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Teaching strategies for ESL students in the Mainstream High School English Classroom

Introduction

The rise of the English language as a basic communication skill needed in the corporate world has become one of the reasons why non-native English speakers find it of utmost importance and therefore, would enroll in English language courses.

The TESL First Annual Panel in Ontario (2007) published that at least in Ontario, Canada, teaching ESL or English as a Second Language dated back to post-World War II when a great number of immigrant soldiers were included. Hence, the rise for the need of a language program for newcomers was administered by the Ministry of Education. One and a half decade later, ESL was mostly taught in the province's community colleges in order to prepare the students for citizenship, which required them to take a citizenship exam.

According to Pittsburg Public Schools (n. d.), ESL or English as a Second Language, also called English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is a formal English language learning course for non-native speakers. The purpose of the classes is to help non-native English speakers excel in the language academically.

In every school, teachers of ESL apply different teaching strategies on their students, especially the ones taking regular ESL classes. Some of these varieties of conditions and strategies include either an all-day class or a specific part of the class schedule and are progressively led to content area classes and school settings with native English speakers (" Tennessee ESL

Resource Guide,” n. d.). There are countless teaching strategies, depending on the area of the school.

In the ESL classrooms of today, there is a move away from the Grammar Translation Method to Communicative Language Teaching (Khatib, Rezaei & Derakhshan, 2011). Unlike the Grammar Translation Method, which focuses on syntax; lexis; phonetics and phonology; and semantics, content-focused methods -- such as the use of literature in language learning -- “ provide an authentic input for language learning” (Khatib et al., 2011) and deals with things that are relevant to the learner. Because of its authenticity and the meaningful context it provides, learners find these learning methods more motivating (Khatib et al., 2011). As well, they promote cultural and intercultural awareness, which is important in this era of globalization.

Moreover, they also provide learners with intensive and extensive reading practice, sociolinguistic or pragmatic knowledge, grammar and vocabulary language skills, emotional intelligence, and critical thinking skills (Khatib, 2011).

In the same manner, Oxford (2001) suggests two forms of integrated-skill instruction, namely content-based instruction and task-based instruction where the former stresses the learning of content through language while the latter stresses the execution of tasks through the use of communicative language.

However, the practical reality is that the ESL theory is often not written with consideration of the practical needs of students who attend mainstream classes. Although the integrated approach is favored in the field, the reality is that the curriculum is still geared towards non-ESL students.

This paper is aimed at defining what ESL is through a review of the literature on some ESL strategies. For this paper, the writer chose to analyze Dave and Jane Willis' task-based learning (TBL) strategy; the present practice produce (PPP) strategy; and the language experience response strategy.

Consequently, the writer will discuss an application of the chosen ELS teaching and classroom practices to the curriculum area of English.

ESL Learning Strategies

According to Dave and Jane Willis (Willis, 1998), fluency and accuracy can possibly be achieved when teaching English as a second language if tasks are to be made a vital part of the teaching strategy. The emphasis of every word in teaching the English language has to be focused on their meaning and actual use. This is where tasks come into the picture – they enable the use of words in a manner where they are grammatically correct and accurate. As cited by Naznean (n. d.), in Willis' framework, tasks are being used in order to make students understand their context and the way they are used in situations in real life. As such, the meaning and use of words are both looked at, preventing errors in grammar and fluency. The emphasis is on the implication and message itself.

According to Long and Crookes' (as cited in Kavaliauskienė, 2005), a task is a set of varied activities or events with corresponding problems that involve both the students and the teacher in an action with both intellectual and communicative investigation (Kavaliauskienė, 2005). The six task types are “listing, ordering and sorting, comparing, problem solving, sharing experience, and creative task” (Kavaliauskienė, 2005). The corresponding

tasks' outcomes are “ completed list or draft mind map, information sorted according to specific criteria, identification of similarities and differences, finding solutions to problems, exchange of opinions and attitudes” (Kavaliauskienė, 2005), and end product than can be appreciated by the audience.

This approach involves three different phases – pre-task, task cycle, and language focus (Willis, 1998). As mentioned in Lackman (n. d.), the three phases have various activities, each of which has corresponding goals. These stages are essential to the learning process of every individual taking ESL classes in a TBL-setting. Dave and Jane Willis carefully formulated these three singular phases to generate a positive circumstance for acquiring and learning the English language.

As indicated by Willis (1998), a task may be in the form of a puzzle, a quiz, a game, an interactive set of activity, or a list. A simple task for an intermediate level may be in the form of asking the students to gather, form into groups, and make a list of things they buy when they go grocery shopping. Although the task is simple, it is interactive as each one of the students will contribute one or two to the list they are creating. Teachers are recommended to be as creative as they can be in forming simple to complicated tasks.

Tasks come in various designs to help students identify the appropriate words to be included in their assigned tasks. “ Tasks of different kinds can be designed for any topic or suitable text” (Willis, 1998). Topics may also be individual or sustainable. An example of a topic is international language. The students will be asked to give English words that are internationally

popular. As suggested, these are the English words the students are familiar with. These words will then be classified into groups such as, say, animals or type of automobiles. After this, the students will be asked to compare their notes to those of the other groups, so that they may be able to take note of the words that are not in their list. This will help students widen their vocabulary while developing their social skills at the same time.

There are a number of advantages of Task-Based Learning. One of them is that learning the English language is so much easier when this approach is being used because it helps the students learn each word based on its usage and meaning. Therefore, it helps students use them in real life, making them grammatically perfect and fluent at the same time. It might be advantageous to students in higher levels who would likely consider it appropriate for their future professions. However, it may be disadvantageous to those in the intermediate levels as the latter may find it difficult and inappropriate for their everyday lives. According to Bruton (2005), learning the English language using the TBL method is not recommended when one aims to learn at a higher level. It is because Bruton believes that TBL promotes pidgin in a maximum setting. Bruton (2005) asserts that the logical progression of learning should be from more to less teacher support or intervention to more peer interaction, student autonomy, and student initiative. However, the TBL method seems to start immediately with the latter.

Plews and Zhao (2010) also assert that many non-native English speakers who teach ESL adapt the TBL method in ways that are inconsistent with its principles and that they often turn it into the Presentation-Practice

Production method. It should be noted, that, whereas the TBL method is

based on research into and theories of second-language learning and teaching, the Presentation-Practice-Production method requires teachers to introduce grammar rules or vocabulary items, with the expectation that students would manipulate the decontextualized sentences before they write or perform something, which is later evaluated for accuracy rather than for its relevance to student self-actualization, successful communication, or meaningful content (Plews & Zhao, 2010). In the study of Plews and Zhao (2010), it was found that both the native English speakers and the non-native English speakers have the tendency to incorrectly apply the TBL method. They found that while non-native English speaker teachers turn TBL into language practice activities or traditional grammar instruction, native English speaker teachers turn it into CLT (communicative language teaching), which is delivered as PPP (Plews & Zhao, 2010). As such, Plews and Zhao (2010) recommend that ESL teachers undergo continuous professional development in the TBL method, both with regards to helping them develop an awareness of their own attitudes and perceptions, as well as in helping them turn the TBL theories into effective practice.

On the other hand, the Language Experience approach encourages the use of known language and familiar experiences for the creation of texts. This approach is defined by Marcia Taylor (as cited in Crandall & Peyton, 1997) as “ a whole language approach to instruction that promotes reading and writing by transcribing a student’s experiences, with the transcription then used as reading material for the student (Crandall & peyton, 1997)” It is based on the premise that students are capable of writing stories even if they are not quite ready to write their own stories (Crandall & Peyton, 1997).

It was originally developed in response to phonics-based programs and mainly employs a top-down approach to reading (Crandall & Peyton, 1997). It also has two basic variations, namely the personal experience story and the group experience story (Crandall & Peyton, 1997). According to Clement and Tanner (1997), this approach encourages the integration of writing with reading, listening and speaking in the classroom (Clement & Tanner, 1997). Tanner & Clement (1997) asserted that the teachers who use this method hold the belief that the writing process is more important than the output; thus, they encourage the students to use drafts and revision in their writing, to explore topics, and to gather ideas from their own experience.

The Language Experience Approach consists of five steps, the first of which is when the teacher and student discuss the topic to use for the dictation (Wurr, 2002). This step enables the student and the teacher to exchange opinions and observations, in turn leading to the development of the student's language skills (Wurr, 2002). The second step is when the student dictates a story to the teacher who records the statement in order to create a basic reading material. In the third step, the student reads the story a number of times – with the teacher's assistance if necessary – until the student becomes familiar with the story. This enhances the student's reading comprehension skills, which is made easier by the fact that they are reading material that they generated. In the fourth step, the student learns individual story words and other reading skills, which the teacher reinforces through the conduct of activities that are related to the story. In the fifth step, the students progress from reading their own dictation to reading the materials

of other authors, in turn enabling them to develop confidence and skill with the reading process (Wurr, 2002)

Practical Application of the Teaching Strategies to the Curriculum Area of English

An example of applying the TBL method is pair-work in speaking class where the students are paired together and are asked to express agreement or disagreement in the context of giving opinions about matters related to social life (Achmad & Yusuf, 2014). This activity enables the students to learn the four skills that are required for English proficiency, namely the receptive skills (i. e. listening and reading) and the productive skills (i. e. speaking and writing. According to Achmad and Yusuf (2014), students who are confused in learning grammar find the speaking class more interesting as the teachers tend to focus more on the meaning than on the form.

On the other hand, an example of the PPP approach is the teaching of correct grammar to students. In this approach, the teacher explains a grammar point (i. e. Present), provides drills and exercises for practicing the point (i. e. Practice), and allows the students to apply the point in the student's own writing (i. e. Produce) (Ballard, 2013). More specifically, the Produce part can be employed by letting students write a five-paragraph essay, which is meant " to model the principles of organization that lead students to successfully present ideas in an essay (Ballard, 2013, p. 16).

On the other hand, an example of applying the Language Experience Approach is the use of dialogue journal for enhancing the ESL students' writing (Clement & Tanner, 1997). According to Clement and Tanner (1997), dialogue journals use an integrated approach where students are able to write

their entries, read the response provided by their teachers, and engage in a written conversation. This ongoing written conversation ensures that the students have a real audience for their writing and that it has a real purpose of communication with the teacher. In addition, dialogue journals enable the students to choose their own topics for their entries, which ensure that they are culturally familiar with and are interested in such topics. Finally, since these journals are not graded, the students are at liberty to focus on the exploration and discovery process of writing without the fear of possibly making mistakes in their experimentation with the language. As well, it enables all of the students to participate in the activity and to write at their own individual level (Clement & Tanner, 1997).

Conclusion

ESL or English as a Second Language is an English language learning course for students who are non-native English speakers. This can be highly beneficial to individuals as it enables them to excel academically and in their future profession.

There are several ESL teaching strategies; one of the most widely-known and researched of which is Dave and Jane Willis' Task-Based Learning (TBL) approach. This teaching strategy implies that tasks are essential in helping the students have a more engaging and efficient ESL learning experience. Tasks, in this sense, are defined as a set of activities for a communication purpose. On the other hand, the Presentation-Practice-Production strategy is mostly used for teaching grammar where the teacher presents grammar concepts or rules, which the students practice through drills and exercises,

and later apply in more formal English classroom activities. Finally, the Language Experience strategy makes use of the students' experiences in enabling them to learn the English language.

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