ELT methodologies in challenging the common sense – Are they applicable in the content learning classroom of higher education?

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Abstract

Current ELT methodology, especially the shift in educative approach, can be very effective if used in the content-learning academic classroom. Higher education instructors face different problems in their courses by simply not regarding their students as entities whose attention has to be "earned". The ELT learner centered methodologies offer a variety of approaches to constructing complex higher order activities for full student comprehension of the "theory". Dry face-to-faces input has to be challenged at one point or another. In this paper, the problems and the prospects of using ELT methodologies in the academic content learning classroom are discussed, as well as the implications and issues in the process.

Keywords: ELT; methodology; higher education

1. Introduction

Language teaching methodologies, especially the teaching of English language as a second language, have lived through many transformations during the last 6 decades: from grammar translations in the early 50’s, the direct method (Berlitz, Gouin), behaviorism, audio-lingual, cognitive (Chomsky), humanist methods (silent way, suggestopedia, Community Language Learning, Total Physical Response, task-based

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learning) to Hymes’ communicative competences approach, i.e. using language in context\(^*\). The abundance of methodological approaches towards language teaching and learning strive at assigning the language learning process different features from other (content) matters, but is it that much different?

From content instructors the following notions are usually present: the language knowledge is an ‘active one’, ‘here and now’, a ‘necessary one’, ‘people are generally into languages’, ‘teachers have greater success in teaching languages than content lesson plans’, etc. These are some of the excuses that content instructors offer when teaching practices are compared. However, the main flaw of learning content is the fact that it is perceived as a “liquid” that needs to be “soaked” by students’ brains. Knowledge has to be transferred to students; students need to accept it and assimilate it with ease (because of the “heavy” input, ‘I have to cover it all’ attitude) and after finishing their studies, put it into practice. This is the traditional and decades-long concept of teaching which has lately led education to a standstill. The traditional teaching methodologies mostly include transfer of knowledge, lecturing, demonstration, teacher-centered classroom, answering questions, very little critical thinking, lower-rank exercises and not many others. If we go even further back, we can find the read - repeat methods which basically kill all learning enthusiasm and drive.

Recent paradigms have emerged in the last 2-3 decades, and these have somewhat different views on the teaching process. For example, social constructivism views learning as a social process where the construction of knowledge is an active process between the individual and the outside world, i.e. meaningful learning happens through social activities (McCohen).
The National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education in Britain, which was formed in 1998, issued the All Our Futures: Creativity, Culture and Education report (also known as NACCCE report) in May 1999, with Sir Ken Robinson as a chairman. They had already detected the shortcomings of traditional curricula and embarked on a creation of a completely new attitude towards teaching and learning. On page 8 of the NACCCE report the authors claim the following:

“Many of those who have contributed to our inquiry believe that current priorities and pressures in education inhibit the creative abilities of young people and of those who teach them. There is a particular concern about the place and status of the arts and humanities. There is also concern that science education is losing its vitality under current pressures.”

They ask for creative teaching (which is not to be equalized with a chaotic and ineffective teaching), which will empower students’ minds with abilities valued in the new era of ICT and spinning technological development - train them to respond to modern challenges with original ideas. They list aspects of the new shifting paradigm which should be carefully attended to: creative development, cultural development (diversity and cultural change), creative teaching (“Creativity can be “taught”), raising standards, developing partnerships of the schools and external communities and institutions, training people, and thus, raising academic standards (for teachers and students alike).

Nomenclature

(E)LT (English) Language Teaching
TM Teaching Methodology
ELP English Language Proficiency
PD Professional Development
HE Higher Education
IELTS International Language Testing System
TOEFL Test of English as a Foreign Language
NGO Non-governmental Organisation
1.1. Why ELT methodologies, and not simply LT methodologies or just Teaching methodologies?

The title of this paper was elicited from the Macedonian context. In Macedonia, rarely other special TMs are incorporated into the teaching context of primary, secondary or tertiary (general) education. TMs basically travel fastest through ELT because of the influential status of the English language and its propaganda: Peace Corps ELT volunteers, British Council’s social involvement, American NGOs, international ELP tests (IELTS, TOEFL), English textbooks for ELT (Macedonian Government’s policy), PD events in English, etc.

2. Crucial issues concerning higher education TM

Language teaching methodologies often depend on many factors: learners (age, gender, interests, etc.), facilities, type of education, context, etc., as well as geography, the place where they are used. Different stages of education impose different TM because of the learning characteristics of the learners. For example, Colluci & Camino (2000) state that “most of the older students retained the idea that Science is a set of facts that describe reality, while high school students are more inclined to consider Science as a dynamic process, connected to the cultural and social context.” However, certain factors and issues have retained their priority connected to any learning environment, and we are going to discuss them in the following paragraphs.

2.1. Motivation

Motivation has been analyzed and discussed from many angles and disciplines (McDavitt, Geen, Maslow), and scientists generally agree that students need to be able to create and maintain intrinsic motivation about the study material. However, it is an issue to be dealt mostly by teachers and instructors. Students (adult learners) are not to be put in a ‘self-motivational’ category just because they are adults and have made their career choices; they still need to be additionally motivated. For example, a student majoring in computer programming needs not to ‘love’, or even ‘like’ calculus, which still is a course present in most computer programming curricula. The instructor needs to cater to the students’ motivational needs.

2.2. Learners’ styles

The three generally acknowledged learners’ styles are: visual, auditory and kinaesthetic. The first two are basic ones which are accomplished even in the traditional classroom (e.g. teacher lecturing and writing on the board), but the kinaesthetic type of learners are especially neglected in higher education. If we take the instructors into consideration, we claim that they rarely sit down in class. Why should we, then, expect the students to want to hold still for one, two, or sometimes even multiple consecutive classes? Kinaesthesia in the classroom/amphitheatre is often considered to have many downsides, like the inability to move in amphitheatres, large groups, chaos, etc., but we still maintain that it raises the level of motivation with students and that it should regularly be included in everyday practice.

2.3. Creativity

\footnote{This basic claim does not apply to specific contents which require specific methodology (e.g. teaching computer programming requires using ICT, etc.)}
Creativity in higher education is considered to be inadequate and unnecessary, but it has to do a lot with motivation. Creative tasks tend to include the student more in the teaching/learning process, which ultimately leads to full motivational coverage.

2.4. Individualized approach/student centred classroom

Customization of teaching in higher education leads to personal involvement of students and instructors, which means appreciation and mutual recognition. Every student usually knows the name of his/her instructor/professor, while it rarely is the opposite case. Though it is not often possible (e.g. a class of 500 or 1,000), the instructor may include group work and activities which have the ability to customize the material and involve the students at a personal level. Thus the teaching process would become student centred, leaving the instructor only moderating and facilitating the learning process. The ability for students to make decisions in the educative/teaching process is also a very important feature in teaching, which empowers students as equal partners in the educative process.

2.5. Pedagogy VS. andragogy

The previous two points are tightly connected to the relationship of pedagogy and andragogy. Andragogy is considered to be “the art and science of helping adults learn” (Knowles, 1980:43), which includes: letting learners know why something is important to learn, showing learners how to direct themselves through information, relating the topic to the learners’ experiences and helping with the learning process (Conner, 1997-2004). “How educators approach the issue of student motivation... is determined, in part, by the andragogical or pedagogical philosophical underpinnings of professors’ teaching practices. Difficulty arises when pedagogical methods and practices are applied in whole or in part to situations that require andragogical dynamics. A misunderstanding or misapplication of these critical issues may result in situational, temporary, or unsustainable models of motivation that guide lifelong learners and perhaps undermine the entire process of student motivation.” (Pew, 2007:14).

2.6. ICT in the higher education classroom

New generations are breeds of the new technological era. While students tend to inadequately use technological gadgets in the classroom, they can be thoughtfully used for teaching purposes. This will undoubtedly include innovation and modernism, which would widely aid the learning process by coming closer to students’ way of life and thinking.

2.7. Higher education instructors’ teaching competences

Most higher education educators have no teaching competences since these are not required. In Former Yugoslavia⁶, up to the 1970’s, there used to be state examinations for higher education instructors concerning teaching methodologies, pedagogy and psychology, which nowadays are employed only for primary and secondary education teachers. This practice is very negative, robbing educators of their rights to teaching competences and leaving them to mostly their personal experience with their usually

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⁶ Macedonia was one of the five member states of the Yugoslavia federation, from 1945-1991.
traditional teachers/professors. We believe that this issue is often undermined by the researcher/scientist role of higher education educators, but a line should be placed between their two equally important duties.

Conclusion

Higher education staff should be systematically trained in the innovative/creative teaching methodologies (‘Creativity can be taught.’), thus giving their educative role as much attention as the researcher’s one. The whole higher education system needs to ‘rise with change’ of external factors such as the new technological era and new motivational patterns.

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** A quote from Sir Ken Robinson’s 2010 TED talk ‘Bring on the Learning Revolution!’
http://www.ted.com/talks/sir_ken_robinsonbring_on_the_revolution.html