

Teaching Foreign Languages in Compliance with “Common European Frame of References for Languages” and the New Pedagogical Approaches

Natela DOGHONADZE*

Abstract

Contemporary educational theories demand from the teaching process to be interactive, democratic, communicative and technically well equipped. All these especially deal with foreign language teaching. Some ways how to make foreign language teaching really satisfying these conditions will be discussed.

“Common European Frame of References for Languages” is the document that provides guidelines of teaching foreign languages in Europe. According to this document language teaching today should not care as much as it used to in the past about vocabulary and grammar lists and formal errors. The main teaching goal and evaluation criterion should become what functions (e.g. writing a letter of claim in order to have a low-quality good for one of normal quality) language learners can perform and how well they can achieve their practical goals via the application of a foreign language.

Key Words: Contemporary Educational Theories; Interactive and Democratic Teaching Processes.

Today didactics is looking for the ways to optimize the teaching/learning process, to bring it into correspondence with the requirements of contemporary society. Several features are especially typical for contemporary pedagogy. It is:

- humanistic,
- differentiated (based on individual approach to the learners),
- democratic, student (learner)-centered and co-operative,
- creative (both on the teachers’ and learners’ part) and communicative,
- and technically well equipped.

Humanistic psychology and pedagogy stress the value of human life, the belief in human powers. If dogmatic pedagogy believed only in mechanical memorization, humanistic pedagogy addresses the learner’s mind, takes into consideration learners’ interests and abilities, and stimulates independent and creative work. There is a motto in it: from school of memory (memorization) to school of thinking. For language teaching it means using problem situations and problem solving in the process of teaching. Of course, language learning cannot be done without memorization of vocabulary, but it is basically done through motivating tasks (games, role play, interesting situations, etc.) and not through mechanical memorization of lists of words (with translation or definitions).

There are various types of learners: synthetic - analytical, verbal – non-verbal (action, image), visual - auditory – kinesthetic, etc. For some of them one way of material presentation and practice is more efficient, for others – other ways are better. In a classroom we cannot always teach each learner the way it is most adequate for him / her as we have to try to deal with all of them. But we should – through observation and psychological tests – define and then take into consideration the learner style in the class and use more kinds of tasks that are useful for our students. We should also take into consideration all teaching / learning styles to provide benefits for all learners in the class at least on some level. For instance, synthetic (also called wholelanguage or holistic) exercises, so popular today, should still leave place to analytical tasks (grammar analysis). We have to avoid the so-called “style

* Prof. Dr., International Black Sea University, Georgia

wars” between the teacher and the students, when the teacher emphasizes only the teaching/learning style s/he believes to be adequate.

There are minimum two reasons why education today has to be **learner-centered**:

- according to the laws of market economy (which by now has spread practically all over the world) the learner (if s/he has already come of age) or his / her parents are the customers, while teachers are sellers, and, as we know, “customer is the king”, if, of course one wants to be successful in business (teaching, in our case);
- contemporary society is becoming more and more **democratic**, which has to be reflected in pedagogy (education) as a humanitarian science.

Learner-centered and democratic relations in the classroom are revealed in several ways:

- these are subject-subject (and not subject-object) relations based on mutual respect, learners are as responsible for the learning process, as teachers – for the teaching process;
- sufficient learner speaking and activity time should be provided during seminars / practical classes; teacher speaking time should by no means prevail in it;
- what and how to learn should be decided taking into consideration learners’ interests,
- teacher’s place in the classroom is not always on a podium, but also often “among the ranks” of learners, moving from pair to pair, from group to group and becoming their equal member.

If a topic is on the syllabus, we can’t avoid it, but we can compromise with our student, at what angle – interesting for them – we should study it (e.g., instead of the dull “My family” you can discuss “What is the best marriage age?”

Learner-centered language teaching means not only more attention to students’ demands (which can be studied by language teacher through questionnaires), but also more responsibility and more independent work done by students. The student doesn’t like the way the teacher demands from him / her to keep a personal vocabulary – fine! Let him / her do it their way, but don’t allow them not to keep a vocabulary at all! The teacher should let the students as much self-expression and creativity, but not passivity (let them, for instance, write a poem instead of doing a grammar exercise, but let that poem contain the language under study).

A contemporary teacher is no longer an all-knowing dictator in the classroom who does all the explanation, classroom management and evaluation, but a friendly facilitator (assistant, helper). The teacher may, instead of explaining some grammar materials (deductive teaching), just provide good and sufficient examples for the learners to make the conclusions by themselves (inductive teaching). Knowledge today is gained through cooperation between the teacher and his / her learners. Equality between teachers and learners cannot, of course, mean equal qualification, but it means respect of a personality in a learner. It also means the openness of the teacher and his / her readiness for communication and cooperation. If your students hate doing the grammatical exercise: “Ask questions”, let them ask questions to you about your tastes in music, and they will see that asking questions may be enjoyable, especially if your answers are sincere, interesting and your participation in the task – interested.

Not all teachers accept these new functions. To some they seem too insignificant (they really are less noticeable, like the stage manager’s role during the performance) and even offensive, to others - too difficult (they really are difficult to fulfill, they require more energy and inventiveness). But this is the requirement of time, so it has to be taken into consideration. In such conditions teacher training and retraining become especially important.

With the growth of the role of independent work programmed teaching was introduced. The two main features of programmed teaching are:

- immediate and regular feedback (tasks with keys that permit the learner to check the correctness of the answer);
- linear (algorithmic) organization of materials.

Materials in programmed teaching are split into minimum steps that require to do only one mental operation at a time (this is called algorithmic organization, as an algorithm is a mini-rule, including one mental operation), only on the last stage or substage several mental operations may be present. For example, to teach Present Perfect tense, the order will be approximately as follows:

I. Form:

1. "have" or "has"?
2. V+ ed (regular verbs).
3. V+III form (irregular verbs).
4. form Present Perfect correctly

II. Context:

1. choose a corresponding adverb
2. place the adverb in the sentence correctly
3. no adverb, but other hints

III. Contents:

1. action in the past – result now
2. action begun in the past but not finished yet
3. Present Perfect or Past Simple?

IV. Put the verbs in brackets in the correct form (Present Perfect or Past Simple).

A linear program is a step-by-step program, that follows a definite logical order.

Programmed teaching creates strong automatisms (habits), as learning is done step by step and much repetition is provided. Each learner chooses his / her optimal speed and number of repetitions. Programmed learning can be done on paper or via a computer, in the second case it is usually more efficient, as bright illustrations, animation, audio materials, hypertext, etc., provide an additional effect.

Computer-aided teaching in a computer lab or in a classroom is used either to provide individual / pair / small group work that is autonomous from the teacher or to play the role of an improved, contemporary blackboard in the classroom when the teacher (or, possibly, one of the students, presents the material). The teacher may prepare at home the materials for teaching and, using a special projector, demonstrate them on a big screen (and / or individual computer monitors) for explanation of the new material and training.

Not only computers, but also any **technical equipment** (audio cassette players, CD players, video cassette players) can be used either in a lab for independent work or in the classroom under the teacher's guidance. Depending on learners' age (and the technical means applied) it is recommended to use technical educational means from a couple of minutes to half an hour during the class, because using them learners have to concentrate a lot and get tired quickly. Besides, computers may harm students' health (eye-sight may suffer, they may get an undesirable level of radiation, "communicating" all the time with computers, students may get psychological and even psychical problems).

The role of technical equipment in teaching is:

- (if used effectively and reasonably) to raise motivation,
- to provide authenticity and variety of materials,
- and to free the teacher of routine jobs, to provide assistance to both teachers and students.

Because of this some specialists think that technical equipment (especially computer) will one day (and some of them even think that the day has come) will substitute for teachers. Even the most sophisticated machines cannot substitute for a teacher (and classmates), as they can only imitate face to face communication, which is indispensable for the student's normal development. Besides, even the best educational programs cannot fit the materials under study to particular learners. Programs are made up by programmers and teachers who cannot preview all possible problems that may arise in the process of teaching / learning. Technical teaching aids should be viewed as teachers' effective support, not as their rival or enemy.

There still is the “opposite camp” of conservatively thinking specialists who go on thinking that teaching can be done totally without technical means. They use as argument the fact that teaching had been done without them for centuries before they were invented. Sure teaching of humanities can be done without technical equipment, but there should be progress in everything, so why should education be an exclusion? Why – then - do they use electricity, cars, etc. in their everyday life? People lived without them for centuries, too.

Contemporary technical aids are becoming not only cheap and efficient, but also more and more user-friendly (=easy to use), so hopefully resistance to using them will decline. Another question is that technical equipment should be used cost-effectively and not just in order to show off. To be effective, teaching with the help of technical equipment should be active (involve not only listening and / or watching, but also doing some tasks before, during and after using it), the tasks used should be various and correspond to contemporary methods of teaching.

Today, when there are so many teaching aids, it may seem that no place is left for teacher or learner creativity. This is definitely not so. Having so many teaching/learning aids frees the teacher and the learners from routine work and lets them enjoy the process of teaching and learning. Making posters with their own hands, for example, now occurs not because of the lack of visual aids, not because it is a tiring duty, but because teachers or learners want to realize themselves, their interests, fantasies, etc.

“Common European Frame of References for Languages” is the document that provides guidelines of teaching foreign languages in Europe. Its basic principle is authenticity – i.e. realistic use of language in all aspects of the syllabus and – whenever possible – in the test. Correspondingly, tasks used in teaching and testing should be as authentic as possible.

If in the past language syllabi consisted of lists of vocabulary to be memorized and grammar rules to be mastered and applied, today many syllabi (especially of higher levels) do not give such lists at all. It is not essential how rich and formally correct the student’s vocabulary is, if s/he has effective strategies of verbal communication and successfully performs communicative functions. By functions we mean the practical needs and/or social functions that the speaker is trying to satisfy: greeting, thanking, expressing surprise, doubt, interest, pity, support, etc. As for strategies, these are avoidance of language that the speaker is not very sure about, methods of elicitation of the meaning of the received message, face saving (trying hide one’s gaps of knowledge, apologizing for a wrongly said / understood phrase) and politeness (observing not only grammar, but first of all politeness rules in the process of communication (e.g., not asking questions dealing with the person’s income or expenditures). It is very important to choose the functional style (formal / informal) corresponding to the situation.

The concept of functions is tightly linked with the concept of scenarios. These are typical situations (communicant’s social function: shopper, office worker, teacher, etc. and the place where the situation occurs: home, work, educational institution, street, service institution, airport, bus / train stations, etc) that arise in communication that the language learner will have to cope with performing the corresponding functions. That is why contemporary language syllabi first of all contain communicative scenarios. They may look in such a way:

Oral interaction in order to:

| | | | |
|--|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--|
| Influence other people’s behavior | Establish and maintain social contact | Exchange information | Exchange opinion |
| - favor-seeking - complaining (in order to get what | small talk (everyday talk) | - asking for / giving information | - discussion - negotiating - consensus finding |

| | | | |
|--|--|---|---|
| one needs) - persuading - ordering - asking for / giving advice - asking for / offering help | | - acting as a guide - describing objects / processes - interviews | - |
|--|--|---|---|

What has to be changed according to these contemporary requirements and what many language teachers oppose (based on their own education and teaching experience) is the system of evaluation of students' language skills. While grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary correctness and grammar and vocabulary "richness" still do matter, they are no way main parameters. If the student can carry out all his practical tasks (in a foreign language), his / her evaluation has to be positive, though his / her speech / writing is far from flawless. Task management should be the dominating parameter in evaluation of language skills. Of course, depending on the skills' level (beginner – intermediate – advanced), expression (cohesion of the text, variety and correctness of vocabulary), grammar correctness, pronunciation and intonation have to be taken into consideration. On the beginner level it will be enough if the listener / reader can understand the speaker / writer without serious problems. On the advanced level the utterance that the speaker / writer produces should be not only understandable, but also natural to the native speaker's ear / eye.

To sum up, teaching in general and language teaching in particular has to be reconciled with the demands of contemporary society. Much has to be done in this direction, the first and the main is not just making up contemporary syllabi, but also training retraining language teachers so that they understand what they have to do.

References:

1. "Common European Frame of References for Languages". CUP. Council of Europe. 2001.
2. S.J.Savignon. Communicative curriculum design for the 21st century. – "English Teaching Forum," Jan. 2002, p. 2-7.