

Promoting meaningful learning in the English class

Edmundo Mora
Universidad de Nariño

Various psychologists and methodologists have discussed through the years the different aspects involved in the teaching-learning process. Likewise they have experimented with a good many theories and approaches in the hope of discovering the best elements to make the afore mentioned process a dynamic, effective and integral activity. Nevertheless, theories that were once important have become less influential and have been replaced by others which have evolved as a result of the weaknesses of preceeding theories as a way of meeting the needs of a demanding modern world.

The evolution of the afore mentioned theories can be observed in a relatively short time span. For instance, in the 50s and early 60s, Psycholinguistic theory was dominated essentially by behaviorist psychology and the work of taxonomic structuralists such as Bloomfield. In the 60s and early 70s, cognitivist-mentalistic ideas of transformationalists, mainly Chomsky, made up the main supports of psycholinguistic theory. In the 70s, there was also a shift of emphasis towards the communicative and pragmatic aspects of language. Among the authors that have tackled this approach we can mention such names as Hymes, Widdowson, etc. It is worth pointing out that these linguists still developed their research studies within the limits of Transformational Linguistics. Later, the pragmatic or sociolinguistic approach was at its highest point with its advocates as Halliday, Ervin-Tripp,

Leontyev among others.

The contribution of Humanistic Psychology by Carl Rogers also deserves to be mentioned. He suggested a deep change in terms of viewing education. He claims that its goal should be the facilitation of change and learning. In this dimension, learning how to learn is more important than being taught by the teacher who decides unilaterally what to teach and how to teach it. Likewise Rogers holds that to be facilitators of knowledge teachers must be real and genuine, discarding their masks of superiority. They must also have genuine confidence, acceptance and appraisal of the student as a worthy individual. This theory has definitely traced a revolutionary path in education as its principles differ considerably from those proposed by Skinnerian Psychology and from those rationalist theories such as Ausubel's.

Recently, the Holodynamic Approach, Constructivism, Self-Learning theories, etc. have also gained scientific recognition.

A similar evolution has taken place with foreign language teaching methods and materials. Methods as old as Grammar-Translation, or the Audiolingual Method had a profound effect on TEFL theories in the past. Some of their techniques are still in use today, but their whole structure has been widely questioned. To make up for these weaknesses, through time they have been replaced by other models. Thanks to this, we now have such methods as CLL,

TPR, Communicative – Approach, Silent Way, Suggestopedia, etc. which are supported by such theories as ‘trace theory’ of memory in Psychology and Humanistic Education.

The advocates of the psychological laws of language learning and some of the proponents of the various methods listed above hold that a class consists of three phases, namely presentation, assimilation and active and creative use of the material. Of course, different names have been given to these stages but in essence they refer to the same thing. These same experts claim that the most important stage which is often omitted is the last one, that is active and creative manipulation of the language studied.

Undoubtedly a carefully planned class should include the stages previously mentioned. The first thing we do as teachers is to present new materials. That is, we introduce new knowledge, making use of sundry techniques to stimulate the students’ attention, motivation and interest. In order for an activity to be productive, the students must be interested, motivated and concentrated on what they are doing. This can be reached by using different techniques, varied materials as well as through careful explanations fitting to the student’s level. A second step that is generally faced with care is the assimilation of what we teach. In fact, many teachers feel satisfied if the students can repeat back with enthusiasm what they have been taught. Unfortunately, if this happens we feel we have accomplished our task and continue presenting new topics to comply with the syllabus set out for the course. As a result of this, the students are deprived of the opportunity of applying the knowledge they have acquired to real situations, to solve problems, to test hypotheses, to make

generalizations, etc. Indeed, mechanical repetition of what has been studied is a simple formalism that only shows that a student has taken in discrete, meaningless information. This can easily be seen when a student gets a good mark on an exam, where he reproduces with spirit the ideas and sentences from his textbook. Nonetheless if he is asked to apply what he has memorized to a particular situation, to answer an unpredictable question, his weakness to associate, deduce, that is to give life and meaning to what he has memorized, becomes evident.

The previous observation reveals that in fact, the most important phase of a class is and should be the active and creative use of the material or exploitation of knowledge as it has been called by others. Unfortunately, as was said above, it is a stage that is often neglected.

It should be noticed, though, that to give students the opportunity to apply the acquired knowledge to solve problems or to create their own situations, they should be trained through careful exercises, rather than being merely asked, to think in English, as they are often told by their teachers.

Ausubel (1985: 56) holds that “any learning situation can be meaningful if 1. learners have a meaningful learning set, that is, a disposition to relate the new learning task to what they already know; and 2. the learning task itself is potentially meaningful to the learners—that is, relatable to the learners’ structure of knowledge”.

When teaching a foreign language, English in this case, the teacher ought to make a special effort to lead his students to take in the new information in a meaningful way so that they can later make a conscious

handling of the new items to cope with the structures required to make an active and coherent use of the target language. For example, when teaching the past tense and past participle of irregular verbs, instead of providing his learners with long alphabetized lists to be crammed, he may find it helpful to help them organize various groups of verbs making allowance for their morphological changes, or their identical forms for present, past, past participle, etc., i.e.

Naturally we cannot deny the fact that students may learn their lessons even by rote memorization if they are required to do so, under the pressure of a test for instance. Nevertheless, learning under these conditions has tremendous drawbacks, among them we can simply state that individuals will learn for an exam but will easily forget the material after a short time span. Unlike mechanical learning, meaningful learning gives learners

Group A			Group B			Group C		
Ring	<i>Rang</i>	Rung	Burst	Burst	Burst	Bleed	Bled	Bled
Sing	Sang	Sung	Cut	Cut	Cut	Feed	Fed	Fed
Sink	Sank	Sunk	Let	Let	Let	Lead	Led	Led
Swim	Swam	Swum	Put	Put	Put			

This classification may go on with the teacher's assistance. A similar strategy can be used with such structures as the plural form of irregular nouns, the comparative form of adjectives, etc. The nice thing of this procedure is that students meet with awareness what they are studying rather than have to rely exclusively on their memory. Last but not least they begin to create settings, to associate, to infer, to discover their own strategies of learning. Of course, some materials as those previously indicated lend themselves exceptionally well to creating the strategies described, but if the learning task is not potentially meaningful the teacher needs to make a special effort to establish meaningfulness as Smith (1975) has called 'manufacturing meaningfulness'. This means that he has to devise special exercises, contrivances and so on to lead his students to relate the new items to be learned to what they already have consolidated in their cognitive structure. Thus they will be in the position of putting it to good use so that they can make sense of what they have studied.

the opportunity to associate the new learning

task to previously learned material. Through this practice they will eventually retain the new information for the rest of their lives.

The points discussed above show us that a direct transition is not possible from the presentation of new topics to their free and active handling. One of the things that has given rise to this problem is the abuse that some teachers make of mechanical drills. These are good resources especially at the beginning to help the students take in the basic patterns of English, but these cannot lead students to communicate in this foreign language, as the student can practice them without understanding their content. The teacher needs, then to use meaningful drills to allow students to be aware of what they are repeating. It can be argued with some justification that the expected terminal behavior of meaningful drills is the same as that of mechanical drills, that is automatic use of the language.

Nevertheless “mechanical drills by their nature can be drilled without grammatical analysis, with the students left to ‘analogize’ the pattern on their own. This is not possible with meaningful drills. Unless the students understand what they are doing, i.e. recognize the characteristic features involved in the language manipulation, they cannot complete the drill. In order to help students benefit fully from meaningful drills, these should be preceded by some grammatical explanation and analysis. Once they have been given enough practice with meaningful drills they can be exposed to communicative drills” Paulston and Newton (1987: 9). These same authors claim that with “communicative drills there is still no real communication taking place as students have a tendency to learn what they are taught rather than what we think we are teaching. If we want fluency in expressing their own opinions, then we have to teach that”. In order to allow students to gain fluency in English, that is as some linguists assert, to help students function in the foreign language as they do in their own, communicative drills should be followed by such communicative activities as dramatizations, information gap, opinion gap, information transfer, task dependency, mingling activities, cued dialogs. The teacher may very well use to other activities as long as they foster intense real oral practice, i.e. debates, presentations on topics of interest, video watching followed by questions and analysis, etc.

Only if we as teachers follow the procedure outlined previously can we help our students make a fluent and free use of the target language. It would only be then that we can say that we are tackling the third phase of a class – active and creative use of the material.

For the sake of illustration, you will find some drills of the kind described above.

Mechanical Drills

Verbatim Repetition

Teacher: It’s cold outside

Ss Repeat: It’s cold outside

Teacher: Mary is absent today

Ss: Mary is absent today

Correlative substitution drill

T: I looked for the pencil, but I couldn’t find it.

Ss: I looked for the pencil, but I couldn’t find it.

T: _____ dictionary _____

S: I looked for the dictionary but I couldn’t find it.

T: _____ papers _____

S: I looked for the books but I couldn’t find them.

T: _____ picture _____

S: I looked for the picture but I couldn’t find it.

Chain drills

Teacher presents situation. You’re going to go on a picnic with your classmates. What are you going to take with you?

S1: I’m going to take (a radio)

S2: I’m going to take a radio and (a camera)

S1: I’m going to take a radio, a camera and (a magazine).

Moving slot substitution

T: The van leaves tomorrow at nine

Ss: The van leaves tomorrow at nine.

T: _____ on Friday _____

S: The van leaves on Friday at nine.

T: The plane _____

S: The plane leaves on Friday at nine.

T: _____ is leaving _____

S: The plane is leaving on Friday at nine.

T: George _____

S: George is leaving on Friday at nine.

Transformation drill.

T: The students are happy.
 Ss: Are the students happy?
 T: The girls are dancing.
 S: Are the girls dancing?
 T: The man has gone.
 S: Has the man gone?
 T: They were here yesterday.
 S: Were they here yesterday?

T: Tom doesn't drink much _____
 S: Tom doesn't drink much (water).

Expansion

Adjective – noun

T: man/doctor

S: The (intelligent) man is a (good) doctor

T: girls/singers

S: The (tall) girls are (excellent) singers

T: children/actors

S: The (thin) children are (bad) actors.

Response drill with a cued alternate expression.

Teacher	Student 1	Cue	Student II
Are you going to the ballet?	Are you going to the ballet?	(movies)	No, I'm going to the movies
_____ he _____	Is she going to the ballet?	(fair)	No, He's going to the fair
_____ Paul _____	Is Paul going to the ballet?	(circus)	No, he's going to the circus
_____ they _____	Are they going to the ballet?	(book display)	No, they're going to the book display

Meaningful drills

Completion

T: Since/ago – time expression

T: They had a party

S: They had a party two months ago

Conjunction

T: They were singing and _____

S: They were singing and dancing

T: She always reads books in Spanish or _____

S: She always reads books in Spanish or English

T: He likes to go to the park or _____

S: He likes to go to the park or to the country.

Count/Noncount nouns

T: Helen eats a few _____ .

S: Helen eats a few (apples)

T: John doesn't write many _____ .

S: John doesn't write many (letters)

Transitive verb – complement

T: I think it is my obligation to _____ .

S: I think it is my obligation to tell you that you have to come early to class.

T: We call it success when _____ .

S: We call it success when (you reach your goals).

T: I find it discouraging to _____ .

S: _____

T: Do you consider it proper to _____?

S: _____

Communicative drills

T: Be present

T: Describe your brother/sister

S: He's/She's a nice person

T: Describe your house

S: (It's a big yellow house)

T: Describe a museum in your city.

S: _____

T: Describe the best student in your class.

S: _____

Reflexives

T: What does your wife like to do?

S: She likes to read but she doesn't like to cook by herself.

T: Do you always wash your own clothes?

S: _____

T: Do you go to school by yourself?

Have-causative

T: Do you wash your own car?

S: (Yes, I do)

(No, I don't. I have it washed at the gas station across from the park).

T: Where do you have your car fixed?

T: Do you cook your own meals?

These exercises are adaptations of those suggested by such authors as Decanay (1971), Paulston and Newton (1987).

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