Engaging Teenage Learners in the Foreign Language Lesson

Urania Sarri[1]

Hellenic Open University, Greece[1]

Abstract

Foreign language (FL) teachers in Secondary Education often have difficulties in engaging their students. This may be the outcome of several parameters, the effectiveness of the teaching methods included. There are many cases where the teacher has little or no control over the teaching material that may not cover the learners' needs or match the teacher's personality and may even lack sufficient relevance to the current sociocultural situation. In addition, the latest educational approach, the 21st century Pedagogy, has set specific aims for educators that involve the development of specific skills such as innovation, research, critical and creative thinking. Therefore, the need to support the FL lesson with material that is relevant, useful and enjoyable emerges. This paper presents a framework for designing lessons that engage teenage learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) as they investigate and develop their multiple identities and shape their worldview. Using the tools provided by student-centered pedagogy, the latest version of the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR) and Bloom's taxonomy, it presents examples of learner-centered activities that promote differentiation of learning, cooperation, critical and creative thinking skills and the proper use of ICT tools. It aspires to assist FL teachers in providing meaningful, relevant and enjoyable knowledge to their learners that will also be useful in the long run, after they have entered the Higher Education area and/or joined the workforce.

Keywords: *CEFR, student-centered methodology, creative thinking, content-based instruction*

1. Introduction

Teaching teenagers is often a challenging experience, no matter the teaching subject involved. This is mainly due to the many variables that affect the teaching process, functioning beyond the teachers' control. Fonseca & Toscano [3] refer to the physical, emotional and cognitive characteristics of this age group that affect communication and, therefore, need to be taken into consideration by language teachers. The significance of peers, the tendency to rebel against authority, the frequent mood swings, teenagers' concern about their body image and the fact that they are in a vital stage of identity construction constitute variables that cannot be controlled by teachers but need to be considered in the planning of content and the implementation of suitable teaching approaches and methodologies.

Our proposed framework for student engagement adopts Abla's & Fraumeni's [1] definition of student engagement as "a condition of emotional, social, and intellectual readiness to learn characterized by curiosity, participation, and the drive to learn more." This definition implies that there are other factors involved in learning that *can* be handled by teachers. Viewing learning as a self-reflection process, Fonseca & Toscano [3] add the affective factors involved: motivation, language aptitude, a teaching climate that fosters the development of self-confidence, the feeling of belonging, physical and emotional security, goal-setting, challenging activities and the teacher's role as a facilitator. These might also lead to the effective handling of disruptive behaviour during the language lesson as such behaviour may be the result of boredom or our students' failure to meet the learning aims and even the teacher's attitude while responding to mistakes.

Our framework approaches the issue by focusing on what teachers *can* control. For example, we can control the content of our lessons by designing suitable activities (or transforming those included in the course book), the teaching methodology, the material and the tools that we can add to the syllabus. At this point, it is important that we consider some essential pre-conditions: we provide students with knowledge that is *meaningful, relevant* and *useful* for their lives and we do this in an *enjoyable* way that caters for *all learning profiles*. This means that as teachers we should be able to acknowledge our learners strengths, needs and interests. Building rapport from the very first lesson is a crucial part of this process as is the practice of teacher reflection.

2. A framework of student-centered methodology for effective engagement

Student-centered methodology views education as a shared experience between the teacher and the students but also among the students themselves. Having a more active and collaborative role in the

learning process, learners interact without constant supervision by the teacher, while the teacher provides feedback or correction when questions arise and applies methods of *formative assessment*. Learning to work independently and participating actively in their own education, the students develop collaboration and communication skills and tend to be more interested in learning. Class management skills are important as well, so that boundaries are set from the beginning of the school year. In order to achieve effective engagement, our proposed framework encompasses the following practices of student-centered methodology:

A *Communicative Approach* [7] proposing that language learning is facilitated by interaction and meaningful communication in the target language, with trial and error and the use of authentic material as significant parts of the learning process. Since the emphasis is on meaning, *content-based teaching* [2] reflects this approach as it seeks to explore meaning through content. At the same time, language learning is facilitated by activities that involve *inductive / exploratory learning* of the suggested rules of language use and structure and *cooperative learning*, since language learning is not private activity, but a social one and depends on interaction with others. The activities are presented *in context* and have a communicative purpose. The students interact in pairs, groups and the plenary, orally and in writing and are constantly exposed to the target language. The classroom becomes a community where students learn through collaboration and exchange. However, the teacher needs to consider that each student moves at different rates and has different needs and motivations for language learning. This is why *differentiation of instruction* is considered significant if we are to engage our students in what we want them to learn. A *classroom environment* that is conducive to language learning and provides opportunities for students to use language and reflect on their learning is important. Communication skills are developed in connection with grammatical development; therefore, grammar is not taught individually, but often arises from a communication activity.

These practices are strongly connected to *21st Century Pedagogy* that highlights the significance of *critical and creative thinking* development. Critical thinking and its techniques (observation, analysis, conclusions, assessment) encourage students to connect concepts, solve problems and apply knowledge in new ways, such as incorporating different perspectives or linking different ideas. Creative thinking methodology [4,5] improves student self-esteem, enhancing effective learning and the development of skills such as problem-solving, self-confidence and self-awareness. A creative classroom is actually a collaborative learning community, where curiosity and problem-solving are encouraged. Peachy [5] suggests different ways of enhancing creativity using the senses and "out of the box" activities that develop divergent thinking. Experiential creativity is another way to engage teenage students, such as the *one-pager method* and the approach of *black-out poetry* [6]. Alternatively, students can create a collage, brochure or digital poster on the topic of the lesson/unit, using pictures, art, excerpts and pieces of text. Students can also create their own Haiku poems on a theme, write their own stories with digital storytelling tools or add captions to funny photos. Last but not least, activities become more appealing when they involve popular songs, art and drama, depending on the students' suggestions and learning profiles.

3. Tools for goal-setting

Goal-setting for language development constitutes a significant part of our framework and each activity must have one or more specific aims, each one contributing to the aims of the whole lesson and, eventually, the unit. We propose that language proficiency goals are based on the *Common European Framework (CEFR)* descriptors, considering the students' language proficiency level. In addition, we recommend *Bloom's taxonomy* as an effective tool that has helped teachers set clear learning goals with measurable results. Finally, we propose *content flexibility* as a teaching practice, using sub-topics based on our students' interests. For example a unit on the topic of education can be designed on the sub-topic of inclusion or school bullying etc. Learning goals may also involve digital competence. Therefore, we propose the involvement of ICT in the language lesson so that learners develop skills that enable them to manage and create digital content, communicate and collaborate through digital technologies and understand issues related to personal data protection and copyright restrictions.
.

4. Designing engaging foreign language lessons: examples

The following grid presents indicative combinations of all the elements mentioned above aiming at engaging teenage students in the FL lesson:

STAGE-SKILL	STRATEGIES	CEFR DESCRIPTORS	BLOOM TAXONOMY VERBS (indicative)
Introduction (Brainstorming Activating previous knowledge- Relating content to personal experience)	Creating word-clouds Concept maps Categorizing vocabulary	**Oral interaction** - Informal discussion with friends. **Linguistic competence**- Vocabulary range	interpret, list, compare, define, hypothesize, recall, conclude, express, describe, visualize
	Discussing the content of images - Matching images to ideas- Narrating a personal experience	**Oral production**-(Sustained monologue-Describing experience) **Pragmatic competence** (Thematic development- Language awareness and interpretation)	
Reading comprehension Poem analysis Critical analysis of text Finding examples of grammar structures Reflecting grammar structures - creating new examples.	Poem analysis Visual representation of information Black-out poetry Creating a comic strip Presenting main ideas in a web with sketchnotes Choice board with differentiated tasks Creative thinking questions	**Text Mediation** (Analysis and criticism of creative texts (including literature), Expressing a personal response to creative texts, Visually representing information)	relate, create , interpret, comprehend, contrast, explain
Oral comprehension Videos Songs Audio books Podcasts Films	Sequencing images Writing captions to images Understanding main points Catching important information Identifying speaker mood, attitudes and viewpoints	**Audio-visual comprehension** (Watching TV, film and video) **Oral comprehension** (Understanding as a member of a live audience) **Oral interaction** (Understanding an interlocutor)	understand, apply, evaluate, compare, elaborate, distinguish, express, conclude
Oral production	Discussing and presenting the results of online search Jigsaw technique Debate Simulations and role plays Presentations	**Oral interaction** (Interviewing and being interviewed/ Using telecommunications/ Information exchange Conversation **Mediation** (Facilitating communication in delicate situations and disagreements)	apply, demonstrate, express, argue, present, criticize
Written production	Essay, report, persuasive speech, article, social media post, story, email	**Written production** (Creative writing, Reports and essays) **Written interaction** (Correspondence)	combine, apply, summarize, relate
Assessment / End	Discussion for project	**Oral interaction**	

product	planning	(Goal-oriented co-operation/ Goal-oriented online transactions and collaboration/ Information exchange)	apply, demonstrate, express, illustrate, compose, create, synthesize, explain
Group project Web quest Presentation e-Poster Video Brochure Podcast e-book Class padlet	Collecting information SWOT analysis, Presenting search results, Self-peer assessment with rubrics Transferring information from L1 to target language and vice- versa	**Linguistic competence**- (Vocabulary range- Grammatical accuracy) **Pragmatic competence** (Thematic development **Sociolinguistic competence** (appropriateness) **Mediation** (Facilitating pluricultural space, Explaining data, Relaying specific information)	

5. Final thoughts

Our framework has illustrated that the fully engaged FL class is the outcome of interplay of various factors and the implementation of methods that have been part of the teacher's toolbox for a long time. However, what works for one group of students may not be successful for another. At that point reflection is critical and sometimes teachers realize that they are a big part of the solution. Eventually it all comes down to *who we are as teachers*, in other words, what *our teacher philosophy* is and how ready we are to change.

References

[1] Abla, C., & Fraumeni, B. R. (2019). Student engagement: Evidence-based strategies to boost academic and social emotional results. McREL International. p.2

[2] Coyle, D., Hood, P., & Marsh, D. (2010). CLIL: Content and Language Integrated Learning. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

[3] Fonseca-Mora, C. & Fuentes, C. (2007). Fostering teenagers' willingness to learn a foreign language. In: Self-esteem and foreign language learning. Publisher: New Castle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing Editors: Fernando Rubio

[4] Maley, A. (2015). Overview: Creativity-the what, the why and the how. In: Creativity in the English language classroom, Maley, A. & Peachey, N. (Eds.). British Council.

[5] Peachey, N. (2018). Hacking creativity. Teaching techniques, exercises and activities for the creative language classroom. London: Peachey Publications Ltd.

[6] Potash, B. (2021). One-Pagers Roundup: Examples to Inspire. Retrieved 14 April 2021, from http://www.nowsparkcreativity.com/2018/03/one-pagers-roundup-examples-to-inspire.html http://www.nowsparkcreativity.com/2018/10/the-easy-guide-to-blackout-poetry.html

[7] Richards, Jack C. (2006) Communicative Language Teaching Today. Cambridge University Press