MODERN APPROACHES IN TEACHING LANGUAGES
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Abstract. Communicative English practice may provide the only opportunity for students to make active use of the language. However, it is also true that in certain linguistic environments the only language input for students comes from the teacher, the materials, and the students themselves. Unfortunately, the language input of peers in communicative activities may be very faulty, and there is no natural English input from the community to counterbalance it. Therefore, a limited use of old-fashioned techniques such as drills, grammar explanation, and correction of errors may still contribute to learning if combined with more modern communicative activities. Whether or not this is so is the proper object of class-room centred research. It should tell us not which method is best, but which activities and combinations of activities are more effective for different learning situations.

Foreign language teaching specialists have often asked how to make a foreign language class successful and what criteria are to be used to judge a class. One way to answer is to determine how well the class achieves the objectives set for it. However, even if the objectives are all reached, we have to examine the objectives themselves. Behavioural objectives, for example, may be helpful in planning and teaching, but achieving the objectives does not in itself assure that a class is effective. Another way to judge a class, often used by both supervisors and methods instructors, is by means of a checklist. This is an analytic approach in which individual aspects such as volume of voice, clarity of instructions, and even appropriate dress are graded separately, then averaged for a total grade. Again, there remain questions about the items themselves, especially how they are weighted. As anyone who has used this method knows, the sum of the parts does not always add up to an accurate evaluation of the class as a whole.

Thus, neither attainment of objectives nor itemised checklists will necessarily indicate whether or not a class is successful, much less the characteristics that make it so. But there is an element, which we should take into consideration at all costs: methodology. We can assume that classes taught with a particular method will be successful. The claims for some methods are quite strong. Yet we have only to return to the heyday of audio-lingualism to put these claims into perspective. Like several more recent methods, audio-lingualism was firmly based on theory (a general theory of learning) and was supported by prominent people in our field. Yet today, this method is widely considered ineffective. This is not to say that all methods are the same; the point is rather that despite all claims, the re- search available so far has not indicated which method is best. This may be in part because the method is only one cluster of variables that influence a class. If method alone cannot assure a successful class, less so can technique. Professional publications are replete with successful teaching techniques, especially communicative activities. Yet rarely is it explained how these activities combine with others to constitute an entire class. If, on the other hand, communicative activities alone make up the total class, they are suspected of promoting fossilisation and pidginisation. Unfortunately, there is little empirical evidence either way.

The perseverant teacher should continuously observe and describe successful classes.
The result takes us back to our original question. But perhaps the best way to find out about successful classes is to go to the classes themselves. By observing many different classes, we will be able to isolate the ones that are outstanding. The second step is to describe what these classes have in common. This involves intuitive, subjective judgement that will not be as precise or reliable as formal research. But it can give us a valuable perspective. Far from constituting an answer, this may serve as a question for future research. Perhaps more EFL teachers should observe other classes and describe those features, including activities and combinations of activities, that seem to enhance language learning. Research could tell us if in fact this is so, and theory could tell us why. In this article I am going to describe the characteristics of several successful classes I observed and tentatively explain why. First, however, since the features contributing to a successful class in one set of circumstances may be woefully lacking in another, it is important to know something about the four clusters of variables that influenced these classes: the student, the teacher, the method, and the learning environment. The classes observed took place in various colleges and agricultural faculties of Romania and Slovakia, where the number of foreign language classes in school is very small. Consequently the methods the teachers used were both traditional (audio-lingual, cognitive-code) and innovative (communicative, notional-functional), often combined within the same class period, providing all the motivation possible.

Here are some characteristics of successful classes:

Some of the classes attended were truly impressive for various reasons. First of all, the successful classes had many features in common with good classes everywhere. The teacher maintained control without dominating the class. This permitted more innovative activities and therefore more, not less, freedom for students and teachers alike. Another important effect was a relatively tension-free atmosphere conducive to learning.

Control was aided by the effective use of non-verbal communication: whole-body movements, gestures, facial expressions, and eye contact. Even more important was the teachers’ paralanguage – aspects of voice such as tone, pitch, volume, and intonation. The effective use of non-verbal communication also facilitated a second aspect of these classes: the active participation of all students throughout the class period. A special effort was made for the often neglected areas in the back and sides of the classroom. Teachers included these students not only by calling on them frequently, but also by speaking in a clear, audible voice and by establishing eye contact with students in all parts of the room. Teachers also moved into the rows, thus eliminating the front and back of the room altogether. There were, of course, many more aspects that characterised these classes and probably successful classes everywhere. Of these, the most important was variety.

All of the successful classes consisted of a variety of short activities – four to six within a 45-minute period. Yet this was not confusing since most of the activities centred around the same teaching point, whether a grammatical structure, a notion, or a function of language. But instead of discussing each class, I will list some of the activities appropriate for three typical classes focusing on one traditional teaching point: the use of will for future time reference. Then I will discuss how the selection and combination of activities contributed to the success of the classes.

**Class One** 1. A short paragraph with instances of will underlined for emphasis. First the teacher, then the students read the paragraph. 2. A short true/false listening-comprehension exercise on the paragraph. Students answer orally. 3. Dictation of three or four questions on the reading. All students write the questions and answers, then volunteers copy them on the board. The teacher and students may make corrections at the board. 4. A short
pronunciation drill contrasting /w/ and /gw/ (easily confused by native speakers of Spanish). 5. A small-group speaking activity. The teacher describes a child as s/he appears in a picture. Then students in small groups describe what they imagine the child will become as an adult. The teacher may write two or three questions on the board to guide the students. 6. A class speaking activity. A member of each group explains to the class the group’s idea of the child’s future as prepared in activity 5 above. Students and teacher discuss similarities and differences in the responses.

Class Two
1. A short dialogue with will in negative and interrogative sentences. The teacher, then the students read the dialogue aloud. 2. A grammar demonstration on felt board contrasting will in affirmative, declarative sentences with negative and interrogative forms. 3. Short choral repetition or individual transformation drills for negative and interrogative sentences with will. 4. A dyadic speaking activity. The teacher describes an activity of the future such as vacationing in space or using robots at home. Each dyad writes a short dialogue for two imaginary characters engaged in the activity. 5. A class speaking activity. Presentation of the dialogues to the class by volunteer dyads.

Class Three
1. Class speaking activity using a large picture or drawing with several people of different ages. Students comment on what will become of each person in the future. 2. Student-to-teacher dictation of a paragraph about one of the persons in the picture. The teacher writes the paragraph on the board, making suggestions and adjustments as needed. Students copy their paragraph in notebooks. 3. A listening-comprehension and pronunciation drill on // and / / 1. 4. A writing activity. Each student writes a paragraph about personal plans for study, work, or travel in the future. 5. An individual speaking activity. Students present an informal, oral summary of their personal plans for the future to the rest of the class.

The activities mentioned were combined in a variety of ways that seemed to contribute to the success of the classes. First of all, the classes were composed of several short activities instead of one or two long ones, and this helped hold students’ attention. And since all of the activities focused on a single teaching point, they allowed students to approach the problem from many angles and through the four basic skills. This is important, not only because different students have different learning styles, but because each individual may learn in a variety of ways. Besides the number, the types of activities also helped provide for differences both between and within individual students. Some activities were mechanical, while others were creative. This meant that all students, including the most proficient, were challenged to develop their language skills to the fullest. The mechanical drills, especially the choral drills, also played an important, though limited, role in the classroom. First, they gave students oral practice with new structures. Practising sounds and structures may play a small part in learning or acquiring a language, even a native language.

Second, the oral drills helped pull students together as a working unit. This recaptured the students’ attention and thereby facilitated transitions between other more creative and demanding activities. Drills were not the only traditional techniques used. In these classes, grammar was explicitly taught and errors corrected. However, instead of listing rules, the teacher demonstrated concepts on a felt board and asked students to formulate the rules. The students then applied the rules to a written exercise, often a homework assignment. Here, and only here, were errors corrected. With this treatment of grammar, students participated actively by analysing examples and putting their generalisations into words. They also made a concentrated effort to monitor their language by consciously applying rules and correcting errors, but only for the duration of the activity. When the class shifted to another activity,
students were encouraged to use language unselfconsciously. But the grammar demonstration may have been successful for another, unexpected reason. If we think of all the activities that normally take place in a classroom for any subject, a demonstration at the board along with student participation may be, paradoxically, the most natural of all the activities described so far.

A final feature the classes had in common was the use of teaching aids. All the teachers observed included some type of real pictures, drawings, or felt-board cut-outs – as an integral part of at least one activity. The aids were useful in several ways. For grammar, they allowed teachers to demonstrate complex concepts, thus avoiding long explanations in either language. Visual aids, recordings, songs, and games of all types helped maintain student interest alive.

Communicative English practice may provide the only opportunity for students to make active use of the language. However, it is also true that in certain linguistic environments the only language input for students comes from the teacher, the materials, and the students themselves. Unfortunately, the language input of peers in communicative activities may be very faulty, and there is no natural English input from the community to counterbalance it. Therefore, a limited use of old-fashioned techniques such as drills, grammar explanation, and correction of errors may still contribute to learning if combined with more modern communicative activities. Whether or not this is so is the proper object of class-room centred research. It should tell us not which method is best, but which activities and combinations of activities are more effective for different learning situations.

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