

TEACHING ENGLISH – AN ART OR A SCIENCE

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The present paper is meant to throw some light upon the way in which language teaching is a continuously improving process, how it was seen years ago, and how is perceived nowadays. Is language teaching an art or a science? This is the key question and this paper tries to answer it.

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In the context of globalization, probably more than ever, the needs for English felt around the world today, and hence the reasons for teaching it, are particularly diverse and pressing. In the U.S.A. it is taught in order to give children mastery sufficient to enable them to obtain a complete education in American schools, to make it possible for adult immigrants to function effectively in a new society, to put foreign students in a position to cope with university lectures and examinations. In Europe, other aims are followed, being equally valid and sometimes being prescribed by law. The clearest conclusion to be drawn is the necessity for variety and flexibility in methods.

Over the years, the field of language teaching has gone through many fluctuations and dramatic shifts. As opposed to physics or chemistry, where progress is more or less steady until a major discovery causes a radical change brought over by a theory revision, language teaching is a field where heroes and fads have come and gone in a manner fairly consistent with the kinds of changes that occur in youth culture. One can notice the fact that very few language teachers have even the vaguest sense of history about their profession and this could be one reason for the frequent changes that have been taking place until recently.

Some years ago, language teaching vacillated between two types of approaches: one type of approach which concentrated upon the language (i.e. speaking it and understanding it) and the other type which focused on analyzing it (i.e. learning the grammatical rules). The periods known in history as Classical Greek and Medieval Latin were characterized by an emphasis on teaching people how to use foreign languages. All over Europe higher education was given first in Greek and after that in Latin. They were also very widely used in philosophy and religion, politics and business. In this manner, the educated elite became fluent speakers, readers, and writers of the appropriate classical language. Later during the Renaissance, the appearance of printing press made possible the study of the grammars of Greek and Latin, thus becoming very popular. In the case of Latin, it was discovered that the grammar of the classical texts was different from the Latin being used as a lingua franca, - the latter being known as Vulgate Latin – i.e. the Latin of the common people. During the 17th century, the focus in language study shifted back to utility rather than analysis. Since the European vernaculars had increased in prestige and utility, it is not surprising that people in one region or country began to find it useful and necessary to learn the language of another region or country.

But, in this paper, we will not make a history of teaching foreign languages; it is enough to say that there have been a lot of methods that have been widely used over the years, methods among which we mention just a few of them, such as: reading approach, grammar-translation approach, situational approach, communicative approach, cognitive approach, comprehension-based approach, and so on.

The question is: what is the solution for the ones who teach foreign languages, given the abundance of current and future approaches? In order to make wise decisions, we have to learn

more about the specific methods available. But we also have to keep in mind other four things, in order to make a good choice:

- Assess students' needs: Why should they learn English? What is their purpose?
- Analyze the instructional constraints such as: how many hours a week, class size, materials, and so on.
- Determine which are the needs, the aptitudes and the attitudes of the students towards learning foreign languages.

After doing this, the teacher will be in the position to use proper techniques and approaches. For effective teaching to take place, a good method must be adopted by a teacher. A teacher has many options when choosing a style to teach by. When deciding what teaching method to use, a teacher will need to consider students' background knowledge, environment, and learning goal. Teachers know that students learn in different ways and they have different ways and rhythms in absorbing the information and demonstrating their knowledge. So, the teachers have to adopt the style, the teaching methods, the aims, etc to the needs and possibilities of the students.

The belief that it is necessary to relate language teaching to an established scientific discipline is certainly not new. Studying the history of language teaching, one can come to the conclusion that, up to the present, it has been rather more of an art than a science. To say it in other words, it has been largely intuitive and dependent on the personal skill and convictions of the teacher. One can hardly see in it the characteristics of a systematically arranged body of knowledge developed through the use of generally time-tested and generally accepted methods. The element of human nature and behavior is one element that cannot be treated with scientific rigor. This is why language teaching can probably never be entirely explicable in scientific terms, such as mathematics, physics or chemistry. On one hand, there are some educators who are deeply uncomfortable if they cannot find more demonstrable relationship to established scientific facts. On the other hand, there are some others who consider their profession is purely an art, basically without being able to be analyzed and taught, that is improved only through the exercise of personal gifts of insight and imagination.

Thus, we come to the conclusion that language teaching is both an art and a science. To the extent that it remains an art, it permits the individual teachers to exercise their personal gifts they may be endowed with. To the extent that it can be related to a science or sciences, and thus it becomes an applied science, it can be developed in a coherent way, be given continuity and be taught. The most successful teacher will always be something of an artist, but the art will be enhanced rather than destroyed if it is exercised within a framework of scientifically established guidelines.

But, the most important things concerning teaching foreign languages is represented by the aims of instruction. And this should be the main idea in the mind of any educator, in every part of the world. In any given classroom, the teacher should always have a clear idea of what he or she wants to accomplish and which methods should be used in this respect. For example, a class made up of students who need, above all else, to learn to pronounce English well, so as to become radio announcers. Because of the very definite nature of these students' needs, objectives can be precisely formulated in terms of specific scientific skill. The human element in the language teaching equation is undoubtedly the understanding of it and a stronger emphasis on it.

Nowadays, things have changed a lot and one can say that teaching languages, teaching literature or any kind of science or, even cultures have migrated across geographical and political boundaries since the earliest historical times. But for sure, one thing remains the same: the importance of making classes attractive for the students by a person who is both a teacher and an artist in the same time.

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