Teaching a second language: methodology, mixed abilities classes and assessment

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Abstract
Although it could be easy to recognize when an educational process is being carried out successfully, it is not very simple to develop and take into consideration all the guidelines needed to fulfill the expectations and the needs of the students. This is due to the great diversity and number of students in the Spanish classrooms. The aim of this article is to provide readers with some standards to follow so that this educational process in the teaching of second languages may be developed successfully and the objectives established by the Spanish law may be achieved.
Keywords: Didactics of language

Título: Enseñanza de un segundo idioma: metodología, clases con niveles de aptitud distintos y evaluación.

Resumen
Aunque se puede reconocer fácilmente cuando un proceso educativo está teniendo éxito, no es tan sencillo llevar a cabo todos los puntos necesarios para cumplir las expectativas y las necesidades de los alumnos. Esto es debido a la gran diversidad y al gran número de alumnado en las aulas españolas. El objetivo de este artículo es mostrar al lector algunas pautas a seguir para que dicho proceso educativo en la enseñanza de segundas lenguas sea llevado con éxito y cumpla los objetivos marcados por la ley española.
Palabras clave: Didáctica de la lengua.

Although it is easy to recognize a remarkable teaching process and see when it bears fruit, it is not so easy to carry it out. There are many studies focused on the pursuit of the perfect method to teach but so far, a unique and infallible methodology with which every single learner gets successfully their aims established by the European council and Spanish government, has not been discovered yet. This is because of the heterogeneous nature of teaching; it is not something static or fixed which follows some marked patterns, which can be applied to everything and everyone equally. Nevertheless, it seems to me that the next points are key to achieve success in the teaching and learning process.

As it is commonly known, teaching a foreign language aims for communication, therefore, it requires mainly a communicative approach, stressing the linguistic functions and focusing on fluency rather than accuracy and on content rather than form (Harmer 1983:84-85). One of the ways to develop this approach is the continual exposure of students to real communicative situations, in which they may be involved in the future, for instance, a situation in which they have to order food in a restaurant, make a suggestion, ask for information or give opinion about a specific topic.

However, English language teaching must not be only based on this communicative approach and oral skills, but it must also foster those activities and tasks in which all the language skills and contents are integrated. The interdisciplinarity encourages an integral education, in which everything, skills, contents and knowledge, is closely connected in the learning process, as it is in the real world. This approach is the axis of the CLIL (*Content and Language Integrated Learning*) methodology.

Bearing this CLIL methodology in mind, a curricular design, considering on the one hand, the socio-cultural aspects and the characteristics and needs of students and their school, and on the other hand, the Spanish law, should follow a task-based learning approach (TBL), in which students must perform a set of tasks with the aim of putting into practice the knowledge and contents through integrated language skills.

Beyond teaching content, developing skills and transmitting knowledge, the teaching of English must be associated to values, ethic and personal attitudes. Thus, the teaching and learning of English also entails a humanistic approach, in which the affective and personal factors of students –their likes, opinions and feelings– are relevant. Following the open character of the teaching-learning process, cross-curricular teaching becomes increasingly important and valid in the

process of education and is another factor to consider for the students' development as people, professionals and citizens in today's world. In most of the high schools and schools, the teaching of civic values and moral education as well as of peace education are extremely significant.

Consequently, students play the main role in the classroom. They set the pace in the class and they must notice they are supported and guided by the teacher. To get this, the treatment of errors must be carried out in a positive and indirect way, so that students do not feel inhibited and embarrassed when they express themselves.

Considering all these methods, strategies and techniques; taking into account the three fundamental pedagogic parameters in the English teaching: particularity, practicality and possibility (Kumaravadivelu 2001: 34-37) and developing a set of tasks which promote dynamism and cooperation in class, besides other personal and social values, we will draw us closer to attain an exemplary education and an effective methodology.

MIXED ABILITIES CLASSES

Nowadays, teachers face a great diversity in the classrooms, with students with significant cognitive and social differences. Hence, teachers have to pay attention to every single student in particular and must not let these differences impair their learning. This is relevant for both for students with learning difficulties and for gifted students.

In order to cater for the needs of such varied groups of students, it is necessary to perform a set of exercises and strategies which encourage the students' strengths. As Howard Gardner (2011) stated, there are multiple intelligences and every person may develop different ones and be motivated doing tasks related to music while another person may be more comfortable doing tasks related to logic and mathematics.

A clear example of these kinds of exercises for the first and second years of ESO students are exercises with an easy development and a clear objective to reach, so that the student knows how to act in an autonomous way and so, he/she will feel self-sufficient and competent. In addition, reflection on learning and being able to use learning strategies, such as, using glossaries, picture dictionaries or making associations improves and leads students to acquire greater autonomy and personal initiative competence. Students must find out, with the teacher's help, which strategies are more suitable for them and their learning, therefore, it will be easier for them to acquire and remember contents.

As far as contents are concerned, for those students who have not attained the expected objectives or those students who have exceeded the same ones, it is necessary to provide them with reinforcement or extension worksheets, adapted to their curricular and personal needs and interests.

ASSESSMENT

Just as a wide variety of activities must be carried out with the aim of making students acquire new knowledge practicing some skills and develop different competences, the assessment of these ones must be also diverse and flexible. Assessment is intended to follow a complete monitoring of the classroom and of the students, individually and in groups, one that will allow us to know if they have truly got the knowledge and skills, and if the methodology, strategies and techniques used are the appropriate ones.

The more assessment tools and measures are used, the fairer and more reliable the assessment results will be. Besides, it will be easier for the teacher to see and study which tasks have had positive and negative results. Not only is assessment useful for teachers, but it also serves for students' self and peer academic awareness. On top of that, it is the best way to observe the development of the classroom, and if there must be some changes in the methods and techniques employed in class.

So, depending on the students' capacities, contents and skills, assessment will be both traditional and alternative, using as assessment instruments, for instance, different unit tests, adapted to the diversity of students, at the end of every unit; open ended activities, curricular adaptations and extension and reinforcement exercises, rubrics or questionnaires for the oral and written skills. Moreover, students will be assessed by their own classmates in some tasks, giving an extra and a different opinion and vision to students' work.

At all times, learners must be aware of where and how they are going to be assessed. This is essential so that they may focus on parts which they need to improve and so, fostering the autonomy and personal initiative competence and learning how to learn competence.

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