TEACHER'S ROLE IN TODAY'S LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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Summary: The article defines the role of the language teacher in today's classroom. Teachers should have a broad background knowledge of the social environment, different pedagogical techniques, social and cultural aspects of the language being taught. Teachers share responsibility with the students for what goes on in the classroom.

It is obvious that we have much to learn from the history of language teaching, but it is also evident that language teaching and investigation are progressing at an ever accelerating rate. Today, however, the most significant discoveries are not those describing *the* new and revolutionary method. The "really new and different things" in language teaching today involve a different *approach* to teaching. Previously, it was believed that the only basic tool a language teacher needed was a sound knowledge of the language. He was then briefly trained in the methodology currently in vogue and sent into a classroom. Now we know that linguistics is not the only area in which a language teacher should be trained. The importance of psychology and sociology, as well as more extensive training in pedagogy, is being recognized. The relevance of each of these disciplines can easily be seen by analyzing the three main areas in which the approach to language teaching has recently changed.

1. Emphasis on the Individual Learner. In the past, the question most frequently asked was "Which is the best *teaching* methodology?" Now teachers ask "How can students best *learn* the language?" The focus has shifted from the teacher to the learner, and with this has come the realization that each learner is an individual, with distinct needs, learning styles, mental abilities and attitudes. And to further complicate matters, not only do different learners have different overall learning styles, but an individual learner utilizes different approaches to learning at different

stages in the learning process.

Not long ago eight different types of learning were identified, including stimulus-response learning, learning of concepts, and problem solving, among others. Depending on the content and difficulty of the subject matter, the learner would apply one or more of these different types of learning in a given situation. Evidently, if the teacher is to be aware of these multiple individual cognitive and personality factors and able to diagnose and utilize them to the fullest, he must have more than a passing knowledge of recent investigations in *psychology.*

2. Eclecticism. Having come to the realization that each learner possesses distinct cognitive and personality traits, it follows that *one* teaching methodology will not be the most appropriate for all students. The recent tendency has therefore been toward eclecticism, selecting materials and techniques from various sources. This obviously puts a much larger responsibility on the teacher, for now he should be <u>famili</u>ar with a much wider range of materials, exercises, and activities than before. It is no longer simply a matter of picking up the textbook and teaching it. A much broader training in *pedagogy is* now called for.

3. Communication in a Social Context. There are two important points to be made regarding this third general tendency: *communication* and *social context.*

The audiolingual method eliminated meaning almost totally from the initial phase of language instruction. It was possible to teach the major patterns of a foreign language without letting the student know what he was saying. Only after students had gained complete and automatic control over the grammatical patterns would they be acquainted with the precise meaning of what they learned. Or, in more formal terminology, they demonstrated "linguistic competence" (Chomsky) but not "communicative competence" (Hymes). Now we recognize the importance of what a language does (function) as well as what it is (structure)—and what a language does enables us to communicate. Communicative competence is what a person "needs to know in order to communicate effectively in culturally significant situations." It is not enough to acquire knowledge of linguistic structure. One must also possess the appropriate schemata regarding the culture of the language being

learned in order to understand the communication and be able to respond using the vocabulary and structure that correspond to a specific social situation; hence we observe the growing importance of sociology in language teaching.

How is a language teacher to cope with all this? Today's language teacher must manipulate much more information in several different areas of knowledge. The problem lies not only in the amount of information to be mastered, but in the organization and application of that knowledge to a practical situation. In other words, how can he use his knowledge of linguistics, psychology, sociology, and pedagogy to help his students learn English?

The teacher should collect information from his students in each of these main areas and analyze it, using his knowledge of psychology, linguistics, and sociology. Once analyzed, he should call on his pedagogical knowledge to apply this information in three ways. First, he should select the most appropriate materials, based especially on his knowledge of the students' needs and their cognitive levels (schemata). Second, he should decide on the way of presenting these materials, keeping in mind the cognitive styles of his students. And finally, he should create a classroom atmosphere conducive to learning, or in Krashen's terminology, eliminate the affective filter so maximum learning can occur in an open, non-threatening environment. In order to create this environment in which the student feels secure and motivated toward learning, the teacher must be aware of the affective factors and social factors that might influence his students. On the other hand, in a group characterized by a positive affective environment, the students themselves may frequently contribute to the selection and presentation of class materials, following the humanistic idea that self-initiated learning is more meaningful and permanent. These three areas are therefore closely related.

It should also be mentioned that the *students' needs* constitute a major source of information for the teacher. What do the learners want and need to get from the course? Will they have to read scientific texts or do they simply want to learn a few phrases for their next summer vacation? Do they need general or technical vocabulary? Have they chosen to take the course or are they there simply because it

is required for graduation? It is important for the teacher to discuss the students' needs with them for two main reasons. First, this will help the teacher select and present materials in the most appropriate way. Second, by voicing their needs, students will clarify them in their own minds and be able to formulate realistic, concrete goals to work towards. But the students the teacher should especially focus on are those who are there only to earn credits for graduation. The teacher must help those students see the practical benefits of language study for them as individuals and what they can realistically expect to obtain from the course.

The *social factors* are one more major type of information vital to the teacher. In addition to knowledge about the social and cultural environment surrounding the language being taught, the teacher should also be aware of important factors in the students' social environment that might affect their learning. There are two levels on which this social environment may influence language learning. The first level refers to the *society as a whole* from which the student comes or in which he lives. Is success in that society measured by how well one follows orders or by one's level of critical thinking? Which is most important in that society: the needs and goals of the society as a whole or of the individuals who live in the society? What are the collective attitudes of the society? From the students' point of view, these attitudes may hinder language learning.

The second level of social factors refers to the *individual social environment* of each student, i.e., his reference groups. Psychological factors such as attitudes and self-esteem are known to affect language learning, but these attitudes and self-images are largely influenced by the people closest to us: family, friends, professional colleagues, etc. Many of our values and goals are also reflections of those held by the reference groups to which we belong.

In conclusion, it is evident that the role of the language teacher today is not as simple as it once was. Every day researchers are discovering new factors that may play a part in language learning. Today, knowledge of the linguistic structure of the language is only one of the requirements of a good language teacher. Teachers should also have a broad background knowledge of the social environment that

influences their students, different pedagogical techniques, social and cultural aspects of the language being taught, and techniques for diagnosing certain psychological characteristics of learners. For a language is much more than lists of vocabulary and sets of grammar rules, and language learning is not simply a matter of acquiring a system of linguistic formulas. Language is a form of communication among individuals in a specific social context. But even more than that, language is a way of thinking and of processing information. It is a symbol of a culture and of personal identity.

This new, increased responsibility for language learning does not fall entirely on the teacher, however. The student must also assume more responsibility for the learning process. Now, the student is not simply a passive receptacle into which the teacher pours knowledge. He must participate actively in the learning process. In the final analysis, it is the learner who must assimilate the language and allow it to become part of him. And the teacher can only "facilitate" this process.

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