

HOW TO ESTABLISH LEARNER -CENTERED CLASSROOM

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INTRODUCTION :

Learning takes place only when a learner is actively involved in his/her own learning. However, learners do not necessarily learn what teachers believe to be teaching them. Then, why is it that the focus is still on teaching rather than on learning?

Some teachers claim that such a situation is due to the course books (long lessons overloaded with a wealth of material to be taught) and a limited number of sessions devoted to English that does not help teachers involve their learners and make them aware of their own learning. They do not help the many teachers who still have to rely on course books because of their own limited experience in teaching and preparing their learners for lifelong learning.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO FOCUS ON LIFELONG LEARNING?

As stated by John Trim (1988): "It is more important for a young person to have an understanding of himself/herself, an awareness of the environment and its workings, and to have learned how to think and how to learn". Hence, successful learning cannot take place unless the following elements are present, to some degree, in the learning process:

Personal involvement / motivation.

A feeling of confidence, security, acceptance, respect.

A feeling of progression.

Peer-tutoring.

Help and guidance when needed or asked for.

If teachers look back at their own learning experience and consider what supported and what hindered their learning they would realise that they themselves are learners and not just teachers, they just put themselves in the shoes of learners: they focus on learning rather than teaching (shifting roles):

Again, the course books give little help when it comes to action knowledge as apposed to school knowledge.

The development of learner autonomy is one of the solutions if not the solution to get the learners actively involved in their own learning. The conditions for an autonomous learner according to Holic (1981) are their active involvement in:

- " choosing aims and purposes
- " choosing materials, methods and tasks
- " exercising choice and purpose in organizing and carrying out the tasks
- " choosing criteria for evaluation and using them in evaluation

This is pragmatic but rather difficult to be implemented in the Tunisian educational framework where the objectives are defined by the official syllabus and the teachers intervene to select what suits his/her learners' needs. Hence, resorting to the definition stated by Bergen in 1990:

"... an autonomous learner is not only an active participant in the social processes of learning, but also an active interpreter of new information in terms of what s/he already and uniquely knows. It is essential that an autonomous learner is stimulated to evolve an awareness of the aims and processes of learning and is capable of the critical reflection which syllabuses and curricula frequently require but traditional pedagogical measures rarely achieve."

Hence, what is of capital importance is to succeed in getting the learners actively involved in their own learning.

FACTORS PROMOTING LEARNER AUTONOMY:

Most students do not plan their learning. They passively follow what the teacher tells them to do. As a result they may or may not learn.

Students should be made aware of the learning aims of each lesson, unit. The elements listed below may help students to focus their efforts. The check what you have learnt today (Perform Through English) or the do you remember? section at the end of each session or unit allows students to assess their own learning. It could be used as a group activity or as part of a quiz. Teachers should try to integrate it into parts of their lessons so that their students are guided into taking responsibility for their own learning

The organisation of the classroom: to consider the classroom just as part of a language learning environment since much of the language learning should take place out of the classroom.

A shift in focus from teaching to learning.

A change in the learner's role.

Authenticity.

The role of reflection and documentation.

A view of the language classroom as a rich learning environment.

A learning environment where the teacher, instead of asking him/herself how best to teach this or that, asks him/herself how best to support the learners is one that generates learning.

The move to a learning-directed environment where both the teacher and the learner enter an authentic dialogue - one that enhances rather than hinders learner autonomy- concerning what to learn, why to learn and how to learn can only be beneficial to learners. Self-evaluation on the part of both the teacher and the learner would probably lead to better performances. To get rid of the teacher-directed traditional classroom and move towards the learner-centred environment is a long, tedious process which is most difficult for teachers particularly those reluctant to

change their roles and keen on being at the centre of things. This change necessitates four steps:

- 1- Experience which involves useful and relevant activities, suitable mode of interaction and evaluation of the process as well as the progress.
- 2- Awareness of one's own role in the learning i.e who is who and who does what.
- 3- Participation in decision-making involves the choice of activities, partners and materials.
- 4- Responsibility for one's own learning.

The teacher is in charge of raising some questions that may motivate and well orient the learners such as: what is a good learner? Why do you learn English? What do you think you are good at? What would you like to become better at? In order to sensitise the learners and arise their motivation and form the basis for the future learning environment from the very moment they enter the English language classroom. These questions are samples of authentic communication between teacher and learners. After this introductory phase the teacher moves on to activities involving language learning.

This leads us to the sad fact that students begin to forget as soon as the lesson ends. The things that we forget fastest are those which have not penetrated deeply in our brains. This is why we should ask students to activate what they have learnt by using it / putting it into practice and encourage them to use new language in a piece of personal creative work (according to their preferences: poem, letter, song, story...). We now understand that there are memory "anchors" which hold things in our memory and "triggers" which stimulate us to recall what is memorised.

We create strong memories by anchoring "new" memories to something else that is already firmly fixed in our memory. The same is true in language learning. An "anchor" may be a topic, a picture, a sound, a movement, a texture, an emotional memory. An idea that has many anchors is very firmly fixed in our memory. Some of the vocabulary-focused exercises encourage students to group words by topic, an important aid to memory; others concentrate on collocations which also help memory because they anchor a new word or meaning to a word which is already known.

INSTANCES OF LEARNER-DIRECTED ACTIVITIES:

Do students come to school to be taught or to learn?

Unfortunately most students come to school to be taught. They imagine that the teacher will do the work and that s/he is responsible for their success or failure. But students who come "to learn" are more active. They take more responsibility for their own learning. They actively search for information, take notes and make a conscious effort to remember. As for the students who come to be taught, it is the teacher's role to think about how they learn and find a way that is suitable for them.

In the types of activities listed below, the teacher is rather a co-learner i.e. a participant in the learning process and the learners are trusted with a greater responsibility for their learning.

Share homework in pairs or in groups.

"Two-minute" talk.

Free learner chosen activities in groups, in pairs or individually within the framework of the topics dealt with in class (the course books).

Peer / self-evaluation.

THE CONTENTS OF THE LESSONS:

Teachers should try to get pupils involved in real communication both with the teacher and among themselves e.g. think of questions that learners would like to ask their friends: comprehension questions whose answers they don't know. This serves the teacher in preparing his/her own set of questions in the light of the learners' interests. This brings us to the importance of the teacher's criteria for the choice of activities introduced during the teacher-directed stage of a period taking curricula guidelines into account and encouraging peer-tutoring. The activities assigned to promote learner independence should:

call upon learner activity and peer-tutoring.

be open to different learner outcomes.

focus on learner/learner interaction and cooperation.

make use of the products for other learners rather than just the teacher.

activate the learner's existing knowledge (most of the course books do).

expand the learner's knowledge (most of the course books do not so it is the teacher's task to take this into consideration).

satisfy the individual learner's needs and interests.

Learners cannot become effective learners unless they are trained.

THE CLASSROOM SETTING:

Traditional teacher-centred classroom:

seating arrangements: learners face the teacher.

Although these seating arrangements are different they result in the same thing, pupils facing the teacher who is at the centre of the learning operation.

A linear use of the course book which leads to one lesson at a time for the whole class (the difference in the learning styles is ignored).

Additional materials (if ever used) are provided by the teacher.

Communication occurs between the teacher and the students: T --- S.

Learner-centred classroom:

A physical environment that facilitates learning: pupils facing each other.

Group work leading to individual counselling: non-linear exploitation of the textbook i.e. creativity.

Project-oriented learning: students are given greater share of responsibility for their learning.

A "together session" with presentations and shared evaluation.

USEFUL TOOLS TO DEVELOP LEARNER AUTONOMY:

Use of a diary/ logbook.

Documentation for what has been done (learner responsibility).

Self-evaluation and peer-evaluation.

Room for individual support and guidance.

Use of any appropriate means of awareness raising for both the learner and the teacher.

Focus on the four skills.

Encouraging learners to develop their portfolios to measure progress.

CONCLUSION:

The road towards learner autonomy is long and tedious for many reasons:

" parents as well as learners are still reluctant about the idea of giving a share of the responsibility to the students; they think in terms of "it is the teacher's job to teach".

" teachers feel insecure and hesitant and wonder whether the learners "will learn enough" or whether "they have learnt anything".

" it is difficult to manage with the majority of students.

" the learners' capacity to take responsibility (it is very low even though this is very important as it prepares them for social life).

" it is difficult to administer : chaos, lack of time, waste of time.

" curricula demands and tests.

However, the outcome deserves giving it a try. In fact, describing teaching in a learner-centered classroom, a Spanish teacher said (1989): "the most positive thing about the way I am working now is that I have become a human being in my classes" rather than a teaching machine haunted by the syllabus and the burden of covering it in whatever teaching and learning conditions.

References

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