

Chapter XXIII

TEACHING ADOLESCENT STUDENTS: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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Abstract: Adolescence is a critical period of life and only if teachers understand its dynamic nature, are they able to identify students' needs and to assist them in the process of growing up and learning. Students are motivated to learn when they see the relevance of the content and if they can find a connection between instruction and the demands of modern society. Therefore, instruction needs to provide an academic challenge and develop the life skills that students need in future. This paper presents findings from some small-scale qualitative research that was carried out with adolescent students and their teachers in two different educational institutions in Serbia. The research had two aims: to establish what competencies adolescent students consider important for their future and to discover how teachers attempt to address the needs of their students. In order to understand what young people view as important for the future, in-depth semi-structured interviews were carried out with 14 students. In-depth interviews with the teachers helped establish what steps teachers should take to assist the adolescents to develop life skills. The findings indicate that collaboration, critical thinking, and taking responsibility for learning are identified as areas that students need to develop in order to be successful in school and later in life.

Keywords: *adolescence, affective skills, collaboration, critical thinking.*

Introduction

Globalization has introduced a number of critical changes, and as our society undergoes transformation, so should education. The pace of transformation will cause many jobs to disappear in the near future, and unless young people acquire new competencies, they may not be prepared for the professions that will be in demand. Although there is a common agreement that schools need to equip students with a new set of skills, curriculum does not include teaching these skills. Teaching core academic subjects remains vital, but not enough to ensure that students are ready to participate in the modern world as responsible citizens. In such a rapidly changing world, adolescent students are often left to themselves.

Adolescence is the period in life characterized by significant cognitive, physical, and social changes: adolescents become cognitively ready for abstract thinking, their body matures, and their social status changes. All these changes make adolescence a turbulent period of life and this age group is often considered difficult to relate to. Adolescent students experience difficulties at school and teachers may label them as rebels. Unlike children, adolescents are not too eager to please the teacher and will not take part in activities to gain teacher approval. They are also not prepared to show the same understanding for a teacher as adults would do. Only if teachers understand the dynamic nature of adolescence, will they be able to help their students in the process of growing up.

Education will be effective for adolescent students if their psychological characteristics are taken into account. Sheppard and Levy (2019: 194) point out that “teachers must have the ability to observe and listen to students’ emotional reactions and allow for ambiguity in learning experience”. Instruction that relies on lectures, abstract concepts, and that is mainly concerned with transferring knowledge will not be very successful. Interactive teaching that enables students to share their views and that is related to students’ experiences will be more appropriate than any attempt to teach from the position of someone who knows everything. The starting point has to be the potential of the young people and what they already know.

Theoretical Background

If education is understood as a process that equips students with required knowledge, understanding, skills, and develops attitudes, then current teaching practices need to be re-examined. Bridgestock (2009) explores qualities that students would need in the future, concluding that they currently do not receive adequate preparation. Building of knowledge capacity is not enough, and students need to develop higher order thinking skills, collaboration, resilience, and affective skills (see for example Miri, David, Zoller 2007). In spite of numerous educational reforms that have an increase in student achievement as their aim, necessary life skills seem not to be taught.

Advancements in technology have changed the nature of education. Socket (2014) points to the relative popularity and use of technological tools, both in and out of the classroom. Indeed, many adolescents spend a great amount of time in online environments. They socialize online, seek help through social networks, and establish their identity in the virtual world. In a case study that explores the ways in which technologies assist literacy development, Black (2009: 695) explains that “youths visited online help sites and forums to find information about how to create and maintain various web pages, forums, and

LiveJournal accounts.” As communication moves online and allows informal learning to take place in the virtual world, students encounter new obstacles. They find the amount of information on the Internet overwhelming and they are unable to evaluate its quality. To help young people, schools should find ways to teach them how to evaluate information from a wide range of sources, that is, to assist students in developing critical thinking skills.

Critical thinking is a cognitive activity that encourages students to discover deeper meaning. The International Baccalaureate Middle Years Programme defines critical thinking as “Specific cognitive skills, such as analyzing and interpreting, used to consider ideas, arguments and points of view, and to reach a conclusion” (MYP Language acquisition guide 2014: 102). Unfortunately, students do not have “much practice applying knowledge to new contexts, communicating in complex ways, using it to solve problems, or using it as a platform to develop creativity” (Rosefsky Savera, Opfer 2012: 9). To help students develop higher-order thinking skills, teachers need to teach those skills explicitly and provide opportunities for students to practice using them. Ustunluoglu (2004:3) points out that teachers can activate critical thinking by prompting students to be “aware of their perceptions, assumptions, prejudices, and values, and can help students break old habits to construct a new point of view.” Tasks that require students to employ more complex thinking would promote discussion and problem solving. Teaching students to think critically is a time consuming process and the results may not be immediately visible. Barahal (2008: 301) maintains that teaching to think “requires a focus on the student and looking for clues as to the current state of their thinking”. Tasks that are designed to employ critical thinking skills require teachers to adjust their syllabus, design additional material, and allow students more time to complete them. Analyzing texts, finding flaws with arguments, and looking for commonalities is worth teaching and learning, but these activities may not be easy for students.

Communication and collaboration are skills that are also valuable for future academic settings and work. Having in mind the importance of social interaction (Vygotsky 1978), the big step forward is the growing emphasis on the dialogue that takes place in the classroom and to its pedagogical value. Socio-cultural theories of learning, like those that originate from Vygotsky’s research emphasize the importance of conversation as a medium of learning and define successful education as a “long dialogue” (Mercer in Thornbury, Slade 2006). Bruner (in Williams, Burden 1997: 29) points out that the dialogue and cooperation with others enable students to develop a sense of individuality. He believes that effective learning takes place when students are assisted during the conversation and when their minds are developed through dialogue with others.

Methodology

Context and participants

This small-scale study was originally designed as second language acquisition research, and was conducted during the 2014–2015 academic year. It had two aims. The first one was to establish what factors contribute to successful foreign or second language learning, and what competencies adolescent students consider important for their future. The second aim was to discover how teachers address the development of competencies identified as important. The data gathered pointed out that both teachers and students would relate language acquisition to the learning process in general, and their contributions emphasized the importance of assisting students in developing critical thinking, communication, and collaboration.

The study was conducted in two educational institutions in Serbia. The first institution was a privately owned high school where English is the language of instruction. The second institution was a high school that follows the national program. The reason for including two schools with such a different background was to establish what both groups identify as successful teaching practices that promote both second language acquisition and learning in general.

The research questions were:

- What skills do adolescent students consider necessary for success in school and in life?
- What skills do teachers consider necessary for their students' success in school and in life?
- How do teachers assist their students in developing those skills?

Data

Qualitative research was a logical choice for achieving the aim of this study. The format of qualitative research enabled the researcher to introduce both students' and teachers' voices into the account. The nature of interaction generated during the interviews allowed students and teachers to explain how they perceived their roles in the educational context. It also prompted them to think about necessary changes. The openness and readiness to talk about their convictions could not have been achieved through other forms of research.

Qualitative interviews and analysis of students work were used for collecting data.

Interviews

Students' opinions were gathered from fourteen students. The first group of six students came from a school where English was the language of instruction (Student 1 – Student 6). The interviews were conducted in English. The interviewed students were learning English as their second language and they were all intermediate level language learners. The second group consisted of eight students from a Serbian (state) high school that followed the national program (Student 7 – Student 14). The students were learning English as a foreign language and the interviews were conducted in Serbian. Two in-depth interviews were conducted with students from the first group and three students took part in each of these interviews. One focus group interview was conducted with students from the second group. Eight students participated in this focus group interview.

Teachers' opinions were gathered from six teachers who taught high school students in the same schools that the interviewed students attended. Three teachers worked in the private high school (Teacher 1 – Teacher 3) and three teachers worked in the Serbian high school (Teacher 4 – Teacher 6). All teachers taught languages: two teachers taught English as a foreign language, one teacher taught English language and literature, one taught French, and one taught Serbian as a foreign language. Four individual interviews were conducted and two teachers were interviewed together. In total, there were four in-depth interviews with teachers.

The in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted to establish aspects related to participants' thoughts and intentions. Through semi-structured interviews, students and teachers answered previously composed questions. The questions were asked in the same order. They were open type questions and participants had the opportunity to express their views on certain problems or occurrences. All participants were asked all questions but during the interviews, additional questions were introduced to clarify participants' views. Semi-structured questions gave an opportunity to teachers to initiate new topics and to discuss possible ways to teach new skills they considered important. After initial interviews were completed, additional interviews with some teachers were requested. In that way, additional data were gathered that were not within the scope of the originally devised research.

All participants were guaranteed anonymity. The interviews were recorded and transcribed with the permission of the teachers and the students, which enabled detailed analysis. The comments that were in English are given verbatim. The comments in Serbian were translated so some of the language nuances might have been lost in the translation. Interviews with students and teachers enabled triangulation.

Analysis of students' work

Throughout the school year, students from the private school were asked to reflect on their work during language acquisition classes. Their tasks were part of the syllabus and were not designed to be part of the research. Students were asked to write about the challenges of the world they live in. Some of their reflections are included in this paper.

Results

Digital literacy and critical thinking skills

A contemporary society requires educational practices that are different than those used in the past. Both teachers and students identified the use of technology as an important aspect of education. One teacher explained how students know much more than they did in the past.

Teacher 3: When I went to school, there were questions that I could not answer. The students I teach have never experienced this. If my students have a question, they google it and they have an answer. Sometimes they have 30 answers, and they have to figure out the right answer, and that is another of the life skills that we have to teach.

This comment is aligned with Kessler's warning that, "the wealth of information is both impressive and overwhelming [...] we are likely to misunderstand or miss out on some sources" (Kessler 2013:13). Indeed, adolescents embrace technology and use it abundantly, but they still need teachers' assistance to approach it with critical awareness. The access to technology offers students novel ways of gaining knowledge and interaction and they are not afraid of becoming involved in online communities. Teachers see their role as guiding students to become competent users of modern technologies. However, not all teachers consider themselves ready for this task.

Teacher 1: First of all, they need to learn how to use technology, and secondly, we need to teach them not to be too dependent on it.

Teacher 2: I would like to be more competent. Often I do not know what they are talking about. I don't know how to help them.

The interviewed students claim that they know how to use technology and that is aligned with teachers' perspective that technology gives a sense of power to young people. They turn to the Internet to find the information they need and take it as authority rather than consulting their teachers. Teachers are concerned that their students have not developed information literacy.

Teacher 4: My students can rarely tell me what a reliable source is. Often-times, they take for granted that everything they read on the Internet is reliable.

Developing critical thinking is vital if information is to be interpreted accurately. Black (2009: 693) points out that students need the “ability to seek out and critically evaluate information across a range of media”. Kessler (2013:310) emphasizes that “many social media contexts promote reflective discussion about the content” and to benefit from those opportunities, students need to know how to participate appropriately.

Teacher 3: I need to teach students how to put facts together, how to tell what is important, and what is not so important. But, I don’t have time to do that.

Teacher 5: I want to show them that everything is a part of a bigger picture.

Students are aware of the importance of taking into account different perspectives and evaluate situations. They are also aware that they need to learn how to do so.

Student 1: Education [...] affects the way people see the world. If educated enough, people have the ability to think more critically and judge the situation they are in. (Excerpt from the end of unit assessment)

Student 3: A person who is able to critically think all the time while seeing advertisements is more likely to be less affected by them, than a “naïve” person who believes most of the information passed to him through advertisements. (Excerpt from the end of unit assessment)

The lack of critical thinking skills makes it difficult for students to judge the relevance of information. They cannot synthesize information they have and that often leads to misunderstanding. As Teacher 3 pointed out, skills that students need should be incorporated in instruction. When students think critically they become active learners who draw on their previous experience and new information to construct new knowledge.

Overall, teachers recognize that print based literacy is not sufficient for students to access learning since learning process increasingly takes place in a virtual environment. Students use technology, yet they need assistance to succeed academically and not to be lost in the vast array of information. Also, as they spend a great amount of time online they need to be taught how to participate effectively in that environment. Although teachers agree that they should assist the students, they are also concerned that they may not be in the position to do so without additional professional development. This point of view is encouraging because teachers view themselves as life-long learners.

Developing responsibility for learning and reflecting on learning

Adolescent students are transitioning into adulthood and they want to have more control over what happens in their lives, especially over what happens in school. Young people need to become independent learners and they

need to have choices. However, in order to become mature, they need to take responsibility for their choices and learning.

Student involvement during the class depends on their perception of whether they can influence what happens to them. They are prepared to do what is expected of them only if they understand why certain things are expected. Based on students' comments, it appears that those who feel that the teacher takes into account their opinion when decisions are made, and those who feel that the teacher creates a safe atmosphere are more successful than students who feel that the teacher is in control.

Students from the Serbian state school display a desire to be given the possibility to make decisions. However, they do not seem to be ready to take on the responsibility for their choices.

Student 8: It is hard to function in a school that is not serious. There are only ten percent of us who are ready to study and we have to make ourselves study. Teachers should make us study.

Students seem to expect teachers to guide them, motivate them, and tell them what they need to do. On the other hand, they resent teachers who are strict and expect them to meet expectations without questioning.

Student 9: I would not like a teacher to tell me that I must learn this and that.

Student 10: When they tell me that I must, then I do not want to learn.

On the other hand, students from the private school seem to be prepared to take on responsibility for their actions. One student pointed out the importance of having engaging content during the classes. She explained that if she does not like the class, she thinks about something else:

Student 2: I would move my brain to another place. I transfer myself where I want to be. If the teacher calls on me, I am not here. I am there physically, my body is there, but my mind is not."

She also explained that if she did not pay enough attention in class, then she would have more to study at home. "I only blame myself if I do not pay attention at school." As she reflected on the learning process, she demonstrated readiness to take on responsibility for her actions.

Independent learners believe that their learning styles and learning preferences and the process of discovering personal strengths and weaknesses help them to draw their own conclusions, make connections, and make transfers. As stated above, not all adolescents are prepared for such a shift. Although they want to be given freedom, many of the interviewed students expressed their appreciation of "strict" teachers who give non-negotiable directions.

Developing communication skills

Students from both institutions emphasized that the development of linguistic and intercultural competences plays a key role in education. Although they identified the importance of communication, for them communication skills meant speaking two or more languages. The students from the school in which English was the language of instruction pointed out how important it was to speak other modern languages as well as the language of the host country (Serbian). “I don’t understand when people don’t try to learn at least some basics”. Students from the Serbian school stated that English and German were popular foreign languages. Therefore, young people from both institutions understood the value of multilingualism.

Students in the private school identified the importance of mastering English as soon as possible upon their arrival to the new environment. Since English was the language of instruction, students had a dual task before them: they were studying in their second language and at the same time they were learning the language for academic purposes. Their efforts were directed towards their general academic success and towards integration into their school environment. They needed to master English to be accepted by other students and not to be observed as different. All six interviewed students came to the school with insufficient knowledge of English. They talked at great length about the difficulties they had until they had learned enough language so that they could understand basic phrases to engage in short, everyday conversations. Having conversations in English was a daunting experience for them. In all cases, the lack of communication led to a lack of friends.

Student 1: You need to really be smart at the beginning. I had no one to try to talk to. When I learned more, it became better.

Other students expressed their frustration because they were not able to express themselves in the same way that they could in their own languages. They were all very communicative in their own language and it was difficult to accept that they had limited vocabulary in the second language.

Student 2: I know what I want to say, but often I do not say it in a proper way. I decide to keep quiet.

Student 3: When I say something in English, it seems so simple. Back home, my friends would come to ask me for advice, I was clever. I am not anymore.

Both students and teachers identified another problem, and that is the language of instruction becoming their dominant language.

Student 4: Sometimes I do not know how to say something in my language when I talk to my parents. I tell them in English.

Teacher 2: I am sad to see how students forget their mother tongue.

It became evident that students from the English speaking school were experiencing the loss of their mother tongue. Since their learning was in another language, they would use their first language mostly at home and not for academic purposes. Gradually, it became increasingly difficult for them to express complex ideas in their mother tongue. For those students, English would become their strongest language.

Communication skills were understood differently by teachers. Unlike the students who mainly talked about the importance of learning a new language, teachers identified the need to develop negotiating skills.

Teacher 5: My students need to learn how to accept perspectives of other people and to adjust their wishes. They need to explain what they want in an appropriate way.

Teacher 6: Young people do not know how to make a decision together. They need to learn what it means to be a team player. They need to learn how to help others to contribute. One person should not be in charge of deciding.

One student also reflected on a situation when she had to make sacrifices in order to complete the task.

Student 4: There are situations when I need to give up on something so that others would want to finish the project with me. If we do not finish the project, we will all get a bad grade.

This comment shows that young people are also aware that communication and collaboration are tools that would enable them to perform better and achieve results through teamwork.

Communication skills gain prominence in all areas of life and it comes as no surprise that encouraging thoughts and information exchange through class interaction is observed as important. As skills of collaboration and communication are becoming increasingly valued in the workplace, teachers need to guide students and to provide feedback not only on knowledge and understanding, but also on the way they achieve these, bearing in mind that civilized dialogue is vital. Students need to learn how to provide meaningful feedback to their peers but also to learn how to receive feedback from others (see for example, Prolman 2017).

Conclusion

The study has a number of limitations. The data was collected for research that attempted to establish what factors contribute to successful language learning and all interviewed teachers taught a foreign or a second language. The collected data represent the personal opinions of fourteen students and six teachers who live in Serbia. Furthermore, the study was conducted in two

schools that, although very different, do not represent all institutions that educate adolescents. Since this research has not been done on a representative sample, it cannot be generalized. However, the study has shown that mastering a new language could not be considered without addressing the needs of students in general. Although the students were asked to provide insights into second language acquisition, the aspects they identified apply to all disciplines.

The interviewed teachers reflected on student performance in their classes. They all showed a desire to understand the students they taught and to help them develop the social and thinking skills they would need in future. This is aligned with the belief that teachers who know the developmental characteristics of their students and who want to understand them are in a position to create an atmosphere in which independence, creativity, and self-reliance are developed. They also encouraged students to reflect on their actions. By creating a safe environment and encouraging reflection, attention is paid both to the intellectual and emotional needs of the students and content is related to students' interests and previous experience. For teachers, it means that they have to take into account individual differences of their students and design appropriate activities.

The study confirms the curriculum should stay academically challenging, but also include the development of life skills since they facilitate effective disciplinary learning. It is essential to integrate skills "deliberately and systematically into [...] education" (Kay 2009: 45). Teachers need to assist their students in developing the necessary skills, but to do that curriculum should incorporate explicit teaching of those skills. If teachers do not teach students how to go beyond surface meaning, students cannot be expected to practice critical thinking. Tasks that require students to use metacognitive strategies and tasks that demand deep processing of knowledge require students to use higher-order thinking, resulting in more effective learning. For students to think that they are developing their abilities, they need to be encouraged and assisted to choose what and how they learn. Teachers could contribute by directing students in a timely manner.

Responding to these challenges would mean that some teaching practices need to change. Students are aware that a new set of skills is needed and that they need help from their teachers to do so. For that reason, teachers are central for implementing appropriate instruction since they know their students and the learning context. They play an important role in equipping students with the tools they will need. Despite the fact that teachers play a vital role in educational process, they are not necessarily prepared for the task of helping students gain new competencies. To accomplish the task, teachers need to have adequate professional development to improve their teaching repertoire.

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