

WHAT IS THE MATTER WITH OUR ESL PROGRAMS AT THE UNIVERSITY

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Foreign language teaching has gone through many important changes. There have been changes in the principles governing the language learning process, changes in methods and methodologies for language teaching, in the clientele who enrolls in a foreign language course and many other changes. They all have been a challenge to foreign language teachers. It is their responsibility to become aware of the innovations, to evaluate them and to decide which ones seem useful to their students and which may be used in the classroom.

The title of this paper shows my concerns, shared by several colleagues, for the present teaching experience we have been dealing with. There seems to be some sort of confusion regarding the teaching approach to be used in the classroom, how to conduct our courses and which direction to take as far as L2 teaching is concerned.

Up until the 50s the concept of behaviorism as a theory of human learning and the ideas of behaviorist psychologists attracted and dominated the attention of those concerned with language teaching. It was a general belief that language learning was based on stimulus-response, and to learn a language meant to manipulate the linguistic forms of the target language through imitation of a model - a native speaker or a near-native-speaker. Under the umbrella of the behaviorism, the audio-lingual method was created. In this method great emphasis was given to the spoken mode of language manifestation, and it was thought that "to speak a language ... was indispensable for becoming skilled in reading and writing the language as well" (Scott, p.13). As time went by, L2 teachers realized that this was not generally the case. Some students became successful speakers of the target language; yet, they could not read and/or write in that language.

The audio-lingual method and the behavioristic principles for L2 teaching dominated the field of L2 learning for a long period of time without being touched or questioned by those involved with language teaching. The 1960s were a time for questioning and for changes. The Chomskyan revolution shook the foundation of the principles of language learning and gave ground to a renewal of interest in human

learning acquisition. Language was no longer seen as conditioned behavior but rather as knowledge.

Chomsky's ideas on language learning created a certain tension among those in the field of L2 teaching. There was some questioning regarding adult L2 learning. Several arguments were posed, among them the following: (1) adults lack the characteristics typical of L2 learning at an early age; and (2) they do not go through the same stages as children learning their first language. Consequently, adult learning of a new language is almost impossible. We all know from experience that these fears have not been confirmed and probably, at least we hope so, never will. Adults can learn a L2, and they have the great advantage of being able to rely on their conscious abilities in the learning process.

Chomsky's ideas on language learning motivated language researchers to create new methods for language teaching, such as 'The Silent Way' (Gattegno, 1972), 'Total Physical Response' (TPR - Asher, 1969), 'Community Language Learning' (Curran, 1966). These methods are not directly based on Chomsky's principle, yet they reflect a new philosophy for language teaching. Each method differs in its proposals, and principles, but they all intend to promote a better way for language teaching and learning.

The publication, in 1976, of Wilkins' Notional Syllabuses marks the beginning of a new era in L2 teaching. The assumptions and hypotheses presented by the author revolutionized the field of language teaching and gave ground to controversies and discussions. No matter what confusion and how much disagreement Wilkins' idea may have caused, his assumption that in language learning emphasis is to be given to function rather than form so that the students will develop a communicative rather than a grammatical competence has become the focus of attention of language teachers, researchers and course designers.

Despite all the innovations, changes and suggestions for L2 teaching mentioned previously, I feel that the teaching of English is going through a difficult phase. It seems that both teachers and students have been affected by the 'crisis'. College students do not seem to be interested in L2 courses as much as they did in the past. At least this is the situation at the Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Norte (hereafter UFRN). There has been a significant decrease in the number of students graduating from the course of Letters with a major in English. Many students start the course but few of them complete it. The turning point is the third semester of L2 instruction. Whoever overcomes this crucial point, usually completes the course. Recently I did a quantitative survey of the students enrolling and finishing the course and the figures obtained are the following:

Semester	81.2	82.1	82.2	83.1	83.2	84.1
#of Std.	21	16	09	08	08	06
Semester	82.1	82.2	83.1	83.2	84.1	84.2
#of Std.	19	16	16	05	04	05
Semester	82.2	83.1	83.2	84.1	84.2	85.1
#of Std.	20	11	12	11	13	05
Semester	83.1	83.2	84.1	84.2	85.1	85.2
#of Std.	33	30	15	13	13	12

Figure 1 - Number of students enrolled per semester (81.1 = year 1981 first semester; 81.2 = year 1981 second semester)

Then we checked the percentage of the students graduating every semester, and the results obtained are the following:

semester	% of std
84.1	28%
84.2	26%
85.1	25%
85.2	36%

Table 1 - % of students in the last semester of English

Apparently there was an increase in the number of students taking the last semester of English in 85.2. The high figure for this semester was due to the fact that some students were behind their original entrance group and had to take the course in 85.2; otherwise they would not be able to graduate.

The drop-out may be blamed on several facts: first, the way the courses are organized. At the UFRN students are placed in the classes by year and not by language proficiency. Thus, in the same class there will be people at a low, at an intermediate or even at the advanced level of English proficiency. This heterogeneity creates a chaos for the teacher and the students. The organization of a course becomes difficult, and the teacher ends up helping students at one level of language proficiency at the cost of those at another level. Second, students who opt for a major in English are required to have a major in Portuguese as well, thus increasing the number of credit-hour from 152 to 168. This fact discourages students to take a foreign language course at the University. Whoever is interested in learning and/or improving his/her knowledge of English, or any other foreign language, takes private classes where the workload is much lighter than at the University. Third, in Natal the job market for college graduates with a degree in English is very limited. The only option for most of them is a teaching career.

As for the teachers, the major source of the crisis seems to be related to inappropriate training in and preparation for L2 teaching. There are many teachers who interrupted their training when they left College, and there are teachers who have never been trained to be language teachers. Both kinds of teachers have difficulty selecting a book for their students and using new techniques and approaches to L2 teaching because they are not fully acquainted with the current issues. A part from their previous experience as students of English as a foreign language, when they had to read some of the literature on L2 teaching, these teachers have little theoretical basis on the subject.

Add to these facts the present teaching demands. It is widely accepted that teachers should promote the communicative competence of the students. When Dell Hymes (1974) defined the term what he had in mind was the competence of the native speaker. This competence is acquired naturally, without formal training. The communicative competence of the L2 learners is to be developed in the classroom, unless they are exposed to the TL at the host country. Several questions regarding this matter deserve an answer. First how are we going to help the students develop communicative competence? Second, how similar or different is the communicative competence of the native speakers and the L2 learners? Third, is the appropriate use of functions a sort of communicative competence? Fourth, to what extent should the student be communicative?

It is difficult to say which ones of these reasons are responsible for the crisis in the English courses. Teachers should not blame just the students for the 'lack of success' of the courses. It is time we, teachers, examine what we are doing with and for the students. It is possible that our work has not been done properly, and that there has not been any, or very little, updating of the techniques and approaches to language teaching. We cannot say that our students are lazy or uninterested in learning a new language. They may be highly motivated at the beginning of the course but later on they lose any interest they might have had. As

teachers, have we considered that we may be the cause y all that? Let us ask our students to evaluate us and our work. By doing so, we will be able to develop a new relationship between ourselves and our students; we will humanize our courses, our classroom and our students, and we will be able to organize courses which might be of interest to more students and draw their attention to them. Many students are unmotivated to study, they know very little of the TL. Nevertheless we should not let these things turn us down. Let us ask our students what we can do for them, and how they want us to conduct things for them. Maybe this is the beginning of a new experience for both students and teachers.

I believe that one way to minimize the present critical situation of our college English courses is to work close to the students, find out about their needs, goals and interests. Rather than imposing what to teach, we must listen to the students. Learners are the center of our job, and helping them to learn is the aim of our teaching.

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