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**CREATING PRODUCTIVE COMMUNICATIVE CONTEXTS
WITH THE FOREIGN STUDENTS**

Florentina Bucuroiu (a)*

* Corresponding author

(a) Florentina BUCUROIU, University of Pitești, Tg. din Vale Street, no. 1, Pitești, florentinabucuroiu@yahoo.com

Abstract

Educational activities carried out in a positive, entertaining and challenging atmosphere arouse the students' interest, increase motivation and desire for getting involved into the tasks. Consequently, interactivity derives not only from the application of modern teaching methods, but especially from the skill and the sense of humour of the activity coordinator. If game playing is the main form of organization of work in childhood, then we can say without hesitation that laughter remains the necessary ingredient of any successful interactive teaching activity, regardless of age or social status of the protagonists. Open discussions on our weaknesses and strengths, successes and failures, on whatever we love or we abhor are all helpful for a better integration within the group, and they are good prerequisites for socialization and empathy. Students must be happy simply because they are in classroom in one another's company. It is good if we can strengthen their sense of belonging to the group and remind them the reasons why all of them are lucky to be there together. Our paper aims to bring into the attention of those teachers involved in training the foreign students some suggestions of modalities that come to support activity development by creating relaxed didactic contexts, beneficial to interrelating and learning in general.

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1. Introduction

For some adults, language learning can be a common and easily mastering process, while for others it becomes one of the most frustrating experiences. In the former case, there is aptitude for language learning that permits acquiring a lot in a stress free mood and without dedicating so much time to it. In the latter situation, there are many reasons people consider when it comes to being discouraged about their skilfulness in learning. Among these reasons, there are aspects learners can control and things that go beyond their control: personality type, lack of motivation, improper learning environment, not

inspired learning strategies. They all may affect the quality and quantity of language acquisition. That is why some people are discouraged and abandon “the war” even before getting started.

Most of the debates lie on the differences between the adults` and the children`s learning capacity because there are studies which state the scientific recognition of the adults as poor/not so successful language learners. Yet, some other specialists stress the opposite idea: “Research comparing children to adults has consistently demonstrated that adolescents and adults perform better than young children under controlled conditions” (Snow & Hoefnagel-Höhle, 1978). Intellectual curiosity, self-confidence, intuition are all prerequisites for identifying, sensing and making correlations between the already-known structures and the new ones. Adults are not “older children” just the same way children are not “miniature adults”. There are considerable differences and they cannot be ignored or discredited, but these age-related anxieties should be abandoned as soon as possible in order not to let them pull down the edifice of language learning. Students need permanent encouragement and reinforcement of the idea that any theory circulating all around is not necessarily and unanimously available; one cannot accept isolated descriptions and misconceptions about the individuals` potential. In turn, anyone can explore his inner forces and talent while manifesting strong self-confidence. It`s up to each learner to get closer and closer to his language learning purpose.

2. Several Tips to Success in Language Learning

Firstly, we admit that writing, reading, watching, listening, speaking are all-essential in language learning all over the world. Up to this point, things are crystal-clear and firmly stated by scientific research.

Secondly, each day of the week should be a day gained to the benefit of learning with writing, reading, watching, listening, and speaking activities. An American professor stated that anybody could progress in language learning on condition that one makes quite a bit of effort on a daily basis. And this daily spoken practice is a basic condition from the 1st day of “study”. Every single day postponed is a lost one and the best path to developing a defence wall out of reasonless hesitation.

The task of learning a new language comes with lots of new words to understand, keep in mind and reactivate as many times as needed. Under these circumstances, one will hardly consider himself ready for language interaction. Yet, there is the following message that teachers should convey to their learners: students are not supposed to know all the words but the necessary ones to express their own main needs and requirements for the beginning. Language learning is not about memorizing everything at once, it is more about getting to know those words and expressions that work well for specific communication contexts.

There are simple and handy things one can do about it, such as learning the main linking words (preposition, conjunctions, adverbs of mood/time/position etc.) This is a promising step because the linking words will be largely used throughout the whole learning process and there is no risk of forgetting them once one memorized them. They are basic elements for building and structuring any sentence, text etc.

Cognates - those words one recognizes from his/her native language – are good friends to any learner at the beginning of the language absorption process. A list of such familiar terms gives everyone a feeling of security and self-confidence. Once one has it downloaded from the internet, making simple sentences with the words is the best option possible: make them work to one's advantage even from the first contact with the list.

Basic vocabulary acquisition helps everyone build many new contexts and enrich language comprehension. Yet, getting to know one thousand words all by heart is less important than knowing only one hundred and integrating them properly in everyday conversations. Memorizing words and phrases is only the first step to making them produce effective conversation, and then enlarge sentences and nuance them progressively. Mnemonics technique is the shortest way to memorizing some new words by integrating them into attractive contexts. Once one created the “reminding device”, the possibility to forget the basic word is practically non-existent. They can make sure the memorization is good enough by using them regularly and even more often at the beginning. An exchange of mnemonics among the group members would be interesting, amusing and useful.

With the time, vocabulary acquisition mainly depends on the exposure learners may get to the language. Usually, an informal context will create better acquisition opportunities than a classroom. Nevertheless, if we create both formal and informal learning contexts right into the classroom, success is definitely ours.

Defining language goals for short and medium-sized periods is a clear measure of the personal progress recorded and a source for frustration avoidance. Connecting is essential in language learning. Language exchanges are important, that is why expanding the social circle is always advantageous. One decides, for example, that within a definite period he will be able to have casual verbal interaction with the next room Romanian mate. Learning from one another and even from the other students' mistakes is a good opportunity for avoiding their repetition. Relating to people by means of conversation brings students much further in terms of fluency than any other method. Conversation should be on varied topics and constantly progressing in vocabulary volume and length (duration).

Mistakes are a source and a reason for correction as well as for entertainment. Everyone makes mistakes and this is nothing else but a sign of effective learning. The position of a beginner learner saves one's “reputation” while he keeps mastering the new language. Native speakers will never be offended by a foreigner's vocabulary or grammar imperfections. On the contrary! Mistakes become sources of amusement and determine the native to get to “support the error-makers” unconditionally. However, learners should be made aware of the fact that pronunciation comes with the time: understanding is much more important than sounding because communication is the immediate goal for language learning. *Communication* is essential; perfection is a daydream!

Getting to know as many things as possible about the other group members is very important. Each student needs to be aware of the fact that his colleagues are just in the same position, they all share the same range of feelings regarding the new learning experience: they are anxious, suspicious, hesitating, curious etc. They are very much alike. Starting from this idea, in the beginning, when students find it difficult to make up correct language structures (sentences/phrases), they may receive a set of personal questions – questionnaire – together with a large number of possible answers to them. They will only have to choose their own answers from the list of ready-made alternatives and practice questions and

answers as many times as necessary. A short personality-type description will come soon to confirm and strengthen learning. Once he starts to accumulate new words and expressions, this may be one of the first short personal communications every student is able to perform. Their sense of skilfulness, confidence and energy mobilization is getting stronger and this is a good premise for going to the next step.

3. Learning Experiences with the Foreign Students

As far as Romanian language teaching - learning is concerned, multinational groups of students should be made aware of the following requirements:

- Language items must become oral speech as soon as possible
- Oral speech should be practiced extensively and on a daily basis
- Homework is very, very important!

While the first and the second statements are common and perfectly logic, the third one must appear strange and even exaggerated, especially when it comes to proposing interesting, non-boring approaches to adult language learners. Yet, from our experience with adult language learners from many regions of the world, we drew the conclusion as it is stated above: students should be given varied and complex studying tasks for home no matter their age, preoccupation, beliefs. Homework is good for keeping learners involved, for having them permanently connected to the language reality, and usage requirements. It forces students out of the comfort zone and urge them into manifesting their attitude, knowledge, language comprehension. Yet, one thing is worth reinforcing here: homework items *must* be *exciting, surprising, funny, creative, challenging!* If all these requirements are met, students will never feel homework as a burden but as an opportunity to enjoy language learning, and they will be curious about finding out how the following one will be enunciated.

Although adult students are more disciplined and more resistant to effort, boredom can still push them into inactivity at times. They are much aware of the reasons of their learning and they definitely know what they want to achieve. Yet, motivating them to get full involvement into the class teaching – learning approaches needs attentive planning and consideration of very many variables. However, didactic tasks, exercises with a high level of challenge will never fail: “Let me first of all mention the fact that learners do not necessarily learn what we believe ourselves to be teaching... What we can do is give our learners an awareness of how they think and how they learn – an awareness which hopefully will help them come to an understanding of themselves and thus increase their self-esteem” (Dam, 2000, p. 18).

In the following, we are offering examples of good practice with some homework-type activities.

Reading stories and memorizing short simplified rhymes for kids can be a beneficial approach and a task not so hard to accomplish. Students find it funny and amazing to receive such a “mission” and they will be looking forward to the next class to introduce the content of their narrative/poetry to their colleagues. The texts will be finally used for vocabulary and grammar comprehension as well as under the form of a basic start for other compositions. The quality of reading is a matter of self-confidence and consistent repetition. This activity can be done during the class or at home. In the latter case, each student is given the possibility to choose his favourite text, study it thoroughly and narrate, recite or interpret it. Everyone will enjoy this activity to a great extent and the outcome in terms of cheerfulness, involvement,

and language acquisition will be at its maximum level. Generally people choose to do those things that bring them pleasure and joy and they avoid stressing or too demanding tasks. Learning a foreign language is a not so easy activity and that is why it is important for any teacher to make sure that language learning is taking place as a pleasurable experience for students (Caon, 2006, p. 18). A positive environment will always have a beneficial influence on the people working or studying in it: "Positive emotions and the broadened thinking they engender also influence one another reciprocally, leading to appreciable increases in emotional well-being over time" (Fredrickson, 2004).

Writing essays about themselves is a good chance for the class participants to get to know one another better and to improve the cohesion and communication within the work group. Besides, it is easier to write about somebody and something familiar than have to find the scientific information first and put it in a logical and grammatically correct speech afterwards.

Amaze me with a new reply/saying today! Every class may have such a funny and useful way of setting off. All the students are supposed to come up with something new every day: a traditional saying, an expression they read somewhere or heard it in the street. This exchange of "language experience" will highly multiply each student's knowledge base and it will help them establish a better communicative mood while explaining the context where and when they "picked up" the respective saying and its meaning.

Watch the TV commercials and choose a slogan you considered inspiring and convincing! Watching TV is very important for immersing into the language as much as possible. Commercials are generally captivating and that is why watching them attentively and extracting their message will not be a hard to accomplish homework. Listening to the local/national radio stations, music channels, together with watching various TV broadcasts, commercials are of much help for the foreign students to get closer to the Romanian language. TV commercials and even street billboards generally draw their attention and make them curious about the phrases and the message rendered. That's why focus-group-discussions on commercials can be relaxing and entertaining approaches to language learning.

My monologue – is an activity that can take part consequent to receiving a topic that brings each student into the position of thinking deeper about the "Philosophy of one's life", for example. They are supposed to meditate on it and prepare a few lines to interpret them during the class. Their life experiences can be used in order to embroider around them. The monologue generally turns into a parody and everyone enjoys it largely.

Recitation session is a two-hour lesson dedicated to the Romanian poetry. Students are asked to look for a poem they like, memorize a few lines and give them an expressive recitation during the class. Vocabulary and grammar discussions will follow the "performance".

Music time can take place under different forms: students can choose, learn and play a part of a Romanian song they enjoyed most or they are listening to a fragment of a given song and their listening skills are tested by writing/saying the verses of the musical play, if possible.

Role-play brings joyfulness and involvement while students have the opportunity to manifest their talent, language knowledge and personal charm at times.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

To conclude, we will start from the idea that “What really matters, for teachers who wish to grow and develop as they teach (and for the students whom they work with), is that practices should be constantly scrutinized to see if they are working and why or why not.”(Harmer, 2001, p. 97) We only offered examples of good practice we experienced in class. All these activities proposed above proved highly challenging and enriching. Students opened both their minds and their hearts and communication developed in a coherent and efficient manner out of a mechanical framework. We tried to change teaching in the direction of interactivity as much as possible being aware that the teacher’s modelling influence on learners can make the difference. Listening to songs with few verses that repeat as a refrain, watching movies without subtitles, listening to news programs, writing informal letters to family members, friends, all the communicative contexts, which give learners the chance to express their own needs and beliefs, are activities with often spectacular results regarding the acquisition of vocabulary and grammar elements.

Any beginning is difficult and it seems hard to take a good start. Progress making is always associated to mistake making, but this is acceptable because language reinforcing is permanently necessary. “The popularly held view that there is a “critical period” for language development is not generally subjected to more than rather superficial scrutiny. Most adults simply take it for granted, for example, that children are of their nature equipped to learn a foreign language with much less effort and in a generally more competent manner than they themselves are able to manage”. (Singleton, & Ryan, 2004, p. 31) However, once the learner feels confident enough to start to speak the language at any expense, he will more easily understand the grammar structures and the exemplification of how they work exactly. Under-confidence is, in fact, the only weak point to deal with as far as the adult learners are concerned. If this aspect is quickly removed and they stop worrying about their diminishing intellectual endowment, both the trainer and the trainees have everything to gain and nothing to lose.

Foreign language learning is a long lasting process during which learners continuously improve their acquisition techniques. At the beginning, a teacher will guide them into the “unknown”, opening the doors of basic understanding and of the simple oral and written communication. Comprehension highly depends on each and every learner’s involvement and conscientiousness, and it comes later on, with a lot of practice and language exposure. Language production is an edifice that can be built only with the time and with assiduous repetition and receptive skills consolidation.

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