

ENHANCING LANGUAGE LEARNING: The Primary Goal

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Good learning in any subject is first and foremost a matter of how much time the student invests in productive learning activity. So in the case of English language teaching: there is consistently and inevitably a correlation between how much time a student spends actually engaged in language-learning tasks and how much language he or she learns (Berliner, 1990). Very simply: a student who gets six hours English lessons a week is likely to do significantly better than a student who only gets four (assuming that the level of instruction is similar); a student who studies for forty weeks a year will do better than one who studies only thirty. And so on. No other variable that has been researched from time to time – such as the use of a particular methodology (Adamson, 2014), age of beginning English studies (Munoz, 2011), or use of digital technology (Macaro et al.), has produced similarly consistent correlations with successful learning outcomes.

But of course this assumes that students are really engaging with language learning throughout the lesson, which is not always the case. Even if students are on-task the whole time, even if no time is wasted on management problems and other disturbances, they may learn very little if the tasks themselves are not productive of learning. For example: a student in third grade who spends time coloring in hollow letters is learning very little English; as is a student in tenth grade who spends half a lesson designing headings or searching for illustrations and decorations to enhance a writing assignment.

So if we want students to learn English better, what we need to do is focus on making sure that the content of our lessons does in fact enhance learning. If we use things like digital materials or higher order thinking skills appropriately in our teaching, these may help, and may be valuable for general educational reasons: but as far as language-learning is concerned, they are not, in themselves, the major goal.

The next question is, of course: how do I judge how much, or how well, students are learning from tasks in the lesson? I would say the main things to look out for are the following:

- The students are actually engaging in English-language activity for most of the lesson;
- The students are involved and on-task most of the time;
- The students can respond at different levels;
- The language-learning tasks are likely to be done successfully;
- Students are clearly motivated to participate.

Here are a couple of examples of activities we do in class, and how they do, or do not, enhance language learning.

Example 1: Checking homework in class

Teachers check homework in class primarily in order to find out first whether students have done the homework at all; and second, how well they have done it.

If, as is often the case, the homework is answering a set of questions or doing an exercise, then the way this is done in many classrooms is through conventional teacher-student “ping-pong” interaction. “Take out your homework. Raise your hand if you can tell me the answer to question 1...” and so on.

But if we do it this way, learning is pretty minimal. Only one student is directly involved at any one time; the rest may or may not be paying attention. And in any case, how do you know if the rest of the class in fact did the task, and whether they got the answers right? Not to mention the fact that such processes are deadly boring. I have seen teachers spend up to half the lesson on such time-wasting checking of homework, leaving very little time for learning of new items or language or skill practice.

What are some other solutions that will produce better learning?

Undoubtedly the best is not to check in lesson time at all but to collect notebooks and check at home; or get students to submit online, and check and send back to them in electronic form. We’ll discuss the problem of workload in a moment, but first think about the teaching/learning value of doing it this way: students benefit from correction of their own mistakes or confirmation of what they did right; they get the message that you care about them and their work; you get complete and thorough information as to who did the homework and how well. There is just no comparison with the time-wasting classroom processes described above.

It is true that most of us do not have the time to take in and check every single homework assignment; but you should be doing so as much as you can reasonably manage. Perhaps only one out of two or three assignments? Or once a week?

However, it remains true that the assignments you don’t have time to check at home you will need to check in class. Here are some procedures which can make the process more efficient, with more learning value and less time wasting.

1. Just dictate the answers and ask students to self-check. You will quickly see which students are not checking (i.e. probably didn’t do it.) Encourage them to ask you if they have any questions.
2. Write or project the answers on the board, and walk round the classroom while students self-check, noting which students did/did not do the homework.

Again, any problematic points can be discussed as necessary.

3. Put students in pairs and tell them to help each other check, calling you over only if there is a problem.

The main advantage of these procedures over the conventional “ping-pong” is that they involve all the students all of the time, checking all the items; are more likely, in short, to promote real learning. They also take much less time; time saved which can then be invested in the main learning activities you’ve planned for the lesson.

Example 2. Group work

We are often told how important it is to do group or pair work, to encourage collaborative learning in the classroom. Group work has certainly some educational advantages: it helps students learn how to cooperate and help each other; it can enhance group solidarity; when it produces good results it can be motivating and good for morale. For English learning, it is essential in order to give students enough time to practice talking. All the other skills (reading, writing, listening) can be practiced in the full class; only speaking cannot, because an oral activity run in full class only allows one student to speak at a time – and if you have a class of thirty students, that means that each one will get very little, if any, opportunity to talk.

But there are problems also associated with group work that are, in my view, underestimated by the experts who urge us to use it in principle. It is very time-consuming to organize (getting in and out of groups, deciding who will work with whom, distributing and gathering in materials;) there are often problems of discipline and management (students may spend the time doing things other than the task in hand, chat, disturb.) Perhaps most importantly, it deliberately denies the teacher opportunities for direct teaching and hands over responsibility to the students. This is all very politically correct and in theory accords with a constructivist, learner-centered approach, but it means, in practice, that tasks based on projects or problem-solving often result in very slow progress, a “sharing of ignorance” rather than sharing of knowledge, with relatively little real learning going on.

I’m not saying never use group work; as indicated above, it’s essential in order to provide students with enough practice in speaking, and pair work is even better. But for most other purposes, when planning group work, ask yourself: what is the (English language) learning goal? Is it really best achieved through group work? Or would it be better achieved either by individual work with the teacher going round helping, or by traditional teacher-led (“frontal”) process?

Conclusion

There are occasions when learning English gives way, temporarily, to other goals as the basis of a lesson-component. There may be situations where your main preoccupation is the creation of good classroom climate, or solving discipline problems; or there may be an incident – nationally or locally – which demands discussion with the students in L1 rather than an English lesson. But in principle, the “default” goal should be getting students to acquire as much English as quickly as possible, through interesting and engaging activity: the enhancement of learning.

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