Maria-Teodora Creangă

A REFLECTIVE APPROACH TO TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

MARIA-TEODORA CREANGĂ

A REFLECTIVE APPROACH TO TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

Referenți științifici:

   Conf. univ. dr. Ileana Cristea

   Conf. univ. dr. Ana-Karina Schneider

CONTENTS

1. BACKGROUND TO LANGUAGE LEARNING

Aims:

- to raise awareness regarding the learners' profile and the variety of their needs, goals and expectations, the main characteristics of their learning styles and of their age groups
- to discuss possible ways of integrating the above-mentioned features with a pre-established course plan

REFLECTION

Ask your partner the questions below. Then say in what way was his/her experience as a learner of English different from yours.

1. How and when did you first start learning English? Was it a decision you made or someone else made it for you? Would you have chosen another language instead? Why? Who do you think will learn faster and easier: a young child, a teenager or an adult?

2. What did you expect you would learn when you started? What did you expect you would use English for? How good did you expect to become at using English?

3. Did you like working individually or in groups? How did that influence the learning process from your point of view? What were some of the class activities you enjoyed very much? What activities did you find most effective and why?

4. Is there anything you would have liked your teacher to do differently? Why?

5. Have you ever had a native speaker of English as a teacher? If yes, describe this learning experience.

Irrespective of the context in which it takes place, teaching a foreign language can be an extremely complex, yet carefully planned process. Whether the teaching situation involves only one learner or a group of learners, there are a number of aspects which need being considered and which may maximize the learners' chances of achieving their goals, such as the learners' profile (who they are, how old they are and what their learning styles are), their goals, needs, expectations and, last but not least, the learners' motivation. In what follows, a description of these influencing factors will be provided.

1.1. Learners' profile: general characteristics, age-group and learning styles

An ideal teaching context would probably involve a group of no more than 12 to 15 learners with similar goals and expectations, possibly the same age-group, with comparable learning styles and homogenous in terms of language level. Unfortunately, in real life teaching, the chances are close to nothing that one teacher should face such a situation. More often than not planning a course for a group of learners not only should take into consideration aspects such as aims, materials that are about to be used and a set of topics to help develop language and skills, but also crucially depends on the learners' profile considered both individually and as a group.

As Harmer points out, there is a wide range of theories in language learning expressing various positions from the well-established theories in the 1950's arguing that some learners are more 'prone' to foreign language learning than others, to more recent theories profiling the 'good' learner or attempting a scaling of learners' characteristics and learning styles. Such theories are similar in that they use some types of questionnaires – some even in the form of aptitude tests – as a tool to determine the learners' profile. Though the English teacher does need to determine such a profile, at least to some extent, in order to meet his or her learners' needs successfully, Harmer remains skeptical about the efficiency of the above-mentioned questionnaires, arguing that:

…while they may discriminate between the most and the least 'intelligent' students, they are less effective at distinguishing between the majority of students who fall between these two extremes. What they do accomplish is to influence the way in which both teachers and students behave. It has been suggested that students who score badly on aptitude tests will become demotivated and that this will then contribute to precisely the failure that the test predicted. Moreover, teachers who know that particular students have achieved high scores will be tempted to treat those students differently from students whose score was low (2011:86).

Other, more recent questionnaires 'rate' learners' preferences in studying a foreign language on a scale say between 1 and 5, indicating importance from high to low. Nonetheless, regardless of how accurate such questionnaires may be, Harmer argues that they fail to take into account the cultural factor (2011:87). Indeed, eastern cultures in particular tend to encourage auto-nomous learning or may view errors as a natural step forward in learning a foreign language. Cultures, such as the one in Bangladesh, encourage learner contributions only when they are correct. In addition to this, large groups (between 50 and 100) are quite common here, unlike in most western countries where a foreign language group does not include more than 20-25 individuals at a time at the most. Whereas in eastern civilizations the use of traditional approaches such as grammar-translation method is commonplace, western cultures prefer communicative and eclectic approaches to cater for the needs of as many learners in a group as possible.

Bottom line, it is quite hard for a teacher to devise a tool that would serve his students' purpose, and possibly even harder to adapt an already existing lesson plan or syllabus to the needs of every group of learners and each individual within those groups. As Scrivener suggests, questionnaires (formal and informal), tests, true/false statements, gap-filling, home assignments, writing letters or emails to one's teacher informing him/her about his needs and expectations or simply asking those key-questions and discussing them with the rest of the class are just as many possible instruments to find out that crucial piece of information which might guide the teacher in helping the learners attain their goals (70).

Even so, such instruments and the data they provide are to be considered with a fair dose of skepticism often combined with an even more consistent one of expertise as teachers may discover that the most motivated of students

drops out of the course, or that another's expectations and goals have just changed. After all, such shifts tend to occur quite often and are as unpredictable as human nature. However, there are a number of aspects such as the learners' age, their learning styles or language level which will remain crucial in the teaching of foreign languages.

1.2. Learners' age

REFLECTION

What do you think the characteristics of young learners (up to the age of ten) are? What learning needs do you think are specific to this age group? What do you know about their intellectual abilities? How long do you think their focused attention can last? What are some activities that are suitable for their age?

Young learners are ideal learners in terms of enthusiasm and ability to 'absorb' information very fast from whatever sources they have at their disposal. On the other hand, however, they cannot focus for more than 10 minutes at a time and they can lose interest in the activity they are engaged in very quickly. At this age, their cognitive development is at its fastest, they tend to move all the time – hence their need to play all the time even while learning – and are in great need of attention and encouragement from the teacher (Harmer: 2011, 82).

REFLECTION

What do you think are some of the features of adolescents as learners? How motivated are they? How can a teacher increase motivation in their case? What type of information are they eager to learn? What types of class activities are suitable at this age and why? How might other features of this age group affect their learning and, accordingly, impact your teaching?

Adolescents can be particularly difficult to work with. They go through a difficult period in both their physical and intellectual development. They

constantly discover what they can do with the knowledge they acquire on a daily basis, which can make a group of teenagers particularly demanding for a teacher. However, this is also an age when their assimilation abilities are probably at their best and also one when abstract thinking starts to develop. Despite the fact that their motivation level may appear quite low at times (Scrivener: 2005, 329), and provided that the teacher comes up with the right choice of methodological ammunition, teenagers can be particularly exciting to work with: they are extremely curious – especially when the topic on the agenda concerns them directly – competitive and always ready to 'show off' in front of their mates and teachers.

REFLECTION

What essentially differentiates adult learners from the other age groups of learners? Why might some adult learning features require a different language teaching approach as compared to young learners and/or adolescents? What difficulties may a teacher encounter in teaching adult classes? How do you suggest addressing these difficulties?

Adults, unlike the previous categories of learners, are able to focus for longer periods of time and more aware of the consequences of their actions (Spratt et al. 53). Hence, adults tend to ponder far more before they answer and often tend to be more reluctant to be part of a larger group of learners. On the other hand, they pay attention to form as well as the meaning of language (idem) and are quite likely to have had some past language learning experience (54).

1.3. Learning styles

REFLECTION

1. Which method would you find most useful or appropriate in order to learn more about your students' learning styles?

2. Discuss the aspects of language learning styles that the following questions, selected from a questionnaire, are intended to collect information about.

a. I learn best by …
repeating information / hearing information / seeing information written / moving all the time.
b. I normally expect to ….
receive logical explanations from the teacher / find and process information myself.

Beyond any age peculiarities, each learner is different from the others in terms of their learning styles. There are a number of theories and studies focusing on this issue. One such study envisages learning styles on two intersecting clines: *passive/active* learners on the one hand, and *studial/ experiential* learners, on the other (see the figure below).

studial

	A	B	
passive			active
	C	D	

experiential
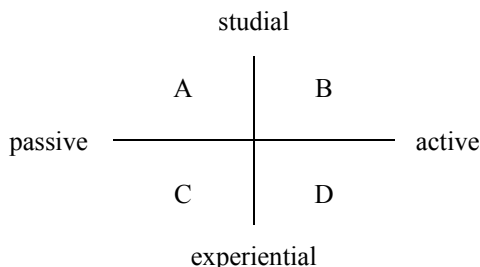
(Thornbury and Watkins 9)

The *passive learner* will rely on someone else for guidance, such as the teacher, whereas the *active learner* is generally more independent, opting for an active involvement in and assuming a higher responsibility for his/her own learning process. *Studial learners* normally prefer formal environments, such as an established school or institution, whereas *experiential learners* appear to learn a foreign language better in the company of a native speaker (ibid.). However, the more experienced teacher will immediately notice that there is no such learner as 'purely studial' or 'purely active'. Such features tend to combine to various degrees in different individuals. Hence, it is unlikely for a teacher to identify two learners sharing similar characteristics in the same class at the same time.

REFLECTION

Here is part of the answer given by a learner whilst completing a questionnaire. What type of learner (passive/active, studial/experiential) do you think he/she is most likely to be?

I enjoy working alone. I've mostly learnt English by watching films on the TV.

Another perspective on learning styles takes into consideration the so-called 'multiple intelligences' which are present in each individual to various degrees. *Visual learners* for example, tend to remember information better if this is presented to them in the form of pictures, diagrams, etc. This must be because, at some point in their life, they have developed some type of spatial thinking which helps them operate with visually-presented information, an ability which is not present in individuals suffering from brain damage affecting the sense of seeing (Gardner 187). The other 'intelligences' identified by Gardner differ in terms of their nature. Thus, according to him, they can be: *linguistic* (individuals with extraordinary capacity to communicate and generally to use languages), *musical*, *logical*/*mathematical*, *bodily*, *interpersonal* (who enjoy contact with other people and are extremely interested in listening to them and understanding them) and, finally, *intrapersonal* (who tend to focus on themselves) (Gardner qtd. in Scrivener:2005, 64). Other approaches distinguish among learners depending on their sensory preferences (*auditory*, *visual*, *kinaesthetic*), on their way of interacting with other people (*group* or *individual* learners) or on their style of thinking (*reflective*, who learn better by understanding and thinking of a particular issue, and *impulsive*, who benefit most from responding immediately to various questions) (Spratt et al. 52).

REFLECTION

1. Suggest one activity for each of the learner types below, explaining in what way the activity you have chosen would favour that particular type of learner.
   - a visual learner
   - a musical learner

- a linguistic learner
- a kinaesthetic learner

2. How would your teaching reflect a classroom reality in which you had to teach a class consisting of individuals with different learning styles? What activity or perhaps set of activities would you use under these circumstances?

1.4. Learners' needs, purposes, goals and expectations

REFLECTION

1. In groups, discuss which of the aspects mentioned in column B you would associate with the concepts listed in column A. Explain your choices.

A	B
- learners' needs - learners' goals - learners' expectations	- wish to develop certain skills only - a certain outcome - reason(s) for undertaking a language course - particular language priorities (e.g., vocabulary or grammar) - language to be used in target situations - an interest in certain topics

2. What practical ways of collecting useful information about your learners' language needs can you think of? (Scrivener: 2005, 69, adapted)

Perhaps one of the most challenging aspects in teaching a foreign language is conducting a need analysis study and using the findings in the teaching process. However, while the tools for conducting such an analysis are quite varied – the latter being carried out in writing, speaking and/or by means of learner observation – Scrivener questions the relevance of such studies:

Needs analyses are not always as useful as teachers hope they might be. This may be because learners (for some reason) have not taken their task seriously enough and have produced little information, or information they have not thought very carefully about or even untrue information. This suggests that it is essential to carefully introduce a Needs-analysis task so that learners understand the importance and value of what they are doing and take an appropriate amount of time to complete it (2005:71).

Indeed, though need analysis studies may be crucial in preparing successful lessons, it is often difficult to collect the kind of data which is also relevant to the teacher (e.g.: why they want to learn English, what their present language level is, what some of their difficulties are, what they would like to learn and how they would like to learn it, etc.). Provided that such a study is carried out preferably over a longer period of time, that it includes all learners in the group, and that the teacher does not exclusively rely on his/her observation of what students say or write, the study may in fact achieve its aim.

REFLECTION

Which of the following ways – suggested by Scrivener – of collecting data about learners' language needs would you personally favour or consider the most efficient and why? What are the advantages and the disadvantages of each option? Should you have to opt for a combination of them, what would it be? Are there other effective ways of pooling information about learners' needs that you would suggest?

a. having the learners answer questions or write comments in a questionnaire
b. having the learners sit a language test
c. interviewing the learners individually
d. having a whole-classroom discussion with the learners
e. observing the learners in class while they are completing a pre-set task
f. having the learners write an e-mail / letter / essay to their teacher with reference to aspects such as their 'wants' and/or reasons for learning English
g. tick pictorial representations of the situations in which they mostly use English

---

h. asking the learners for advice as regards what they would find useful to learn in the next lesson

i. present the learners with the coursebook you intend to use and discuss with them the contents as well as the extent and/or the pace at which they would like to use them

j. ask each learner to come up with sample of the materials they mostly work with.

(Scrivener: 2005, 69-70, adapted)

The term 'purpose' is used to indicate the reason for which one individual may choose to learn English at a particular point in his/her life. Some may choose to learn English in order to obtain an internationally recognized competence certificate, which may help them enter the higher education institution of their choice. Others may be immigrants in an English-speaking country, in which case a certain level of competence in English might be required to obtain a residence permit or citizenship. Thus, it soon becomes clear that the approach, methods and procedures used in the classroom are very likely to be adapted to match individual purposes.

REFLECTION

Read the following learner profiles. Then work in groups to categorize these learners' purposes in learning English according to the following criteria: **ESL** (English as a Second Language); **EFL** (English as a Foreign Language); **EIL** (English as an International Language); **EAP** (English for Academic Purposes); **ESP** (English for Specific Purposes).

A. Bogdan and Ana are two adults living in Romania. They have been taking intensive private English classes so as to prepare for the IELTS exam with a view to settling in Canada permanently.

B. Carlos, from Spain, lives and works in Manchester. He is learning English by interacting with his workmates.

C. Hiroto, from Japan, is the senior manager of a financial company in Tokyo. He is taking one-to-one private English classes to help him cope with his board meetings successfully.

D. Andreas, a Greek student, is attending an evening course with a view to

preparing for the IELTS examination, a requirement for his admission to a British university.

E. Iulia is a pupil in the 10th form at a technical secondary school in Brasov. She has been studying English for almost six years now. Her study of English has been restrained by the school curriculum to only two English classes per week.

F. Jos is a young man currently living and studying economics in the Netherlands. Most of the classes he is attending at university are in English, a language which he took up studying at the age of six.

G. Giovanni has recently resorted to self-study in order to prepare for a two-week trip to the USA.

(Thornbury and Watkins 6-7, adapted)

The term 'goal' refers to the level of linguistic competence that learners aim to achieve. Depending on their purpose, the learners may aim to attain a basic level (if they are individuals who only need survival skills to help them while on holiday in an English-speaking country), who may need to use English correctly at work (independent level), or who are eager to constantly improve and eventually attain native-like proficiency in English.

REFLECTION

Discuss in groups what language level each of the learners in the previous 'REFLECTION' activity is most likely to have (*proficient user*, *intermediate user*, or *basic user*) and what language level they might aim at achieving. Bring arguments to support your opinion(s).

(Thornbury and Watkins 7, adapted)

Irrespective of their goals, all learners will have certain expectations of the class they attend, which may put the teacher under a lot of pressure. Quite often, for example, students may have unrealistic expectations, wanting quick results and a passing certificate as soon as possible. Therefore, it is quite important to make them aware of the fact that foreign language learning requires patience and commitment and that progress usually occurs in small

steps. On the other hand, it is also very common for learners to have expectations which are not known and, implicitly, met by their teachers.

REFLECTION

Here is what Bogdan and Iulia – two of the learners already discussed above – said with respect to their English classes. First, read their accounts of their English learning experiences. Then discuss the following aspects in groups: identify these learners' expectations and determine how realistic they are; suggest ways in which a teacher could become aware of such expectations; suggest what could be done in order to meet these two learners' expectations.

Bogdan:
"I really don't know what to say or think about my evening classes. There is no doubt, our teacher is amusing and we have a lot of fun. We have a great many listening activities. As for the rest of the time, we have group discussions about diverse topics that our teacher chooses on the spot for us to discuss. Yet, I find it a bit worrying that we rarely use our IELTS preparation book. We don't study words or grammar rules. More than that, I've hardly written a word in English and, in less than two months, I'm going to sit my IELTS exam."

Iulia:
"In the primary school, my classmates behaved badly most of the time and our teacher didn't know how to control them. She used to work with a couple of us only, the rest of the class doing whatever they wanted. Then, since I got into the high school, I've had a more severe teacher, so everybody keeps quiet during our English classes. We normally do many grammar activities, read texts aloud and answer questions. Except for that, however, there's no chance to speak. It is true that I've learnt many words, but I'm still very hesitant in speaking. Also I'm not sure if my pronunciation is right."

(Thornbury and Watkins 8, adapted)

1.5. Motivation

REFLECTION

1. How would you describe a motivated learner?

2. Why is it important for learners to be motivated?

3. Some learners are motivated as a result of their job requirements or career perspectives, others learn English just for the sake of this learning experience. Which of the two types of motivation would you find more stimulating and why?

4. What do you think are some motivation 'boosters' in your culture?

5. Have you ever felt de-motivated in learning English? What were the factors that contributed to this state of mind?

Motivation is unquestionably an irreplaceable ingredient in the learning process. Although it may be argued that keeping students motivated is exclusively the teacher's responsibility, it is also true that *internal motivation* is more often than not far more constructive than *external motivation*. As the names indicate, the former may be associated with the learner's need to improve irrespective of the aspects which may interfere with this process:

> Extrinsic motivation is the result of any number of outside factors, for example the need to pass an exam, the hope of financial reward or the possibility of future travel. Intrinsic motivation, by contrast, comes from within the individual. Thus a person might be motivated by the enjoyment of the learning process itself or by a desire to make themselves feel better (Harmer 98).

Hence, it is likely probable that an internally-motivated learner will be able to last through the long and often strenuous foreign language learning process whereas a student whose motivation lies in the future benefits of their effort, is more likely to change behaviour as circumstances change.

However, regardless of the source of their motivation, a motivated student will always be more committed and, eventually, more successful in their strive to learn a foreign language. Hence, Harmer identifies four distinct sources of motivation – internal and external. The first of these is the goal behind learning a language. He points out that this appears in the form of an exam (2011:98). It is typical of Romanian adolescents to prepare for a Cambridge exam for example. While some view exams as an aim in themselves, others look beyond them and see the certificate they obtain as a passport to high academic achievement.

A second aspect acting as a motivator is the very society we live in. As unlikely and mind blowing as it may seem, the attitude of the society with respect to foreign language learning is inculcated in the members of the community and in the status of foreign language learning in the curriculum:

> All these views of language learning will affect the student's attitude to the language being studied, and the nature and strength of this attitude will, in its turn, have a profound effect on the degree on motivation the student brings to class and whether or not that motivation continues (Harmer: 2011, 99).

Thirdly, Harmer stresses the importance of the learner's environment, in particular the members of the community they live in. People like parents, tutors, siblings, etc. and whether they approve of or encourage foreign language learning has a crucial impact on their attitude towards it (idem).

Finally, curiosity is a crucial element in motivating learners. The initial dose of interest naturally manifested by learners at the beginning of the semester/school year/ module, etc. must be cultivated as the teacher attempts to raise her students' interest and to maintain it throughout the teaching-learning process (Harmer 99).

As for feeling de-motivated at times, I suppose everyone has had their share of it brought about by external factors such as a less-than-loveable teacher, a less-than-stimulating environment, the lack of resources, etc. or by internal factors like physical and/or mental exhaustion. However, no matter what the reasons behind such a more or less short-lived state of mind might be, it is always important to find the driving force to keep our learners going through the strenuous but rewarding process of foreign language learning. This aspect will be more thoroughly dealt with over the next chapter in this book.

1.6. Learning awareness

REFLECTION

1. Have any of your English teachers ever explained to you the purpose of any in-class activities? Do you think this would have been/was useful?

2. What do you think are some of the aspects that English learners need to be aware of?

3. Some may argue that it is not a student's job to know anything about the choices a teacher makes during a class in terms of the method used, activities, materials, etc. How far do you agree with that?

While such aspects as the ones mentioned above are not often considered in teacher training, it may come in as a surprise to some teachers that developing language learning awareness in their students is not only a means of maintaining and even boosting learner motivation but also of encouraging student autonomy. Nevertheless, as Scrivener remarks, trying to involve students in the teaching-learning process beyond their comfort zone may prove quite a challenge:

> Many students may have spent their whole educational career being told what to do all the time, constantly presented with work that has included minimal elements of choice. They may never have stopped to realize that what they learn and how they do it involves their own personal choice, and that it is their own time and energy they are investing. It may be a real surprise to be asked what they want or need, and not surprisingly they might need a clear explanation as to the purpose of it – and guidance as to how to start thinking about and conveying their ideas (Scrivener: 2005, 71).

Thus, preparing one's students for what is going to follow and encouraging them to take responsibility of the learning process has multiple benefits. One of these concerns the fact that students will know what to expect and will feel less uncomfortable with the upcoming activity. Being aware of the purpose of one activity or another, no matter how strange or useless it may seem, will also stimulate them to do better and profit from the respective

class activity. Some learners, who feel less prepared than their mates, may even choose to prepare a bit in advance for the upcoming lesson.

The most obvious advantage of encouraging learners to become aware of some of the intricacies of the teaching-learning process is the fact that they become more autonomous learners. Once they have been given feedback and have understood why it is so important to develop a particular skill or to improve a language level such as vocabulary for example, they tend to do supplementary work to improve. They will use all resources at their disposal and make the most of the feedback given by the teacher. In Scrivener's own words this means:

> Raise student awareness about how they are learning and, as a result, help them to find more effective ways of working so that they can continue working efficiently and usefully, even when away from their teacher and the classroom (2005: 77).

Assessment-wise, these learners will also tend to be more objective in the self-evaluation process and improve scores significantly from one test to another as they tend to put more effort in the preparation and concentrate more during the test. This is crucial particularly when it comes to exams scheduled ahead and efficiency in the teaching-learning process is a must irrespective of the preparation stage.