Effective strategies for teaching foreign languages

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Recent learning theories suggest that learning is an active process of meaning rather than acquiring knowledge. Following this line of thinking, instruction should be a process of supporting the process of construction and not merely transmitting knowledge(Duffy & Cunningham, 1995). This construction process requires learners to individually construct their own understanding by interaction in authentic situations. Because learners are central to this process they must have ownership not only of the learning process but of the problem itself. Therefore students should be given autonomy in setting up their personal learning objectives and take responsibility for their own learning.(Mar-Molinero & Wright, 1993).

In this new paradigm, teachers are no longer transmitters of knowledge but are coaches, mentors, and managers of the learning environment to aid their students in constructing knowledge. Scaffolding, or supporting learners is a very demanding job. In addition to being subject experts, teachers must be experts in learning psychology as well.

Although learners have ownership of the problem, teachers ensure that the problem is authentic and sufficiently challenging . In some ways, computers can help, but teachers must acquire a measure of technical expertise as well. In short, in this new learning environment we need a 'super' teacher acting primarily as a ''resource provider and mentor, with students as apprentices who gradually advance themselves… to gain an increasing measure of skill and independence over time''(Pennington, 1996) Thus, this paper is an attempt to shed light on some proposed new tools for teaching foreign languages and their proper implementation in the classroom..

1-Improving the lesson

The teacher may elect to retain the lesson as the primary educational technique within his course. In this situation, he must recognize the limitations of the lesson and understand that exclusive use of the lesson constrains learning (Bonwell, 1991 .). The challenge is to make changes in the delivery of the lesson in order to improve its effectiveness as a learning environment for students. The lessonr's task is to teach students how to use concepts and principles and how to think, not to present abstracts of textbooks or other readily available sources of information. The lesson should complement and supplement the text, not replace it. The lesson should be used to provide up-to-date information that is not readily available along with theories or opinions. Thus, lessons should be updated and revised yearly. .(Turnwald et al, 2002)

The preparation of each lesson and topic is critical. It is necessary that the teacher introduces the subject in an organized and well-planned fashion. The students' ability to assimilate and retain new information is dependent upon them acquiring a conceptual framework for the subject in which to place the information. In addition, each lesson should be designed so that the student is not overloaded. Keep in mind the time constraints with respect to the student's attention span and subsequent performance. Each lesson should be organized around 2 to 3 key concepts or points. The lesson is divided into three sections: 1) introduction, 2) body of lesson, and 3) summary.

1.1-Introduction. A lesson should begin with a quick summary of the key points of the previous lesson. It is appropriate, at this time, to ask if there are any questions in regard to the previous lesson. In introducing the topic for the current session, the importance of the material should be explained and related to real-life situations, and if possible, to previous and subsequent lessons or laboratories. This time should not be used to apologize for a lack of time or for the amount of information which must be covered. Statements such as these indicate a lack of preparedness on the part of the instructor. .(Turnwald et al, 2002)

2.1-Body of Lesson. Only 2 to 3 major concepts should be discussed within each lesson. The teacher should decide which ideas can be effectively developed in the time available. This time constraint requires that a balance be struck between the depth and breadth of the material covered in each lesson. Excessive detail results in the students losing sight of the concepts or principles which are important. Thus, each concept should be logically developed and its importance illustrated through the use of numerous, real-life examples. Make sure that there is flexibility in the presentation and the time allocated in order that students can ask questions and provide comments. At the end of each concept presentation, summarize and provide a transition to the next concept. This permits restating the key concept and demonstrating its relationship to the next concept. This also is an excellent opportunity to provide the students with a brief break, a question period or other activity which breaks them out of their passive role. Alternatively, the lesson can be broken into several 20-minute sessions. .(Turnwald et al, 2002)

Remember, the students' ability to concentrate is significantly diminished 20 to 30 minutes into a lesson. Mini-interactive sessions, some of which are described in this series, may also be used to reduce students' fatigue and increase their participation in the process. The instructor should be aware of the nonverbal signs students may demonstrate if they become disinterested or if they are no longer following the instructor's logic. Nonverbal clues such as sighs, loss of eye contact, clock-watching, reading, talking, paper shuffling, all indicate that the instructor has "lost" the students. The instructor may confirm his or her suspicions by asking specific questions of the students or by asking for student generated questions. In any event, these indicators should not be ignored. .(Turnwald et al, 2002)

3.1-summary. At the end of each lesson, sufficient time should be provided to summarize the lesson's key points and relate them to the overall context of the course. Time must also be provided to clarify information presented during the lesson. An excellent technique is to ask a student to provide the summary. This

activity not only encourages students to participate in the process, but also provides the teacher with excellent feedback on the relative success of the lesson. Alternatively, the teacher can designate some time for each student to summarize the key points and write one question on a 3 x 5 card to be returned to the teacher. This permits the teacher to receive feedback on the effectiveness of the session and follow up on issues in the next lesson by answering some of the questions. .(Turnwald et al, 2002)

2-The best learning ''state''

It is believed that two core elements affect learning: state and strategy, the third is obviously content. ''State'' creates the right mood for learning. ''Strategy'' denotes the style or method of presentation. ''Content'' is the subject. In every good lesson the three should exist. But many traditional school systems ignore ''state''. Yet it is the most critical of the three. The ''door'' must be open to learning before true learning can happen. And that ''door'' is an emotional one- the ''gatekeeper to learning'', part of being in a fully resourceful state.(Jeannette Vos & al, 1993 : 307-309)

2.1-Orchestrating. In many classrooms, learners are told to sit still on a classroom seat all day, in straight rows, listening to the teacher and not exploring, discussing , questioning or participating. A good teacher does know that is not the best way to learn. So, he tries to plan a classroom setting that facilitates easy learning. As some suggest they cover walls with colourful posters, highlighting all the main points of the course to be covered, in words and pictures. It is believed that most learning is subconscious, since students absorb the lesson-content even without consciously thinking about it.(Jeannette Vos & al, 1993 : 301)

Liechtenstein's Stockwell-one of Europe's leading new-style trainers in both schooling and business, says that the importance of well-designed colourful posters cannot be overstressed. ''Overhead projector slides, 25 mm slides and flipcharts are fine….., but posters are miles better- and all should be up around the walls before any learning session begins. They are peripheral stimuli. Their constant presence engraves their content into your memory, even when you are not consciously aware of them……..'' (Jeannette Vos & al, 1993 : 303). He also says colour psychology is important '' Red is a warning colour; blue is cool; yellow is seen as the colour of intelligence; green and brown have a pacifying effect and are warm and friendly. Never forget that effective posters make a strong impression on the long-term memory. They create memory pictures which can be called on when required although they were never consciously learned''(Jeannette Vos & al, 1993 : 303).
What is more striking is that some other teachers use music playing to establish the mood as students enter the classroom. The atmosphere can be stimulating when it is highly welcoming as it is stressed by many practitioners :''The total atmosphere must be non-threatening and positively welcoming''(Jeannette Vos & al, 1993 : 303). Top Swedish high school teacher Christer Gudmundsson agrees: ''The atmosphere from the time your students enter the

classroom must be thoroughly welcoming''. (Jeannette Vos & al, 1993 : 303.

2.2-establishing an appropriate mood and reinforcing students' attention. It is said that variety, surprise, imagination and challenge are essential in creating a climate of delight. ''Surprise guests, mystery tours, field trips, spontaneous projects (old-fashioned days, pet displays, research initiated by the children) add richness to reading, writing and discussion. The production of plays and puppet shows is stimulated by the children's reading and is masterminded more and more fully by the children themselves.(Jeannette Vos & al, 1993 : 301).

Moreover, ‘’ Your classroom will rarely be totally silent. Sharing and interaction are the vital components of a climate of delight. Discoveries, new learning, the sheer joy of accomplishment demand expression’’.(Jeannette Vos & al, 1993 : 304).
If that climate of delight sweeps over you as you enter a well-planned seminar room or classroom, it is the first step in setting the right mood for more effective learning.(Jeannette Vos & al, 1993 : 304).

2.3-Early activity is vital . The colourful setting, posters will already have started to stimulate those who are mainly visual learners. The music will have ‘’touched base’’ with mainly auditory learners. Early activity makes the kinesthetic learners feel instantly comfortable. Interspersing all three learning styles also makes sure that all three levels of the brain are activated: our thinking brain, our feeling brain, and our doing brain.(Jeannette Vos & al, 1993 : 305)
Californian accelerated-learning innovator Charles Schmidt told us not long before his death. "We learned our alphabet to music - ABCD - EFG - HIJK - LMNOP. But in the last 25 years we've expanded our music knowledge tremendously. We've found out that in a special kind of relaxation, which music can induce, our brain is most open and receptive to incoming information. That type of relaxation is *not* getting ready to fall asleep. It is a state of relaxed alertness- what we sometimes call relaxed awareness’’(Jeannette Vos & al, 1993 : 309).

2.4-Break down the learning barriers. Lozanov says there are three main barriers to learning:

- ***the critical-logical barrie***r ("School isn't easy, so how can learning be fun and easy?");
- ***the intuitive-emotional barrier*** ("I'm dumb, so I won't be able to do that"); and
- ***the critical-moral barrier*** ("Studying is hard work - so I'd better keep my head down"). Understand where a student "is coming from" and you gain better rapport. Step into his world and you break resistance quickly, smoothly. (Jeannette Vos & al, 1993 : 313)

2.5-Encourage personal goal-setting and learning outcomes. Encourage students to set their own goals - and to plan their own future. If they know where they are going, then their path is focused. In our experience, *most people will over-achieve personal targets that they set themselves* - possibly the soundest principle in management

In classroom settings, it is advisable to - to focus on "What's In It For Me?" Not in a selfish sense, but to get participants, perhaps in pairs, to tell each other and teachers what they specifically hope to get from the session, the day or the year. The way this is introduced is vital, especially in school. Many at-risk students get very angry with the traditional "You-will-learn-this today" introduction. Instead, good teachers invite students to set their own goals, right from the outset, and the outcomes they would like from the session. Often students come with "hidden agendas" - and they don't always "buy in" to the instructor's agenda. The key is to make learning a partnership, where the instructor prepares a smorgasbord of possible "curriculum pieces" and the students get a big say in what they want out of it.(Jeannette Vos & al, 1993 : 313)

2.6-Visualisation of goals. Visualizing is a powerful learning tool. An ineffective teacher might well say: "Don't forget to study or you might do poorly in the upcoming test" - a negative reinforcer. two better ways are suggested:

- One is to encourage students to visualize precisely how they would be using their new-found knowledge in the future.
- The other is to plant a positive thought that will encourage students to browse through their study-book looking for specific answers that might be used in the future. We cannot stress this point too strongly: many teachers do not realize how damaging negative suggestions can be.(Jeannette Vos & al, 1993 : 313)

3-Good presentation

The main keys to good presentation are:

3.1-Positivity and linking All good presentations must be learner-centered and linked to students' own goals and existing knowledge. "The more you link, the more you learn."

Another technique to guarantee involvement from the start is for the learners and the instructor to draw Mind Maps covering the same points - from a pre-prepared map that lists the main "learning branches". The sequence is designed to encourage the learners of every subject to start by identifying what they want to know, and then proceeding from what they already know - generally an amazing amount. The entire presentation must also be positive. The facilitator should never suggest in any way that the session is anything but fun - no "now the break's over let's get to the hard work talk''.

Lozanov called his fast-learning process "*suggestopedia*," from "*suggestology*" - but that is an unfortunate translation into English. Says Stockwell: "The name is rather unusual, but if you see 'to suggest' in the sense of 'to propose' or 'to recommend' then it is easier to under-stand the relationship." .(Jeannette Vos & al, 1993 : 315)

The power of suggestion is paramount in learning: we all do best when we think we can do it; we fail if we expect to fail. Every adult has seen how infants' learning abilities soar in a favorable, positive atmosphere. All good Lozanov-style facilitators try to recreate the same kind of positive fun-filled atmosphere in the classroom. And like all good advertising copywriters, they go out of their way to stress how easy the project is. Lozanov stresses the important links between conscious and subconscious presentation. He believes each of us has an enormous reserve of brain power waiting to be tapped. He believes that by far the most important part of all learning is subconscious; and that good teachers remove the barriers to learning by making their presentations logical, ethical, enjoyable and stress-free. Hence the importance of posters and "peripherals" as part of the total presentation.(Jeannette Vos & al, 1993 : 315)

3.2-introduce the big picture first. A major presentation technique is to present "the big picture" first - to provide an overview, like the total jigsaw puzzle picture, so that all the later pieces can then fall into place. Again, posters or other classroom peripherals may well present the big picture - so it's always there as a focusing point. Telling a story is also a great preview technique. And field trips are highly recommended at
the start of any study - to see the big picture in action. Drawing Mind Maps at the start of study, including all the main "limbs", allows students to draw in the smaller branches later. (Jeannette Vos & al, 1993 : 317)

3.3- ***Involve all the senses***. All good presentations also appeal to all individual learning styles. The most neglected learning style in nearly every school system is kinesthetic - or movement. Every good learning experience has plenty of verbal stimulation, plenty of music, plenty of visuals - but the really great teachers make sure to have plenty of action, plenty of participation, plenty of movement. Even though students may be visual learners, everyone embeds information by doing.(Jeannette Vos & al, 1993 : 317)

3.4- ***Step out of the lecturing role.*** This is probably the major personal change required in teaching styles. All the best "teachers" are activators, facilitators, coaches, motivators, orchestrators. (Jeannette Vos & al, 1993 : 317)

3.5-Organize plenty of "state changes" The best teachers organize plenty of "state changes" so that students switch from singing, to action, to talking, to viewing, to rhyme, to Mind Mapping, to group discussions. This has a two-fold purpose:

- It reinforces the information in all learning styles; and
- It breaks up the lesson into chunks for easy learning.

Both have a major bearing on how well the information is absorbed. For example, it is now well proven that, in any presentation, students can generally remember easiest the information at the start, the end and any "outstanding" examples that gripped their imagination. Regular "state changes" provide the

opportunity for many more "firsts", "lasts" and graphic examples. (Jeannette Vos & al, 1993 : 319)

4-The Lozanov "concerts".

Possibly Lozanov's greatest contribution to education has again been in the sphere of music: not only to relax your mind and put it into a highly receptive state - but to use music to float new information into your amazing memory system. Lozanov recommends *two concerts*:

4.1- **the *active concert***. With the student looking at the text, the teacher turns on some selected music, and he reads the foreign language in time to the music. He deliberately acts out the words dramatically in time to the music. "Now there's no magic to this; it's precisely why it is easier to learn the lyrics of a song, rather than remember all the words on a page of notes. The music is somehow a carrier and the teacher surfs along with the music - almost like catching a wave." (Jeannette Vos & al, 1993 : 319)

4.2- ***passive concert***. The second concert follows immediately after the first. And here we use very specific slow baroque music - around 60 beats to the minute - very precise. And while the first reading of the language was very dramatic, the second is in a more natural intonation. Now the students are invited to close their eyes if they want - although they don't have to. They put the text aside, and imagine, that they are in a theater in the country they're studying, and somebody is acting a story in the background. (Jeannette Vos & al, 1993 : 321)

Generally this will be the last part of a particular language session - and the students will then go home - and probably skim through their foreign-language 'play' just before they go to sleep." Overnight the subconscious goes to work - and the seemingly automatic start of the transfer to long-term memory storage. Lozanov fans claim the use of music in this way can accomplish 60 percent of learning in 5 percent of the time. (Jeannette Vos & al, 1993 : 321)

5-Brainstorming

Brainstorming techniques may be used by the teacher in order that students may participate in, and help create, the lesson. This technique is less time efficient for information transfer than the lesson, but it actively engages students in the learning process. The teacher must have a clear idea of what he or she wishes to be revealed or discovered in the process and plan accordingly. In some instances, the teacher may need to interject points in order to keep the process on track. However, it is important to guard against excessive manipulation of the process once it has started. In addition, the teacher must be flexible enough to begin with his or her preconceived ideas when necessary.

The teacher initiates the process by asking students to tell him or her everything they know about a topic. Everything goes, and no evaluations are made of the suggestions or comments put forward by the students. The points are recorded by the teacher, as they are made, on a chalk board or on an overhead projector. During the process, the ideas are then categorized or placed in groupings by the teacher with the students' guidance. The lesson becomes a process of arranging, and reordering ideas, and concepts regarding the topic into a coherent and rational pattern. The final creation reflects what the students and instructor consider important about the topic. During the lesson, the students have spent their time thinking about and organizing the salient concepts or points of the topic as opposed to simply recording information.(Turnwald et al, 2002)

6-*Activation of the memory*

Storing information is also only one part of the learning process. The information also has to be accessed. So the next step is "*activation*". And here games, skits, discussions and plays can all be used to "*activate*" the memory-banks , and reinforce the learning pathways. Again, this does not need to make more work for the teacher. The opposite, in fact. Students love to organize their own plays, presentations, debates and games. They need to be given the chance to present their new-found information to the rest of the class or group or any other way they prefer.(Jeannette Vos and Gordon Dryden, 1993 :321)

7. *Apply it*

In our view, the real test of learning is not a written examination through multiple-choice questions. The key is to use the learning and apply it to purposeful situations, preferably real-life. The real test of an English course is how well you can speak English. The real test of a sales course is how well you can sell. You learn to play a piano by playing a piano, you learn to type by typing, to ride a bike by riding a bike, to speak in public by speaking in public. So, the best teachers and business seminar organizers plan plenty of action sessions to back up the theory, so students can purposefully use and apply the learning. (Jeannette Vos and Gordon Dryden, 1993 : 325)

7.1- ***Turn your students into teachers.*** As in the activation phase, it makes sound sense to have students work in pairs or teams, with a free hand to prepare their own presentations of main points. Groups in a teacher-training class, for example, may each be asked to crystallize a specific aspect of educational psychology. And more and more schools are using the "buddy" system, where an older or more qualified student helps another, and both benefit. (Jeannette Vos and Gordon Dryden, 1993 :325)

7.2-***Encourage Mind Mapping.*** We've already covered the principles of this and suggested you use it to preview the learning, but it is also a remarkable way to review and make notes. *It really is what it says: a map that records main points in the same way the brain stores information - like branches on a tree.* It's also a major tool in the next process. (Jeannette Vos and Gordon Dryden, 1993 :325)

8- ***Review, evaluate and celebrate***

Even highly efficient learners will not always be conscious of whether they "know what they know". This can be done through many ways:

- "*passive concert" review*, which also covers all the points handled.
- *the self-evaluation*. This is where a student truly "digs within" to uncover those precious gems of the day. Self-evaluation is a tool for higher thinking: reflecting, analyzing, synthesizing, then judging.
- Another way to review is to skim over your Mind Maps or "highlighted" notes, or both:
  - Before you go to sleep on the day you have been studying;

- The next morning;
- A week later;
- A month later;
- And just before you need to use it - or before an exam (Jeannette Vos and Gordon Dryden ,1993: 327)

Conclusion

The instructor must create a learning environment which increases students' involvement in, and responsibility for, the learning process. The student must be provided with an environment in which he or she can practice and develop these skills and attributes. Increased student involvement does not mean independent study or a structureless learning environment. Rather, increased structure may be required to ensure that the educational strategies employed are successful. A number of factors must be taken into account if a faculty member wishes to incorporate these strategies into his or her teaching strategies. If they are not, the process of change is unlikely to be successful. First, and perhaps most important, the teacher r must take the time to examine the principles and concepts upon which these strategies are based, and reflect upon his or her role as a teacher(Entwistle,1983). It is important to understand the theory which is the basis for, and which in essence sustains, practice. Gutek puts it succinctly: "Theory without practice is insufficient; practice unguided by theory is aimless." (Gutek,1988:1)

We believe that student involvement in the educational process should be increased. In doing so, students will recognize and accept their responsibility for lifelong learning and continued professional development. Increased involvement does not mean additional requirements for independent study on the part of the students. Rather, educational strategies which take students out of the passive role and place them in an active, thinking mode should be used. In order to implement these strategies, or improve upon the learning environment, faculty need to learn new educational strategies and develop new skills.

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