

Managing Language Learning Difficulties

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INTRODUCTION

The foreign language teaching profession today is faced with increasing enrollments and a shortage of qualified teachers. At the same, a rapidly changing student's population, nationwide education reform, and the development of national standards for foreign language learning are placing a number of new demands on foreign language teachers.

Even though, during teaching career, teacher may be faced from time to time with challenges and changes in emphasis and recommendations for the adoption of new procedures that lead to reach the aims of any programme.

Foreign language teachers maintain proficiency in the target language and stay up to date on current issues related to the target culture.

1-1 The Statement of the Problem

In foreign language learning including English, there has been a lot of controversy concerning the best way to teach this language around the world.

Methodologists argued different methods and approaches by analysing the weak and strong points of each one. Teachers faced some problems and difficulties in the practice of these methods and approaches in different levels of language learning situations.

Even under the fair learning conditions, the achievements of students reflect some of these problems. The many new directions that opened up by researchers and methodologists provided

teachers with ideas and suggestions concerning the best way of language learning.

Even though , during teaching career teachers may be faced from time to time with challenges and changes in emphasis and recommendations for the adoption of new procedures that lead to reach the aims of any programme .

There is a feeling among teachers and educators that the process of teaching English language should receive considerable amounts of attention .The task of teaching this language produced some difficulties according to the levels and programmes of learning situation.

This paper will investigate the problems and difficulties in different levels of foreign language learning and find out the suggestions and solutions for each one of them.

1-2 The Significance of the Study

The significance of this study can be explained as follows:-

- 1-It may present suggestions about the suitable techniques that can be used as solutions for the problems of language learning.**
- 2- It will prepare teachers for teaching career and explore the expected difficulties that teachers may face in their work .**
- 3- It can be used by those who are learning to teach English as a foreign language (EFL) and English as a second language (ESL) as part of pre-service teacher's education programme.**

1-3 Aims of the Study

This study aims at clarifying the expected problems and difficulties that may face teachers in their teaching and find out the suitable suggestions for them.

1-4 Limits of the Study

This study investigates the difficulties that may face teachers of English at different stages of language learning, primary, secondary and college levels.

2- Language Learning Difficulties

Foreign language teachers today "require" a combination of competencies in the preparation of foreign language teachers and that strong professional development is critical. Teachers in ESL, bilingual and foreign language classrooms need to form strong partnerships that allow the sharing of information, curricula, strategies and support across disciplines, department, schools and levels.

Even though, teachers may be faced a number of difficulties in language learning situations. Some of the expected difficulties are the following:-

Problem No.1: The Students are at Different Levels

It is one of the biggest problems that some teachers face everyday, some whose English is not very good, and some whose English is only just getting started. What then are the possible ways of dealing with this situation.

Suggestions

a- Using different materials

When teachers know who the good and less good students are, they can form different groups while one group is working on a piece of language study the other group might be reading or doing more advanced exercise or listening to a tape . Group work can be defined as " one of techniques that allow students to do a range of tasks for which pair work is not sufficient or appropriate " (Harmer, 2001: 117).

b- Doing different tasks with the same material

Where teachers use the same material with the whole class, they can encourage students to do different tasks depending on their abilities. A reading text can have questions at three different levels , for example the teacher tells the students to see how far they can get the better ones. They may quickly finish the first two and have to work hard on the third .

In language study exercises, the teacher can ask for simple repetition from some students, but ask other to use the new language material in more complex sentences . Finochiaro (1964: 132) states that imitation is a "technique to repeat a spoken material by an entire class or by a group speaking together". If the teacher is getting students to give answers or opinions, they can make it clear that one word will do for some students where as longer and more complex contributions that are expected from others.

c- Using the students

Some teachers adopt a strategy of peer help and teaching so that better students can help weaker ones. Brown (1987:19) states that teaching strategies are "those specific "attack" that we make on a given problem" there are two types of strategies; learning strategies and communication strategies. Teachers can work with in pairs or groups, explaining things and providing good models of language performance in speaking and writing. Thus when teachers put students in groups they can ensure that weak and strong students are put together.

Problem No.2: The Class is Very Big

In big classes, it is difficult for the teacher to make contact with the students to ask for and receive individual attention.

Suggestions

a- Using work sheets

One solution is for teachers to hand out work sheets for many of the tasks that they would normally do with the whole class. If the class is smaller, the feedback stage is reached. Feedback refer to the listeners or readers response given to the learners speech or writing (Dulay and etal,1982:34).One type of feedback is correction ,another is approval or "positive feedback" as some call it. Teachers can go through the worksheet, with the whole group and all students will get the benefit.

b- Using pair work and group work

In large classes, pair work and group work play an important part since they maximise student's participation. Even where

chairs and desks cannot be moved, they are ways of doing this: first rows turn face to face second rows, third rows to face forth rows etc.

When using pair work and group work with large groups, it is important to make instructions especially clear to agree how to stop the activity.

c- Using chorus reaction

Since it becomes difficult to use a lot of individual repetition and controlled practice in a big group, it may be more appropriate to use students in chorus. The class can be divided into two halves. Each half can then speak a part in a dialogue, ask or answer a question, repeat a sentence or a word.

d- Using group leaders

Teachers can enlist the help of a few group leaders. They can be used to hand out copies, check that everyone in their group has understood a task, collect work and give feedback.

e- Using the size of the group to your advantage

Big groups have disadvantages of course, but have one main advantage ;drama is more dramatic, Dramatization is "an enjoyable activity which connect the action with the spoken word" (Al-khafaji and Al-shyib. 1987: 38). It adds liveness to the classroom. It is educationally valuable because it provides much pupils participations.

Experienced teachers can use this potential to organize exciting and involving classes. This technique will help to turn a potential disaster into some kind of success.

Problem No. 3: Students Keep Using their Own Language

One of the problems that teachers sometimes face with students who all share the same native language rather than English language to perform classroom task. This may be because they want to communicate something important and so they use language in the best way they know, they will almost certainly find speaking in their language a lot easier than struggling with English.

Suggestions

a- Talk to them about the issues

Teachers can discuss with students how they should all feel about using English or their own language in the class. Teachers should try to get their students agreement that overuse of their own language means they will have less chance to learn English.

b- Encourage them to use English appropriately

Teachers should make it clear that there is not a total ban on their own language; it depends on what is happening.

c- Responding to English use only

Teachers can make it clear by their behaviour that they want to hear English. They can ignore what students say in their own language.

d- Create an English environment

Teachers themselves should speak English for the majority of the time , so that together with the use of listening material and video , the students are constantly exposed to how English sounds , and what it feels like.

e- Keep reminding students

Teachers should be prepared to go round the class during the speaking exercise encouraging, cajoling and offering help if necessary.

Problem no. 4: Lack of Cooperation

All experienced teachers will remember students they have not enjoyed working with, and most teachers can recall times when students were deliberately uncooperative sometimes to a point of great discomfort for the teacher.

A cooperative learning is "directing students to share their knowledge play down competition among students" (Richard and Remandya 2002:16).

Lack of cooperation can take many forms constant chatting in class , not listening to the teacher , failure to do any homework , constant lateness and roddiness , sometimes things get so bad that students complain to someone in authority.

Suggestions

a- talk to individuals

Teachers can speak to individual members of the class outside of the classroom. They can ask them what they feel about the class why there is a problem and what they think can be done about it.

b- Write to individuals

The same effect can be achieved with all students by writing them a confidential letter and want to know what can be done about it. Students can be invited to write back in complete confidence. The replies which are received (and not all students will replay) will show what some of the problems are.

c- Using activities

Teachers can make it clear that some of the more enjoyable activities, which students like to do will only be used when the class is functioning properly.

d- Make a language – learning contract

Teachers can talk directly to the students about issues of teaching and learning. They can get the students' agreement to ways of behaving and find out what they expect or need from the teacher.

Problem No. 5: Students Find Difficulty in Writing Skill

Some students simply do not like to write. In fact, some students have negative attitudes towards writing. When students believe they cannot write or have a defeatist attitude towards writing, they disengage themselves from the writing process.

The question then becomes how teachers can provide opportunities for less- proficient students to improve their writing skill.

Suggestions

Gebhard (2006: 225) states the following suggestions:-

- a- pointing out that no person's writing is perfect.**
- b- pre-writing, drafting and revising activities.**
- c- rewarding students and recommending a piece of writing.**
- d- giving students a more positive perspective about their writing.**
- e- providing students with guidelines.**
- f- having students read each other's drafts and,**

g- creating interesting and authentic writing challenges such as news letter readers.

Problem No. 6: Students Do not Want to Talk in Class

Many teachers have come across students who do not seem to want talking in class sometimes this may have to do with-

a- The student's character.

b-There are other students who dominate and almost intimidate.

c-Students are simply not used to talk freely for reasons of culture and background. Perhaps in their culture, women are traditionally expected to remain quiet in a mixed-sex groups.

Suggestions

a- Using pair work (and group work) will help to provoke quiet students into talking. When they are with or perhaps two or three other students, they are not under so much pressure as they are if asked to speak in front of the whole class.

b- Allow them to speak in a controlled way at first

Teachers can asked quiet students for instance fluency may be doomed to failure, initially it is better to do it in stages.

c- Using acting and reading aloud

Getting students to act dialogues is one way of encouraging quiet students. The teacher as to work with the students like a drama coach.

d- Use role –play

Many teachers found that quiet students speak more freely when they are playing a role. The use of role cards allows students

to take on a new identity in which they can behave in uncharacteristic ways.

e- using of the tape recorder

If teachers have time, they can tell students to record what they would like to say outside the lesson. The teachers then listen to the tape and points out possible error.

Problem No. 7: Difficulty in Understanding the Listening Tape

Sometimes, despite the teacher's best judgment or the judgment of textbook writer- listening material on tape seems to be too difficult for students to understand. There are a number of alternatives to this scenario that might help.

Suggestions

a- Introducing interview questions

If students find (or will find) an interview difficult, they can be given the questions first and encouraged to role-play the interview before listening to it.

b- One task play

Students can be given a straight forward task which does not demand too much detailed understanding. A useful possibility is to get them to describe the speaker on the tape. The sound of the voice will suggest sex, age, status etc.

c- Play the first segment only

Instead of playing the whole tape, teacher can just play the (first segment and then let students predict what is coming next.

d- Using vocabulary prediction

Students can be given "key" vocabulary before they listen again. They can then be asked to predict what the tape will be about and because they now know some of the words, they may well understand more.

Problem No. 8: Students-in-Groups Finish Before Everybody Else

When teachers asked their students to complete a task, they can be sure that some groups will finish before others. If the activity has a competitive element, this is not a worry.

Suggestions

a- Spare activity

The teachers can work with the group that finished first by providing them with some "spare activity" material.

But, if one group is left without having finished, the teacher may decide to stop the activity anyway because the rest of the class should not be kept waiting.

b- Selecting additional activity

Teachers can select little work sheets, puzzles reading etc. which can be done quickly and which will keep the early finishing students happy until the other have caught up.

Conclusion

There have been major changes in the theory and practice of second language teaching and learning . These changes have been driven by changes in educational theory and the way we think about language learning .

Some of the expected difficultis that may face teachers in various learning situations are the following:-

- 1- The students are at different levels.**
- 2- The class is very big.**
- 3- Students keep using their own language.**
- 4- Lack of cooperation.**
- 5- Students find difficulty in writing skill.**
- 6- Students do not want to talk in class.**
- 7- Difficulty in understanding the listening tape.**
- 8- Students-in-groups finish before every body else.**

Many suggestions, techniques and recommendations are presented as solutions for each difficulty or problem. Different kinds of alternatives are given to overcome language-learning difficulties.

The alternatives that are presented may help learners in the following:-

- 1- Urge students towards the active use of the target language.**
- 2- Help learners to learn useful language and become better learners.**
- 3- Provide models of the language they are learning and share their knowledge of real-word tasks.**

- 4- Improve learning performance and provide a detailed profile of their skills.**
- 5- Help learners to make connections between the classroom world and the world behind it.**

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