A TEACHING APPROACH TO LEARNER AUTONOMY

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Abstract: *Modern methodology focuses on learner autonomy as this is especially relevant in preparing students for exams. In order to pass their exams, students should do extra work, which means that they must be highly motivated. Further on, the fact that teachers work with motivated students allows them to put responsibility on the students' shoulders, which also involves keeping the balance between autonomy in learning and the teacher guidance. Therefore, the focus of this paper is on finding ways to avoid hidden drawbacks in the teachers' attempt to cover the needs of the learners in gaining autonomy and also on designing strategies to prevent a higher workload for teachers.*

Key words: learner autonomy, learner needs, motivation, teaching approach

Motivation was, is, and will always be a very important part of the learning process. Young learners may study a foreign language for some indirect incentives such as for the sake of a good grade or for some gifts offered by their parents. Contrary to them, adult learners struggle and put forth sustained efforts for some other goals than the immediate enjoyment of the activity itself. Some internal and external factors that promote adult learners' motives might be new challenges in their careers, promotions at work, requirements for English literacy, assignments and trips abroad, workshops and conferences in English, welcoming foreign visitors, professional differentiation and specialization, e-communication of any kind. Moreover, contrary to young learners, adults generally dislike activities such as role-plays or made-up stories, drilling and doing grammar exercises. They avoid doing homework or any other additional tasks that would help them to consolidate structures and vocabulary, but prefer activities of listening and speaking spontaneously.

The students as active learners – a new challenge for educators
Recent studies have shown that the majority of college students are active learners requiring learning experiences that engage their senses. Efforts to improve the teaching must focus on changing the role of the student from passive observer to active participant. In this approach, the responsibility for meeting learning objectives is shared by the instructor and each student.

The key question that motivates lecturers who challenge, inspire, and motivate students is how they can engage students in the process of teaching and learning. The goal is to create conditions that make students active, autonomous learners.

Modern teaching and learning must be an intellectually challenging experience whereby students, through extensive interactive teaching, are able to gain through conceptual understanding. A lot of scholars cite evidence that interactive learning is enhanced through the effective use of key teaching skills including: questioning, demonstrating, providing positive reinforcement, and reviewing. They also recommend the use of active learning activities, such as analysis of case reports, problem-solving exercises, student presentation and students working cooperatively in groups.

Student-centred discussions are better than traditional lectures as they encourage independent learning, change attitudes, and motivate further learning. Group discussions focus on thinking and reasoning instead of rote memorization and enable students to reflect on their own thinking, discuss issues, exchange ideas, question statements, and formulate questions for clarification. Thus, group discussions enable students to produce meaning through critical enquiry and deepen their understanding.

Engaging students as active, autonomous learners

In planning to engage students, lecturers should try to start with what the students already know, making a point of showing their own interest and commitment to the topic and using a mixture of modes of explanation. If the material is unfamiliar to the students, several examples should be provided.

Playing on the intellectual curiosity of the audience with puzzles, problems, and questions is another means of engaging students' attention and interest for the subject taught.

The effectiveness of handouts and audiovisual aids depends on the quality of the aids as well as on why and how they are used. The point of introducing slides, video or other media is not to entertain or merely to break up a verbal presentation, but to enhance learning.

One of the most effective techniques an educator can use during a lecture to help insure interaction is questioning – ask and encourage questions.

Questions can be used to introduce lectures, throughout the lecture to stimulate interaction, in the end of the lecture to summarize its content. Involving students through questioning helps maintain their attention, which is critical especially with long lectures whose topics are complex.

Among the most useful questioning techniques are: asking questions of the entire group, in which case the educator must guard against some students dominating the discussion, as during questioning there will be students who wish to volunteer; targeting a question to a specific student, especially when the audience is relatively small; using students' names when asking and answering questions, as this recognition may act as a powerful motivator; providing positive reinforcement when students respond in order to create a positive climate and encourage more students to enter into the discussion; repeating students' questions and answers to ensure that all students hear the discussion.

When a student asks a question, the educator has several choices: to answer the question directly; to respond by asking the student a different, related question; to offer the question to the other students.

Lecturers should vary their questioning techniques, as if they always ask and answer questions using the same pattern, the impact on the students will be limited.

A skilled lecturer uses a variety of presentation techniques to involve students, maintain their interest and avoid a repetitive lecturing style. Among the most important ones it is worth mentioning: using the lecture notes prepared during the planning stage with reminders and key words on the lecture introduction, body and summary; opening the lecture with a good introduction designed to capture students' interest and attention; communicating on a personal level (during the lecture, the lecturer should attempt to relate to the students); maintaining eye contact with the students, procedure which gives lecturers feedback on how well students understand the content and help to communicate a caring attitude on the part of the lecturer; exhibiting enthusiasm about the topic by smiling, moving around the room, gesturing with hands and arms, etc.; making sure everybody in the lecture room can hear the lecturer's voice; using appropriate language by avoiding slang, repetitive words, fillers (e.g. *um, er, you know*, etc.), phrases or gestures that may become distracting with extended use; using a variety of audiovisual media; addressing questions to students and encouraging them to ask their own; providing positive feedback when students ask or answer questions and make comments; using students' names as often as possible; displaying a positive use of humour; making smooth transitions between the parts of the lecture, transitions that should be highlighted in the lecture notes and should include: a brief overview of the next topic, a review of the agenda between topics, a change of media, an interim summary before a new topic, and an activity; closing the lecture with a brief but powerful summary.

There is always room for improving the quality of lecturing, no matter how good the lecturer is or how long he/she has been at it. The effectiveness of the lecture may partly be judged on students' perceptions of the presentation or on how much students remember, but it may be just as important to consider how many students were motivated to borrow a book on the subject or, perhaps, how many of them chose to pursue further study of the area.

In other words, the real test of the worth of a lecture is the extent to which students were challenged and excited by the lecturer's own belief in the importance of the subject.

Training strategies in teaching adult learners

One of the important goals in learning a foreign language is to develop the skill of listening comprehension. Listening activities often prove to be time-consuming. After listening to some passage, most of the adult learners usually make complaints about all being too fast. Or different learners recall the passage differently. Moreover, they often misinterpret the recorded information and claim that they have definitely heard it.

The best approach in this case is to lengthen pauses during the listening activity, according to the scheme listening – pause – listening – pause etc. These pauses give adult learners the 'thinking time' they need to process information. At first learners might need longer pauses after a brief listening, but gradually they will develop the ability to process longer passages without any pauses and get the information right.

The issue of developing speaking skills for adult learners is particularly difficult. The major reason is that oral and listening skills are interrelated: the better listening comprehension, the better speaking skills. That is why they should be developed simultaneously.

Competence in speaking skills is also hard to develop as factors like emotions, self-esteem, empathy, anxiety, attitude, motivation, uneasiness, self-doubt or frustration come into play, making the teachers' task even more difficult.

Teachers dealing with adult learners must remember that adults are always concerned with how they might be judged by their peers. 'They are very cautious about making errors in what they say, for making errors would be a public display of ignorance, which would be an obvious occasion of 'losing face'…' (Shumin, 1997). This sensitivity to making mistakes is the explanation for their inability to speak without hesitation.

Consequently, the teachers' efforts should be directed towards encouraging learners to speak out their minds on all aspects of covered materials and persuading them that making mistakes is a natural process of learning.

Reading a text in a foreign language might be challenging too. Many adult learners easily give up doing it, as they feel they do not know all the words and need the dictionary all the time. They usually classify the activity of reading as time-consuming and boring.

Teachers might find useful to make their students enjoy this activity by providing them with the following tips: decide on why you are reading the text; find the right place to read; survey the text in order to find out how long it is, if there is a table of contents or a conclusion; if there are any unfamiliar words look them up in a good dictionary; read headings and diagrams; during reading, try to summarize the main idea of each paragraph and if there are no subheadings, create your own; make some bullet point notes as you proceed through the text; if there is a conclusion of the end of one chapter, read it first.

Adult learners may be assessed through writing, speaking or observing. In writing, the learners might be asked to fill in a questionnaire (e.g. about their work, interests, previous study, etc.); take a language test, write a paragraph about topics set by the teacher, write a letter/e-mail to the teacher.

Before taking up any of these activities, the teacher should indicate his/her learners the main steps to follow when writing in English: write a short outline, write an introductory paragraph, write a topic sentence for each paragraph, follow the topic sentence with supporting details, and write a conclusion.

In speaking, the learners might be interviewed individually or in pairs, asking them informally for advice about what would be useful to work on during the future lessons or showing the intended course-book or materials for the course and discuss them together in order to select the most appropriate ones. Or teachers might collect oral feedback comments about the course at the end of the lessons.

Through observing, the teacher sets the learners tasks to do in class. This will allow him/her to observe them working, speaking, and using the language. The teacher will be able to diagnose the learners' language or skills problems and discover more about what they need.

Conclusion

A method is a way of teaching. The choice of a method is dependent on the teacher's approach, namely what he/she believes about how people learn or how teaching helps people learn. Any teacher then has to make methodological decisions about the course aims, the teaching techniques, the type of activities, the methods of assessment.

Despite the various methods that could be approached by language teachers, many of them nowadays do not follow one single method. Over the years, they develop a personal methodology, built from their own selection of what they consider to be the best and most appropriate of what they have learnt about.

There are individual preferences regarding how learners like to communicate and learn.

A complete repertoire of teaching and learning approaches improves learning. Learners who approach the learning process with a wide range of strategies have more options available for meeting expectations. Increased student awareness of different learning styles builds multiple perspectives, which help students to better understand others and to work within their learning community.

Every individual learner has his or her own specific purpose for learning English. A needs analysis is an essential starting point in teaching adult learners, as teachers cannot really address a learner's specific needs unless they are absolutely clear about what they are.

A successful course for adult learners is one that is learner-centred and helps to meet the foreign language needs of the learners.

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