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Recommended Citation

Aada, K. (2020). Foreign Languages Teaching Challenges: Stages, Practices and Methodologies. Arab World English Journal. https://scholarworks.utrgv.edu/wls_fac/12

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SEPTEMBER 22, 2019

Foreign Languages Teaching Challenges: Stages, Practices and Methodologies

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Foreign Languages Teaching Challenges: Stages, Practices and Methodologies

Abstract:

Leading an engaged teaching-learning process involves considering a bidirectional transfer of knowledge between teachers and students, since it is about favoring an educational interaction environment where students are not only limited to participate in a traditional way, but expect to find meaning to their learning experience and be able to build the acquired knowledge. It's a dialectical unit between either instruction and education or teaching and learning that would allow to identify a stage of reflection and critical thinking toward the new educational models. In other words, a field where teachers are asked to transform their role as exhibitors of knowledge to learning facilitators, and students from spectators to active participants, proactive and critical members in the construction of their own knowledge. This article discusses and illustrates the important relation between three essential axes that would benefit the collective though to get a better understanding of the perception of the teaching-learning process from the perspective and conviction of each participant; interactive action when participating in the classroom or at a distance; and, results of the behavior of the main actors, the educator and the student. Through different insight on stages, practices and methodologies, this article presents a pedagogical tool that could facilitate the organization and the establishment of a follow-up in an actual form and thus contribute to the improvement of the study programs.

Descriptive keywords: Foreign Languages– Teaching and Learning Process - Multicultural and Educational Diversity Environment.

Introduction

Achieving an optimal teaching-learning process is undoubtedly the ideal intention of each educational entity. However, to guide an active change of this process, it is relevant to consider a

bidirectional transfer of knowledge between teachers and students, since it is about favoring an educational interaction environment where students are not only limited to participate in a traditional way, but their expectations to find meaning to their learning experience are the result of the entire process where they are able to build the acquired knowledge. That would allow establishing a stage of reflection and critical thinking about the current educational situation in both theoretical designs and in the field of reality. In other words, three essential axes - which could favor the research process - are defined between the perception of the teaching-learning act from the perspective and conviction of each participant; interactive action when participating in the classroom or at a distance; and, results of the behavior of the main actors, the educator and the student.

On the other hand, it should be noted that one of the most forgotten topics in the various educational agendas is the anthropological reflection for both the teacher himself, as well as for the students. Questions concerning educational foundation arise without a doubt: who do we educate? from where do we educate? and how do we educate?

The constructivist educational philosophy that has assumed the majority of educational reforms implies certain approaches that should influence educational proposals with an eminently humanistic profile and integrates five basic assumptions: a) the person is a rational being; b) his cognitive ability is essential; c) he has a psychic dimension; d) he is a social being, and e) he is a biological being. This implies that during every educational event, these dimensions of who is implied in the process of learning; who is in charge of facilitating the interaction with students, and under what modality the whole process is carried out should be addressed and analyzed for the beneficial of all the factors included.

Scenes from outsides of the traditional format:

This awareness implies a greater commitment from all faculty and staff members involved in the Teaching process. The new challenges based on the birth of new scenarios and training modalities, and the ability of networks to promote information growth exponentially; the evolution of society and the implementation of technological resources in the information process affect the educational environment in a straight way.

The teacher represents an essential role in the design and creation of interaction environments considered appropriate to the new temporal space coordinates, to the new educational objectives, etc., in such a way that one can understand how the changes influence and affect the students, educators, schools and community. Between the classroom and the possibilities of access to learning materials from any coordinate or specific data through technological tools, the teacher as facilitator faces a range of alternatives to access learning resources, so it is necessary to route with the opportunities of the networks which - without a doubt - add a more global perspective and enhance the communication process.

The changes of the educational models have also influenced the evolution of the modalities of open or distance learning, which favors the approach of flexible educational offerings that serve both students who follow face-to-face teaching and those who are enrolled under distance learning modality or by any of the mixed forms. These changes have required educators to get involved in the design of new pedagogical models and strong support of interactive multimedia technologies. Communication through different social media networks enhances this new model of more flexible learning and at the same time the appearance of new scenarios - according to Salinas (1995) -: learning at home, in the workplace and in a center of multimedia resources.

However, technological availability is not considered as the only fundamental element in the whole process, but rather teachers contemplate in their design – either known as creation, retrofitting or

reengineering – the characteristics of learners or learning’s users, who do not identify themselves with the same needs, the same motivations, the same independence, the same work and professional situations, the same conditions and availability, etc., or those who learn from home do not claim the same learning as those who do it from the job, for example.

Multicultural and Educational Diversity Environment

Another scenario is that educational establishments in many countries have become a multilingual environment (Perregaux, 1995). The diversity of languages is part of the reality of schools at different levels. From the point of view of learning - as stated by Dolz (2009) - the analysis of students' verbal abilities implies establishing a linguistic profile in accordance with the language of study. The places that recognizes or faces a migratory transit of families are extremely important, a situation that leads teachers to research and seek alternatives to evolve and improve their level of adaptation with cultural and linguistic diversity. In other words, teachers adopt a new curriculum whose content contemplates a new integrated teaching of foreign languages, a challenge considered without any doubt as relevant. A compromise that implies creating an intellectual environment where multilingualism and interculturality are not lived as factors of academic complexity or teacher overload, but – following (Vez, 2011:105) – as stimuli for social enrichment and cultural development.

For this purpose, the need for the teacher to master a foreign language is clearly relevant in the multilingual contexts of today's society. That is why their professional training involves identifying the aspects that influence the language and its uses and concern the treatment of the contents intended for teaching, because it is problematic to teach a foreign language if the oral or written abilities of the educator are limited. Due to its role in interactions with students, it is necessary to recognize the diversity of uses depending on the communication situations. A

language is not only an object of teaching, but also the tool of all linguistic learning process. Hence, the teacher training - in itself - reflects a challenge that consists – mainly – of studying didactical transposition (Chevallard, 1985/1991; Schneuwly, 1995; Bronckart and Plazaola-Giger, 1998). That is, it is about studying how linguistic knowledge is transformed to allow its teaching and learning. In other words, the teacher finds himself in the need of establishing a relationship with knowledge and literary culture, to question the source of the references involved and to choose and analyze heritage texts that allow work in that direction.

Another challenge identified as an important human capital in the process deals with the teacher seen as an agent of the 21st century in his teaching phase under the new demand of the educational offer. In a new model based on information and communication technologies, both teachers and educational institutions cease to be the only source of knowledge. Educators become facilitators and advisors for students by guiding them to how to use the necessary resources and tools, monitoring their progress and providing feedback on their progress to acquire new knowledge and develop different skills through new collaborative experiences and thus responding to the challenges of tomorrow's society.

For both Gillett and Wray (2006), teaching should focus on the needs of students in their academic courses and help them to perform better in these activities. Within this academic conceptualization, content-based teaching (Content-Based Teaching) appears as the one that allows students to practice language skills in the process of studying an academic course through the development of speech, reading, listening comprehension, writing, grammatical forms and some sub-skills such as note taking (Pally, 1999).

Although the development of skills that allow academic and cognitive learning through exposure to academic language is highly valued (Cummins, 1981), the availability of teachers who can teach

courses in a foreign language is relatively small. As it is stated by Bell (1999), finding teachers trained in teaching a foreign language is a challenge to the extent that those who teach do not generally have the required language experience and lack the academic content that allows them to contribute with a comprehensive training of its students.

Crandall and Kaufman (2002) consider the following factors as challenges for teaching foreign languages in an educational content: Identify and develop the appropriate content; Motivate teachers to participate in this type of instruction by developing and maintaining communication and collaboration among themselves; Develop sufficient knowledge between disciplines and institutionalize this academic practice.

That means that the new profile of teachers would be beneficial when it includes characteristics of creativity, proactivity, availability to research, positive attitude for continuous training, promotion of teamwork, use of all technological resources available to enrich and make more efficient the interaction with students, move from linear education to students-centered education and be skillful to manage their own teaching and learning resources.

Didactical Training importance for Foreign Languages Teachers

Foreign Languages Teachers are in the need of basic development tools necessary in their interaction process, and which could be divided into three essential axes: having the academic training to teach languages; being able to develop a new curricular design based on educational competences and finally, becoming pedagogically involved in all interaction processes with students either in a traditional face to face classroom, blended learning environment or distance classes using different technological resources available for this purpose.

These didactical resources implicate a substantial change in accordance with the conditions and needs of the educational act, basically when it refers to the field of education and the level

corresponding to learning activities. It is very different when we teach in the elementary section than when we do in middle/high school or at the university level. The teacher's training is directly related to the linguistic competence and the didactic and pedagogical preparation through different training programs.

Another requirement that reflects a positive impact at both professional and personal level is the study abroad. It is suggested that every educator in charge of teaching foreign languages should consider the option of experiencing a period of three weeks in a specific country of interest at least every three years, for immersion, linguistic practice and social and cultural contact. On the other hand, there is no doubt that seminars and courses referring to the same purpose provide updated experiences and lessons.

Teachers in charge of distance education are crucially needed especially for students without access to language schools in their communities. They find themselves in the need of taking an approach that guarantees independent, self-regulated, responsible and developer learning, and at the same time promote the integral development of the student's personality, so that he acquires knowledge and develops skills to learn, learn to do and learn to be. It is important in this endeavor that the teacher does not lose sight of his role as facilitator and adviser, he has the responsibility in this mode of design, organization and control of the activities that make the learning process happens smoothly, through which the student will build knowledge. (Juca-Maldonado, 2016)

In dual education, it is recommended that teachers keep a close connection with the professional environment in which students develop their learning skills, as well as being involved in a comprehensive education that includes transversal competencies and allows to have the ability to adapt to different social and economic contexts. Likewise, it must permanently evaluate the

relevance of the educational programs that allow the anticipation of the market's requirements and/or demands. (Martínez, Ramos and Briano, 2016)

Learning a foreign language implies knowing and understanding diversities and contexts in an equal relationship. Students are offered the possibility of being acquainted with other realities and cultures, as part of belonging to the new world of globalization, multiculturalism, and interculturality. It is also important to highlight the cultural strengthening that reflects a high impact on the studies and helps cultural motivations and vocations to be enhanced.

Teaching practice:

"Send a soldier to a war without weapons" is an expression used to metaphorically say that someone has been ordered something, without providing him with the indispensable and minimum tools to perform his task. It's when teachers are not usually provided with sufficient resources according to the demands of modern society; In addition, there are not always favorable and concrete circumstances to produce and use many of the teaching resources.

Also, there are still few teachers with enough training in this field. That leads us to reflect on the profile of the teacher of foreign languages. Is he a teacher like any other? Each one conceives or poses the teaching in a particular way, having to teach according to his own vision or personal interpretation developed through experience, trying, at the same time, to discover and reach the best way to apply the Linguistic knowledge of the practice, which is not easy.

Teaching a foreign language requires a series of skills, abilities, attitudes and aptitudes. The teaching competence should be characterized, among other reasons, by a true pedagogical and didactic training. Such teaching competence, as Mendoza warns (1998: 241), refers to:

“Teacher's set of knowledge, skills and behaviors that seem to motivate a better student performance (...) The professional competence of the teacher is determined by the specific training that he has received and by the way in which it has been assimilated and nuanced according to his own capacity for self-training (beliefs) (...). The training process focuses on the critical assessment of the relationship between problems and solutions; according to this criterion, training is understood as permanent observation and assessment and as a pedagogical pragmatic.”

Undoubtedly, the intervention of the teacher is decisive in the success or failure of the learning of his students since, as Montijano (2001: 29) warns, we want to believe that there is a direct correspondence between the quality of the teaching performance and the effectiveness in learning and, therefore, "teaching performance can be seen as the best aid for learning, if it really provides students with meaningful communicative experiences, triggers of authentic learning."

Curriculum Design

Each teaching process requires standards based on which the assessment is measured. One of those that can be recognized as valid (as mentioned by Lewy, cited by Arnaz, 1985) is the design of the curriculum, which is expected to meet several criteria such as: Be useful to meet one or more social needs; Curriculum objectives must be attainable under really important circumstances, that is, they must be "realistic"; The curricular objectives must be evaluable, that is, it must be possible to determine in some way whether they are being achieved or not, whether they have been achieved or not; Be consistent with the educational policy and philosophy contained in the applicable laws in this regard; Be a guide concrete enough so that everyone's effort contributes to the achievement of the same goals; Be useful for the satisfaction of the needs and expectations of the students considered as individuals; The selected contents must be relevant for the achievement of the respective objectives and thus contribute to the integral education of the student; The lessons to be achieved, proposed in the curriculum, must be designed in such a way that they are coherently integrated into the material and intellectual reality of the student; The curriculum must be in line with the degree and type of student's average development in biological, psychological and cultural aspects; and, The curriculum should be prepared considering the really available resources, or those that are feasible to have in the relatively near future.

Landing these criteria to the area of foreign languages, a curricular design whose structure is multidimensional and with a vision of fostering the development of cognitive and strategic skills that are considered key to language learning would be needed. This design would include four outlines developed separately before being integrated into a single program:

- The first would focus on knowledge of the language as a means of communication. Its structure will include aspects of phonetics, grammar, vocabulary, and pay attention to acts of oral production. In addition, no specific content or teaching material would be provided. Its objectives will be achieved through the material provided during interaction.
- The second one would deal with cultural issues and focus on sensitizing students about multilingual culture, allowing to understand intercultural relationships and deepening their understanding of the multicultural reality especially in their environment. The dimension of tolerance will be developed when living in a multicultural society.
- The third would contemplate a communicative study plan based on real experiences that highlight strategic aspects of communication. It would focus on involving students in experiential activities of daily life by performing linguistic exchanges, projects in foreign culture contexts... etc., thus allowing them to develop their communication skills. It should be mentioned that these experiences may be in the intellectual, social, sports field ... etc.
- The fourth structural framework of the design would focus on general linguistic education; whose objective is to lead the student to achieve some autonomy in their language learning. When developing and evaluating your own generalizations about the structure and functioning of French as a foreign language, you should acquire skills that are useful for learning other languages.

Research studies lead us to reflect on the fact that the practice of foreign language teachers is characterized by two fundamental aspects: learning about teaching and teaching of teaching. What

involves the acquisition and development of a wide range of skills, knowledge and competencies. These aspects are complicated by cognitive and affective tensions present in practice that influence learning and professional growth.

In the words of Rosemberg (2011), there is a need to promote new and better training activities as a result of the rapid changes in the world and the speed of knowledge production. These training processes must transform traditional practices based on teachers' conceptions as simple reproductive technicians of knowledge elaborated by others. Learning then a foreign language implies the design of a set of didactic strategies that contemplate the use of the native tongue. A configuration process that allows to organize learning in an understandable and meaningful way, because the acquisition of a language is more creative than mechanical.

Conclusion

It is important to adopt a methodology that prioritizes oral language and is based on the natural acquisition of languages, which leads to the development of listening comprehension, oral production, reading comprehension, written production and interaction skills.

The motivation of teachers plays a significant and influential role in the communication process, they have a great responsibility to be a linguistic model, to guide students to measure their own progress, managing and organizing activities within the classroom; develop the communicative approach stimulating the degree of students' curiosity and creativity.

The importance in our today's society of the new Information and Communication Technology resources becomes a necessity that requires continuous promotion, as they serve as a vehicle for learning the contents of the area. However, their use in the classroom must be accompanied by adequate planning to achieve the desired objectives. ICT resources favor the learning's autonomy.

As a language teacher, I believe that the goal is to help students become efficient, creative and critical users. To reach that, as Martínez (2006: 180-181) states, the language teacher must grow as a person with autonomy, master the teaching practice through critical reflection, know the natural and social environment in their multiple interactions and generate attitudes that allow support opinions and commitments.

An innovative experience would be planning the teaching process based on social daily life contexts and diversity of students. In addition, integrate basic notions from their native language into target languages contexts and teach them simultaneously. It would create an active interaction environment that would allow a consistent follow-up to the development of both oral and written learners skills. It will not only focus on school programs, but will adapt them to the needs of students. The assessment process would cover common skills and consider being rational to the requirements of each environment. Dealing with any new curriculum design involves the influence of social media demands on the educational system to go through a noticeable change by including programs and pedagogical resources that apply integrated teaching of different foreign languages. As a didactic sequence proposal (Dolz, Noverraz & Schneuwly, 2001), teachers will have the ability to choose and adapt materials, texts, and activities to their classroom's reality, design a multilingual curriculum and put it in practice, being aware that developing their teaching-Learning process requires an essential training and continuous development workshops.

Having in our hands, as educators and educators, the cognitive destiny of students, being able to influence their freedom of thought and forge an ethical framework, is of relevant importance; So, let's review our beliefs and truths about the person, and try to outline the vision we have regarding the educational, since without pretending it we are always configuring and contrasting the student

with models, whose foundations can be decisive for their future. Efforts should be more focused on how to develop the new training paradigm to gain access to a true Knowledge Society.

Acknowledgements or Notes

I am grateful to all of those with whom I have had the pleasure to work during this and other related researches. Every time, I was provided with extensive personal and professional guidance and learned a great deal about both scientific research and life in general.

Nobody has been more important to me in the pursuit of this research than the members of my family. I would like to thank my loving and supportive wife, Faviola, and my two wonderful children, Samia and Ismael who provide unending inspiration.

Statement: This manuscript is an original work that has been produced by the author: Dr. Khalid Aada and has never been submitted before to any other journal.

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