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A GLIMPSE ON THE TRIBULATIONS OF TEACHING ENGLISH IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

This paper has aimed at identifying the main hindrances during the process of teaching/learning English language. The findings result from data collected in a university with heterogeneous levels of proficiency in English and a wide range of attitudes towards learning. I have found that most students are not aware of the distracting factors that prevent them from achieving academic performance: the smartphone, romantic relationships, distraction to other sites instead of work, lack of personal discipline, etc. Students are not aware that the learning process is complex and they overlook: the need to combine individual study and class work, the role of the teachers to detect the students' needs and difficulties and to provide feedback, the difference in learning skills, the affective barriers and inhibitions, the lack of ambition and the lack of ability to organize time and resources efficiently.

What I found useful after 5 years of teaching is a 30-page Handbook for English Students designed in such a manner so that it should raise awareness about all the above mentioned aspects and instruct students how to combine individual study with teamwork, how and where to find info, and how to manage time.

Teachers should keep in mind that higher education in today's digitalized world is operating more on constructivism and less on cognitivism. It means that the teacher will mainly make efforts to teach the students how to learn and where to get information from, and what to learn, depending on each student's needs.

Keywords

Teaching, Learning, Students, Constructivism, Cognitivism, Proficiency, Distraction

1. Introduction

This aim of this paper has been to identify the main burdens during the process of teaching English in today's higher education and to propose some practical solutions.

The burdens identified are based on empirical observations collected during my 5 year experience as an English teacher in a university where I taught around 800 students every year, enrolled for bachelor degree and master degree, divided into groups of 18 per session. I noticed 2 cardinal trends: a) highly heterogeneous levels of proficiency in English and b) a wide range of attitudes towards learning in students, where half of the students have more superficial attitudes towards academic performance.

These are challenges for a teacher. I have tried to list the biggest distracting factors during the process of learning and to propose some practical solutions.

After analyzing the findings, I am claiming that:

- In our progress towards a digitalized educational world, we often forget how to teach simple things. Our students are lost in a digitalized world without knowing how to manage their resources and time, how to collect information, structure it and use it. They often ask questions to which they should already know the answer when they come to higher education;

- As pre-university educational institutions are losing their quality teaching, the burden on universities becomes heavier, especially with the first year students, to have them adapt to the new educational environment, understand the new academic requirements and work autonomously.

- Many students come with the idea that passing exams is enough and they do not have the ambition to get the highest marks. It becomes a task, therefore, to prove that graduation mark 6 (on a scale of 10) means lower and unimpressive academic performance compared to graduation mark 8 – 9 - 10.

Since verbal instructions and explanations disrupt the process of teaching and take a lot of time, the idea of writing a Handbook came to me, after 5 years of collecting observations and trying solutions. 30 pages of detailed instructions distributed to students at the beginning of the academic year will help a lot.

2. Research Techniques

My paper starts from the idea that technology used in class by teachers during the process of teaching and used at home by students during the process of learning causes some adverse manifestations noticed in students, which has a negative impact upon the acquisition of new knowledge.

I have used the following research techniques:

- Collection of empirical observations during my 5 year experience as an English teacher in a university where I had the chance to teach around 800 students every year, enrolled for bachelor degree and master degree, divided into groups of 18.
- Inductive reasoning: from specific empirical observations to recognizable patterns and broader generalizations.
- Classification of the observations collected into 3 main sets of challenges related to: 1) the heterogeneous levels of proficiency of the students, 2) the students' attitude towards learning and 3) the distracting factors during the process of teaching / learning.
- Short description of the core specifics of each set of challenges identified, accompanied by examples.

3. Challenges during the Process of Teaching/Learning

3.1 Heterogeneous Proficiency

Students may have heterogeneous levels of English proficiency. They come to higher education with no English, beginner's English, or intermediate English, or advanced English, or bad English, due to the wide range of ways they have acquired it. According to their statements, students learn English:

- As a result of exposure to cartoons, films, etc
- As a result of exposure to speaking and documents at the workplace
- As a result of exposure to the Internet and social media, from games and digital online activity
- As a result of proper study, from previous educational institutions.

Learning English as a result of exposure is both an advantage and a disadvantage. Little English is definitely better than no English, but the students' knowledge may be highly heterogeneous, sometimes English has been acquired with inaccuracies and students possess a dangerous feeling of confidence and certainty about their self-acquired knowledge which makes them reluctant to the teacher's corrections and advice. Sometimes, students have

acquired English from native speakers whose level of education is low, and they make mistakes in their native language. It is very difficult to persuade students that, although the native speaker may possess deeper knowledge of idiomatic vocabulary, the English teacher, who has a PhD, possesses better proficiency in grammar.

That task of the teacher will be to identify each student's needs, to instruct him/her how to study on its own and monitor the progress, to explain in class aspects of the English language that are most difficult to understand and acquire on one's own and to work with the students in order to develop the students' abilities to understand, read, write and speak. All that, in only 28 weeks, the length of the academic year.

3.2 Students' Attitudes towards Learning

Most often, students are not aware that the learning process is complex and they overlook the following aspects:

- The acquisition of a foreign language should be the result of 2 processes: individual study, including compulsory assignments and homework, and interaction during classes.
- Communication with teachers is vital because teachers can detect students' needs and difficulties, and provide feedback.
- Learning skills are different, some people are analytical and focus more on grammar and on understanding the structure of the language, others are more holistic and focused more on communication and vocabulary without paying much attention to rules and grammar;
- Affective barriers and inhibitions do exist but they can be easily removed through peer interaction and teachers who will make them feel more comfortable, and stimulate their motivation.
- The lack of ambition to get the highest marks is an obstacle that prevents academic performance. Some students believe that passing the exams is enough to prove academic performance and it takes time to persuade them that it is worth studying hard. The most efficient statement I have found to motivate students to become more ambitious is to ask: "If you have 2 doctors, one has graduated with 6 (on a scale of 10), the other one with 8, which one do you choose?"

3.3 Distracting Factors in Class

During classes, I have identified the following *distracting factors* that prevent students from focusing on work:

- a) *The smartphone*. As many international studies show, teachers all over the world deal with students who cannot help checking their smartphones every 5 minutes, so 75% of students keep their smartphones on desks and cannot help exchanging messages

during classes. Indeed, studies conducted all over the world identify “tech addiction” as affecting their process of learning. One day, I personally asked 18 students to write me on a piece of paper, anonymously, why they keep their phones in their hands during the entire duration of the English class and why they cannot stay away from their smartphone for 50 minutes. 16 out of 18 answers were shockingly childish but also worrying for me as a teacher: “I cannot wait for 50 minutes without checking my phone because of my boyfriend”, “...because I am social media addict”, “...because I like to be in touch with technology”, “...because I want to be connected to the news all the time”, “...because I must develop an application for my job”, etc. Only 2 answers were: “I *can* stay for 50 minutes without checking my phone”. Indeed, Woollaston, in his article entitled *University students check their phones 11 times per lecture and 80% admit the tech addiction affects their grades*, asserts that “Research from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln has discovered that average university student checks their phones 11 times per lesson. More than 80% believe this tech obsession is interfering with their learning. 25% of the students across five U.S states also blamed poor grades in exams specifically on the fact they used mobile devices when they should have been concentrating and revising”.

- b) *Romantic relations between students*. Students sit next to each other, and are busy with exchanging glances, touching each other, exchanging love notes, arranging each other’s floes of hair, and even talking to each other during classes. Studies conducted all over the world suggest that, although in their early stage, romantic relations may induce a positive state of mind, seriously getting involved affects academic performance because of less time spent on studying and possible negative crises that may arise (2). An article entitled *Romantic relationships and academic grade point average*, and published on www.ukessays.co.uk, gives details about a study conducted on “355 pharmacy students in their first, second, and third professional years of the traditional Doctor of Pharmacy program at Shenandoah University Bernard J. Dunn School of Pharmacy in Winchester, Virginia utilized as subjects” led to the conclusion that “that involvement in a romantic relationship affects pharmacy school GPA. Students enrolled in a graduate program can use the information from this study to make decisions concerning involvement in romantic relationships and extracurricular commitments”.
- b) *Distraction to navigate on various sites while working on computers*. From my experience, 75% of the students cannot refrain from going to various other sites than

dictionaries and databases and instead of solving the assignment or looking up in dictionaries, they end up by looking for news, playing games, or watching funny videos on YouTube. Indeed, for instance “In a study conducted by Dr. Larry Rosen, a psychology professor at California State University - Dominguez Hills, students were observed studying for a 15 minute period where they were told to “study something important.” He found that students generally started to lose focus after about three minutes. On average “students only spent about 65 % of the observation period actually studying.” That’s not exactly what you might consider “quality” studying time”, says Howard in his article entitled *Distracted by Technology: Focusing Attention on Homework*. Most studies confirm that: “It’s hard to focus while working on computers, with social networks, pop-ups, etc...According to a Canadian study, students using laptops in classroom received lower grades. In order to stay focused, you need to make a conscious effort!”, says Connell in his article entitled *6 Tools That Stop Computer Distractions and Help You Stay on Task*. The lack of focus on work seems to be the biggest challenge. The conscious effort to focus on work is the secret of efficiency. Gleib explains in his article *10 Online Tools for Better Attention & Focus* that applications have been developed for computers in order to prevent users from diverting to other sites than the work, such as : *Self-Control*, which blocks out the distracting sites for some time, *TrackTime*, which audits the time spent on the computer, *Concentrate*, which maximizes focus while shifting between sites, *Notational Velocity*, which centralizes and syncs all the scattered notes, *FocusBooster*, which focuses on single tasks for 25 minutes apiece, *FocusWriter*, which creates a distraction-free environment for writers, *Anti-Social*, which blocks the social sites, *StayFocused*, which curbs the time spent on time-wasting sites, *TimeOut*, which takes regular breaks in order to ensure sharp focus .

- c) *Lack of personal discipline and childish behavior that prevents them from sitting still for more than 5 minutes*. Some students behave as if they bottoms itched, they look at themselves in mirrors or smartphone screens, arrange their errant locks of hair, put on make-up or tidy their handbags if girls a.s.o . A few such students may disturb the rest of students who are focused on the activity in class. These are usually students lacking self-control as a result of lack of discipline since early ages and who are now difficult to manage. Experience shows that once they take up a job, they learn to educate their patience and attention. However, how can we control the unruly students? Carr, in his article entitled *What The Internet Is Doing To Our Brain*, explains that some voices

claim that “most discipline techniques don't deter or change unwanted behaviors. Our techniques teach our kids to be more sneaky”, and on the other hand, other voices claim that “successful schools have the same thing in common — a discipline procedure in place that serves as a deterrent for undesirable behaviors”. My experience shows that students do not exhibit much fear or shame, or, if the fear of sanction works, it'll work for a short time, so teachers should put a lot of effort and tact to motivate and explain that self-control and appropriate behavior are vital for human beings. Humans are born equal but education makes the difference.

- d) *Attention deficit (ADHD)* may be more subtle and difficult to identify in adults, but there are such cases, as long we face students who have difficulties in structuring and interpreting information and they need to be repeated things at least twice. Flaniken, in *Schools hurt by the lack of discipline among students*, explains that very often, students seem not to remember what they heard a few seconds earlier and are not able to organize basic information. An article published on <http://www.webmd.com> and entitled *10 Problems that Could Mean Adult ADHD* explains that, apparently, 4-5% of the adults in the USA and between 2-8% of students in the USA exhibit the ADHD disorder. There aren't too many studies on this topic and therefore, no specific techniques to counter this disorder unless the individuals affected receive specialized treatment. So, poor listening tasks, extreme distractibility, difficulty in paying attention or focusing, disorganization and forgetfulness, chronic lateness, constantly losing or misplacing things, impulsivity, are among the symptoms.
- e) *The difficult participant* may appear and it is not easy to deal with him/her because he/she will make efforts to embarrass the teacher and the class. Practice shows that in most cases, the difficult participants may be integrated if they are asked to actively get involved, what they want is attention. If, however, they seem to be very reluctant, the best way would most probably be to ignore and avoid them during class.
- f) *Differences according to the year of study*: There are also differences in attitudes towards the learning process among students: on the one hand, among 1st year, 2nd year and 3rd year students, on the other hand, depending on ages, and on whether they have jobs or not. We notice that in time, students change from more childish to more adult-type behavior, especially because many of them get jobs after the 1st year of study.

4. The Impact of using Technology in Education

In his book on *What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains*, Nicholas Carr explains that the Internet is a medium based on interruption, and it's changing the way people read and process information. We traditionally associate the acquisition of wisdom and knowledge with deep reading and solitary concentration, and Carr says there's not much of that to be found online. This chronic state of distraction "follows us", believes Carr, long after we shut down our computers. The more time we spend surfing, and skimming, and scanning ... the more adept we become to that mode of thinking.

Statistics confirm that the use of technology in education does not necessarily lead to high academic performance. The first OECD PISA assessment of digital skills made public in September 2015 and entitled *Students, Computers and Learning: Making the Connection* found that "countries that have invested heavily in ICT have not seen noticeable improvements in the results for reading, mathematics of science. Overall, students who use computers moderately at school tend to have better results than students who use computers frequently at school"(11).

5. More Constructivism, Less Cognitivism

Teachers should keep in mind that higher education in today's digitalized world is operating more on constructivism and less on cognitivism. It means that the teacher will mainly make the effort to teach the students *how* to learn and *where* to get information from, and *what* to learn, depending on each student's needs. Each student should perceive his/her limits and shortages and cooperate with the teacher to compensate and facilitate the learning process. Learning is a process of acquiring cognitive ways to organize and corroborate the information, and not necessarily information transmission and reproduction.

There is no time to do everything in class! It is vital to spend time to explain *how* and *what to learn!* The so-called communicative method has led, in the long run, to speakers of a second language that speak fluently with inaccuracies. Theoretical explanations in a nutshell, presented in accessible wording, orient the students in their process of learning on their own and clarify the rules. Further on, technology provides the means and the resources.

In class, beginners may find it difficult to cope. On the other hand, it may be sometimes boring for more advanced students to follow things they already know. Experience has proved that beginners will be compelled to study on their own, and advanced students will anyway learn new things and settle their confusions, because they have learned through exposure. Attendance of language classes is very important. Interaction with peers

contribute to better cohesion, gives a sense of belonging, helps peer cooperation, peer encouragement and peer assessment.

Meanwhile, all students should rely heavily on individual study to complete the knowledge provided during classes. Combining class attendance and individual study is vital to acquire a foreign language. And above all, students should remember that there is no *best* handbook to learn English, *best* is the one that *meets their needs!*

6. Potential Solutions to Hindrances

What I found useful after five years of teaching is a *Handbook for English Students* designed in such a manner so that it should:

- raise awareness about all the above mentioned aspects,
- instruct students how to combine individual study with team work
- guide how and where to find info
- train how to manage time.

Practice shows that students are not even aware of many aspects that adversely affect their work. It is more efficient to give them a written guide than to give verbal advice because: *Verba Volant, scripta manent* (Lat.). A detailed description of the desirable behavior and academic performance helps a lot. Most first year students are confused. Many of the students who have jobs are also confused because their life is divided between work and academic studies, they may not attend all the classes and they miss useful information.

So, by giving them a 30-page digital copy of my Handbook for English Students, I helped them find answers to many questions they have throughout the academic year.

Written messages tend to be more effective. Distributing a 30-page digital copy of my Handbook for English Students turned out to be efficient in guiding them in all aspects of the learning process, avoided many misunderstandings, and made communication smoother.

My Handbook includes:

- A presentation of the teaching / learning environment (structure of the English class, materials used, useful technology, resources etc)
- The goals of the teaching / learning environment, namely: developing the reading, comprehension, and speaking skills, acquisition of new business vocabulary, learning specific structures of the English language.
- The teaching techniques in class: pronunciation practice, listening-reading – comprehension, elicitation techniques: gap filling exercises, multiple choice exercises,

etc as well as transformation, re-writing, essay writing with specified requirements regarding a topic, length and structures to use.

- Recommendations on how to counter the list of distracting factors that I have mentioned above. A special attention I gave to...attention and focus. Practice shows that students are not even aware of these distractions. “Whatever people are doing, whether reading or shopping, they tend to be happier if they focus on the activity instead of thinking about something else.” In short, being mentally “present” and focused on the task really does matter! If only finding focus were so simple. With a tidal wave of information coming at us daily, the focus is rapidly becoming the scarcest commodity of the 21st century”, says Carr.
- Recommendations on how to combine individual work at home and teamwork in class. *Class work* is mainly meant to identify the students’ weaknesses, to orient individual study, to clarify misunderstandings, to acquire new knowledge, to ask for and to receive feedback. *Individual study*, at home and in the library, should be the utmost goal of students and it can be customized to one’s needs. The customized individual study will complete the nutshell knowledge provided in class. Combining work in class and individual study is vital to acquire a foreign language. I gave special attention to *how* to learn on one’s own. Although it may look logical, it is vital to remind students, for instance, to stay away from family, siblings, pets, etc, while studying, to avoid using online translators instead of using their brains and dictionaries, to organize very well their studying sessions, etc. Most of them are chaotic and vulnerable to all kind of temptations.

7. Conclusion

7.1 Essentials for Efficient Teaching to Heterogeneous Groups of Students

A 30-page digital copy of Handbook for English Students distributed to students at the beginning of the year can be very efficient in guiding them in all aspects of the learning process; it avoids misunderstandings, and makes communication smoother.

Presentation of the teaching and learning processes, goals and outcome desirable of the learning process, detailed instructions and recommendations on how to counter the distracting factors, recommendations on how to combine individual work at home and teamwork in class, recommendations on *how* to learn on one’s own, where to find resources and how to manage time represent vital information to develop good learning habits in students.

Today's digitalized world is operating more on constructivism and less on cognitivism. The teacher should make efforts to teach the students *how* to learn and *where* to get resources from, and *what* to learn, depending on each student's needs. There is no time to do everything in class! Explaining *how* and *what to learn* becomes vital! Technology provides the means and the resources.

7.2 Research Limitations

My research may have the limitations of 1) not being represented in charts and numbers and 2) not being in-depth enough.

At this stage, my research is basically the list of challenges accompanied by limited descriptions of their contexts. It does not include too many details organized in tables to show the distribution of the manifestations listed here among the students, classified in sets of: age groups, gender and level of proficiency. This is precisely the scope of my future research, which will be more in-depth.

The purpose of my research has been to have it serve as serious warning for both students and teachers who may not be aware of the challenges I have identified and listed in this paper because, traditionally, books on teaching English as foreign language refer to the use of technology as added value and the utmost achievement in this field. Although papers like mine have been published by teachers around the world in many languages, no book refers to the potential adverse impact of technology upon the process of teaching / learning. Authors may be reluctant to have a critical stand towards technology as an aid to education because of the fascination of technology - we are living in a knowledge society based on the latest technologies.

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