

HELLENIC NAVY
LANGUAGE SCHOOL
PALASKAS TRAINING CENTER
SKARAMAGKAS, ATHENS
GREECE

**Managing National Language
Programs:
Setting Goals, Designing Syllabus
and Assessing Programs**

The teaching process

The process of teaching a foreign language is a complex one: as with many other subjects, it has necessarily to be broken down into components, such as:

- a. presenting and explaining new material
- b. providing practice and
- c. testing

In principle, the teaching processes of presenting, practicing and testing correspond to strategies used by many good learners trying to acquire a foreign language on their own. They make sure they perceive and understand new language (by paying attention, by constructing meanings, by formulating rules or hypotheses that account for it, and so on); they make conscious efforts to learn it thoroughly (by mental rehearsal of items, for example, or by finding opportunities to practice); and they check themselves (get feedback on performance, ask to be corrected). (O' Malley and Chamot, 1990).

In the classroom, it is the teacher's job to promote those three learning processes by the use of appropriate teaching acts. Thus, he or she: presents and explains new material in order to make it clear, comprehensible and available for learning; gives practice to consolidate knowledge; and tests, in order to check what has been mastered and what still needs to be learned or reviewed.

This is not, of course, the only way students learn a language in the classroom. They may absorb new material unconsciously, or semi – consciously, through exposure to comprehensible and personally meaningful speech or writing, and mediation. Through such mediation, however, the teacher can provide a framework for organized, conscious learning, while simultaneously being aware of – and providing opportunities for further, more intuitive acquisition.

SETTING GOALS

Effective presentation of new material

An effective teacher presentation of new material in formal courses is that they can help to activate and harness learners' attention, effort, intelligence and conscious learning strategies in order to enhance learning. For instance, you might point out how a new item is linked to something they already know, or contrast a new bit of grammar with a parallel structure in their own language.

This does not necessarily mean that every single new bit of language – every sound, word, structure, text, and so on – needs to be consciously introduced; or that every new unit in the syllabus has to start with a clearly directed presentation. Moreover, presentations may be given after learners have already engaged with the language in question, as when we clarify the meaning of a word during a discussion, or read aloud a text learners have previously read to themselves.

The ability to mediate new material or instruct effectively is an essential teaching skill; it enables the teacher to facilitate learners' entry into and understanding of new material, and thus promotes further learning.

Guidelines on Teaching Communicative Language in an EFL Context.

Communicative language teaching in an EFL context is clearly a greater challenge for students and teachers. Often, intrinsic motivation is a big issue since students may have difficulty in seeing the relevance of learning English. Their immediate uses of the language may seem far removed from their own circumstances. Classroom hours are sometimes the only hours of the day when students are exposed to English. Therefore, the language that you present, model, elicit, and treat takes on great importance.

But in many countries English is a required subject in schools, usually secondary schools and military academies,

thereby diminishing possibilities of intrinsic motivation to learn. Teachers are in a constant state of war with the “authorities” on curricula goals and on the means for testing the achievement of those goals. By passing a grueling computer – scorable standardized multiple – choice examination, a student’s “proficiency” is determined. Unfortunately that proficiency turns out to be more related to the ability to cram for a standardized test than the ability to use English for communicative meaningful purposes.

How can you teach a classroom, usually full of students under such circumstances? Can you focus their efforts and attention on language rather than on the exam at the end of the course? Can students develop an intrinsically oriented outlook on their motivation to succeed? Can it be done? The answer is obviously “yes” because many people have done so. Here are some guidelines to help us compensate for the lack of ready communicative situations right outside the classroom door (H.D. Brown 1994)

- Use class time for optimal authentic language input and interaction.
- Don’t waste class time on work that can be done as homework
- Provide regular motivation – stimulating activities
- Help them to see genuine uses for English in their own lives.
- Play down the role of tests and emphasize more intrinsic factors
- Provide plenty of extra – class learning opportunities, such as assigning an English – speaking movie, having them listen to an English speaking TV or radio program and so on.

Teacher development:
Practice, reflection, sharing

A teacher can and should advance in professional expertise and knowledge throughout his or her career, and such advances

do not depend on formal courses or external input. You have within your own teaching routine the main interaction with other teachers in your institution. Teacher development takes place when teachers, working as individuals or in a group, consciously take advantage of such resources to forward their own professional learning.

On going teacher development is important not only for your own sense of progress and professional advancement; in some situations it may even make a crucial difference between survival and dropping out. Constant teacher development is a necessary contributor to your success and satisfaction in professional work today, and to your career in the future as teacher and/or in other allied professions: materials writer, trainer, author, researcher.

Personal reflection

The first and most important basis for professional progress is simply your own reflection on daily classroom events. Very often this reflection is quite spontaneous and informal and happens without any conscious intention on your part. Traveling to and from the institution where you teach, or at other odd moments when you have nothing particular to occupy your mind, things that happened in the classroom come to mind and you start puzzling about what to do about a problem, work out why something was successful, rethink a plan in the light of the last lesson. This sort of spontaneous reflection is the necessary basis and jump – off point for further development: it is the hallmark of the conscientious professional.

Sharing with a colleague

Informal discussion with a colleague with whom you feel at ease can contribute a lot to your own development, as well as boosting morale. (Penny Ur 1991): What you wish to share may be negative or positive: on the one hand you may wish to find a solution to a problem, to confide a failure, get an idea as to how

to teach something; on the other hand, you may wish to tell someone about an original solution you have found to an old problem, share your delight at a success, discuss a new teaching idea you have had.

Practice principle of stress management

Contrary to some opinions expressed from outside, teaching is a career with all the makings for high stress conditions. Think of some of the sources of stress in this business (H. D. Brown 1994):

- Long hours
- Large classes
- Low pay
- Pressure to perform in the classroom
- High student expectations
- Demands beyond the classroom
- Emotional connections with students' lives
- Bureaucracies
- Pressure to keep up with a rapidly changing field
- Information overload

But, sometimes, one of the recurring nightmares for teachers of military school students is losing control: the lesson that slips away from them, that they can't control because the students don't like the subject, each other or the teacher – or sometimes just because they feel like it. And, whatever the causes of this behaviour, a problem is created.

Managing those potential stress factors is an important key to keeping yourself fresh, creative, bright, and happy.

Characteristics of a Good Language Teacher

One way to begin setting goals and priorities is to consider the qualities of successful language teachers. Harold B. Allen (1980) offered the following list of characteristics of good language teachers:

1. Competent preparation leading to a degree in TEFL
2. A love of the English language
3. The critical faculty
4. The persistent urge to upgrade oneself
5. Self – subordination
6. Readiness to go the extra mile
7. Cultural adaptability
8. Professional citizenship
9. A feeling of excitement about one's work

Designing and Using the Syllabus

A syllabus is a document which consists of a list. This list specifies all the things that are to be taught in the course for which the syllabus was designed. The syllabus generally has explicit objectives on the basis of which the components of the list are selected and ordered.

Objectives define the ends that the curriculum is designed to bring about, that is, the changes in knowledge and ability that the curriculum is expected to accomplish in learners. Some phases in curriculum development are concerned with planning the means by which the objectives can be achieved. The process by which content is selected for a course of instruction in language teaching is generally referred to as syllabus design (Wilkins 1976). Generally, a syllabus represents a particular view of what is needed to attain an objective.

How teachers use the syllabus varies very widely between different countries and institutions, and depends on financial resources as well as on teaching approach. A competent teacher may develop new, independent programmes, based mainly on the teacher's preferences and learners' needs. But the abandonment of a carefully pre – planned syllabus may result in significant gaps in the language content taught. Also, it may make it difficult for either teacher or learners to feel a sense of progress or evaluate learning outcomes.

Syllabus Design Criteria

When designers put syllabuses together they have to consider each item for inclusion on the basis of a number of criteria. This will not only help them to decide if they want to include the item in question, but also where to put it in the sequence. However, these different design criteria point, in many cases, to different conclusions. The syllabus designer has to balance such competing claims when making decisions about selection and grading (Jeremy Harmer – Longman 2001):

- a. **LEARNABILITY:** Some structural or lexical items are easier for students to learn than others. Thus we teach easier things first and then increase the level of difficulty as the students' language level rises. Learnability might tell us that, at beginner levels, it is easier to teach uses of was and were immediately after teaching uses of is and are, rather than follow is and are with the third conditional.
- b. **FREQUENCY:** It would make sense, especially at beginning, to include items which are more frequent in the language, than ones that are only used occasionally by native speakers. Now we are in a position to say with some authority, for example, that *see* is used more often to mean understand than it is to denote vision. (e. g. Oh, I see)
- c. **COVERAGE:** Some words and structures have greater coverage (scope for use) than others. Thus we might decide to introduce the going to future before the present continuous with future reference, if we could show that going to could be used in more situations than the present continuous.
- d. **USEFULNESS:** The reason that words like book and pen figure so highly in classrooms (even though they might not be that frequent in real language use) is because they are useful words in that situation. In the same way words for family members occur early on in a student's learning life because they are useful in the context of what students are linguistically able to talk about.

Evaluating Lesson Effectiveness

It is important to stop and think after giving a lesson whether it was a good one or not and why. This is not in order to indulge in self – congratulation or vain regrets, but in order to have a basis for your own learning from reflection on exercise: this lesson was unsatisfactory, what could I have done to improve it? Or: this lesson was good, what was it exactly that made it so?

Criteria for Evaluating Lesson Effectiveness.

- a) The learners were active all the time
- b) The learners were attentive all the time
- c) The learners enjoyed the lesson, were motivated
- d) The class seemed to be learning the material well.
- e) The lesson went according to plan.
- f) The language was used communicatively throughout
- g) The learners were engaging with the foreign language throughout (Cambridge University press 1996).

Putting it all together

Summing up, it can be said that a school curriculum that comes from “the administration” can be modified to some extent to include student – centered learning and teaching, to allow students to set some of their own goals, and to individualize lessons and activities as much as possible. The result will be higher student self – esteem, greater chances for self – actualization, more deciding for oneself.

Expectations of parents and other authority military figures are a reality that we cannot simply dissolve. But teachers can help to convert the perception of those expectations into a sense of the positive effect of the immediate family on a student and of the importance of military career, not because it has been forced on them, but because its intrinsic worth is perceived. The result: an appreciation of the importance of the military career, intimacy, and respect for the wisdom of age.

In turn, society's expectations may, through a process of education and counseling, be seen as a means for providing comfortable routines (time schedules, customs, mores). Class discussions can focus on a critical evaluation of society so that students aren't forced to accept some way of thinking or acting but are coaxed into examining both sides of the issue. The result is a sense of belonging, a sense of the value of the military career and the wider community.

Tests and exams can incorporate some student consultation and peer evaluation. Teachers can help students to view tests as feedback instruments for self – diagnosis and not simply for comparing one's performance against a norm. So students become motivated by the experience and by achieving self – knowledge.

In conclusion, the faculty of military academies and schools should bear in mind that military knowledge and competence are not enough for the military personnel to climb up the ladder of leadership. These should also be conjoined with courage, loyalty, obedience, subordination of the self to the greater whole, and most importantly, with moral integrity. Such virtues are crucial to carrying out the military function in a morally sound nation and not merely “nice to have” as they might be in some other professions. Therefore, that's why, in most countries, society as a whole looks to the military profession as a final reservoir of its most precious human values.

But who is going to instill those values into the military staff? Certainly the teachers who, according to a stimulating essay written by Pennycook, are “transformative intellectuals” who must see themselves “as professionals who are able and willing to... connect pedagogical theory and practice to wider social issues, and who work together to share ideas, exercise power of the conditions of our labor, and embody in their teaching a vision of a better and more humane life.”