

PRINCIPLES OF EFFECTIVE ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

Abstract: The paper studies some principles of effective foreign language teaching, focusing on the foundations of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL). Modern foreign language teaching methodology and pedagogy stress individualization of teaching, differentiation of tasks, learner involvement, group and cooperative activities, encouragement of learner autonomy and development of positive self-concept as principles that should be applied for achieving effectiveness in teaching. The paper aims to determine how realistic it is to achieve these prerequisites in mixed-ability classes characterized by a big diversity of learners.

INTRODUCTION

The quality of teaching English determines the effectiveness of teaching and influences success in the English classroom. To be successful in their work, teachers of English should apply some principles of modern foreign language teaching: individualization of teaching, differentiation of tasks, learner involvement, group and cooperative activities, encouragement of learner autonomy and development of positive self-concept. Meeting these prerequisites of successful teaching is even more stressed in teaching environments that challenge the EFL teacher's knowledge and skills most, like big mixed-ability classes and a great diversity of learners – both being recognized as EFL teacher's professional reality, irrespective of levels (s)he teaches.

1. INDIVIDUALISATION OF TEACHING

There are marked differences in learning capability and learning styles in any class, especially at primary level. Learners differ from one another in ability, prior knowledge, strengths and weaknesses, interests and experience, while some have learning difficulties or special educational needs. The effectiveness of English language teaching is very much affected by the differences learners display both in learning (a variety of learning styles, speed, language ability and motivation) and in personality (different levels of self-confidence, social skills, curiosity, risk-taking and persistence). An important factor determining success in an English language classroom is the appropriateness of teachers' response to the needs of every child.

How much they will be able to apply adequate methodological and pedagogical principles depends mainly on individual teacher's attitude, knowledge and skills. If a teacher is ready to search for the reasons behind a child's difficulties in foreign language learning, (s)he will be willing to learn more about the child's condition and to respond accordingly: adjusting own practices to facilitate the learning of all children experiencing foreign language learning difficulties. Similarly, teacher's readiness to encourage learners who are specially talented is crucial for their development. Differentiation of tasks can help learners to develop at their own speeds, securing the indispensable feeling of achievement.

Foreign language learning, like any learning, is influenced by a learner's personality and interests. As Howard Gardner¹ pointed out a quarter of a century ago, we all possess several kinds of intelligences, and the most prominent ones define our learning styles. Proponents of modern teaching suggest matching teaching to learners' learning styles, activating the different intelligences and engaging all senses, in order to secure effective learning. Otherwise, learning difficulties can easily appear (Hannell 2008: 15). Hannell (2008: 16) discusses different intelligences² and their relevance to language learning, while Brewster et al. (2004: 36) list language activities that facilitate learning:

- Verbal-linguistic intelligence characterizes a word-smart learner who likes to listen and to talk, read and write. Traditional teaching, based mainly on spoken and written language, appeals to them most, as well as activities involving stories, poetry or drama (storytelling, role-play, using puppets, crosswords).
- Logical-mathematical intelligence means that a learner is mathematics smart and likes logic, mathematical order and systems, which characterize orderly sequenced learning. These learners enjoy research and using ICT in learning and all kinds of puzzles, sequencing, classifying, ordering and ranking activities.
- Interpersonal intelligence is typical of people-smart learners who learn best in group or pair activities, or sharing ideas and supporting each other (through interviews, surveys, dialogues, or peer teaching).
- Kinaesthetic intelligence means that learners are body smart and learn best through practical, active, or physical activities (Total Physical Response, dancing, action rhymes, craftwork).
- Musical-rhythmic intelligence characterizes music-smart learners who get highly involved in language activities like songs, chants, or action rhymes, but get distracted by unpleasant sounds and background noises.
- Intrapersonal intelligence is typical of self-smart pupils, who learn best through independent thinking and working alone (they prefer creative writing, project work, or learning diaries to activities involving group work).

¹ In his book *Frames of Mind* (1983), Gardner suggested that we possess a range of intelligences and mentioned seven different intelligences.

² To Gardner's set of seven intelligences, she adds two more: naturalist intelligence and aesthetic intelligence. (Hannell 2008: 16)

- Spatial intelligence means that learners are picture-smart and approach learning through visual patterns, graphs, design or construction, and find learning easy when using mind maps, drawing, diagrams, maps, videos, shape puzzles or visualizations.
- Naturalist intelligence is obvious in nature-smart learners who learn most effectively in contact with nature and benefit most from hands-on activities that involve the natural world.
- Aesthetic intelligence means that learners are beauty smart and very aware of sensory information like colours, shapes, textures, perfumes and enjoy learning materials (books, worksheets and equipment) that have an aesthetic appeal.

In order to secure effectiveness, an EFL teacher should offer alternatives (e.g. give information in several formats) to learners so that they can work in the way that suits them best. Varying the kinds of activities, an EFL teacher can facilitate learning of all kinds of learners. As young learners need to use all their senses, multi-sensory learning³ will greatly contribute to effective EFL learning (especially TPR that satisfies their need for physical action and learning by ‘doing’). Visualisation helps learners memorise new vocabulary, and teachers can use objects, pictures, flashcards, illustrations, photos, and drawings.

Studies show that multisensory structured language methodology engages learners with EFL learning difficulties (Viskari 2005: 70). Touching, tasting, feeling, smelling, pointing, using actions, mime and gestures, are all techniques that help introduce new vocabulary and convey meaning (Brewster et al. 2004: 87). For example, visuals (pictures, flash cards, posters) and puppets can be used for vocabulary teaching and revising, as well as for presenting grammar in an inductive way, allowing learners to spot patterns and structures. Teaching grammar interactively, through demonstration of patterns in terms of functions, can very much be supported by the use of teaching aids and multisensory approach in appropriately designed activities. Acknowledging learners’ different learning profiles, an EFL teacher will be able to take these differences into account and engage all learners in EFL learning.

2. DIFFERENTIATION OF TASKS

A strategy that takes into account all above factors and responds best to individual differences is differentiation of tasks and activities. The teacher can use resource materials (books, worksheets, CDs) at different levels of complexity to differentiate activities, or grade tasks according to difficulty, taking care that even in a simpler/easier form they represent an adequate challenge for particular learner(s) and allow for their learning and progress.

³ Neuro Linguistic Programming is the approach to language teaching/learning which stresses the relationship between the mind and language, and the importance of using different senses (visual, auditory, kinaesthetic, olfactory and gustatory) to enhance learning.

Brewster et al. (2004: 226) suggest that in each lesson, in addition to core language, a teacher should prepare and use extension activities for the more able pupils and support activities for the less able. They propose considering seven key factors of organizing differentiated learning activities, one of them being providing extra help to some pupils, like checklists, a substitution table with useful phrases for doing writing activities, posters, picture cards, etc. Another useful suggestion they give is demanding different outcomes from pupils in accordance with their language ability, asking the less able to perform the activity or draw something or talk about it, while the more able pupils should be asked to write something, retell a story or speak in front of the others. To achieve this, a teacher should have substantial sets of materials specially created for certain lessons and organized according to topics, language structures practiced, or any other criterion.

Differentiation of classroom activities can be done in practising any of the four language skills, not only grammar or vocabulary. Free writing task offers many possibilities, both at primary and secondary levels. Tasks can involve writing about the same topic in different styles: an account of the weekend activity can be given in the first person, for the less able, or in the third person, as a report or even as a poem, for advanced learners (Hennell 2008: 69). Also, a teacher can give an especially challenging writing task or project work to a group of learners who particularly enjoy writing and encourage them to collaborate and produce a class newspaper or a class diary of events.

3. LEARNER INVOLVEMENT

Effective teaching aims to engage the whole learner, both affectively (emotionally) and cognitively, so that feeling and thinking are interlinked. Reduced anxiety lowers the affective filter⁴ and ‘sets the scene’ for a positive attitude to language learning, positive learning experiences and environment, leading to more success: if learners are engaged with what they are learning, if they think that the teacher cares about them, respects them and listens to them, they stay interested and motivated, and their self-esteem rises.

The affective need of young learners is satisfied by letting them experience fun in EFL learning. The feelings of enjoyment, challenge and success determine the level of a learner’s engagement in the difficult task of learning a foreign language, and make the teacher’s job easier (Brewster et al. 2004: 218). Using enjoyable and creative materials and activities (like games), participatory and discovery methods, helps pupils experience learning as a positive and unthreatening process. Learners who are emotionally involved in the learning and encouraged to think about it express greater creativity (Harmer 2007: 58).

On the other hand, if young learners have negative experiences with EFL learning, like frequent failure or feelings that they are not good at language learning,

⁴ Stephen Krashen used this metaphor to name the “internal processing system that subconsciously screens incoming language based on what psychologists call ‘affect’: the learner’s motives, needs, attitudes, and emotional states” which “act to limit intake”. Stevick (1996 : 48-49)

they tend to lose interest and may underachieve. This is often the case with learners who have foreign language learning difficulties, as they generally learn slowly and quickly forget already learned lexis or structures. Positive thinking can help them overcome such stumbling blocks and the teacher can create inclusive environment by helping them concentrate on the things they are good at, even if such things are not linguistic abilities. The teacher should devise methods for restoring motivation and self-esteem by ensuring learners experience success (Westwood, 2004: 377). Learners' confidence can be (re)gained if the tasks are of realistic level of challenge and if learners are given choices about the level of difficulty they want to tackle (Hannell 2008: 23). What is more, praise in such cases helps these learners develop a very strong feeling of success and enhances their confidence.

One of the main reasons of failure in EFL learning is anxiety, often experienced as fear of making mistakes in grammar and pronunciation, of not understanding the teacher, or of forgetting vocabulary (Schwarz 1997). Rinvolucris⁵ (2006: 11) suggests using enjoyable icebreakers and warm-up activities for calming anxiety, releasing energy and opening up the linguistic unconscious, and offers a range of listening activities specifically aimed at overcoming anxiety in writing dictations. If pupils feel comfortable and relaxed their creative powers can be released and learning can happen with much more ease. An inattentive learner might be bright, but very bored (Hennell 2008: 108). Interesting activities, involving competitiveness that is not only based on linguistic skills, may foster involvement.

4. GROUP AND COOPERATIVE ACTIVITIES

Social relationships and learning as social interaction are stressed by Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory of learning, which sees social interaction as crucial to the development of higher cognitive functions. His social-constructivist model of learning explains learning as learners' understandings constructed from the social interaction of their learning contexts (Brewster et al. 2005: 30). A foreign language is learned in interaction with peers and the teacher. The learner should be provided with the right 'scaffolding', i.e. help resulting from interaction with a person with better knowledge, such as a teacher (Harmer, 2007: 60).

Cooperation among students of different abilities enables foreign language development through peer teaching and helps learners develop social skills, like tolerance, peer respect, taking turns, listening to each other, resolving conflict, encouraging each other, and collaborating. It develops positive relationships and decreases divisiveness and prejudice regarding diversity (related to learners with special educational needs and socially marginalized learners).

In cooperative activities learners work in groups to achieve a common goal. It is different from other group work activities as cooperative activities have a definite outcome (specified at the beginning of the activity) and members of a

⁵ Activities annexed to the paper are adaptations of Mario Rinvolucris's ideas in his book *Humanising Your Coursebook*.

group work together to accomplish it, each giving own specific contribution. There is positive interdependence of group members who are all responsible for the success of the group and have to do their own share of work. In cooperative learning learners are placed in heterogeneous groups of four, chosen by ability (one top-level, two middle-level and one low achiever). Cooperative learning requires learners to interact with each other and use the language for real purposes. It promotes development of a number of sociolinguistic skills, as pupils learn how to give instructions, explain, paraphrase, give opinion, request a justification, ask and answer questions, agree or disagree, and negotiate.

Learners with FL learning difficulties or special educational needs are included fully and benefit from small group work as they feel supported by other group members, their peers can give them explanations better than a teacher can do it to the whole class, they tend to memorise the language used in interaction much better, and they gradually build confidence in using a foreign language in communication. They also benefit from the absence of competitiveness within a group and feel less anxiety and more confidence to use a foreign language. However, if cooperative activities involve competition among groups, all members of a group feel motivated to do their best for the success of the group.

Cooperative learning is a successful teaching strategy when used with a plan and when learners are well-instructed and prepared for this kind of activity. Pair and group work are widely used in English language classes, introduced by instructions given in course books, and teachers favour them to individual work. These activities enable interaction and can prepare learners for true cooperative learning. It is believed that cooperative learning is effective in both cognitive and affective areas of pupils' learning and development. It enhances learners' satisfaction with their learning experience and promotes their self-esteem, resulting in more a positive attitude to learning English and confidence in using it.

5. LEARNER AUTONOMY

Encouraging learner autonomy means helping learners become responsible for their own learning, decrease dependence on the teacher, and develop skills of lifelong learning. Instead of assuming a passive role in the process of learning and relying exclusively on the teacher for the development of own knowledge and skills, learners should develop both language learning strategies and language use strategies. This means that they need to be aware how they learn best, which learning styles and strategies they find most successful in learning English as a foreign language, and how best to use the acquired language and skills to retrieve information about the language, rehearse English language structures and communicate in English (Cohen 2006: 53).

Studies have shown that the ability to learn of learners with foreign language learning difficulties has been increased through the teaching of cognitive and metacognitive strategies, and that strategy instruction is crucial to them (Beckman 2006: 49). If learners are encouraged to reflect on their own learning and the

mistakes they make, to assess own accomplishments and review progress, to plan own learning and set goals, they become independent learners and acquire skills of lifelong learning. Teaching strategy use demands a lot of patience and persistence on the part of the teacher as pupils develop strategies gradually and over longer periods. Pupils benefit from strategy instruction not only in learning English, but in learning other school subjects.

Brewster et al. (2005: 55) give tips for developing metacognitive and cognitive strategies in teaching young learners. Learners can be involved in planning certain aspects of their learning, encouraged to work out simple grammar rules (e.g. when *a* or *an* is used with certain nouns), to hypothesise about the word meaning, to analyse and compare differences and similarities between English and their mother tongue or between two cultures. They can also be taught to reflect on the content and the process of their learning, to complete self-assessment sheets or personal portfolios and reflect on their performance, strengths and weaknesses (through self-correction), and to review systematically for long-term retention. Strategies like memorizing, sorting, matching, classifying, making links, sequencing, generalizing, problem solving, predicting, risk taking, and organizing work, are examples of cognitive strategies which are usually developed by giving students language tasks and activities (Brewster et al. 2005: 56). These strategies are more individually determined and influenced by learners' learning styles.

Learners with learning difficulties tend to be passive and find it hard to evaluate own work (Hannell 2008: 21). Constant encouragement to reflect on their own learning can help them take responsibility for own progress. Learning cognitive and metacognitive strategies helps them develop and use a personal study process, improve accuracy, enhance memory, acknowledge their mistakes, learn how to correct themselves, learn how to 'try', learn there is more than one right way to do things, and increase self-esteem (Beckman 2006: 50).

6. POSITIVE LEARNER SELF-CONCEPT

Giving reassuring feedback, like praise, is a way to establish a good relationship between the EFL teacher and pupils. The teacher should praise good work, like student's using the foreign language accurately and creatively, making a marked improvement, listening and following instructions well; good behaviour should be praised as well, like trying or achieving something difficult for the first time, persisting with a difficult task, working well with peers and sharing, observing classroom rules, completing homework on time, or producing tidy work (Brewster et al. 2004: 222). Brewster et al. (2004: 222) suggest using simple language to praise young learners (*well done, brilliant, superb, good reading/writing/spelling, what neat work*), or even giving praise in learners' mother tongue. Hannell (2008: 21) points out that the teacher should make it clear to her pupils that making an attempt is an achievement in itself and should give positive feedback whenever a learner with language difficulties takes risks in using a foreign language. Viskari (2005: 70) sees praise as a strategy for creating inclusive setting

– giving praise to the class as a whole occasionally has a positive effect on the atmosphere in the class as pupils feel they are all appreciated and treated equally.

Effective language teaching emphasizes equal importance of affective and cognitive dimensions of education. Self-concept is viewed as involving both cognitive and affective elements in learning English as a foreign language (Mercer 2008: 183). The concept is relevant to EFL as it affects a learner's behaviour and attitude and influences performance in learning English. It is shaped by a learner's experiences, so failure can lead to a negative self-concept, while success contributes to the positive one.

Harmer (2007: 101) points out a well-known truth: nothing motivates like success nor does anything demotivate like failure. The sense of achievement that learners feel comes after the effort they put to do a task, an activity or an exercise. However, the level of difficulty should be appropriate, learners should be challenged without being threatened by something they cannot do. This is particularly important when teaching learners with FL learning difficulties or children with special educational needs. Many factors can influence their self-concept and self-esteem, how they feel about themselves and how confident they are. All learners should feel valued and respected as persons, both for their ideas and feelings. They should feel the class atmosphere as a friendly environment in which the teacher and the peers are honest when expressing either praise or criticism. Above all, they need to feel included in all class activities, tasks and duties and welcomed as group members. A teacher of English who manages to create an inclusive environment will succeed in making English classes a most enjoyable and stimulating experience for all learners.

The basic factors determining self-concept of young learners are safety and shelter (school should be experienced as a safe and warm place where they feel comfortable). Teachers of English who tend to create a friendly, safe and comfortable atmosphere, manage to involve all learners in classroom activities and to give them equal opportunities for linguistic development. Thus, they certainly foster their learners' social development and make own lessons successful.

The family also plays an important role in determining a learner's beliefs and attitude. Previous learning experiences (success and failure), teacher's and peers' approval, teacher's personality and behaviour, are also factors influencing a learner's self-esteem. Positive self-concept is accompanied by a sense of achievement, feeling good about oneself, belief in own ability to improve, persistence and determination, self-motivation and confidence.

CONCLUSION

The principles and strategies for effective teaching stress the role of the English language teacher in creating environments fostering success. The teacher's attitude is crucial in applying these principles and being flexible in the language classroom. Learner diversity requires teachers to respond to their needs and to adjust own teaching styles to the variety of levels, speeds, and styles of learning. Aiming to foster learners' linguistic and social development, teachers of English aim at effective teaching.

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PRINCIPI EFIKASNE NASTAVE ENGLESKOG JEZIKA

Rezime: U radu se ispituju neki principi ostvarivanja efikasne nastave stranih jezika, sa posebnim naglaskom na osnovne pretpostavke uspešne nastave engleskog jezika kao stranog. Savremena metodika i pedagogija nastave stranog jezika naglašava individualizaciju nastave, diferenciranje zadataka, motivisano učešće učenika, kooperativne aktivnosti, razvijanje učenikove samostalnosti i samopouzdanja, kao principe čija primena povećava efikasnost nastave. Rad teži da utvrdi koliko je ostvarivanje ovih principa realno u savremenoj nastavi engleskog jezika, za koju je karakterističan rad u velikim odeljenjima i izražene individualne razlike među učenicima. Zaključuje se da se primenom pomenutih principa nastava stranih jezika može znatno unaprediti i efikasnost ostvariti na višem nivou.

Ključne reči: savremena nastava engleskog jezika, principi efikasne nastave, individualne razlike učenika, teškoće u učenju stranog jezika.