



The Classroom: Forum or Arena?

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1. Introduction

During the last twenty-odd years we have been inundated with various new teaching methodologies that purport to make the learning process more thought-provoking for both educator and pupil. Admittedly, the non-human components, that is to say syllabi, have so far made a significant contribution to foreign language learning, whether we refer to the *structural syllabus*, which was in its heyday in the 50s and 60s, the *notional syllabus*, or the *notional-functional syllabus*. We will not dwell on this any further, since an in-depth examination of the various types of syllabus is not within the purview of the present work. Yet, we have to note that, among the wide diversity of approaches that have permeated foreign language learning, the Communicative and Progressivist Approaches are of particular importance and value. The philosophy underlying the former approach is that language is to be viewed as a *vehicle* for communication; a conduit through which people express feelings or exchange information and opinions, in a given social context. In short, the tenet that informs its structure and methodology is *embedding language in its situational context*. It is, perhaps, (Dendrinos, 1992: 116) a modern recasting, so to speak, of Saussure's *parole* :

The logic behind the first approach is that language is a means of communication in a social environment and we need it in order to use it when we are discussing certain topics / themes or when we find ourselves in certain situations. With its appearance in the foreign language teaching scene, there

was a move away from focussing on language as a system of autonomous meanings, expressed by its formal properties, to concentrating on language in operation, which implies that meaning is dependent on the context of situation and on the speakers using it.

The latter, i.e. the Progressivist Approach, takes a holistic view of the teaching-learning process, with the aim of fostering the student's development of the *whole persona* in an unfragmented way. Consequently, the pupil is no longer considered to be a *passive subject* that is called on to function in a predefined, systematic way; on the contrary, he or she is looked upon as a self-actualizing individual whose cognitive, emotional and educational needs are to be respected and promoted. As Dendrinou notes,

progressivists consider learners as effective participants in the process of learning and responsible for its outcomes and the teacher as a guide and facilitator who creates conditions for the development of an inventive, problem-solving capacity (ibid., p. 131).

However, no matter what kind of approach, design or procedure we may resort to, it is an indisputable fact that, unless human interaction, inside or outside the classroom, leads to authenticity and self-fulfilment, the whole process is bound to fail. There has to be room for both teachers and students to grow into. In this kind of relationship, methods and techniques are merely *facilitating devices*, whereas the cognitive, affective and social growth of teachers and learners is the keynote. In light of this, we will endeavour to shed some light on the role the aforementioned participants play, and address ourselves to some of the most besetting problems confronting both parts of the educational process.

2. On “authority”

Clearly linked to the problems that vitiate the benefit which would, in an ideal world, accrue to those who actively engage in educational programs, methods and techniques, is inescapably the controversial issue of *teacher authority*. As a matter of fact, “authority” has been endowed with various meanings yet remains elusive of any definition whatsoever. Some people

associate it with the teacher's elevated cognitive, intellectual and social status and his / her concomitant primacy over the students, while others tend to connect it with such an unnerving feeling as arrogance and a supercilious observance of rules and norms that are laid down by the teacher her / himself – and the institution within which he / she is *authorized* to teach – and *must* be taken at face value. It is with both connotations that we will be concerned.

2.1. The teacher's authority and its effects

There has always been a tendency, on the part of the teacher, to claim superiority over his or her students and, consequently, to lose sight of his or her role in class. The teacher who evinces these characteristics keeps on blaming the students for their aberrant behaviour and “unsatisfactory” performance; he hardly ever bothers to make a probe of the students' cognitive, emotional and psychological background. He is an arrogant *automaton* who asserts his authority over his socially *unauthorized*, impotent and inferior students in a most undemocratic, uncivilized way; an “educated” person who supposedly strives to inculcate values and ideals but who is “conspicuous by her absence” when it comes to fostering feeling and creative thinking. No doubt, the teacher is conditioned to function – or rather *malfunction* – in this way but let us not become waylaid by further details as to the causes. What could extenuate such behaviour, in any case?

This arrogant, unapproachable figure, with his lofty ideas and pompous language, is as often as not a formidable barrier to language learning. Not only his personality and his intellectual and linguistic abilities but also such paralinguistic features as facial expressions and bodily position in the classroom may exert an immensely negative influence on the student's cognition and affect. Experiments have proved that four bodily positions of the teacher, i.e. *left / right, front / back, elevated / non-elevated*, and *standing / seated*, have each been associated with a certain degree of social dominance. For example, a teacher who, most of the time in class, is standing, elevated and occupies the foreground on the right side, is perceived to be dominant.

The data indicated that 75% of the time the elevated person was perceived as dominant and only 29% of the time the non-elevated person was considered so. Similarly 61% of the time the standing person was perceived

as dominant (Schwartz, Tesser and Powel, 1981: 47, cited in Papaconstantinou, 1991: 64).

We can imagine what a real strain on the pupils this must be. Consciously or unconsciously, the teacher's posture and facial expressions exude a certain air or mood which often builds up tension and aggravates interaction between teachers and students, and among students themselves. This discrepancy between "bad mood" and the educational objectives relating to cognitive development and emotional equilibrium is in itself pernicious and unprepossessing to cope with, mainly on the part of the student. How can the student feel secure and confident in a hostile, unpredictable environment, in which he / she is to be "seen but not heard"?

He [Paul Ekman] argues that facial expressions for primary emotions, such as surprise, fear, anger, disgust, sadness, and happiness are universally the same and are consequently cross-culturally perceived (Papaconstantinou, 1991: 65).

In all likelihood, a grumpy and severe teacher will produce grumpy and severe or refractory students.

As is evident, a teacher who speaks *ex cathedra*, exercising his requisite authority to lay down rules which the students must adhere to unquestioningly, does his cause a great disservice. Many generations look back on their school-days with a measure of fear and contempt because they believe that learning means hard work and sacrifice, and teachers' job is to reward or punish. Legitimate though it may be, this belief should be *de-suggested* by realizing and assuming the correct and *healthy* role as teachers and learners – a task which will be our concern in the following chapter.

2.2. The roles of the teacher and the learner

One can hardly envisage a language learning situation in the absence of an interaction of the student with his / her fellow students, the teacher and the textbook. Every time the student interacts with any of these sources, she makes various hypotheses about what she is learning, and accepts or rejects them, trying out new ones. In her attempt to learn the foreign language, she is dependent on her co-interactants, as she develops a wide range of *strategies* which will be tested only in a communicative context. Strategies can be distinguished in three categories: *production strategies*, *comprehension strategies* and

interactive strategies. We will not explore any of these in the present study. We should only point out the importance of human interaction in the classroom as a condition for successful language learning and intellectual, emotional and social development.

2.2.1. The role of the teacher

As has been intimated so far, language teaching is a complex issue, encompassing linguistic, psycholinguistic, sociocultural, pragmatic, as well as instructional and curricula dimensions. There are a lot of factors contributing to the *dynamics* of the educational process, such as internationalism and the pragmatic status of the foreign language (e.g., English), teaching and learning styles, and program characteristics. For example, the general expectation by students, parents and teachers that learners should achieve a high level of proficiency in English when they leave school influences both language policies and how foreign language learning will evolve. Furthermore, the teaching-learning process reflects different cultural traits and traditions. In some cultures, students tend to feel more at ease in the classroom, expressing their viewpoints and agreement or disagreement; in others, a “passive” attitude towards the teacher and the target language is more common. For instance, Greek society and its educational system favour rote memorization, while western countries, in general, do not value it. Moreover, such issues as the degree of preparation of teachers and the validity of testing and evaluation procedures can have a tremendous impact on language learning.

As is patently obvious, the task or act, one may say, of “teaching” encapsulates a lot more than merely providing instruction and guidelines for students. It presupposes a psychological and philosophical knowledge on the teacher’s part, so as to combine techniques in class, as well as sufficient command of the basic structure of human existence, with a view to assessing any situation accurately and appropriately.

Clearly linked to the roles defined for the learner are the roles the teacher is expected to play in the instructional process. Teacher roles, too, must ultimately be related both to assumptions about content and, at the level of approach, to particular views of language and language learning. Some instructional systems are totally dependent on the teacher as the

source of knowledge and direction; others see the teacher's role as catalyst, consultant, diagnostician, guide, and model for learning; still others try to teacher-proof the instructional system by limiting teacher initiative and building instructional content and direction into texts or lesson plans. Teacher and learner roles define the type of interaction characteristic of classrooms in which a particular method is being used. Teacher roles in methods are related to the following issues: the types of functions teachers are expected to fulfill (e.g., practice director, counselor, model), the degree of control the teacher influences over learning, the degree to which the teacher is responsible for determining linguistic content, and the interactional patterns assumed between teachers and learners (Richards, 1994: 23).

Undoubtedly, the teacher is called upon to perform several functions in foreign language learning. These are the following:

- * Teacher as director and manager
- * Teacher as counselor and a language resource
- * Teacher as a model and independent language user

2.2.1.1. Teacher as director and manager

One of the main concerns of the teacher as a director and manager is to create a warm, stimulating atmosphere in which the students will feel secure and confident.

It is very important for learners to feel very much at home with both their teachers and fellow-learners, if they are to be expected to venture out into the deep waters of foreign language learning, to experiment with new and strange sounds, and to role-play in a language which they have barely begun to learn (Papaeftymiou-Lytra, 1993: 95).

Apart from assisting in creating the right atmosphere, the teacher should also make decisions on the materials to be used, as well as the activities and games which will best accord with the learners' needs and abilities. Inasmuch as learners do not necessarily share the same cognitive and linguistic abilities, or interests and motivation, it is incumbent on the teacher to choose a wide variety of materials and teaching techniques and strategies in

order to respond to the students' interests and capacities. To this end, the teacher is supposed to organize the class, deciding whether a specific role-play or game will be simulated in pairs or in groups. Bearing all this in mind, the teacher may help develop a learner-centred approach to foreign language learning, as he / she takes into account the learners' preferences, tailoring the materials and strategies to their needs.

2.2.1.2. Teacher as counselor and a language resource

The second function that the foreign language teacher is expected to fulfil is that of counselor and a language resource. In other words, the onus is on her to provide the learners with the necessary *input* in order to foster understanding of the relation between language and communication. In short, she must modify and simplify her language according to the *needs* arising in each communicative situation, and to the *grammatical competence* and *language proficiency* of the students. In addition to simplifying *teacher talk*, she should resort to miming and facial expressions, as shown in a previous chapter.

“Learning and teaching is multi-sensory and everything in the classroom and method must imply that learning is relaxing, fun and possible to be attained” (Papaconstantinou, 1991: 35).

Moreover, the teacher as a language resource should help learners to acquaint themselves with, and acquire a taste for, the *target language* and *culture*. He should make explicit that language is not to be held in a vacuum but should always be learnt in connection to its users and the uses to which it is put. In light of this, grammar should not be the sole reference point in foreign language learning; the teacher has to draw his students' attention to the socio-cultural and pragmatic aspects of the foreign language, in order to help them assess the *accuracy* and *appropriateness* of the language they produce, both at the *sentence* level and the *discourse* level. As J. C. Richards (1994: 157) notes, “a focus on grammar in itself is not a valid approach to the development of language proficiency.”

The teacher as a counselor and a language resource should see it as her goal to provide enough *remedial work*, in order to eradicate students' errors, and encourage learners to develop their own learning strategies and techniques, so as to discover the answers to their own questions.

2.2.1.3. Teacher as a model and independent language user

In order to become a successful communicator and model for learners, the teacher should promote a wide range of behaviours and psychological and social relationships such as solidarity and politeness.

Often learners have difficulties in adopting these behaviours because of the *psychological and social distance* that there exists between learners and materials. As a result, learners have a tendency to adopt the teacher's language behaviours to indicate attitude and role relationships, rather than those presented in materials. This is understandable, of course, since the teacher is a live model, a real human being to whom they can more easily relate (Papaefthymiou-Lytra, 1993: 101).

In short, the teacher should help learners to negotiate meaning in the target language through his own active participation in it, and act as a mediator between the linguistic and *extra-linguistic* context of foreign language learning, as these are reflected in the textbooks and re-alia (e.g., audio-visual aids, etc.) or literature, respectively.

2.2.1.4. Conclusion

Beyond the shadow of a doubt, teachers play an essential role in the foreign language classroom. Not only are they directors and managers of the classroom environment but they also function as counselors and language resources facilitating the teaching-learning process. In addition, teachers can become models and independent language users in order to overcome "the inherent shortcomings of the foreign language classroom environment" (ibid., p. 104).

2.2.2. The role of the learner

What roles do learners play in the design of educational programs and systems, and how much leeway are they left with in contributing to the

learning process? In the last two decades or so, there has been a shift from Cognitive and Transformational-Generative Grammar Approaches to a Communicative view of learning. Learners, who were formerly viewed as stimulus-response mechanisms whose learning was the product of practice, –reminding one of the well-known dictum, *Repetitio est mater studiorum* – are nowadays regarded as individuals who should have a say in the educational process.

“The role of the learner as negotiator – between the self, the learning process, and the object of learning – emerges from and interacts with the role of joint negotiator within the group and within the classroom procedures and activities which the group undertakes. The implication for the learner is that he should contribute as much as he gains, and thereby learn in an interdependent way” (Breen and Candlin, 1980: 110, cited in Richards, 1994: 22-23).

In our attempt to gain useful insights into the various factors that are responsible for students’ learning, we will take account of three main areas of investigation:

- * Age, cognitive and learning factors
- * Social and affective factors
- * Learners’ needs and interests

2.2.2.1. Age, cognitive and learning factors

Age variation in foreign language learning and learning differences between children and adults are significant factors that must be taken into account in choosing the right approaches, design and procedures. Experiments have shown that there are a lot of *biological factors* at work in language learning. In young learners, both hemispheres of the brain are responsible for the language function, while at puberty it is only the left hemisphere that takes over, which makes language acquisition and learning more difficult. This process is called *lateralization* and it may be responsible for learning differences between children and adults.

Cognitive and learning styles, already acquired through mother tongue, may influence foreign language learning.

Of all personality characteristics attributed to individuals, certain cognitive and learning variables have been researched to determine the degree of their influence on successful foreign or second language learning. These are: *field-dependence* and *field-independence*, *formal operations*, the *monitor* and *foreign language aptitude* (Papaeftymiou-Lytra, 1993: 84-85).

Field-independent individuals are more analytical by inclination and tend to learn through reasoning faculties, whereas field-dependent individuals view learning *in toto*, acquiring knowledge subconsciously.

Piaget's "formal operations" theory relates to adults' more mature cognitive capacities as opposed to the "unconscious automatic kind of learning" (Genessee, 1977, 148, cited in Papaeftymiou-Lytra, 1993: 85) that characterizes young learners' less mature cognitive system. According to this theory, adults are thought to deal with the abstract nature of language more easily than young learners; it is very often the case, though, that young people may prove better learners in the long run.

Another factor that influences language learning is the monitor use employed by learners.

Three types of monitor users have been identified: overusers, underusers and optimal users. *Overusers* are associated with analytical conscious learning. On the other hand, *underusers* are associated with subconscious learning and extrovert personalities. Finally, the third category is that of *optimal* users who seem to be the most efficient (*ibid.*, p. 85- 86).

Pertaining to foreign language aptitude, we could say that it is the rate at which we learn a foreign language.

2.2.2.2. Social and affective factors

Successful foreign language learning calls for an examination of the social and affective factors at work. First of all, the teacher should take into consideration the *social proficiency* which learners have attained. By social proficiency we mean the degree to which the learner employs, or taps into, the

foreign language in order to communicate and negotiate meaning or achieve certain social goals. Some learners, for example, may complain when their classmate uses their pens or pencils because they have not learnt to use language in a socially accepted way. For instance, they cannot cope with making requests, asking permission, giving condolences, etc. It is worth noting that different cultures favour different attitudes on the part of the learner and, as a result, it is very probable that most of these situations do not necessarily reflect lack of social proficiency.

Apart from social factors, affective factors also play an important role as they may facilitate or preclude learning. It is a commonplace that an atmosphere which fosters and promotes confidence and emotional stability will produce better students. Harmony in the classroom helps relieve tension and keeps the door to language processing open. A teacher's task is like "that of an orchestra conductor, who tends to fly into higher spheres, and has a tendency to fly and pull himself and the others above everyday's problems towards a more creative reality" (Papaconstantinou, 1991: 65). In this "reality" the learner may easily identify with the teacher and venture out into new aspects of the target language, dealing with it in her own, individual way. Unless she feels at ease with her teacher and her fellow-students, she will not learn. If she feels rejected and is afraid of being told off or scoffed at whenever she makes a mistake, she will withdraw from the educational process and lag behind, both cognitively and emotionally. "Consequently, the content of materials for classroom use as well as classroom practices should be compatible with the affective variables influencing learners" (Papaefthymiou-Lytra, 1993: 90).

2.2.2.3. Learners' needs and interests

Indubitably, a successful course should consider learner needs. For this reason, the concept of *needs analysis* has assumed an important role in language learning. Needs analysis has to do with the aims of a course, as these are determined by the uses to which the target language will be put on completion of the program. For example, is our aim to achieve a high level of language proficiency or are we called upon to respond to the needs of, say, adult learners who need to master specific skills, such as academic writing or note-taking? All these parameters will have to inform the methods and tech-

niques we use in class, as well as the materials design we are supposed to implement in order to achieve the best results.

With regard to learner's *interests*, it is worth noting that we, as teachers, should be cognizant of the differences between children and adolescents. For instance, the former are interested in body movement and play, whereas the latter want to learn about human relationships in general and achieve a deeper understanding of their abilities, with the aim of developing a sound personality and character.

2.2.2.4. Conclusion

It has become evident that foreign language learning is far from a simple, straightforward process where teachers are the *purveyors* of knowledge and students the *passive subjects* who receive that knowledge. For successful foreign language learning, students must have both the *ability* and *desire* to learn. Otherwise, the objectives we set are doomed to failure.

Foreign language teachers, therefore, must be flexible enough and sensitive enough to respond well to the individual learning preferences, interests and needs of their learners in terms of materials, techniques, classroom methodology and teacher talk. After all, language learning is *not* a monolithic process since not all personality and environmental factors can be kept under control in a foreign language situation (Papaefthymiou-Lytra, 1993: 94).

2.3. Extrinsic factors influencing language learning

We have hitherto been concerned with some of the *intrinsic* factors that may facilitate or hamper language learning. Now we should turn our attention to a brief description and evaluation of some of the *extrinsic* factors.

Such issues as infrastructure and limited school budgets have not received much attention in ELT articles and books, yet contribute significantly to the outcome of the educational process. One could say that they constitute the *extra-linguistic* context of the teaching-learning situation. A situation

where the school has no lighting or heating, and classrooms are packed with a great number of students, with whom the teacher seems unable to familiarize himself, is not a promising one. Furthermore, limited or no access to school libraries and educational seminars or programs makes inroads into students' and teachers' progress. All these potential shortcomings, coupled with the teacher's "authority," may severely inhibit the learning process.

Equally detrimental – albeit in more subtle ways – may prove seating arrangements in class. For example, in a classroom where desks are arranged in such a way that students look towards the teacher rather than their classmates, learners and teachers alike are unable to interact through role-play and other activities or through *paralinguistic* features such as eye-contact and non-verbal communication, in general. Conversely, in a situation where desks are arranged in a circle or in groups or pairs, learners are provided with the opportunity to develop warm and constructive interpersonal relationships (see Papaefthymiou-Lytra, 1993: 131-133 for more details).

2.4. Final remarks

Throughout this study it has been attempted to shed some light on both favourable and unfavourable conditions for foreign language learning. Our main concern has been with the roles of teachers and learners, with a view to identifying any "problematic areas" and deficiencies arising from false assumptions and incorrect strategies and techniques, mainly on the teacher's part. The teaching- learning situation is not merely an intellectual or cognitive system of values; it is a complex, dynamic, neuro-psychological process, whereby students should be encouraged to *think*, *analyze* and *make hypotheses* as well as to *feel* and *touch* – and, in so doing, to *live*.

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