

Teaching a Foreign Language Focused on the Student as the Main Pillar of the Didactic Process

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Abstract

The student is considered to be the main pillar, when activities become tasks and where collaborative work is done on a daily basis and not sporadically.

Capturing the attention of the students is one of the greatest challenges for a teacher. In the so called Internet era, the ability of a student to concentrate has decreased considerably, but there is an effective formula that can be summarized as “The student, not the teacher, should be the centre of the class.”¹

A comprehensive training of teachers of foreign languages, in our case Spanish, would be considered of major importance not only in linguistic aspects but also in methodology; therefore it implies passing from the old to the new, to implement a more suitable method in order to reach the goal of creating communicatively competent students.

Keywords: *student, teaching, teacher, pillar, motivation, objectives, autonomy.*

Introduction

This study addresses in its first two sections the management of teaching as a process where the teacher must play the role of guide to the students. It also focuses on the linguistic and pragmatic goals of education management where the main objective is to show what happens when the role of the teacher fades and the student becomes a passive receiver of information rather than a producer of it.

The third section argues the implementation of a meaningful education taking into account students' interests and motivations.

With all the training that a teacher receives nowadays, the concept of teaching has changed, and it focuses on two important aspects: teaching focused on the student, where the students become aware of their own learning in order to

¹ Tracey Tokuhama Espinosa quoted by Julieta Paci in *La Nacion*, 17 Feb. 2012, <http://www.lanacion.com.ar/1449413-contel-alumno-debe-ser-protagonista>.

promote their autonomy in the classroom; and teaching focused on the process where the main task in class will no longer be producing correct sentences, but the correct and proper communication considering the context and the situation in which the speaker is involved.

The last section of this study focuses on increasing students' motivation. One of the most common challenges for teachers is to find the formula for motivating students to learn. With motivation everything becomes easier in the classroom. It is important to discuss with the students during class activities about your own learning style, for better using strategies that presuppose an increase of their autonomy as learners.

The Principles of Teaching Management

This aspect of teaching management considers the teacher as a reference point of the class, as they are responsible for representing the language to study and train students in the field of ethics and moral. The teacher, while imparting linguistic substances, he or she should play the role of guidance for students. Therefore, a teacher's responsibilities are:

- To address both specialty knowledge and ethics, to care about students' improvements in learning.
- To be strict in respect of all the educational activities, to have positive influence on them.
- To accommodate the students in the classroom and make lessons as attractive as possible.
- To help the students in finding the best way to achieve their learning goals.
- To maintain the contact with students and give them continuous support in their university career.

Aquilino Sánchez Pérez, a Spanish professor, notes that language teachers tend to perceive their teaching from two different aspects, that of theory and that of practice. The theory-practice opposition can become an error when viewed as contraries. This error is often the subject of language teaching and it becomes more obvious when you hear statements like: "Ok, this works in theory, but in practice it is completely different." A statement like this is common among language teachers. But such an adversarial relationship between theory and practice should not exist, and there should be a complementary relationship between them.²

² Aquilino Sánchez Pérez, *Los métodos en la enseñanza de idiomas Evolución histórica y análisis didáctico* (The methods of teaching and learning foreign languages. Historical evolution and didactic analysis) (Madrid S.A. SGEL, Sociedad General Español de Librería, 1997).

Linguistic and Pragmatic Objectives of Teaching Management.

The aim of this section is to determine the teacher's role and to turn the student into a passive entity which receives information rather than produces it. Through the classroom observations, we have proved that teachers sometimes follow the patterns used by their former teacher, as they do not know how to manage the time, the language, the classroom and the students themselves. Moreover, it is also important for teachers to promote self-learning, including strategies for both learning and communicating and activities between teachers and students.

(LINGUISTIC OBJECTIVES)

According to Chang:

“Considering that the language is the tool of communication, we must continue to demand instructing students in higher grades. We must introduce them into the art of communication.”³

Therefore, it is imperative to develop and promote linguistic objectives in the teaching of foreign languages, in our case in teaching Spanish. Some of them may be:

- Being able to read sentences with the correct pronunciation and texts learned at a pace corresponding to the language level.
- Being able to talk about everyday issues and monologues prepared beforehand. Talk to Spanish speakers about everyday topics.
- Being able to understand common phrases and oral texts, similar to those existing in the manuals, according to a certain pattern of pronunciation of words per minute.
- Being able to write compositions correctly, according to a certain pattern of writing.
- Being able to translate texts from the target language to the source language and vice versa.

(PRAGMATIC OBJECTIVES)

In the current teaching era, defending inter-culturalism is essential, taking into account both social and technological developments. Multiculturalism among our students must be promoted and the interest that Albanian students have in the Spanish speaking world, due to both physical and cultural distance that separates the two worlds, must also be valued. This premise is being carried out gradually by various cultural activities organized in our countries like the weeks of Spanish

³ Fuliang Chang, “¿Que estudian alumnos de español en China?” (Studying Spanish in China). The first meeting of Spanish teachers of Asia – Pacific (Manila 2004), organised by the Instituto Cervantes in Manila. Virtual Library RedEle. http://www.mec.es/redele/biblioteca/ele_asiapacifico.shtml.

culture, organized by the Spanish Embassy here in Tirana, or language courses at Casa de España, or seminars and projects meant to improve the teaching of Spanish language and culture, offered by the AECID agency (Agencia Española de Cooperación Internacional para el Desarrollo), but universities should also take this aspect into consideration while teaching a foreign language.

Germany Patricia and Ferreira Cabrera assume that:

The process of teaching and learning of languages is justified in terms of two educational perspectives: idealistic and pragmatic. The idealistic view of language emphasizes the affective aspects of language, while the pragmatic view emphasizes the functionality of a language. On the other hand, considering that the student must get the most out of a language taught, the learning experience must be further anchored on a solid cultural base.⁴

Teachers are aware of the pragmatic and socio-cultural elements implied by learning a foreign language, therefore they should search for information on the Internet about current issues, in order to show their students real everyday life issues. But there is still a long way to improve the learning of a foreign language and such practices and methods should be developed at all levels.

Implementation of a Meaningful Teaching, Taking into Consideration Students' Interests and Motivations.

With all the professional training that a teacher has been going through, nowadays the concept of teaching has changed, and it focuses on two important aspects: a) teaching focused on the student and b) teaching focused on the process.

a) In the teaching focused on the student, the teacher will no longer be the protagonist of the class, becoming instead a guide that will help students in the learning process. The students will become aware of their own learning, so it will be important to promote the autonomy in the classroom. To achieve this, the teacher will begin to include activities and practices related to the use of learning strategies, so that each student becomes aware of what their style of learning is and learn not only the language, but also learn how to learn the language. All this is achieved through an analysis of the context and the students' needs. Thus, the objectives of the education will no longer be based on external elements, but will depend on the target group in question, their needs, their interests and their educational context.

⁴ Patricia Germany and Ferreira Cabrera Anita, *Evaluación de Competencia Comunicativa en Español como Lengua Extranjera* (Evaluation of Communicative Competence in Spanish as a Foreign Language) (Concepción: Editorial Direction of Teaching, University of Concepción, 1999), 1.

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b) As far as teaching focused on the process is concerned, the main task in class will no longer be that of producing correct sentences, but the correct and proper communication, taking into consideration the context and situation in which the speaker is engaged. Therefore, the activities are no longer mechanical and repetitive and turn into more free activities where the construction is creative and personal, and for that negotiation and error handling will be essential. The messages are constructed from the negotiation between speakers involved in a conversation. For this negotiation are needed not only language skills, but also a comprehensive knowledge, as well as communication strategies. On the other hand, the treatment of the error evolves towards an acceptance and allows to positively tackling it in the classroom; we must give up relying on the contrastive analysis between the language and the negative connotation given to the error in the classroom. This brings about an analysis of the inter-language. The error is part of the learning process and it is necessary, it should be an element of analysis and evaluation, showing each student's language level and inter-language level. In order to apply this new approach in the classroom, the element of integrating communication skills should be applied: the four traditional skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking) should be used in a comprehensive way and adapted to the communication needs. Students are familiarized with activities that should be practiced more often, as they give a feeling of truthfulness to activities. You will no longer be requested to complete activities like: *Read this article and summarize it*, because in real life we do not usually do this kind of homework; instead, students will be asked, for example: *Read the article and then discuss it with your class mates*, since in everyday life we often watch and share with others what we read.

Increasing Students' Motivation

One of the elements that we identify in our students' attitude is the lack of motivation. On the one hand there is the stress generated by tests, with students only interested in taking the exams, not in learning; and on the other hand the routine and monotony in which classes are dipping, guided by a bothersome pattern. It is also important to discover students' preferences in learning, their personal interests, in order to be able to create engaging activities and increase their interest in getting to learn Spanish. We often see our students pretending to be bored and have little or no desire to follow the explanations given during the class. In the digital era we are living in, it is not enough to teach using the same method year after year. One of the most common challenges for teachers is to find

the formula to motivate students to learn. With a certain degree of motivation, everything becomes much easier in the classroom.

The Albanian education system is basically a closed system, in which students are used to get most of the information from the teacher, listening and taking notes throughout the class, intervening modestly or not at all in it. That is because most of students lack autonomy and personal initiative. It is important to discuss with the students during the activities and interventions in class about their own learning style, for a better use of strategies which improve their autonomy as learners. Autonomy also implies the fact that not everyone learns in the same way. We can guide them to a variety of content in various formats: multimedia, YouTube content for online lessons, books, newspapers, blogs and even social networks. In the same way, students can use what they have learned, showing it through oral presentations to the class, by setting pencil to paper, through a post on a blog, a discussion with an expert via video-conference etc. The possibilities are endless and they always find a favourite field of study.

In this way, students develop their creativity and may test new things out of curiosity or amusement. This might be considered as a waste of time, a lack of progress or evolution in learning, but researches contradict this theory. Technologies available today offer us even more ways to provide this autonomy to students. Properly used, they can be very useful to increase motivation for learning.

It can also be argued that the teachers themselves as persons have an important contribution in motivating students. A teacher who has a great impact on students must have a special personality. They are guides helping students by sharing their own cumulative lifetime experience with them. For example, a pessimist teacher, who always sees the negative side of things or who transmits little or no energy at all is going to have a hard time to motivate students, regardless of the techniques that he might use. Not everyone can become an excellent teacher. Most of them lack basic emotional qualities. This does not mean that these qualities cannot be acquired or developed, but this should start somewhere. Teachers need to know and develop their personality. Then, they can identify the best teaching practices.

Self-Taught Learners. Autonomy

Autonomy in learning is expressed as the ability to take responsibilities for the development of the learning process. Autonomy as part of the learning process

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is characterized by four properties: it is intentional, conscious, explicit and analytical.

The psychologist and educator J. Bruner⁵ relies on the theory of the constructivist psychology, and he proposes learning through discoveries⁶ and the development of cognitive strategies and methods of learning how to learn. Thus, the student is no longer seen as a passive recipient of knowledge, but becomes the main protagonist and an agent of the learning process. In the field of language teaching-learning, H. Holec defines autonomy as “*the ability to manage one’s own learning.*”⁷ This ability is available through the development of meta-cognitive strategies.

Dickinson advocates for independent learning for five reasons:

1. Practical reasons (inability for a large number of students to attend classes on a regular basis);
2. Individual differences between learners (concerning not only their attitude, but also their learning styles and different strategies);
3. Educational purposes (fosters independent learning and develops the characteristics of a good learner);
4. The motivation (autonomy encourages students, allowing freedom of movement and choice as far as their learning is concerned);
5. The objective of learning how to learn (autonomy promotes reflection on their own learning, on processes and strategies used).⁸

According to Little, the importance of learners’ autonomy can be explained in terms of present and future learning: *students who accept responsibility for their own learning are more likely to achieve their goals, and once achieved, they’re more able to maintain a positive attitude to future learning.* The acceptance of responsibility by the student implies a willingness to reflect on the content and the process of learning and to integrate what they learn with what they already know.⁹

The exercise of the learner’s autonomy involves the fact of determining the time to make personal decisions about their learning, and a willingness to participate along with teachers and other learners, negotiating aspects as: identifying the learning needs and defining its objectives; planning classes; selecting the content and establishing the sequencing; selecting the appropriate

⁵ J.S. Bruner, “*El proceso mental en el aprendizaje* (The mental process on learning) (Barcelona: Narcea, 1978).

⁶ Learning by discovery or holistic. Learning where the student acquires the knowledge itself, in order to discover himself what is he learning.

⁷ H. Holec, *Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1981).

⁸ L. Dickinson, *Self-Instruction in Language Learner* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

⁹ D. Little, *Learner autonomy 1: Definitions, issues and Problems* (Dublín: Authentik, 1991).

didactic materials; training while using various techniques and strategies, but especially the meta-cognitive learning and the ability to self-assess.

Autonomy can be developed through experience during the learning process. It represents the effort to learn languages and to learn how languages are learned. The development of the autonomy fosters the ability to make decisions, the independence and the personal responsibility of the learners. During the learning process we have to create situations where students can experience various learning strategies and skills, reflecting on the effectiveness of these ones, in order to keep improving the way in which people get to learn. In this way, we can help students to become aware of their own resources and strategies.

The responsibility which we are talking about involves willingness and ability to make decisions, related to their own learning. Students must be able to make choices which meet their needs and interests; they should have the opportunity to discuss and reflect on certain issues during the class, as problems related to the process of learning, on the corresponding system, its form, use and operation, so that the degree of involvement depend on their will and collaboration with the group. Self-responsibility leads students to be honest in learning, to care about what they have learned, to self-assess and even see where they can apply what they learned. In this way, the learner will develop an active and participatory learning.

In this regard, students should be at the core of the didactic considerations of any publisher, responsible editor, institution, language school or teacher. As learning professionals, we need to facilitate and promote learning autonomy; let students see their own responsibility in their own learning process; create situations in which they exchange and compare their learning experiences with the others for a cooperative learning; help them actively participate in class lessons, reflect on the language and the learning process and develop the ability to assess the process, the strategies and the results, drawing conclusions which they may apply in the future.

Conclusions

Teaching a language is much more than teaching students to learn, to produce grammatical structures, as more factors ought to be taken into consideration. Besides the technical difficulties involved in the acquisition of skills in Spanish learned as a foreign language, there are a lot of barriers that need to be considered as well: emotional barriers, such as lack of confidence; physical barriers due to a limited contact with Spanish speakers. I would like to conclude

that the study of the content through the target language not only allows students to develop intellectually, but also to further broaden their language skills in a context of high motivation. It is impossible to motivate a group of students if teachers are the first to be unmotivated. The guidelines to increase motivation are applicable to anyone and if work does not motivate the teacher, the first thing to do is to think about finding that will that can change everything.

The paper suggests to teachers that they should use more autonomy in the form and content of their classes, while being aware of the fact that every day they learn new skills that might make them better teachers, proud of their efforts.

The new teaching methods lead towards an increasing interest on the students, and their needs, towards the respect for differences, multiculturalism and methodological adequacy considering the group with which we are faced in each particular situation.

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