The role of the teacher

Abstract
The aim of this article is to put forward the essential role of teachers in class nowadays, taking into consideration their role as a guide for students and parents equally, this last one also known as tutorial function. Furthermore, this article leads readers to common misconceptions about how teachers, in the Spanish educational system, work and how they are seen in order to, later, raise them awareness of the teacher's implications and hard work they carry out facing diversity in class.

Keywords: role of teachers

“(...) teachers can be seen not merely as performers professionally to realize effectively any goals that may be set for them. Rather [they should] be viewed as free men and women with a special dedication to the values of the intellect and the enhancement of the critical powers of the young” (Israel Scheffler)

Living in the society of the information and communication technologies and being citizens of a multicultural and multilingual continent, English, the so-considered universal language, has become a key feature for the preparation of Spanish students as people and as professionals in order to tackle a more and more demanding and challenging society. A more globalized society with less and less borders among countries, thanks, among other factors, to communication. Not only has English become an indispensable tool for the labour market but it is also the way to get to other cultures and people through language and communication. Hence, the English teaching-learning process is in the spotlight of the Spanish government and the educational institutions and is being continually discussed which is the best methodology to follow, the main objectives to get and the best role to teach.

At the same time society is evolving, education, teachers and their teaching techniques must do it as well. The education of the 21st century is focused on the acquisition of key competences, established by the European Council, rather than on the specific qualifications for predetermined tasks, that is to say, educating and teaching students so that they can get tasks done for themselves autonomously and successfully in the today and future society. Nowadays, education can no longer be viewed from a traditional perspective as it was ten years ago, in classes which were teacher-centred, that means, teachers had the main role and the teaching-learning process was developed around them; and in classes where more than paying attention to the students’ needs, they were ignored, as the diversity of students was. Equally, it can no longer be viewed a universal and holistic teaching, valid to all kind of students without paying attention to them individually and without taking into account their surrounding context. Teaching, being an activity for the development and evolution of people in a specific society, is in a continual change process. Thus, teachers are also subjected to the same changes and evolution, having influence upon their methodology, knowledge, capacities, aptitudes and skills. The role of the teacher is double: educational and tutorial, both are closely linked and indivisible.

On the one hand, the educational role of the teacher happens at class level and the parts directly involved are teachers and students. This is likely to be the most important role that a teacher carries out; this is where the teaching-learning process becomes a fact and where students get ready for their future. It is also here where the role of the teacher is of utmost importance for the development of the class. As it was mentioned before, teacher’s role has changed overtime; it
has evolved from being mainly “controller” to being “facilitator” or a “resource” (Jeremy Harmer, 1983). This means to be that the teacher is not entirely in charge of the class but he/she is a guide, a coach who supports and focuses on learners so as to maximize their abilities and skills to make them feel motivated and enhance their performance.

When it comes to the teaching of a language as English, the communicative approach while learning is vital. It is not supposed to be taught from a merely grammatical point of view and taken out of context, but teaching the uses of the English language and its functions on a daily basis, in a contextualized and productive way to students, concerned that they might face the same or similar situations out of the educational institutions. Therefore, teaching with an approach based on communication and the functions of the language, it is the student who must have the main role in the class and whose interaction must be as active as possible, always guided, enhanced and motivated by the teacher. In this way, teachers are sidelined.

Another classification of the role of the teacher to be highlighted is teachers as transformative intellectuals (Henry Giroux, 1988: 122). This concept entails that not only do teachers transmit, teach and educate through knowledge, but they also do it through the criticism and reflection of the real life and real problems in the today society, enhancing students to evaluate them and give possible solutions. Consequently, the role of the teacher goes beyond the communicative and functional approach of a language and it promotes the student critical and reflective thinking as well. This classification of the teacher as a transformative intellectual has a more humanistic approach and perhaps, as the societies and people are evolving, teaching through values is as valid and necessary nowadays as teaching through knowledge.

Concerning the affective dimension, in spite of the pedagogical capacities and qualities of the teacher, he/she must possess other personal qualities, which contribute positively to the educational environment in and out of the classroom and encourage the motivation of the learners and their interaction in the teaching-learning process. The teacher must be fair and patient, learning and teaching a foreign language in a monolingual country is not a piece of cake. Moreover, he/she must treat equally their students, spur and cheer them up. It is essential that the teacher knows well their students since, from their strengths and weaknesses; they will know how to take the advantages of them and use them for motivation. Teachers must deal with the fact that not all students may want to study English with the same purpose (Jeremy Harmer, 1983) or even they are not very keen on it, so, what is the way to teach something that is necessary for their future lives when they are not really aware of it? This is the point where teachers must pay attention to diversity of their students, where teachers have to be engaged enough to their students’ needs and likes to set goals and objectives and above all, to make students fulfill them.

Likewise, it is crucial that the teacher has a passion for what they do and for their job, in this way, they will pass this energy and communicative and cultural curiosity on the students. When it comes to teaching a foreign language, it is indispensable that the teacher transmits the appetite for learning and the willingness to communicate with people from other countries to students. As well as the pleasure for travelling and meeting other cities and cultures as a way of personal and professional enrichment. But most of all, the teacher must transmit respect and tolerance towards other societies and customs, totally alien to those of students. Creating an environment of cultural and personal diversity in the English teaching as a foreign language is something positive and really fruitful and in most cases, is easy owing to the curious nature of the own students to know and meet different things.

However, teaching English as a second or foreign language presents some difficulties since teachers have to create the perfect environment to contextualize what they are teaching. As we are part of a monolingual society where rarely can we be in a situation in which we are able to put into practice the English language outside the educational institutions, teachers must carefully consider this lack of opportunities and tackle them in the classroom. Giving realism to lessons turns out to be one of the hardest objectives to achieve while keeping students motivated. That is where the teachers’ experience plays an important role. Not only must teachers be academically prepared, but their experiences as students, teachers and citizens (Donald Freeman, 1998) also take action.

On the other hand, the tutorial role of the teacher happens at school level and the part directly involved, besides the teachers of the different subjects and students, is the students’ families. This tutorial role is reflected in the Orientation and Tutorial Action Plan (POAT). The tutor must track and monitor their students’ progress and performance, not only in the subject that they teach, but also in the rest of the subjects, with the rest of the teachers. This means that the tutor must be in contact with the rest of the teachers to carry out this follow-up in detail and they have to know about the existence of problems with any of their students too.
Besides supporting and advising learners, teachers’ responsibility is also to keep parents up to date on the students’ learning process and guide them for their collaboration and cooperation on it. In the tutorial action, the teacher is the connecting link among students; teachers and parents in the educational institution, thus, the communication among them must be continual and fluid. There are two main axis when learning; parents as part of the familiar institution and teachers as part of the educational one. This is why the support of parents to teachers, as another important element in the education of the students must prevail over all, forming a solid and unwavering union for students in the educational community.

It is clear that the role of the teacher is not an easy task, it is not simply to arrive at the high school at eight thirty in the morning and leave at fifteen in the afternoon; it is not only to go into class, sit down, make a speech for an hour and go out. The teacher is not an unknown person who tries to educate our children in any which way without considering the external factors of the class, on the contrary, the teacher is a professional person and he/she should be treated as such. Nowadays, the role of the teacher is much more than teaching, it is to train, educate, transmit, share, discuss; it is to motivate. There are many factors, which may affect and have an influence on the role of the teacher, but in the end, it all comes down to one unique factor to consider and pay attention, motivation. The teacher’s motivation in the first instance and the students’ in the second is vital for the success of the teaching-learning process.

To sum up, the problem in our education system is double: internal and external. First, teaching is not neither a job, occupation or profession, but as David T. Hansen stated, teaching is a vocation. It is not a matter of having a job for sustenance or to survive, or for public recognition and rewards but for personal autonomy and personal significance (Hansen, 1995). Second, it exists a lack of faith in teachers. We trust doctors to cure, we trust engineers to build, lawyers to defend and consultants to advise, but unfortunately, we do not trust teachers to educate. Only when the Spanish society starts to treat teachers as professional people who know how to do their job, and only when we understand that teaching is as valuable, or even more, as curing, then and only then, we will have broken the big barrier which separates the education in Spain with the rest of Europe and we will stop seeing Spain at the top in the European ranking of academic failure.