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TEACHERS AND LEARNERS IN EFL CLASSES – ROLES, EXPECTATIONS, NEEDS AND INTERESTS

***Abstract:** The present paper will focus on teachers' and learners' roles, while providing a description of the current "state of the art," as regards the difficulties and problems encountered. In other words, an attempt will be made to trace some of the intrinsic factors that, either positively or negatively, affect teaching and learning habits, with a view to fostering a holistic approach to education and forging constructive, interpersonal relationships in the classroom which can facilitate the educational process. Moreover, some of the extrinsic problems relating to infrastructure, classroom environment and equipment, etc. will be discussed, as they too play an important role in the teaching-learning situation, whether this is viewed as a process or a product.*

***Key words:** co-interactants, strategies, proficiency, accuracy and appropriacy, psychological and social distance, classroom environment.*

1. Introduction

In the last twenty years or so, we have been inundated with various new techniques and methods that aim to make the teaching and learning process more interesting, thought-provoking and insightful for both parts involved in it, i.e. the teacher and the learner.

2. The roles of the teacher and the learner

One can hardly envisage a language learning situation in the absence of an interaction of the student with his / her fellow students, the teacher and the textbook. Every time the student interacts with any of these sources, she makes various hypotheses about what she is learning, and accepts or rejects them, trying out new ones. In her attempt to learn the foreign language, she is dependent on her co-interactants, as she develops a wide range of *strategies* which will be tested only in a communicative context. Strategies can be distinguished in three categories: *production strategies*,

comprehension strategies and *interactive strategies*. We will not explore any of these in the present study. We should only point out the importance of human interaction in the classroom as a condition for successful language learning and intellectual, emotional and social development.

2.1. The role of the teacher

As has been intimated so far, language teaching is a complex issue, encompassing linguistic, psycholinguistic, sociocultural, pragmatic, as well as instructional and curricula dimensions. There are a lot of factors contributing to the *dynamics* of the educational process, such as internationalism and the pragmatic status of the foreign language (e.g., English), teaching and learning styles, and program characteristics. For example, the general expectation by students, parents and teachers that learners should achieve a high level of proficiency in English when they leave school influences both language policies and how foreign language learning will evolve. Furthermore, the teaching-learning process reflects different cultural traits and traditions. In some cultures, students tend to feel more at ease in the classroom, expressing their viewpoints and agreement or disagreement; in others, a "passive" attitude towards the teacher and the target language is more common. For instance, Greek society and its educational system favour rote memorization, while western countries, in general, do not value it. Moreover, such issues as the degree of preparation of teachers and the validity of testing and evaluation procedures can have a tremendous impact on language learning.

As is patently obvious, the task or act, one may say, of "teaching" encapsulates a lot more than merely providing instruction and guidelines for students. It presupposes a psychological and philosophical knowledge on the teacher's part, so as to combine techniques in class, as well as sufficient command of the basic structure of human existence, with a view to assessing any situation accurately and appropriately.

Clearly linked to the roles defined for the learner are the roles the teacher is expected to play in the instructional process. Teacher roles, too, must ultimately be related both to assumptions about content and, at the level of approach, to particular views of language and

language learning. Some instructional systems are totally dependent on the teacher as the source of knowledge and direction; others see the teacher's role as catalyst, consultant, diagnostician, guide, and model for learning; still others try to teacher-proof the instructional system by limiting teacher initiative and building instructional content and direction into texts or lesson plans. Teacher and learner roles define the type of interaction characteristic of classrooms in which a particular method is being used. Teacher roles in methods are related to the following issues: the types of functions teachers are expected to fulfill (e.g., practice director, counselor, model), the degree of control the teacher influences over learning, the degree to which the teacher is responsible for determining linguistic content, and the interactional patterns assumed between teachers and learners. Undoubtedly, the teacher is called upon to perform several functions in foreign language learning. These are the following: teacher as director and manager, teacher as counselor and a language resource and teacher as a model and independent language user.

2.1.1. Teacher as director and manager

One of the main concerns of the teacher as a director and manager is to create a warm, stimulating atmosphere in which the students will feel secure and confident.

It is very important for learners to feel very much at home with both their teachers and fellow-learners, if they are to be expected to venture out into the deep waters of foreign language learning, to experiment with new and strange sounds, and to role-play in a language which they have barely begun to learn.

Apart from assisting in creating the right atmosphere, the teacher should also make decisions on the materials to be used, as well as the activities and games which will best accord with the learners' needs and abilities. Inasmuch as learners do not necessarily share the same cognitive and linguistic abilities, or interests and motivation, it is incumbent on the teacher to choose a wide variety of materials and teaching techniques and strategies in order to respond to the students' interests and capacities. To this end, the teacher is supposed to organize the class, deciding whether a specific role-play or game will be simulated in pairs or in groups. Bearing all this in mind, the teacher may help develop a learner-centred approach to foreign

language learning, as he / she takes into account the learners' preferences, tailoring the materials and strategies to their needs.

2.1.2. Teacher as counselor and a language resource

The second function that the foreign language teacher is expected to fulfil is that of counselor and a language resource. In other words, her responsibility is to provide the learners with the necessary *input* in order to foster understanding of the relation between language and communication. In short, she must modify and simplify her language according to the *needs* arising in each communicative situation, and to the *grammatical competence* and *language proficiency* of the students. In addition to simplifying *teacher talk*, she should resort to miming and facial expressions, as shown in a previous chapter. Learning and teaching is multi-sensory and everything in the classroom and method must imply that learning is relaxing, fun and possible to be attained.

Moreover, the teacher as a language resource should help learners to acquaint themselves with, and acquire a taste for, the *target language* and *culture*. He should make explicit that language is not to be held in a *vacuum* but should always be learnt in connection to its users and the uses to which it is put. In light of this, grammar should not be the sole reference point in foreign language learning; the teacher has to draw his students' attention to the sociocultural and pragmatic aspects of the foreign language, in order to help them assess the *accuracy* and *appropriacy* of the language they produce, both at the *sentence* level and the *discourse* level. As J. C. Richards notes, "a focus on grammar in itself is not a valid approach to the development of language proficiency."

The teacher as a counselor and a language resource should see it as her goal to provide enough *remedial work*, in order to eradicate students' errors, and encourage learners to develop their own learning strategies and techniques, so as to discover the answers to their own questions.

2.1.3. Teacher as a model and independent language user

In order to become a successful communicator and model for learners, the teacher should promote a wide range of behaviours,

psychological and social relationships such as solidarity and politeness.

Often learners have difficulties in adopting these behaviours because of the *psychological* and *social distance* that there exists between learners and materials. As a result, learners have a tendency to adopt the teacher's language behaviours to indicate attitude and role relationships, rather than those presented in materials. This is understandable, of course, since the teacher is a live model, a real human being to whom they can more easily relate.

In short, the teacher should help learners to negotiate meaning in the target language through his own active participation in it, and act as a *mediator* between the linguistic and *extra-linguistic* context of foreign language learning, as these are reflected in the textbooks and re-alia (e.g., audio-visual aids, etc.) or literature, respectively.

2.2. *The role of the learner*

What roles do learners play in the design of educational programs and systems, and how much flexibility are they left with in contributing to the learning process? In the last two decades or so, there has been a shift from Cognitive and Transformational-Generative Grammar Approaches to a Communicative view of learning. Learners, who were formerly viewed as stimulus-response mechanisms whose learning was the product of practice – reminding one of the well-known dictum, *Repetitio est mater studiorum* – are nowadays regarded as individuals who should have a say in the educational process.

"The role of the learner as negotiator - between the self, the learning process, and the object of learning - emerges from and interacts with the role of joint negotiator within the group and within the classroom procedures and activities which the group undertakes. The implication for the learner is that he should contribute as much as he gains, and thereby learn in an interdependent way".

3. *Conclusion*

Beyond the shadow of a doubt, teachers play an essential role in the foreign language classroom. Not only are they directors and

managers of the classroom environment but they also function as counselors and language resources facilitating the teaching-learning process. In addition, teachers can become models and independent language users in order to overcome "the inherent shortcomings of the foreign language classroom environment".

It has become evident that foreign language learning is far from a simple, straightforward process where teachers are the *purveyors* of knowledge and students the passive *subjects* who receive that knowledge. For successful foreign language learning, students must have both the *ability* and *desire* to learn. Otherwise, the objectives we set are doomed to failure.

Foreign language teachers, therefore, must be *flexible* enough and *sensitive* enough to respond well to the individual learning preferences, interests and needs of their learners in terms of materials, techniques, classroom methodology and teacher talk. After all, language learning is *not* a monolithic process since not all personality and environmental factors can be kept under control in a foreign language situation.

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