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Towards a More Communicative Approach in Teaching English as a Foreign Language

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Abstract: An increased awareness on the complexity of the processes involved in teaching a foreign language and the diversity of the learning contexts have led to an abandonment of the idea that there could exist an ideal method; in the recent years we have witnessed a sort of "post-method" approach, as the traditional, canonical and prescriptive methods have become obsolete, mostly due to an evolution in the formation of students. Learning a foreign language is no longer related to the development of habits or behaviors and language is increasingly seen as a means of communication and a tool of social interaction. Furthermore, the work of researchers in neurosciences (neurobiology, neurolinguistics, neurophysiology, etc.) along with that of psychologists and pedagogists have shed new insights on the way the human brain works and on the underlying mental processes of the act of learning.

Keywords: *teaching methodology; communicative approach; neurolinguistics; student-oriented teaching.*

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Introduction

In the learning process of a foreign language there are several stages that relate to the reception, processing, storage, transmission and reproduction of information. These stages can be further classified in comprehension stages and production stages, the former including the perception of oral and visual linguistic units which constitute the chain of the message, as a continuum of sounds or letter combination that is transmitted to the brain for processing and the latter referring to the recreation of the message, with its natural hesitations, detours and modifications. All these stages can be approached using various methodologies, which calls for a thorough and comprehensive expertise on the matter on the part of teachers, on the one hand, and for a certain flexibility and adaptability of the methods used, to individually address the needs of the students, on the other hand. The teaching methodology of choice requires an ongoing analysis of various factors that relate to the aim of teaching, the students' age and motivation, the cultural and social background or the subject matter of the teaching process, without losing sight of the overall efficiency of the learning process. The purpose of this article is to shed some light on the prerequisites of an efficient teaching of English as a second language, with a focus on the communication skills required by English teachers, who should always improve their communicative abilities in an attempt to nurture the students' desire to learn and kindle their interest in studying.

The Communicative Approach

In a 2019 issue of *Teaching*, a weekly newsletter written by a team of journalists from the *Chronicle* (Supiano, 2019) it was shown that, based on a survey that covered over 40.000 students, the most common discontent and source of frustration among students was: "I want my professors to stop reading PowerPoint slides word for word off of a screen and to start using the technology at hand to create a different kind of lecture that will engage their students in the learning process". If the students feel that they are treated as passive receptors of information and if they are not allowed and encouraged to express their opinion or raise pertinent questions, the information simply passes by and they fail to connect with the teacher. There is no secret here: there are teachers who read and there are teachers who teach. Regardless of the subject matter – but especially in case of teaching a foreign language – what a teacher says is shadowed by how they

say it; in other words, the storytelling becomes as least as important as the message itself. Teachers dedicate years of their lives to master a certain subject and are experts in their field of expertise; however, the success of the act of education lies in the impact a teacher manages to have on their students. Genuinely great teachers are those who blend professional expertise with communicative efficiency and make a memorable impression that can ultimately change the students' thinking and lives, for that matter, in various subtle and profound ways.

Seen from this perspective, teaching and the methodology of teaching become an act of creativity. Old, rigid methodologies that see language out of context and out of its social dimension have become a thing of the past and the emphasis has shifted from the comprehension of in-depth details about a certain linguistic subject matter to the familiarization with competences in a global meaning, providing the students with a means or a tool to communicate their ideas in various contexts. In this communicative approach, the introduction of grammar is different and the course should not follow a strict hierarchy or a grammar scale but rather punctual issues that explicitly show the students the basic structures of language so that they can play with them and become creative interlocutors. The classroom becomes a simulator where, based on authentic oral and written materials, both the teacher and the students try to replicate genuine communicative situations of day to day life. This communicative approach, however, comes along with a whole series of challenges and stress, both on the part of the teachers, who need to reinvent themselves and constantly learn to use feedback and various other instruments to measure the efficiency of their method and on the part of the students, who play a larger role in the classroom and need to step more out of their comfort zone to begin communicating in the foreign language. As far as teachers are concerned, some of the main perils they need to dodge in their attempt of becoming better communicators are related to a *wrong positioning* in the classroom, the *focus on themselves* rather than on the students and a so-called "*false-consensus effect*", which is a sort of cognitive bias whereby a person tends to overestimate the extent to which their opinion, beliefs, preferences, values or habits are normal and typical for the others. Students, on the other hand, are also confronted with a series of challenges, that range from taking on a *more active role* in the classroom (role play, working in groups or teams, etc.) to the *continuous use of a foreign language* in itself to acquire the required competences in that particular language, as almost all the resources made available to them are or should be in the target language.

Communication Errors

The role and job-description of a modern teacher have witnessed dramatic changes over the years. Nowadays, great teachers are expected to be excellent public speakers, master communicators and negotiators as well as good managers and leaders. Flexibility and adaptability have become two of the most sought after skills, as the rhythm of societal change has drastically increased in the last decades, leading to constant surfing on the internet, the use of intelligent devices in the classroom and an abundance of information and cognitive overload that requires a steady hand at the helm to take the students out of murky waters. Mastering a subject is no longer enough: good communication with the students is a prerequisite of an efficient teaching process. However, a simple search on the internet for "communication mistakes" and for "communication skills" shows us that users are more confident in their skills than in their potential lack of knowledge in the field (110.000.000 results compared to 223.000.000 results), which is yet another proof that the information is always there but we fail to take a closer look to our performance and the means of improving it. It is undeniable that it takes excellent communication skills to be promoted in top positions, for instance. But this "executive presence" should not be a prerogative of top managers and leaders and it could benefit specialists in any field and aspects related not only to careers, but life in general. Avoiding certain communication errors can help anyone improve their relationships with the others and grow as a person.

One of the major pitfalls in teaching a foreign language is a teacher's *focus on themselves*, losing sight of the student's needs and perceptions. Regardless of the methodology used, students tend to feel disengaged, lose focus and become bored, confused or frustrated with the course unless they are treated as active participants. A productive sharing of information requires a delicate balance between the level of the class and the level of information being taught, a right assessment of the classroom by using early course feedback, and the use of the right tools to measure progress. It has been proved that most students learning a foreign language at university level become less motivated in time as over 60 percent believe that it is not possible to become fluent in less than 2 years. The same study also found that, as far as German and Spanish students of English were concerned, 60 percent believed that "learning a second language was mostly learning how to translate from English" (Murcia, 1997). A lack of motivation which is not quickly identified and addressed can be devastating concerning the outcome of the course. Instead, teachers should focus less on the observance of a

curriculum, for instance, or on their own performance in front of the class and more on establishing a more personal relationship with the students and to actively involve them in class. Although it may seem counterintuitive, in a foreign language course it is the students who should have the word more often than the teacher. This is closely related to a *wrong positioning* in the classroom on the part of foreign language teachers, who tend to monopolize the discussion and merely present their knowledge on the matter. While the purpose of teaching is, indeed, the transfer of information from teachers to students, quality communication involves empathy, emotional intelligence and, most importantly, dialogue. Long, dense and hard-to-follow lectures under the form of monologues disconnect students with their teacher and only help them theoretically, leaving them completely unprepared for a practical usage of the new language. In the "*Positioning Theory*", Harré and van Langenhove (1999) narrow down the potential modes of positioning to two: interactive and reflexive. The two authors argue that interactive positioning refers to assigning positions and tasks to the others, while reflexive positioning involves assigning such positions and tasks to oneself. Given the intrinsically dynamic nature of language courses, a reflexive positioning would significantly reduce communication and dialogue with the students, hence leading to fewer chances of interaction. Furthermore, it needs to be mentioned that positioning may also refer strictly to a teacher's posture during the class, that is standing or seated, behind, in front or at the side of students, depending on the type of activity, the aim of an assignment or the interaction pattern. Such choices may have a powerful impact on the way the message is conveyed but they are related more to non-verbal communication, or body language and they are not the purpose of this article.

Another common communication error is represented by the so-called "false-consensus effect", a psychological concept whereby teachers make false assumptions about what their learners actually say or do, because most of the times their thinking is biased by previous knowledge and unconsciously hear and see only what they are accustomed to hear and see. One of the main causes of misunderstanding is jumping to conclusions and making false assumptions about a certain situation or act, without paying full attention to the other side of the story. In the methodology of teaching a foreign language, this false-consensus effect can take various forms. For instance, based on research and personal experience, a teacher may insist on developing certain skills related to speaking when learners actually would need a foreign language in its written form (such as to write emails or to publish certain materials in that particular foreign language). Or a teacher

can wrongly assume that their learners are already knowledgeable in certain basic fields of language and move on to more advanced matters without a proper assessment of the class level. According to Gilovich, "the false consensus effect refers to a tendency for people's estimates of the prevalence of a given response to be positively correlated with their own response" (Gilovich, 1990; Myers, 2015). This psychological trap can also significantly influence the process of grading learners, as teachers are sometimes subjectively drawing their own conclusions based on rather few and poorly correlated interactions with their students. Another corollary of positioning is the perceived power/control balance, as teachers may perceive various degrees of power in their relationships with the others and that will, in turn, influence their discourse and attitude in class. In an article on positioning in classroom discourse studies, it is argued that "teacher positioning shapes identity constructions, instructional decisions, student engagement and learning in the classroom environment" (Kayi-Aydar & Miller, 2018), which is indicative of the impact of positioning on the teaching methodology and the educational outcome.

On the other hand, a communicative approach also comes with certain challenges on the part of learners. The accent on communication leads us to one of the most common side effects: it puts a lot of stress on students., as they are forced to accept a *more active role*. First, such a communicative approach is not a prescriptive methodology as teachers no longer hold the primary position in class (using up almost all the teaching time to share information to students) and it allows students to shape their own classes according to their needs. While there are certain common activities, the overall structure of each lesson and the direction in which the class goes are left entirely at the learners' discretion. Based on role plays and group activities, the students are bound to find a way to take up these roles and transmit the necessary language content. Such an approach to teaching a foreign language requires an extensive use of authentic documents, almost limitless photocopies, the use of laptops or other forms of technology. It has been argued as well that such an approach is difficult to implement in countries with a more authoritative tradition in teaching concerning the relationship between the teacher and the student, where learners should show unreciprocated respect to their teachers and that it may give rise to certain disciplinary issues (O'Sullivan, 2001). While admittedly challenging, the benefits of such an approach outweigh the difficulties and efforts should fully be made to increase the learners' participation in class. Another difficulty on the part of the students, as far as a communicative approach is concerned, is that regardless of their level they need *to learn a foreign language*

using the very same unfamiliar language, which can sometimes be confusing and demoralizing. The most common issues are related to a lack of confidence in students' ability related to the production of language and to the stress of having to use the foreign language in the classroom, exposing themselves to the potential judgement of their peers. An assignment a teacher may give to their learners is thus not only difficult at a cognitive level, but also psychologically challenging and stressful. Especially with older age, not being able to find one's words and express themselves can be destabilizing and embarrassing and teachers should insist on the importance of joining this game and the temporary regression it causes while continuously providing support and active encouragement, on the one hand, and accurately marking progress, on the other hand.

Conclusions

With all the new discoveries in methodologies and advancements in the field of psychology and neurosciences, teaching has become more of an art and, particularly in case of foreign languages teaching, it requires a comprehensive knowledge on aspects seemingly unrelated to the regular activity of teaching. As society progresses, it is only natural for the educational process to be in a continuous change and to embrace the new approaches in an attempt to continuously improve the efficiency of the act and to better correlate the information shared in schools and universities with the reality of the labor market. A communicative approach in teaching English as a foreign language shifts the emphasis from the teacher to the learner and sees language as a tool to the used in a socio-cultural context rather than as a discipline that needs to be learnt by heart and used mechanically.

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