Teaching english as a foreign language: issues and challenges

Abstract

Serious and basic research has to be done on the teaching of English as a foreign language in Algeria. It should be based on the functional distribution of the four skills i.e. listening, speaking and writing. Our teaching materials should serve as tools to reinforce these skills.

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Teaching English as a foreign language has come a long way in the last twenty years. Nonetheless, professionals in the field are aware that in the decade serious and basic research has to be done on second language acquisition, teaching methodology, materials development and standardized testing. As an example, I venture in this paper to discuss these issues in general and what we may attempt to archive in this respect.

The Algerian universities have been in the business of teaching English as a foreign language for over thirty years. Currently, the teaching of English as a foreign language is offered at English departments. As the largest professional organization of its kind in the business of providing training in English and related area studies to undergraduates, English departments mainly train new teachers.

In the following overview, I plan to briefly delineate how one should envisage to carry out most pertinent to the teaching of English as a foreign language now and in the future.

LANGUAGE SKILLS

If the learners of English are to interact effectively, English language teacher must be aware of the reality of the Arabic language situation.

ملخص

إن فعالية تدريس اللغة الانجليزية كلغة أجنبية في الجزائر يستدعي القيام بدراسات جدية وقاعدية تستخدم فيها أدوات اختبار لقدرات اكتساب اللغة كالاستماع، التعبير الشفوي، الكتابة والقرأة.

Ferguson's classic article on diglossia formally recognized the existence of two varieties in modern Arabic; i.e. classical and colloquial, each with a definite set of social functions. In the context of this well-recognized diglossic nature of the language, the two varietie have different functional distributions of skills among native speakers of Arabic. Predictably, intra-societal communication makes use of all four skills, i.e. listening, writing and reading, without necessarily assigning to them equal weight. As a matter of fact, classic Arabic has three skills: wriding, writing and listening; where as Algerian colloquial has mainly two: speaking and listening. It is on the functional distribution of these four skills in Arabic that I wish to suggest my own perspective on the functional distribution of those skills in English and illustrate how one should go about enabling Algerian learners to acquire them.

Listening

Although listening activities should be integrated in all courses, English language teachers should offer specialized listening comprehension courses as a matter of focus to guarantee that the learners actually enhance their listening skills. A wide variety of audio and video tapes, both autentic and simulated, should be used to promote learners with systematic aural comprehension training on how to decode accurately, in a culturally appropriate context, what they listen to. The materials used would aim to enhance learners listening skills at the levels of phonology, word structure, sentence and global message. These various levels are briefly illustrated bellow:

a- Phonology. Here learners work on discriminating betwenn sounds in predictably problematic areas. In such exercices, the learners have a copy of the text they listen to with paired choices, one of which they must identify as the correct sound.

b- Word structure. Here learners deal with whole words at the phrase level. Dictation is a useful training tool which encourages the learner to concentrate, at least momentarily, on the form. Another exercice which serves the development of the listening skill on both the phnological and structural levels is to ask the learner to write the content of a taped program word for word. Although frustrating, this exercice can be very successful in helping the learners distinguich word boundaries.

c- Sentence. Here the learner focuses on decoding the meaning at the sentence level. This is a further step in developing the listening comprehension skill when learners decode what they hear for retention. The learners are given true/false questions to test their understanding of complete ideas in complete sentences.

d- Global message. Here learners deal with the overall message, inferential information and shades of meaning. At the beginning stages, the learners need not remember nor concentrate on the details of the material. They are only required to get the gist of what they are listening to. As the learners listening skills develop, the listening materials become longer and the learners are expected to concentrate on the global message as well as on some important details. In order to do so, the learners are encouraged to take notes in order to be able to write a summary or an outline of the material they listen to.

Speaking

For the non-native learners, learning to speak is perhaps the problematic aspect of the language.

The general approach for classroom activities is to focus on those activities that are learner- centered rather than teacher-centered (4). This means that the learners should be encouraged to speak to each other and not only with their teacher. In order to achieve this, the teacher should present activities such as role-play, questions and answers, discussions and games. These activities facilitate speaking in the "real" language and approximate natural communication contexts. They are also graded from controlled activities, to semi-controlled, to free activities. Teaching conversation affectively requires the choise of a suitable direction of the speaking activities by consensus between the learners and the teacher. The degree of control of the speaking activities depends on the grammatical structures and vocabulary as well as the social functions that the teacher wishes to introduce to learners. The teacher should keep in mind that class activities have to match the general proficiency level of the learners as well as the structures and vocabulary to which they have been introduced. Other wise, these activities become aimless and above or below what should be done in class. For ewample, if the teacher wants his/her learners to pratice the past tense, the teacher should introduce a conservation based on questions such as: tell us about your own experience when you first went to school as a yount child. If the teacher wants to reinforce the simple present tense, questions like "what do you do when you take a taxi" could be the base of the conservation. The more grammatical structures and vocabulary the learners learn, the freer class activities there can be. Speaking is also a skill that requires guidance and pratice; it is the teacher's responsibility to provide the learners with guidance and give them suitable opportunities for pratice. Tipically, the teachers choose the conversation activities, explain them, make sure that all leaners participate, answer any questions and provide the structure and vocabulary items the learners need. They should also make sure that they talk less and the learners talk more. To facilitate this process, some pre-conversation activities should be introduce such as:

1- Introducing new vocabulary and practicing using them in meaningful sentences.
2- Introducing pattern drills based on certain structures.
3- Introducing directed listening where the learners listen to real recorded conversation on different topics such as renting an apartment, buying a car, answering a telephone call, etc.
4- Introducting questions, expressions and compliments and training the learners to answer them.
5- Practicing the creation of imaginary dialogues from pictures including two or more persons.

As for correction, the teacher should not stop the flow of speaking activities for correction unless the error seriously impedes comprehension. Instead s/he should record the conversation on an audio or video tape for a general remedial session in which all learners participate. Stopping the learners at every occurrence of an error would discourage them from talking fluently and with confidence or they might even stop talking completely (8). In general, the teacher should strive to create a clasroom

atmosphere that is conducive to free expression and where the learners are not inhibited to use new structures and vocabulary items even if they make mistakes in the interim.

In a conversation class, them, the learner is an actively participating member in a dialogue, not a passive listerner or note-taker. The learners, thus, find themselves forced to think in English and to remember the structures and vocabulary they practised before in pattern drills or have been exposed to elsewhere. Instead of answering in previously memorized answers, they are expected to use the language in real situations as native speakers do. Constant participation in class activities help most learners lower their inhibitions and develop their feelings of confidence and achievement.

Reading and Writing

Reading is an essential language activity for the literate native speaker; it is even so for the non-native learner. Carell et al. (2) convincingly argue that written material, as a source of linguistic data, promotes the growth of general language competence ; increased language competence in turn enhances reading ability. Simply put, one learns how to read through the process of reading itself. Thus, ourlearners should be continually exposed to challenging amounts of reading material. Our task, as facilitators, is reflected in what we do in the process of selecting and grading the material as well as in preparing pre-reading activities.

In selecting the material, I believe that the content and quantity of texts are the most important elements in developing the reading skill. Content determines whether the topic is intellectually stimulating and of interest to the learner. Quantity, on the other hand, is a crucial factor in providing the learner with the opportunity to accumulate vocabulary and reinforce learned material.

Both are indispensable requirements of successful language acquisition. The materials presented should consist of both fiction and non-fiction works covering historical, political, economic and cultural topics. The reading materials should be topic-driven, i.e. revolving around a specific topic like health, women's status, or religion. The advantages of a topic-driven syllabus are that it tends to make the content of the texts more accessible for the leaners and indirectly enhances their repertoire of vocabulary. The more one reads about a certain topic, the wider one's background knowledge becomes and the greater the probability that one would encounter the same kind of vocabulary again.

Accordingly, the texts become more comprehensible and the cumulative effect of vocabulary learning can occur even though the learner's primary focus is not directed to vocabulary building. Besides, every assigned text should be accompanied by guiding questions and a list of vocabulary items including synonyms, definitions and sentences illustrating the use of idiomatic expressions.

In grading he reading material, we should take into consideration three elements: the linguistic complexly, the background knowledge included in the texte and the tasks required from the learner. Thus, we start with linguistically accessible texts dealing with familial topics and limit comprehension activities to answeing the five wh-question (who, what, where and why).

As we proced in the course and as the learners' reading experiences increase, they are expected to perform more sophisticated tasks, such as making informed evaluation, giving personal opinions, or making inferences.

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In attempting to help the learner become a proficient reader, we should plan a series of pre-and post-reading activities. Pre-reading activities would include clarification and comments by the teacher on what s/he considers to be unfamiliar key concepts, expresions and vocabulary items. Pre-reading activities could also draw upon audio-visuel stimuli such as video films, slides and audio materials. For example, the films are shown to the learners to provide background knowledge necessary for the comprehension of a text, expecially if this text happens to have unfamilial cultural information or context.

Post-reading activitieswould have learners being encouraged to ask questions or comment on any difficulties they encountered. The content of the text is then discussed and the learners are encouraged to answer each others' questions in an attempt to enhance group activity and improve class dynamics. We could also have learners read aloud in class for pronunciation accuracy. This activity has been found most useful as the teacher can identify individual weak points (in grammar. Vocabulary or reading strategies) and thus can help the learners to overcome them.

Concerted efforts are exerted to integrade the writing and reading skills. So in addition to answering content questions in writing, learners are expected to write commentaries on certain articles or novels. There, the teacher could try to extract useful materials from the reading assignments for use as samples of the various writing styles such as descriptions, comparisons, etc. Eventually, learners can move on from this mode of controlled writing to creative written expressions.

CONCLUSION

In the previous discussion, we have tried to delineate the main issues that I believe represent the challenges for teaching English as a foreign language in the coming years. It is evident that we cannot teach Englishsuccessfully without incorporating in our teaching approaches the reality of that language and those traits that are particular to it. One cannot, for example, adopt a model of four skills at large without adapting it to factor in the relevant and proportionate distribution of one skill to another.

The concept of authenticity, I believe, should be extended, beyond using authentic teaching materials, into the larger frameworkof authentic language input and authentic cultural context. Teaching for proficiency is a legitimate goal, but a major challenge of the profession in the coming years remains the need fot an accurate definition of the characteristic of a proficient English speaker. Our teaching materials, approaches, techniques and procedures should serve as tools to transmit those characteristics to the non-native speaker.

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