

Teaching English as a Foreign Language

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In this essay, it is intended to criticize the official syllabus actually in application at the *Université de la Formation Continue* (UFC) and to put forward alternative suggestions to improve it. Indeed, this curriculum hinges on general guidelines likely to elicit course overlapping. The glaring absence of clear and precise goals and that of certain subjects such as phonetics, listening comprehension and reading comprehension, despite their overriding importance for the acquisition of a language, constitute some of the other aberrations it presents.

Objectives

Before framing a programme, it is essential, in the first place, to enquire about the type of learners to whom it is addressed and about the aims to be achieved. My short experience at the UFC has allowed me to notice that the students have different academic and professional backgrounds. Medical doctors, engineers, architects, law graduates, teachers from secondary schools and the like attend this institution with the view to improving their knowledge of the English language in order to use it in the field of their work. It is therefore necessary to shape a syllabus likely to answer their individual aspirations and to arouse a sustained motivation. A programme that does not attract the learners' interest is a programme foredoomed to failure.

Yet, the learners are grouped in the same classroom, regardless of their specialization. As a result, the lectures to be delivered have to transcend their individual needs without discarding them completely. The question that arises is how to keep a balance between general and personal interest.

In addition, it seems necessary to define the content of each subject and to order the items it includes to ensure logical progression. As a matter of fact, progression is one of the constant characteristics of the teaching process. A syllabus is built on a transition from language acquisition to specialization. Similarly, instruction in the different skills follows a certain order. The distinguished linguist, Robert Lado, advises to “Teach listening and speaking first, reading and writing next”. Once the students have attained a high level of proficiency, they are in a better position to read the history and literature of the foreign country or study scientific texts.

Likewise, a language syllabus ignoring the weight of phonetics, especially in the Algerian context where the target language is neither spoken nor written, cannot be fruitful. Being part and parcel of a language, pronunciation must be practised intensively in the independent course of phonetics, and at a lesser degree, in the others.

Furthermore, any language must emphasize the crucial importance of grammar. The other subjects, and more specifically oral and written expression, usually tend toward the consolidation of the grammatical functions and structures that are introduced in the independent grammar course. Indeed, without mastering

syntax, the learner will be unable to convey his thoughts meaningfully, and thereby, to communicate intelligibly in the target language.

Courses: content and methodology

To achieve the best results, teaching methods are proposed together with the content. Besides, although the subjects are presented separately, it is important to realize that each one serves, in fact, as a springboard to the other.

Phonetics

When the eminent scholar Charles C. Fries said that “speech is the language”, he meant that the command of speech is fundamental in the learning process of a foreign language. To make the students familiar with the sound system of a target language, the teacher must first select the commonest and most useful expressions --such as greetings, requests for food, drink, or information-- and focus on the chief trouble spots.

He must also regulate the occurrence of the locutions to be learned. The new vocabulary load must be limited and the old items must be repeatedly surveyed until they become unconscious habits.

He must show them the positions of the tongue, lips and other organs of speech and encourage his students to mimic accurately to achieve the best results.

“As poor models produce poor imitations”, it is desirable to entrust native speakers with the task of teaching phonetics. Tape or disc recording providing authentic models can be used instead.

A written record specifying the outstanding features of the sounds, including stress, intonation and the like will help the students practise the language outside the classroom.

Grammar

A functional rather than a structural organization should prevail, especially with advanced learners. This means that old-fashioned dogmas- like the shall and will rule- and theorizing which consists in defining vaguely grammatical categories –like a noun is the name of a person, place or thing- should make room for communicative functions like asking for permission, giving reasons and so forth. As Robert Lado put it: “knowing words, individual sentences, and/or rules of grammar does not constitute knowing the language. Talking about the language is not knowing it. The linguist, the grammarian, and the critic talk and write about the language. The student must learn to use it”

The students are trained to manipulate the suggested functions and structures thanks to guided exercises including completion, conversion and transformation tasks. They must also be induced to utter model-like sentences by resorting to their own linguistic repertoire.

The notions already taught will be reinforced by intensive oral and written exercises before introducing new features. Again the latter forms will be used to the point of automation in guided and/or free exercises.

Listening comprehension

Most Algerian learners have the opportunity to hear news, reports, and music in English from television, radio or other sources.

Listening implies understanding the messages they are exposed to and demands, thereby, the learners' involvement. The latter have, therefore, to become conscious that this skill is not a passive but an active one.

The students must be taught to grasp the gist of the message rather than every item of it.

To foster their listening skills, they may be asked to perform physical tasks, to transfer information, or to reformulate and evaluate it. In the early stages of instruction, they may listen to descriptions of drawings or pictures and to identify the one that has been described. They may also mime actions that are suggested orally. Later, they may hear passages recorded on tape or not, draw relevant information and then transfer it to another form such as table, chart or diagram. They can also be asked to express the ideas of the passage they have just heard in their own words, in the form of notes or summary or engage in group discussion.

Oral expression

In the early stages of instruction, the students are encouraged to speak about common situations likely to occur in daily life such as going to hospital, to the bank,

travelling, booking a room in a hotel, etc...

Dull subjects must be avoided. To foster the students' motivation and sustain their participation, the teacher may prepare several topics and must be ready to give up the less interesting ones.

The information is presented under the form of short dialogues that may be related to the socio-economic, political, and cultural life of either Great Britain or the students' own country.

Various drills must be devised to control the students' listening and speaking practice in English structure and phonology and to capture their attention.

The students must be aware that oral production is an overall activity including several ingredients such as grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and fluency. They are induced to converse in colloquial English with its weak forms and idioms.

At a later stage, the themes may be related to the students' professional concerns. Undertaking interviews, directing meetings, conducting negotiations, getting information about competitors and their products, buying and selling commodities, complying with the customs procedures... are some of the activities that may be proposed to them.

Finally, the learners can be let to express their opinion freely on the important events of national and international life. They are encouraged to speak about a wide range of themes such as historical characters,

political regimes, socio-economic and cultural issues in Algeria and in the world at large.

Reading

This activity aims at helping the learners read for their intrinsic interests. As a result, the texts proposed to them should tend toward the satisfaction of such needs. Yet, a language is not simply a tool; it is the mirror of a culture. The close relationship between language and culture has been stressed by eminent linguists such as Leonard Bloomfield who wrote that “Every language serves as a bearer of a culture” or Robert Lado who pointed out that “language is the most complete index to a culture”. Therefore, subject matters will be selected in such a way as to shed light on the foreign nation’s values and way of living.

The content of the excerpts must be controlled in order to allow the students to encounter a limited number of difficulties at a time. These problems may be divided into four categories: phonological, grammatical, lexical and cultural. A comparison between the native language and the target one is often useful to pinpoint problems. In addition, carefully graded sequences from elementary syntactic patterns to more intricate ones and from basic lexical items to specialized vocabularies should be devised.

The students will first hear the teacher read the text. This approach will enable them to match the phonological and morphological structures of the printed

words or expressions.

They will be trained to grasp the author's central idea and intention, to identify the arguments supporting his thesis and to draw valid inferences.

Writing

Emphasis will be placed on sentence then on paragraph production where the method of organization is used in isolation, and finally, on compositions which require a combination of methods of development.

When the students have acquired a greater linguistic competence, controlled writing must give way to free writing.

At a later stage, they will be trained to provide essays. They will learn how to gather and organize the appropriate bibliography, and how to exploit documents and present the data they contain.

British history

The acquisition of a language must tend toward the comprehension of the culture it vehicles. The study of the foreign country's history and literature can provide an insight into that culture. The learners will be acquainted with the evolution of British institutions and ideologies and with the latter's impact on literary, artistic and scientific creation. To achieve that purpose, summaries of

the literary, cultural, economic and political history should be read.

British literature

The teacher will choose materials for their inner content and proceed from short stories, to historic, descriptive and narrative prose, and finally to drama and poetry. However, it is worth stressing the fact that such a course will appeal more to students with a literary background.

Translation

Translation requires the mastery of at least two languages. At present, the students who are already wrestling with English are, nevertheless, compelled to learn a second foreign language: German. Translations from English into the mother tongue and conversely, seem more desirable for two major reasons. First, English is nowadays the international medium of communication *par excellence*, and the advantages of using it in translation exercises are obvious. Secondly, unlike German, English is taught in secondary schools, and therefore, the students have a higher command of the latter language.

Ideally the students should be grouped according to their profession to enable them to practise the terminology they need in their work, but this is not the case at the UFC. As a result, they have to handle a wider and more general corpus of texts.

The materials selection should cater for the students' needs. Teachers will be supplied with excerpts presenting a historical or literary value and reflecting the culture vehicled by the target language whereas scientific writings providing up to date data will be proposed to the students who wish to keep abreast of modern progress.

The systematic comprehension of every single locution must not be sought for, and word-to-word translation should be discouraged since equivalents are seldom found in different languages. However, technical terms and expressions may stand as an exception.

Conclusion

In short, language teaching depends on careful planning at the central level and thoughtful preparation on the part of the teacher who must focus on the phonological, syntactical and lexical difficulties, devise drills to consolidate the old patterns and reinforce the new ones until they become unconscious habits. Likewise, the students' cooperation is vital in the learning process. They must be allowed to rely gradually on their own linguistic resources.

Bibliography

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