TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE TO FOREIGNERS

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Abstract: *Teaching English as a foreign language requires very different approaches if we consider the recipients of the didactic process. Concerning the practical aspects of the primary task of a language instructor, namely teaching, skills of all sorts are required in order to be able to use best methods and most appropriate resources and up to date materials and devices. Moreover, to teach students of your own mother tongue is one very distinct thing from teaching foreigners. These two categories, namely students of the same mother tongue as their teacher and foreigners, have two things in common, namely: first, they are the subjects on whom the activity of teaching English is to be applied and second, this language is not their native tongue. These facts can thus be reduced to one idea: addressing to recipients of EFL teaching. Still, there is a big difference between teaching the first category mentioned, those who have the same mother tongue as the teacher and teaching the second category, foreigners, to whom not even the vaguest hints can be provided in other language than English. There comes a new challenge, an extra endeavour for an even more special approach. This study undertakes to present some of the distinctions entailed at the level of teaching methods and to parallel the diverse methodological approaches for the two situations presented. Are the four skills that language acquisition assumes to be taught distinctly and shall the approaches in each particular situation differ from one case to the other or not too much? It takes some distinct features to be or, better saying, to become a teacher of languages; and to teach English as foreign language to foreigners is a new development within this typology, a diverse dimension. New levels of character traits are instinctively reached by instructors in order to better cope, unconsciously, psychologically and emotionally, with the 'upgraded' challenges.*

1. Introduction

In the first place, the challenging nature of teaching English as a foreign language can be considered to be due to the permanently dynamic status of both the English language itself and the methodological aspects implied by teaching. Then, it is often painstaking to follow and comply with the too often changes in curricula and in the regulations concerning preparation of documents necessary in the field. Being a didactic instructor means unfortunately a lot of administrative work as well. These are collateral aspects that do not make the concern of this paper though possibly quite relevant in the 'economy' of the profession of a language teacher. The main role of the teacher, the practical aspect of this job, is the matter at stake here. Two particular categories are to be analysed as follows, both concerning teaching English as a foreign language (EFL), i.e. to students with mother tongues other than English, and by a language teacher who is non-native. The two categories differ in the fact that one refers to students having another mother tongue than the teacher (foreigners), while the other one is represented by students of the same language as their teacher.

2. Language teaching

It takes many specific features to be a good teacher in general and some might say that teachers of languages have to be born with certain particularities. They should not only prove a talent for language and a sort of musicality but also peculiar propensities and specific trends of character. English teachers, in the view of Geoff Barton, have to be: "passionate", "text maniacs", "risk-takers", "nervous on the day of exam results" and they "love the process of teaching" and "its creative opportunities", "love individualism", "balance spontaneity with structure", "work too hard", "don't pretend to know all the answers", but "have a powerful emotional impact" and are "more important than they realize" while, still, they seem to be "undervalued". (Barton, Geoff; pp.1-3)

2.1. Teaching EFL

Teaching English as a foreign language is a permanent challenge though as some researchers have noted "It is not unusual for EFL teachers in the present context to interpret professional development solely in the sense of improving their linguistic competence, rather than the teaching practice" (Kubanyiova, p.9). Teaching has in itself always been in the first place a matter of self improvement so as to be able to pass over knowledge and facts that are accurate, true and up to date. So it is only natural that learning precedes teaching and indeed there will be voices to argue that this is never enough; and it really isn't. It is not only the thing to be next transmitted that has previously to be well assimilated but the real challenge comes when turning to the part of appropriately conveying the info one desires to render. In terms of teaching a foreign language, especially English, that is so widely used and thus very much 'alive' and volatile, the teacher who is not a native speaker has of course a double work to perform. Besides doing their job, teaching, i.e. following the methodological steps and improving their methods, the EFL teachers shall be permanently trying to improve own skills and keep up with all facets of this dynamic language. And it is an endless circular endeavour implied here as the new developments in one area trigger diverse approaches in the other.

2.2. Particularities of teaching the fours skills

Listening, reading, writing and speaking are the four skills to be targeted in teaching a foreign language. Each of these skills requires a particular way of tackling it, a different approach of the material and of the class of students.

As several researchers have noted, for instance "when extensive EFL reading is taught ..., it is supposed not only to develop fluency in reading and promote acquisition, but also to develop other skills as well, especially writing" (Sehlaoui 2001, p.620). Reading and writing are said to be shared knowledge, that is, what we know about reading and the way we comprehend a text is similar to the way we compose it. (Carson 1993, Kroll 1993, Sehlaoui 2001, Sehlaoui 2001, p.620)

The range of activities that are used in teaching the skill of reading is quite vast covering from simple reading comprehension question that require straightforward answers more or less easily identifiable in the text as such or slightly differing, to more complex exercises that need accurate interpretation of the ideas present in the material read so as to further allow and facilitate selection of appropriate answers in multiple choice drills that present similar options just slightly different in meaning. This assumes a whole panel of activities of various levels of difficulty, from direct recognition in the text of a group of words and a logical structure to the elaborate and sophisticated process of analysing meaning and also mastering enough skills to correctly identify it once transformed into another lexical structure of exactly the same sense, i.e. having already acquired the complex psychological, interpretational and, ultimately, communicational and linguistic ability to detect such transformations. The latter requires obviously a much

more elaborate cognitive, deductive and inductive process of greater demand both for knowledge of language and of its subtleties.

Gapped text completion with given structures to be placed in the right location can in themselves be of various levels of difficulty. Generally, the more and the longer the fragments to be filled in with are, the more demanding and challenging the drill. However, what is very relevant in all reading comprehension exercises is correct identification and recognition of key words. They shall guide all choices, in all the types of exercises aforementioned. Precise connections and correlations are necessary as well since they are the ones to render the meaning and its precise grasping is of utmost importance when considering activities of choosing communicational structures of identical semantic value – i.e. of very similar interpretability - as the original text.

If teaching first levels reading and speaking, pronunciation and vocabulary, comes more usual, when tackling writing and more complex developments of speaking, involving grammar and specific structures, more explanations will be required so an intensive interrelation needs to be employed between teacher and student, which asks for a developed capacity of accurate, proper communication, between transmitter and receiver of such information in the foreign language.

Obviously, the material provided for reading, together with all possible comprehension exercises, will make a good study object for preparation in tackling the formation of the skill of writing. Here, nevertheless, a series of other specificities shall follow as the learners will later need to make clear cut distinction between the various styles or the diverse types of registers. It will at the same time be crucial for them to acquire proper knowledge of terminology used for particular sorts of texts and to understand what a certain written material should consist of and how it has to be tackled considering its nature, i.e. what is has to comprise if it is, let's say, a report, what if it is a description, or an essay, a formal or an informal letter, a short article, a book review etc. Not only that many examples of texts belonging to such categories are to be studied but also several characteristics of each category of texts are to be learned and much consideration of the details that make the difference should be implied in developing writing skills.

In what speaking is regarded, there is a big variety of abilities to consider, from standard phrases that are to be learned and then used as such or slightly added to concord with the factual circumstance in specific communication instances, to dialogues of the question and answer type, to more elaborate conversations or guided presentations and speeches or monologues on given topics.

3. Teaching EFL to regular classes and to foreign students

3.1. General methods employed in teaching language skills

As mentioned in the subtitle above, the four skills will be taught or, better saying, induced and implemented, using different activities, distinctive from one skill to another.

When, for instance, acquisition of speaking skills is intended during a class activity, the methods of approaching this purpose range from role play, directed discussion, conversation on topic, expressing ideas and preferences, dialogue, description of image, question and answer quizzes, oral puzzle games etc.

In the case of reading, activities such as observation of model reading, silent and loud reading, pair work in case of dialogues, role-play in case of conversations, comprehension drills etc. can be employed.

At listening, for developing this skill, a series of activities of different types of listening can be used, from tape recorders of shorter to longer fragments, from more familiar to more complex scripts, partially supported by fragments of scripts, with previous and ulterior analysis of the fragments heard or to be heard.

For writing, a series of exercises are to be solved in preparation stages, drills of use of language combined with drills on other related aspects that together, in time, shall provide a necessary degree of mastery of a series of components that shall form the writing ability: from the extensive amount of various grammar structures needed, to general or specific vocabulary and lexical elements, idioms or expressions. These acquisitions will ultimately work together with the subjects' knowledge of the particular formulas and formats of the different materials to be written. They will in time be assimilated by, for instance, multiple choice drills or other similar types of exercises that can generally induce passive assimilation of such materials rather unattractive to learn.

All the various aspects employed according to the type of skills in discussion are to be tackled differently in distinct type of classes, consideration of a native language common or not common to the instructor and the subjects being relevant in most cases, i.e. for most of the class activities mentioned.

3.1. Tackling regular classes

It is quite obvious that there can be assigned a higher degree of difficulty to the job of an English teacher since, as noted in various circumstances they "have to explain things to learners in English"; thus, even if they are said to "have more positive attitudes", "show more enthusiasm", to be "more creative" and "more flexible" and to "have a closer relationship with students", they, however seem to have greater impediments to surpass as by the nature of their activity they have to work harder to compensate the language barrier as they "use English, which creates a greater distance between teachers and students." (Lee p.34) More often than not, to perhaps non-deliberately, even instinctively, avoid such perceptions with the students taught, the teachers of languages may sometimes make use of their mother tongue, especially with elementary level students. Thus, students of the same mother tongue as the teacher will be even unintentionally treated in a more stimulating way from the point of view of communication of diverse unknown aspects concerning the foreign language taught. Of course, this 'familiarity' should not be overused. The danger is that the situation might degenerate into an inappropriately extensive use of mother tongue during the foreign language class. Then, it is more harmful than useful as the abuse of mother tongue in a foreign language class will turn that class from its very purpose, i.e. learning and making use of a foreign language. But still, a small, admissible amount of a language other than the one which is being taught at one moment can make a big difference and confer some aid or the needed comfort in a particular, proper situation. Its suitable use cannot harm if not, on the contrary, it can sooner re-establish an adequate atmosphere in the class. Moreover, it will most of the time pass unnoticed, because, as it is said, some things are remarked only when they are absent, and things that come just natural are the ones that best integrate here. In short, it is all just natural and obvious that mother tongue shall from time to time be used in regular classes of foreign languages to make certain clarifications and to settle various things.

Regular classes show yet another particularity that can at times be either and advantage or a disadvantage. Thus, they can benefit or respectively, as specified, suffer from the consequences triggered by the existence of the lexical elements so called "false friends". Students may be tricked by erroneously familiar lexical elements, as the very idea of false friends suggests, or, on the contrary, they can achieve more knowledge of vocabulary, through the very opportunity of having discussed such elements during classes. in many situations it can be considered that several words have become better known especially because they had been learned as examples of false friends and reinforced along previous years of teaching process.

3.2. Approaches of teaching EFL to foreign students

It is indeed said that "some of the best English lessons are often the result of a teacher who only knows English and therefore forces the students to speak in English to communicate. This method of teaching [...] is known as the *direct method* or the *natural method* of teaching a foreign language, and focuses heavily on correct pronunciation and gaining conversational skills." (*Tips for teaching EFL*) When English is the only possible common language between trainer and trainee the situation boils down to the aforementioned one, which in the original reference referred to native English teachers. It nevertheless holds true for the situation at stake, namely teaching EFL to foreigners. The factual circumstance is that the trainer and the trainees can communicate in English alone.

Now how does this change the problem? There are several things that shall no longer be tackled properly, or surely not in the same way as with regular classes. It will be a challenge for both the students and the teacher. To adapt to the new situations of no means of communication other than the language that is just being taught is certainly quite a challenge.

Naturally, the language category of false friends cannot be explained or discussed with classes of students of another language. An approach of the kind and the entire consideration connected to false friends are invalid in classes of English taught to foreigners.

Neither the shortcomings of the English words having the characteristic of being very similar to words in their mother tongue, in spelling or pronunciation, nor the advantages in benefiting from the discussions and the learning of these terms, of these lexica elements, will be present with classes of English taught to foreigners.

The lack of a common language to the instructor and the students (other than English – the language of teaching and the language being taught as well) prevents them from having discussions on vocabulary as those implied in the process of presenting the false friends. Still, there might be instances of multilingual considerations. This holds true in the circumstance that various English terms are known by most students in the class and they can help the others by giving translations in their mother tongue if the case. Also, certain structures can be analyzed seeing the development of particular lexical units in all the languages available in the class if appropriate and pertinent. This can come as useful in rather few situations. For instance, consideration of the English word "car" can be interesting to discuss if among the foreign students there are also Portuguese, Hungarian or Spanish people. Comparing to the Romanian translation interesting situations shall occur. If the Portuguese "carro" resembles the English term and means the same thing, the Romanian "car" is not the correct translation so that we can talk about a false friend here, it meaning a traditional means of transportation with animal traction used in the countryside. What is even more interesting is that considering the Spanish and Hungarian translation of the English "car", namely "coche" and respectively "kocsi", we shall find that there is another Romanian word, similar to these two, "cocie", of regional circulation, and having the same meaning as the term "car", previously explained. So, the mentioning of such a situation is indeed interesting and it maybe quite useful if not else then as a memo technical procedure. But such examples are hard to identify and rather scarce. Continuing the consideration of these terms it might be again relevant to see that the Romanian correct translation i.e. "maşină" also gives way to discussions as the word exists with small variance in most languages implying the general term that denotes a device, an apparatus, a machinery, a system of components put together to work as an ensemble if stimulate by some engine or impulse of some kind. So, vocabulary teaching may get very interesting if tackled in a comparative manner but it shall not be an easy task to embark to. If the teacher has no notions of the language the students have as mother tongue he/she will

have to rely on translations and explanations provided by the students themselves. That will not be quite appropriate nor too reliable. Such approaches can only be then very short and merely consultative or coming as discussions "by the way" not as a regular part of the class. However, documentation and attentive consideration are required.

4. Incompatible activities and commonly applicable techniques
Diverse procedures can be used more or less successfully in both categories of classes under discussion. From among these, the most common are: use of gestures, verbal exemplification or audio device production and repetition, reproduction of material read and learned, visual explanation or physical presentation of notions taught.

4.1. Body language
Several researchers note that the first skill one will need to master in order to "start successfully teaching English as a foreign language is the ability to use body gestures and signs effectively. Many students find that they learn a new language better when they are forced to speak *only* English in the classroom." (*Tips for teaching EFL*) So, in the case of teaching EFL to foreigners, being unable to make use of the student's native language, the teacher will encourage and force them to start communicating and learn English by first using "body language and gestures to teach them new words, and then using what they've learned to build even more knowledge." (*Tips for teaching EFL*)
The same can apply to teaching EFL to students of the same mother tongue as the teacher's though it will be more often than not that the teacher shall in these situations sometimes appeal to the mother tongue to make clarifications, offer translations, give accurate and ultimate explanations of more sophisticated notions. No matter how hard a teacher might try not to use other language than English during the English classes, some remarks, some words, some phrases might anyhow escape this self censoring attempt and this can make an important difference between the two types of classes. Once the teacher gets accustomed to such style, it will be more difficult to control during classes of teaching English to foreigners, and any 'slip' as the previously mentioned ones, towards the mother tongue, would be felt as at least awkward in that context.

4.2. Repetitions
Another technique that is considered relevant when teaching English as a foreign language, and not only, is to have the students "practice common phrases until they feel completely comfortable with those phrases. This technique [...] allows the student to focus heavily on correct pronunciation and accent. [...] It's important when teaching any language to focus on the most useful and common phrases first, so [...] students are able to start conversing right away." (*Tips for teaching EFL*).
This strategy applies perfectly also to the classes of teaching EFL to conational students but it is only at the elementary level that such procedure is valid for (teaching greeting and easy phrases, focusing on pronunciation), and at that level differences are not of too much relevance between the two types of students with respect to the methods of teaching. Both groups know very little English in that case or during that stage and it is not the concern of the current study as the situation is rarely met at the level of higher education and the approaches are however similar if not identical.
To pronounce something and elicit several repetitions from the students is probably the easiest way of tackling foreign language vocabulary. And if only pronunciation is put forward it is nothing more to it.
Indeed when interpretation of meaning is involved things change, the approaches get distinct in the two situations under analysis.

4.3. Translation and retroversion

If with students of the same mother tongue as the teacher translation comes just natural, with foreigners an entire process of explaining the sense of the given notions in many words and gestures shall follow. The latter approach, the extensive explanation in English is indeed applicable, and, which is more, quite preferable and advisable with the former group, while the former approach, the direct translation, is of course useless, invalid and awkward with the latter group.

With students having the same mother tongue as the teacher translation and retroversion constitute usual activities in the economy of the class. With foreign students, the teachers not knowing their mother the regular activities abovementioned cannot be employed in the teaching- learning process. Thus, such activities prove unusable and remain incompatible with teaching EFL to other students than those with whom the teachers share the same mother tongue.

5. Conclusions

As a non-native teacher of English to teach EFL to foreigners can be a process very distinct from teaching students of your own mother tongue.

For instance, while with students having the same mother tongue as the teacher translation and retroversion constitute a normal and maybe extensively used part of the process of teaching and learning, with students that do not share a common language with their teacher of a foreign language, other than the particular language that is the very object of teaching and learning – and that of course to just a certain degree, as else is would not have to be a discipline in the curricula – there is no way of using the otherwise very common activity of translation or retroversion.

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