

Peer to Peer teaching: the importance of being earnest

A Chinese proverb says:

Tell me and I forget. Show me and I remember. Involve me and I understand.

The main concern when teaching colleagues is that they may not feel sufficiently involved. Experienced teachers have developed a method throughout the years, but it is usually applicable to their students and does not always transfer easily to adults of their same profession. Personally I started teaching colleagues many years ago, and I still find it the most challenging, fascinating and difficult job.

Teachers who decide to start a training course, in our case they decide to learn English or join a maintenance course, are highly motivated. The great responsibility is not to disappoint them and the only way of doing so is to give them what they have come for after a hard day's work. The first point is to clearly assess their needs, expectations, and to clearly identify the use they will put their language to.

Training primary school teachers and helping them in their careers implies exploiting their experience as experts in their extremely difficult job, and changing their perspective. They will now be explaining what they have mastered with great effort and sacrifice, and this should be a joyful and stress free experience. Naturally it is very difficult to avoid stress, but it is the responsibility of the trainer to make them feel they are in the right place and doing the right thing as much as possible. Involvement in the learning process, talking about the inevitable problems, facing the challenge together is crucial to keeping motivation high and can influence the acquisition of the skills.

Language is culture, behaviour, attitude. Italian teachers are extremely interested in keeping up to date.

The linguist Noam Chomsky in an interview to Wiktor Osiatynski stated:

(...) I don't think there is any scientific evidence about the question of whether we think only in language or not. But introspection indicates pretty clearly that we don't think in language necessarily. We also think in visual images, we think in terms of situations and events, and so on, and many times we can't even express in words what the content of our thinking is.¹

When we learn a new skill, and in this case a new language, we often cannot express our concepts in words, consequently we feel frustrated and unhappy. Body language, facial expression are another aspect of how we express our feelings and thoughts. They should be exploited as much as possible to help learners express their ideas and gradually change them into words.

Caleb Gattegno's method, "The silent way", was based on the assumption that good teaching must always conform to the demands of learning, whereas he considered traditional teaching as being too concerned

¹ [On Language and Culture - Noam Chomsky interviewed by Wiktor Osiatynski](#)

with filling memories rather than educating students' awareness, which, he thought is the only thing in us that is educable.²

Awareness and feeling of the language is what can help any adult learn to measure him/herself with the difficulties in grammar and pronunciation without feeling totally out of place. Teaching adults and peers in particular requires involvement and the willingness to learn from one's students.

William Draves in **HOW TO TEACH ADULTS** refers to adult learners' expectations:

What do Adult Learners Expect from their Teachers?³

- To be knowledgeable
- To show concern for student learning
- To present material clearly
- To motivate
- To emphasize relevance of class material
- To be enthusiastic
- To create a comfortable learning atmosphere
- To use a variety of techniques
- To adapt to meet diverse needs
- *To be dedicated to teaching*

Analysing each point we can say that knowledge and concern over how it is presented are the greatest issues. They act as a boost towards motivation, and enthusiasm can be contagious. Adults, and peers in particular, cannot be bored and clarity is due to them even more than to other learners because they are familiar with techniques that can be decisive in influencing how content is "digested". A comfortable and relaxed learning atmosphere is crucial in creating cooperation and reciprocal esteem and even affection.

Need analysis becomes of crucial importance in establishing an effective learning strategy. We can be misled into thinking that the objectives are clear: reaching a B1 level in English. However this is only our goal, and all the in-between stages are what constitute what we teach, and the amount of dedication and correct analysis can determine success or failure.

² *Teaching Foreign Languages in Schools: The Silent Way*, 1963, Caleb Gattegno

³ For full text article see this online source: Path: OTAN Resources/Document Library/Adult Educational AE0338/Teaching Adults ([ABE Florida Resource Guide – 2004/8 "How To Teach Adults In One Hours"](#))
Draves, William A. Manhattan: Learning Resource Network, 1988

Another aspect concerns error analysis and the most common mistakes made by Italian mother tongue speakers. Adult learners are very shy about making mistakes, and it is our duty as teachers and advisors to convince them that it is impossible to learn anything whatsoever without errors.

Pitt Corder in 1973 in **INTRODUCING APPLIED LINGUISTICS** theorised error analysis dividing it into three phases: recognition, description and explanation.

Errors go through stages, from a pre systematic stage in which there is no awareness, to a post systematic stage in which the learner is aware of mistakes but still has difficulty in applying the rules and an intermediate systematic stage in which hypothesis on the language are made, but mistakes are difficult to correct.

Our primary school teachers have a specific competence in dealing with young learners, and their knowledge is of the greatest importance in helping us in our language teaching task. Errors are the only way to reinforce structures, through correction, exercise and listening activities.

Being earnest and working on an equal footing with other teachers is really the first and only ingredient for happy, motivated and therefore successful teaching, a way to create a bond with the people who invest so much time and energy in learning a foreign language as adults for teaching purposes.

Education is the kindling of a flame, not the filling of a vessel. We should give our colleagues the desire to learn more and more, never to stop keeping up to date with English for themselves, and this is our greatest challenge.