise to eclecticism in teaching, but it has more recently led to two main branches of teaching approaches: the humanistic approaches based on the charismatic teaching of one person, and content-based communicative approaches, which try to incorporate what has been learned in recent years about the need for active learner participation, about appropriate language input, and about communication as a human activity.

Other prominent figures in this field, such as Stephen Krashen, Tracy D. Terrell, and Noam Chomsky developed the language learning theories which are the source of principles in language teaching nowadays. The advances in cognitive science and educational psychology made by Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky in the first half of the century strongly influenced language teaching theory in the 1960s and 1970s (<http://www.sk.com.br/sk-revie.html>).

Krashen's views on language teaching have stimulated a number of changes in language teaching, including a de-emphasis on the teaching of grammatical rules and a greater emphasis on trying to teach language to adults in the way that children learn language. While Krashen's theories are not universally accepted, they have had some influence. Most recently, there has also been a significant shift toward greater attention to reading and writing as a complement of listening and speaking, based on a new awareness of significant differences between spoken and written languages.

METHOD

Language education may take place as a general school subject or in a specialized language school. Thus, there are many approaches, methods and techniques or strategies of teaching languages.

There are three principal approaches:

- The structural view treats language as a system of structurally related elements to code meaning (e.g. grammar).
- The functional view sees language as a vehicle to express or accomplish a certain function, such as requesting something.
- The interactive view sees language as a vehicle for creating and maintaining social relations, focusing on patterns of moves, acts, negotiation and interaction found in conversational exchanges. This approach has been fairly dominant since the 1980s.

A method is a plan for presenting the language material to be learned and should be based upon a selected approach. In order for an approach to be translated into a method, an instructional system must be designed considering the objectives of the teaching/learning, how the content is to be selected and organized, the types of tasks to be performed, the roles of students and the roles of teachers.

Examples of structural methods are grammar translation and the audio-lingual method.

Examples of functional methods include the oral approach / situational language teaching.

Examples of interactive methods include the direct method, the series method, communicative language teaching, language immersion, the Silent Way, Suggestopedia, the Natural Approach, Total Physical Response, and Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Language_education).

A technique (or strategy) is a very specific, concrete strategy designed to accomplish an immediate objective.

The teaching strategies:

- Analyzing learning characteristics
- Creating a learner-centered classroom
- Setting language goals
- Integrating theory with practice
- Building learner motivation

All these approaches to second language acquisition have the aim to promote the developing of language skills, the four basic ones which are:

listening, speaking, reading and writing. However, other, more socially based skills have been identified more recently, such as summarizing, describing, narrating etc. In addition, more general learning skills such as study skills and knowing how one learns have been applied to language classrooms.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the four basic skills were generally taught in isolation in a very rigid order, such as listening before speaking. However, since then, it has been recognized that we generally use more than one skill at a time, leading to more integrated exercises. Speaking is a skill that is often underrepresented in the traditional classroom. This could be due to the fact that it is considered a less academic skill than writing, is transient and improvised (thus harder to assess and teach through rote imitation).

DISCUSSION

Teaching English as a foreign language is a challenging job, and an ESL (English as a Second Language) teacher must constantly adapt to the students' needs. This usually means dealing with a variety of problems in the classroom, and a good ESL teacher should be able to recognize these common problems, and work to find solutions, and even tweaking the teaching method can help create a more productive and casual environment for both the teacher and the students. These are the 10 of the most common classroom problems faced when teaching English as foreign language, and some possible solutions.

1. Students are unclear what to do, or do the wrong thing. This happens often when teaching English as a foreign language, and it is often the fault of the teacher, due to unclear instructions. Thus, it is important that the instructions are clear, so gestures, mime, and short concise sentences should be used. The teacher should speak clearly and strongly and use models and examples of the activity.
2. Persistent use of first-language - this is possibly the most common problem. As an ESL teacher, it is important to encourage students to use English, and only English. However, if students begin conversing in their first language, it is perhaps a good idea to ask them direct questions like 'Do you have a question?'
3. A student is defiant, rowdy, or distracts others –though this is unusual in a college environment, as motivation is paramount, it has been known to happen. If it is one particular student, there should be a swift reaction to show dominance, and the student must be reminded that he or she is in college to learn.
4. Students become overly dependent on teacher – in this case, there should be a focus on giving positive encouragement to students. This

will help to make students more comfortable and more willing to answer (even if incorrectly).

5. Students “hijack lessons” or in other words, the lesson doesn’t go where it should. In some way, this can be a good thing as it shows that students are interested, and as long as they are participating and conversing in English, it is a productive experience. However, if the lesson strays too far off topic, it’s important to correct the problem by diverting the conversation.
6. Students may be bored, inattentive, or unmotivated – again, this is the teacher’s fault and this problem can be solved with proper planning. A topic related to their reality should be chosen, which will automatically give them motivation and keep them interested.
7. Strong student dominance – in an ESL classroom, there are bound to be students of different learning capabilities and language skills. It is not good to have some students dominate the classroom, so there should be a focus on calling on weaker students in the class to answer questions.
8. Tardiness - tardiness is not only rude, it can be distracting and disruptive of other students. Rules about tardiness and penalties for breaking them should be set.

What is possibly the best way to teach college students?

Steps:

1. Be prepared for variety in a vocational college, as the students can range in ages, from a 19-year-old who wants to earn a college diploma to a 40-year-old police officer who needs the degree for reasons of promotion. They might also come from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds, and may or may have learned English in school.
2. Express enthusiasm. Adults who wish to learn a foreign language need to learn through fun and stimulating discussion about ‘real situations’.
3. Create a safe, comfortable environment, as adults who are learning a new language may feel self-conscious and scared that they will make a mistake. Create a learning environment in which they can feel comfortable making mistakes, as adult learners will be more open to learning if they feel safe and comfortable in the classroom.
4. Use repetition. Create worksheets and exercises for students so they can practice different vocabulary words, verb tenses, and phrases from their professional area.

5. Practice with real-life examples. Teach adult students the vocabulary for words they would use in everyday situations. Adults learning a foreign language are often doing so because they think it will be relevant to their lives, so when you're teaching them, make sure you include the vocabulary they will need to use in the language.
6. Create problems for your students to solve. For example, have them pretend to go to a grocery store in the classroom. Problem solving will make the foreign language seem more real to them.
7. Practice. It will be easier to teach an adult a foreign language if they are using the language as much as possible. You may have to create opportunities for them to practice.

Create opportunities for conversation.

8. Immerse your students in the language. If possible, make it a rule that everyone has to speak the language when they are in your classroom. The best way for adults to learn a foreign language is for them to be completely immersed in it.

CONCLUSION

Teaching English as a second or foreign language is not an easy job, and the teacher needs to continuously adapt to the needs of the students. The goals of teaching, generally speaking, are to help the students not just learn another language, but to also expand their cognitive horizons and learn how to think in a broader and more cosmopolitan way. The point is to help the students communicate in another language. In the current Serbian environment, where emigration is an on-going reality, it is imperative to prepare students for attaining multicultural awareness and thus to integrate in an easier way. Thus, another language is not only about self-development and the acquiring of methods of learning or new perspectives on themselves as well as their societies, it is also a sort of an entrée into another culture, helping them appreciate and assimilate into other cultures. Also, it can be an entry into their own language as well, as awareness of the mother language can be enhanced by knowledge of a second one. Ultimately, speaking a second or third language entails the promoting of intercultural understanding and peace.

On the other hand, the job of a language teacher is to keep her or his students awake and interested, as well as motivated. Hence, one must not only teach, but inspire and empower. The goal is to excite the students about learning, speaking, reading, writing, and comprehending English.

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