A multidimensional approach in teaching L2

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Abstract

This paper aims to discuss some good techniques gaining better results in second language acquisition during L2 classes. The core idea is that the "whole" person is involved in the learning activity and, therefore, the teaching experience has to deal with a multidimensional approach: it should adopt creativity tasks, such as painting and drawing, as well as practical ones, such as cooking and reciting; it should adopt unmoving activity, such as singing, as well as moving activity, such as jumping and dancing; etc. Each technique will be discussed on a theoretical-driven background.

Keywords: L2 teaching; language acquisition; Practical-Guide

1. A Theoretical Framework

Teachers are more and more demanding of successful techniques in order to improve their ability and efficiency. It is well known from Lenneberg's (1967) pioneering studies on the Critical Period Hypothesis, that L2 learners need different input and approaches depending on their age. For example, it has been argued that learners from 0 to 6 years old are able to learn every natural language without any effort and just from direct contact; learners from 6 years old to the end of puberty gradually lose their natural ability and, therefore, they increasingly need to be overtly educated. Learners after puberty completely lose the ability to learn a language from direct contact alone, requiring deliberate attention and extensive comprehensible input in the target language. Although the Critical Period Hypothesis has been challenged (for a critical discussion, see Muñoz, Singleton, 2011), there is an international consensus on the fact that there is a continuous linear decline in the capacity to learn a second language: from the completely naturalistic way of newborns to the completely structured way of adults. Clearly, teachers who want to perform courses in the best way should adopt different techniques depending on which phase the students belong to. For example, while the correct acquisition of the phonological components of the L2 is natural during the first phase (Tahta, Wood, Lowenthal, 1981), in the last one it is extremely difficult, contrasting with the easier acquisition of the other grammatical components, such as syntactic, semantic and pragmatic ones (Isik, 2000).

Teaching second languages requires many tools and abilities (Greco, 2021) and very often it is not easy to make decisions on how to arrange L2 courses. Theoretical literature is rich in suggestions, but it often lacks practical

indications (Kanno and Stuart, 2011). On the other hand, practical books present many activities without a theoretical explanation for them. This study wants to melt together these points of view, by discussing some practical indications, which are based on a theoretical scientific background, and it will focus on the youngest learners, i.e. those from 0 to 6 years old.

2. Activities and strategies in L2 Teaching

One of the first helping tools in language acquisition projects is the evaluation of the similarities between the students' native language with the L2 ("cross-linguistic influence in second language acquisition"; see Odlin, 2012). For example, a well-established principle in this field is that people use the knowledge of their L1 to acquire a new language in all the grammar domains (phonetics, lexicon, etc.). An immediate implementation on this point is that it will be easier for students to start from the similarity between L1 and L2 (Molina et al. 2013). The bottom line of this strategy is to start from the sound and the words that, eventually, are identical in the two languages.

2.1 Passive listening

Passive listening is one of the most stable principles in the teaching of a second language since the 1960s / 1970s. A way to perform it is to conduct the class in the L2 language, either completely or not. Other strategies can be adopted, such as listening to a story at the end of a class once a week for just 10 minutes. During the story time, students are engaged in a twofold way: they are very attentive to the tale, focusing on it with passion, and the teacher has the chance to interrupt the reading activity to question and ask clarifications. This is particularly appreciated and efficient in order to increase the vocabulary knowledge, confirming what Elley (1989) proposed: stories repeated three times as well as working on some specific words considerably increases the vocabulary learning. Other activities very useful for passive listening are the applied projects in L2 (such as, cooking and art classes). We know from the literature (Long, 2006) that when students learn a foreign language and, at the same time, some subject-specific content in the same language they gain higher results than a language-only approach.

2.2 Active Speaking

Speaking in an L2 is undoubtedly the goal of every L2 course. Many activities can be implemented to reach this goal, such as pronunciation tasks, repetition tasks, and singing activities. Very often, languages display sounds that are either different or absent in the learners' mother tongue language. For example, Italian and Standard English differ in the /r/ pronunciation: Italian /r/ is a voiced alveolar trill consonant; English /r/ is a voiced alveolar approximant consonant. This issue is particularly challenging for L2 learners. An easy way to

help students is to pay deliberate attention to pronunciation (Trofimovich, Gatbonton, 2006), such as looking for some acoustic analogies with such sounds. In this case, some animal sounds, like frogs, are perfect for learning how to trill the tongue in order to make a perfect Italian /r/. This also meets a principle for which it seems to be easier to learn a new sound in a word or pseudo-words that «has no previous associations for a learner, than to learn it as part of a known word» (Nation, 2011: 449). Coming to the repetition tasks, it can be arranged in multiple ways. Students have to greet in the second language and they have to answer some polite questions – such as, 'how do you feel today?', 'what day is it?', etc.– at the beginning of every class. They can also review the content of a previous class at the beginning and at the end of each class at least 3 consecutive times. This assured deep memorization of both the lexicon and the small sentences. Moreover, the story times and the applied projects further give the opportunities to review the acquired knowledge. Finally, students can also sing a L2-song (the same song for a whole month) every class. Songs may refer to some lexical-phonological arguments planned for that month. According to the literature (see, among others, Ludke, 2016), using songs is very useful for better and faster lexicon acquisition, gaining long-term benefits. This mix of activities should allow students to perform sentences, however simple, in a one-year program. It is very important that students learn small full sentences which may guide them in building the more complex one. More specifically, lexical chunks representing pre-patterned grammatical structures may be replicated by changing the lexical vocabulary, reducing the communicative stress and improving the knowledge of the L2 grammatical features.

2.3 Some strategies

One of the key features of a good L2 project is the emotional engagement of the students: the whole person is involved in the learning activity and, therefore, the teaching experience has to deal with a multidimensional and multiple-sensorial approach. For instance, according to Lazaraton (2004), the interaction between gesture and speech during a vocabulary explanation shows that «classroom L2 learners receive considerable input in a nonverbal form that may modify and make verbal input (more) comprehensible» (p. 111). Other strategies can involve some dancing and gym activities, very useful for both keeping the attention up and learning the vocabulary referred to the parts of the body, and having fun at the same time. Painting and drawing are very useful in learning many things, such as food names. Showing pictures of animals when students are asked to shout out their names is particularly appreciated. Watching videos on some handicrafts work very well in the review activity: videos are stopped by the teacher any time the teacher wants to ask some words or phrases referring to something in the given video frame (movie-talk strategy). Finally, an important strategy is to arrange the class according to an

"8-minute rule": every 8 minutes the ongoing activity has to be stopped and changed due to the limited attention span of young students, mixing the multidimensional and multiple-sensorial activities seen above. For example, the first 8 minutes can be dedicated to reviewing (repetition and song); then, 8 minutes can be dedicated to crafts and games; and, finally, the last 8 minutes can be dedicated to a movie-talk activity.

3. Concluding Remarks

The present work provided some good techniques and strategies L2 teachers may adopt in order to obtain better and stronger involvement from the student in the early scholar stage (from kindergarten to second grade). The full involvement of the students is the key feature of the learning activity as well as the theoretical-guided multidimensional approach performed by the teacher. Activities are based on listening and speaking strategies, which range from creativity tasks, such as painting and drawing, to practical ones, such as cooking and reciting; from unmoving activity, such as singing, to moving activity, such as jumping and dancing; from memory tasks, such as repetition by heart, to "out the blue" tasks, such as shouting new words out; from traditional support materials, such as paper, to informatic ones, such as videos; etc. Future research will arguably give quantitative information on all the techniques discussed here.

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