Methods of Teaching English as a Foreign Language

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Abstract
Teaching English has become nowadays a real challenge because we live in a fast-moving society and young people, who can easily access all types of information, are no longer willing to attend classes where the information is presented as a lecture. Young people expect for the teaching methods to be changed and for the information to be presented in an interesting way. This paper shows different teaching methods, several activities that can be used in class and at the same time methods of assessing.

Keywords: teaching, learner, vocabulary, teacher, information, assessment

Rezumat
Predarea limbii engleze a devenit in zilele noastre o adevarata provocare datorita faptului ca traim intr-un mod alert iar tinerii, care au acces la informatii cu mai multa usurinta, nu mai au disponibilitatea de a participa la ore in care informatia este prezentata sub forma de lectura. Tinerii asteapta ca metodele de predare sa se schimbe, ca orele sa devina o activitate interactiva si ca modul de prezentare a informatiilor sa fie unul interesant si captivant. Aceasta lucrare prezinta diferite metode de predare a limbii engleze, diverse tipuri de activitati ce pot fi folosite la clasa si in acelasi timp diferite modalitati de evaluare.

Cuvinte cheie: predare, cursant, vocabular, profesor, informatie, evaluare

Introduction
The methods used for teaching foreign languages have changed over the years because of the society that has changed in time. The interests of people have also changed and at the same time, in order to learn anything, they need things to be presented in an interesting way. Instead of using rather old, dull methods, teachers have to find new ways of presenting their information to the students. Students are no longer interested in attending traditional classes where information is presented as a lecture and the students' only duty is to listen and take notes. They are attracted to interactive classes which challenge them continuously, making them surpass their own limits. These are a few reasons why methods changed and they continue to change because nowadays children have access to all types of information and by not finding something new to be taught, a piece of information presented in an attractive way, they lose their interest in learning English.

In this paper I will present some methods used for teaching English and at the same time, I will give some examples of activities that might make the English lesson more appealing to students. When teaching a foreign language, there are several aspects to be taken into consideration: teaching grammar, teaching listening, teaching reading and teaching culture.

The first aspect that I will refer to is grammar which is one important part of teaching and learning a foreign language. Grammar is essential in every single language, without it we cannot communicate correctly. At the same time it is also one of the most difficult aspects of teaching a foreign language. When hearing the word ”grammar” both teachers and students think of various sets of rules and ”formulae” that are supposed to be taught and learnt. Students often make the association between ”speaking grammatically correct” and the formal situations, the elaborate ways of
writing and, on the other hand, between “speaking incorrectly” and the informal situations in which the language is used, with their friends and families. Most teachers focus on teaching these sets of rules and expect their students to learn them and use them in everyday communication. These types of lessons become less interesting and students are, to a certain extent, “encouraged” to lose their interest in learning English.

Some other teachers believe that students will acquire the necessary and correct grammar by reading and listening to correct examples of grammar usage. The two approaches should meet somewhere in the middle. For example, students should be encouraged to use the so-called grammatical rules in dialogues, without necessarily being corrected every time they make a mistake because they might develop a certain fear of speaking. On the contrary, they should be praised for trying and given as examples to their peers. It might also be useful for teachers to use simple radio recordings that contain short dialogues, identify the grammar that is being used and only afterwards ask students to produce their own examples. This is the second aspect that I will deal with in this paper: Teaching Listening. "Listening is the language modality that is used most frequently. It has been estimated that adults spend almost half their communication time listening, and students may receive as much as 90% of their in-school information through listening to instructors and to one another. Often, however, language learners do not recognize the level of effort that goes into developing listening ability.” (National Capital Language Resource Center (NCLRC). The essentials of language teaching. Retrieved November 20, 2013)

Listeners are not passive. On the contrary, they become actively involved when asked to produce similar dialogues. They pay attention to the way of formulating sentences, of asking and answering questions. Listening involves a message, a sender of the message and a receiver. The listening activity is rather difficult because the listener has to understand the situation presented and the context. At the same time, he/she must focus on the speaker's choice of vocabulary, structure of discourse and pace of speaking. In addition to this, he/she might be faced with the challenge of understanding different accents and dialects. Teachers' main role is to help their students become effective listeners. Teachers should choose listening materials that are easy to understand and contain language that is likely to be encountered in real-life situations. Moreover, after listening to a text/dialogue on a certain topic, for example a dialogue taking place at the market, students may easily be asked to imagine a similar dialogue using the vocabulary heard on the tape. This way, their attention will have been caught because the situation presented to them may happen in reality, outside the classroom.

The third aspect of teaching English is teaching reading. We may ask ourselves why it is important to learn to read in a foreign language. The answer is not very difficult. First of all, by reading in the language that students are planning to learn and master, they will have access to the literature written in that language, and therefore to the culture represented by the foreign language. This method refers to learning to read in English by studying the vocabulary, grammar and sentence structure. Lower level learners will be given simple texts containing short sentences. However, the topics should be appealing so that the learners do not lose their interest in learning the language. On the other hand, the texts written by the great writers of the English literature have to be reserved for the upper level students. Even so, the lower level students may be distributed texts that are also representative for the English culture. For example, teachers may be able to find short texts about the famous British detective Sherlock Holmes. By giving the students a series of texts about the adventures of this detective, students will definitely become more and more interested in reading and they will be eager to find out what he will do in the next episode. Based on these texts, the teacher may formulate questions so that he/she assesses the level of understanding of the students and at the same time he/she can
reinforce other information, such as grammar and vocabulary. This proves that reading is an activity with a purpose. A person may read in order to gain information or verify already existing knowledge, or in order to criticise a writer's ideas or writing style. A person may also read for enjoyment, or to enrich knowledge of the language being read and learnt. The selection of texts is influenced by the purpose of the reading. This means that teachers will not use the same texts for students who want to develop their vocabulary, those who should improve their grammar or those who want to find out information about the English culture. Therefore, we can state the fact that reading is an activity which has a purpose. It can also be said that good readers read the text extensively; make connections between the information provided by the text that is being read and the knowledge that they have already acquired; at the same time they are motivated, meaning that they are willing to learn new things.

Reading is a "bridge" between the reader and the text. The two participants are in constant connection with each other. On one hand, the text presents letters, characters, words, sentences that encode the message and on the other hand, the reader is decoding this message, using his/her previous knowledge, his/her skills and strategies. The reader's knowledge and strategies may include the following: knowledge of vocabulary, knowledge of how words are arranged in order to form sentences, knowledge of the markers connecting the different parts of the text and knowledge about the different types of texts.

One important question may arise: how do we, teachers, encourage students to learn English? First of all, we should explain to the students that knowing a foreign language does not only mean being able to translate different texts, but also to communicate, to understand it and to think in this language, the way they think in their mother tongue. Second of all, we should also try and change our own methods of teaching. Despite the fact that translating texts is a useful activity for practising vocabulary, this should not be the only method used to teach English. Working with the dictionary is indeed important because this way students may find different synonyms and antonyms but at the same time it may become a rather dull activity and students may lose their interest in learning the language. In order for teachers to teach vocabulary, they may also use other types of activities. For example, if the lesson presents information connected to restaurants, they may use flashcards containing images of different types of food or the people who work in a restaurant. By extension, the students may also be given examples of jobs that can be encountered in the tourism sector. As a revision exercise, we may use the "spider chart" where starting from one word which is given by the teacher, students should be able to complete the chart with words connected to the word written on the blackboard.

We should also be aware of the differences between teaching children and teaching adults. When teaching adults, teachers may find it difficult to motivate them because adults cannot be forced to learn. On the contrary, they need to be encouraged to express themselves in English despite their reluctance. On the other hand, working with children is an activity that involves two stages. The first step is knowledge consolidation where the teacher tries to catch the student's attention. The new information is gradually introduced, starting from something simple and reaching a more complex level. For instance, imagining that our students know Present Simple Tense and that now, we have to teach Present Continuous Tense. We can easily start from simple examples referring to everyday activities, such as "I read poems every day", "I have breakfast every morning" or "I wash my hands every day"and only afterwards we should introduce the new tense by asking the students to describe what they are doing now. The second step is represented by practice. This is the moment of the class when the teacher finds out whether students understood the information and whether they master it in conversation. While communicating, students are supposed to use both the new information and the information that has been previously learnt.
Another important item that needs our attention is the **assessment** of learning.

There are different types of assessing how much and how well the students learnt. The most frequently used are the traditional tests, the so-called "pencil-and-paper" tests. Students are given a sheet of paper and they are asked to solve the exercises in a given period of time. These exercises differ according to what the teacher is assessing. There may be grammar and vocabulary exercises or comprehension exercises. The first two types can be presented under various forms: fill-in, find the synonym/antonym, find the correct definition for certain words or find words in a crossword puzzle. The latter type of exercises is more complex. Students may be asked to read a text and answer a set of questions that follows or they may be asked to listen to a recording and afterwards solve a set of tasks based on the information that they heard. When teachers give these comprehension tests, specialists believe it is better for the learners to be given the tasks before reading the text or listening to the recording. Teachers may find out that some of their students do well in written tests, but when they have to express themselves orally, when they have to interact with other people, they do not do very well, making a lot of mistakes. In such cases, tests only show what students know about the language they are studying, but they do not really know how to use the information they have learnt. In this situation, it is the teacher's obligation to encourage the learners to communicate more so that they reach a higher level of intellectual development.

When teachers' goal is to develop their students' communicative abilities, they may replace the traditional tests with alternative methods of assessment. Alternative assessment uses activities that focus on the students' strengths rather than on their weaknesses. Among the characteristics of such alternative assessment we can mention the following:

- both teacher and students focus on communicating not on giving right answers to a set of questions
- students have the opportunity to assess themselves as well as their colleagues
- it is based on authentic tasks

Students should be allowed to show what they can really do with language. These activities imitate the genuine situations in which students may find themselves outside the classroom. There are some important criteria that need to be taken into consideration when designing such an assessment:

- the activities should be built around topics that the students are interested in, for example they can be asked to talk about their favourite movie or past-time activity
- they imitate real communication contexts, for instance students can be asked to imagine that they are talking to a foreigner who wants to go to a certain place in town and they are supposed to offer him/her directions
- they involve creative use of language instead of simple repetitions, for example students are asked to imagine a telephone conversation with an angry customer who needs to have a problem solved. This way, they cannot use the same problem nor the same solutions. Therefore, they need to be creative.
- they require students to use polite, formal language
- they use appraisal criteria that are known by the students
- they involve interaction (student → teacher, student ←→ student)

By using alternative assessment, students actively participate in appraising themselves and one another. Students who are used to the traditional types of assessing may find it difficult to adjust to a new type. Specialists recommend introducing the alternative methods of evaluating gradually, even using both methods concomitantly in order for the students to have time to get used to them. Secondly, teachers should create a supportive classroom environment where every student...
feels that he/she can express his/her own opinions without the fear of being corrected, criticised and sometimes laughed at. Students need to be reassured that everybody can make mistakes and that it is more important to learn from them. Thirdly, teachers should find out their students' own thoughts and opinions regarding the evaluation, what they think about the traditional methods and the alternative ones, thus identifying together the importance of alternative assessment.

Conclusions

In conclusion, teachers should always be able to find the best teaching methods taking into consideration the age of the learners, their level of knowledge and the purpose for their wanting to learn English. At the same time, they have to adjust to every student, to encourage them to learn, to refrain themselves from criticising and correcting students all the time because this eventually leads to a refusal to communicate. It is essential for the teacher to involve all students during the class, by using modern, interesting methods and topics that stimulate students' creativity. English is among the subjects that allow teachers to use different methods: the dialogue, the stories that can be read in class and the images that can become useful when we are trying to teach young learners. It is also important to find the most suitable way to assess the students. After being assessed, students should be able to understand what mistakes they had made and how they can improve their future results.

References

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