

Distance TESOL

Module One Assignments

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Task 1:

Learning a new language can be an intriguing hobby since it provides the chance to understand and communicate with a foreign culture, as well as enabling one to study literary works originally written in the target language. Yet, it can be a challenging and arduous task for many, especially those at an older age. While there were many reasons behind my decision to learn German when I started teaching English, the strongest motivation came from the fact that many of my students at the time were people in their 20s and I really wanted to know what it was actually like to begin learning a new language as an adult. It is my goal in this essay to offer as clear an account as possible of this rather short experience, as a university student and in-service English teacher, with learning German as a foreign language. I shall attempt, to the best of my memory, to describe the most prominent details of the class along with a number of noticeable techniques employed by the instructor to teach the language and, where possible, analyse them and investigate any possible associations with generally-accepted language teaching standards and theories. An effort has also been made to determine if any aspect of the experience described herein has influenced my conception of the learning process or my beliefs regarding concepts and techniques in teaching.

The class I joined was mainly comprised of true beginners and, although the teacher held an advanced certificate (ZMP) in German, he managed to rough-tune his language to make it understandable for the students and maintain a predominantly German atmosphere in the class. In other words, contrary to my beliefs at the time, he tried to teach and make himself understood in a class of beginners using solely the German language, which I now believe derived from his direct method-driven belief that new words and structures should be taught using the same language that is being taught in the class. In doing so, he made extensive use of well-performed body language (i.e. hand and facial gestures) as well as silent mime to teach lexical items or define new grammar. For example, he taught the word "Abfalleimer" (=dustbin) by acting out the throwing out of a bag of rubbish into the classroom dustbin and then picking it up and, after writing the word on the board, asking us to drill the word. I believe this is one of the main reasons why even after having been away from the language for 5 years, I still can remember many of the words I learnt in that class. My guess is that visual students like me associated the new language with the teacher's acting out or made use of the written form written on the board. Nevertheless, I cannot ignore the fact that this was to the detriment of aural learners and in addition, the effort that went into this process consumed a great deal of time, which could otherwise be used to implement more efficient and communicative practice/production tasks. The teacher also tried hard to make sure the correct pronunciation and stress pattern was observed by all students from their first exposure to any new language item. He went through extended drills of new words and sentences until he could finally elicit the correct pronunciation and stress from every single student. This practice rather inarguably had its roots in the ideas preached by the audio-lingual and direct methods, because both these approaches consider phonological accuracy to be of great importance. However, it had its own merits and flaws, too: one could argue that while it contributed to more correctness in speaking, this firm emphasis averted the students' attention from realising the importance of spoken fluency or even accuracy in other skills such as writing. All in all, it is important to remember that despite all the advantages and drawbacks mentioned above, the methods employed by my teacher in order to maintain an L2-driven class were considered mainly successful by the students and so, are arguably worth deploying in language classes (although one might suggest careful moderation and adaption based on the students' characteristics and views).

The teacher's presentation of new grammar structures was also distinct, in that it clearly followed the lines of research that was, at the time, new to the teaching community in my country. One of his favourite methods was starting a lesson by setting out a comprehension task: he would provide the students with a conversation (in print or via cassette) and after clearly defining the situation and the people in the conversation, ask them to try and guess what actually went on. Alternatively, he would play a song and provide the lyrics in print which contained the target grammar. One clear example of this was when he played "Mein Berlin" by the famous German singer Reinhard Mey, a song which uses a lot of simple past statements to describe the city of Berlin before and during the Second World War and contrasts it with how it is now (e.g the first half of the song says "das war mein Berlin", this was my Berlin, while the second half repeats "das ist mein Berlin", this is my Berlin), in order to present the simple past tense. My guess is, he did this to set a goal for the class and encourage them to try and decipher the new construct on their own, or at least become motivated enough to try and learn it. While this could clearly be associated with the direct method's urge for the discovery of grammar through induction or discovery, it still has obvious roots in the more recent task-based approach because, by defining the situation, the teacher actually hinted at the need to learn the language required for performing linguistically under such circumstances, thus allowing us to form a purpose for learning the new pattern. Although this was at times really fun and may be lauded now by many of my colleagues, it is important to remember that it strained the already-taut beginners and the complexity of the tasks would, at times, actually drain our enthusiasm, resulting in actual dissuasion. Another method he employed especially in order to present new tenses was drawing timelines. For example, to teach the simple past, he would draw a line on the board and label a point on the far right as "das Jetzt" (=now) and write a sentence about an action happening at the moment. Then he would mark a point to the left of the line labelling it "Gestern" (=yesterday) and write a similar sentence showing the same action happening then. He then underlined the second verb (which appeared in a new form), as well as the adverb of time (Gestern) and pointed out how the verb transformed when the action happened in the past. One might argue that this presentation of rules and syntax in the first exposure of the students to a new structure is more in line with the long-rejected principles of the grammar-translation method rather than the more modern inductive system (introduced first by the direct method), and it would also appear that such use of a diagram to "portray" language for beginners might focus their attention on the rather mechanical features of the new grammar, thus distracting them from its function(s). However I should assert that this was not the case with me and my classmates, as by combining elements from both the structuralist and functionalist views to language, this approach helped us clearly understand when and how to use the new patterns we learnt (i.e. their use and function) and their distinctions from each other. In a nutshell, the teacher made great efforts to base his grammar teaching practices on newly introduced approaches and motivate his class, although some of his efforts added to the confusion of the beginner pupil and were also based on more dated approaches.

To sum up, I believe this experience has affected my perception of several aspects of the learning process to different extents. I now clearly see that the beginner adult learner is more prone than young learners to possible confusion arising from the teaching approach. I assert it that one should carefully examine the techniques and methods one decides to use in the class as well as the reaction of one's students to their utilisation, and adapt, change or even discard and replace them with other, more effective ones accordingly. Moreover, although this

successful implementation of an L2-driven class for beginners may encourage many teachers to follow suit, it is wise to remind ourselves that not every teacher may be able to perform every new lexical item in a respectable and, most importantly, sensible manner, as there are many features and characteristics, both of the teacher and the students, that can affect the success of this approach. It should of course be clear that I am not arguing against an L2-based classroom, but simply warning against the dangers of its unsuccessful implementation. Another assumption proven false by this experience was that the recentness of an approach necessarily means it can definitely help any set of students learn better or faster. In fact, it could be suggested that while one should always study to improve one's knowledge of new theories and try new approaches, one should always keep a choosing hand at old and new techniques and methods alike, considering at all times one's abilities, students and the material to be taught. The question which remains unanswered nevertheless is if the language teaching community will ultimately be supplied with a universal approach by researchers in the field that would reduce the current need for extensive knowledge of different theories about learning and approaches to teaching, allowing educators in the future to focus more on the practical aspect of the teaching process.



Maradona cried after he had lost the game.

He then underlines the two verb forms in past perfect and simple past and labels them 1 and 2 respectively, and then writes “Maradona lost the game and he cried” and labels the two verbs in simple past 1 and 2 in the order that they appear in the sentence (opposite to the order in the first sentence). After this, he reads the simple past-only sentence with usual stress, and next reads the one with a past perfect verb like this: “Maradona cried after he *had lost* the game” (note the contrastive stress). He tags the sentences A (for the past perfect) and B (for simple past-only):

A: Maradona cried after he had lost the game.

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B: Maradona lost the game and he cried.

1

2

He then displays picture 2 (description at the end of this plan) and ask the students CC questions set 3. Next he asks them to make a sentence similar to sentence B and then change the order and say it like sentence A (with the last event first). Then he displays picture number 3 (description at the end of this plan) and asks CC questions set 4 and follows with asking the class to make a sentence similar to sentence B and then change the order and say it like sentence A (with the last event first). In both cases, the marker sentences that contain the past perfect form are written on the board after the correct form is elicited.

At the end of this stage, students should be able to identify the past perfect and divine the rules behind its usage without any direct explanation from the teacher.

Description of pictures (could use stock pictures/photos or draw them on paper):

Picture 1: Maradona, the famous coach of Argentina’s national football team in the last World Cup, is crying after his team lost 4-1. There are German players in the background celebrating and the scoreboard shows the time of the game (which is finished) along with the final score.

Picture 2: A split view of the two sides of an apartment’s door – inside, a boy is standing with sweat on his face and looking at the shining furniture (they are shown glittering). Outside, a girl is raising her hand to push the button of the doorbell.

Picture 3: The same boy and girl are in the front row of a cinema. On the screen, the words “*Titanic*” written in white letters over a pitch black background can clearly be read. The boy has a happy face and is holding a pack of popcorn, but the girl has a gaping expression on her face and is frowning in anger. There is big an exclamation mark (!) next to her head (like Tin Tin comics) and a thought balloon has emanated from her head depicting her sitting on a couch and watching a television screen showing the words “*Titanic*” in white over a black background. The balloon has the words “*last month*” on the top.

Concept Checking:

Set one:

1. Why did Maradona cry?
2. Was he sad?
3. Who cried harder? Maradona or you?! (fun factor)
4. So, what did Maradona do when he lost the game to Germany? [Possible answers: he cried/he went back to Argentina/...]
5. Did he have to go back to Argentina? (Answers can vary)

Set two:

1. Which one happened first: the crying or the losing?
2. Which one happened after that?

Set three:

1. Was the boy still working?
2. Was the girl inside the apartment?
3. So, she had just arrived, huh?
4. What was the boy doing before the girl arrived?
5. Which one happened first, the boy finishing his work or the girl arriving?

Set four:

1. Where were they?
2. Why is the girl so angry?
3. Was the film new for the girl?
4. How about the boy, was the movie new for him?
5. Do you think she watched until the end of the film?!
6. (If not, did she leave the boy inside and go away?!) (fun factor)
7. Which one happened first, the girl watching the film for the first time or the film starting here in the cinema?

Anticipated problems:

- Confusion with distinguishing the past participle from the past tense
- Not divining the importance of the order in which the events happened and the fact that it has been reversed.
- Confusion with the contracted form of had ('d) especially in spoken form (they might not hear it at all)
- Using simple past where they should be using past perfect
- Using have instead of had as the auxiliary
- Confusing had (possession/eating) with had as an auxiliary.

Possible Solutions:

- Eliciting the forms or labelling the verbs to ensure all understand which form they are in.
- Detect thorough concept checking and correct by explaining the order and reversal or order in the marker sentence.
- Start off with the complete form and slowly make the transition to the contracted form, stressing the “’d” in the first few sentences to make sure they detect it. In case there are questions, explain.
- Pick up and correct errors as they occur or point out the need for the correction and the error’s location (e.g. by using finger gestures: Every finger represents a word in the sentence. The teacher points at his fingers as the sentence progresses and stops on the one representing the error’s location), then get a corrected re-do.
- Pick up and correct using finger gestures. Get a corrected re-do.
- Could be explained during the presentation to avoid the confusion in the first place. If any occurred, drill the correct form, especially in cases where the main verb is also have, e.g. “Gloria had had her lunch before he went to work”.

Task 3:

a) Elicitation:

A process in teaching new language (or reviewing and revising language partially taught before) in which, instead of offering the students a slow description of such aspects as form, meaning or usage, the teacher elicits the ideas and information from the students who already have come across these in the course of their learning. By doing so, the teacher can succeed in increasing the student talk time (STT), involve them in the teaching process and allow them to learn or review the language in a way more suitable for them than the way the teacher might devise despite having a limited knowledge of their previous experiences and exposures. It can also provide a great chance for the teacher to investigate the extent to which the class knows about the new structure or vocabulary (and so, determine what and how exactly to teach) and find out if there are any misconceptions regarding its form, use or meaning which require correction.

The implementation of this technique is, of course, based on the premise that the learners have already been exposed (at least partially) to the target language and so, is more likely to be useful at intermediate levels or in communities with a higher degree of exposure to English (e.g. through the media).

b) Methodology in language teaching:

A theory or set of beliefs concerning how learning occurs or can be facilitated. It therefore attempts to formulate the teaching process and the educators' mind-set, supplying them with tools and techniques in order for learning to happen more effectively and efficiently.

Methodologies – with the exception of the grammar-translation method – have been based on different strands of research in different fields such as psychology and pedagogy. Thus, as new discoveries are made and novel theories are presented in these associated fields, new teaching methodologies arise accordingly in an attempt to coordinate the practice of teaching with our perception of the learning process and the students' needs, attitudes and responses to the educational material and settings employed.

It should be noted that while every single mythology, old or new, has its own merits and drawbacks, it should be noted that the current thinking in ESOL suggest an eclectic view, choosing and mixing elements from different methods at every time.

c) Form in language teaching:

A linguistic structure with a clearly-defined syntax and definite usage, used as a solution for the need to get a certain type of message across.

d) Meaning in language teaching:

The idea conveyed when a specific structure is used which is normally unique to that pattern. For example when one uses past simple in a series of sentences without employing adverbs of time or linkers to show a chronological order, it is still obvious that actions or states follow each other. E.g.:

I brushed my teeth. I watched a film. I went to sleep.

e) Communicative methods:

A rather more recent set of approaches to teaching languages which start by setting a clear communicational purpose for the learner (by making her understand the need to learn new language in order to perform in a certain situation). It emphasises the need for a student-centred environment in order for this to happen.

The learner is put in a situation which requires her to understand or produce meaningful language to perform a certain task (e.g. booking a ticket at a travel agent using formal requests, or understanding airport announcements in present continuous). These situations, as seen from the above description, involve an input material and a clearly-defined activity with a goal to be attained, which ultimately result in the realisation of the need for learning the new language by the learner. The effective and efficient design and implementation of these tasks, therefore, is of great importance for the communicative approach to work.

f) Phonology:

The study of the sounds made in the speech of a certain language (such as consonants and vowels). Phonology also studies the “music” of a language in its spoken form, and defines the rules for such elements as word pronunciation and syllabus stress, as well as sentence stress and intonation which can strongly affect the way a listener perceives a spoken sentence or alter its focal point. Therefore, it has been in the centre of the attention of a number of modern approaches to language learning and integrated into many of the techniques based on them from the earliest stages of teaching a new language.

g) Function in language teaching:

A well-defined communicative (conversational) situation/context in which a specific language pattern is used to satiate the need for a certain message to be relayed while making oneself clearly understood (e.g. giving instructions to someone on the street on how to get somewhere).

h) Personalisation:

An attempt by a teacher or material developer to associate the language being presented with the experiences, likes and dislikes of the learners in order to make the new structure more meaningful as well as interesting for them and create stronger motivation for learning. This can be done by exploiting the interests of the learners and create contexts accordingly to present the new grammar in. The teacher or material developer should therefore investigate such interests among the target student before any lesson planning is performed. Personalisation is also utilised broadly in the practice stage of lessons to motivate greater participation and contribution from the class.