

Teaching English to Refugees in a Multilevel Classroom

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Abstract

In order to assess the teaching of English to refugees in a multilevel classroom, a pedagogical investigation was carried out with the mixed paradigm: qualitative and quantitative, with a sample of six students who formed part of a family of refugees, from whom two were illiterate adults, two were adolescents and two were children. The adolescents and children had different educational levels, the first two were Senior High School students, one child was a Junior High School student, and the other one was in the first level of Basic Education. They were taught English for six hours a week in the Pontifical Catholic University of Ecuador in Esmeraldas, Ecuador, as part of a project of connection with the community. The analytic-synthetic and hermeneutic methods were used, with the technique of observation. A quasi-experiment was done with the use of a pre-test and a post-test. The results showed that at the beginning of the experience the students were not able to use English in basic communicative functions or with basic knowledge about the alphabet and numbers; but after using strategies concerning the classroom arrangement in pairs and groups and the use of a combination of methods for language teaching, the adult students were able to have some interaction in English with the younger students. One of the children (a girl), who was in Junior High School, participated actively and influenced the learning process of the adults and of the younger child, who had never studied English before. It is concluded that the English-language teaching-learning process to refugees in a multilevel classroom demands creativity on the part of the teacher, motivation, a combination of methodologies and needs assessment in order to find out the contents the students need to learn, which is in relation to the language of survival.

Key words: teaching English; refugees; multilevel classroom; pedagogical investigation

Introduction

Teaching English to Refugees has become a daily activity of teachers and students from the Applied Linguistics School at the Pontifical Catholic University of Ecuador, Esmeraldas Campus. This forms part of a project of connection of the university with the community, which takes care of refugees in the region, giving them upgrading programs necessary to resettle in another country.

One of the activities that are carried out as part of the mentioned program is the teaching of English for survival. When this process takes place, it frequently happens that the students who come are from different educational levels, which, according to Roberts (2007), is one of the fundamental features of a multilevel classroom. Despite the students come from different educational levels, they are gathered in the same class

because most of them come as a family, and due to reasons of economy or security, they are taught together, in the same group and at the same time.

Different authors recommend activities that could be carried out to assist all the students at the same time: Jigsaw activities, pieces of writing with the help of pictures, and others, as recommended by Ferlazzo (2014).

If the students have different educational levels in L1, they have different views about the culture of foreign language learning, their comprehension of its importance is very distinct, as well as their perspectives of achievement. Anyway, they know that they need to learn English for a specific purpose: to survive in an English speaking country.

In one of the groups of English we had six members of a family of refugees, the mother and the father, two sons and two daughters. The former were illiterate in L1, one son and one daughter had been studying at college before they came, one daughter was a Junior High School student, and one son was in the first level of Basic Education. Two students from the Applied Linguistics School were in charge of teaching English to them. For the purpose of this investigation report they will be called students-teachers. A teacher from the mentioned school was the coordinator of the project and had the responsibility to evaluate the process by means of frequent observations. Another teacher collaborated with the investigation.

When the students-teachers first presented to the class, it was very difficult for them to know how they could manage to teach English in that class where the students had different levels of learning, so a question came to their minds: How can English to refugees be taught in a multilevel class?

This question led to the statement of the general objective of the investigation, which consisted of making an analysis of the teaching of English to refugees in a multilevel classroom. To accomplish this, the following specific objectives were stated: to find theories concerning teaching to multilevel classes; to make an assessment of the students' learning needs and to determine the students-teachers' methodological strategies to teach.

The Multilevel Class

The term multilevel is used by teachers when they want to identify learners who have significant differences in one way or another. Bell & Burnaby, (1984); Wrigley & Guth, (1992) consider that precisely every class is multilevel since the students start with different degrees of competence and then they advance in the development of the four basic skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing at a different rate.

The mentioned authors state that more aspects to consider that mark the levels in a class are programs, for instance, which affect because of funding difficulties, scheduling problems, number of students and program logistics. These programs place students of all levels of English, from beginning to advance in a single class. Another important problem that occurs frequently (Bell, 1991; Santopietro, 1991; Wrigley & Guth, 1992) is that students have different degrees of literacy either in their first language or in English. This is something common when a family of refugees come to the English lessons. Many times the young ones and the children have been to school so they have been studying English and have general schooling. On the contrary, it sometimes happens that the adults have never been to school before, so they are illiterate in their mother tongue as well as in English. This makes the classroom diverse and more demanding to teach.

Levels of proficiency in the multilevel classroom

In order to teach English in a multilevel class, it is very important to know the different levels that may be present and their characteristics.

According to Roberts (2007), to plan instruction for a multilevel class, teachers must consider the different levels of their students, because some students perform at a similar level, but others at a below level and others at an above level.

Below-level. In this level the students need extra time to do the activities and, consequently, need the help of other students in order to succeed. Teachers may have in mind that these are students who may feel some kind of frustration because they appreciate how other students learn more rapidly than they do. These students are struggling to keep up with instruction.

At-level. The students in this level are doing well in the process of learning.

Above-level. In this level the students may be more proficient than the at-level students, or may be quicker in learning than their classmates. They are also at risk because they can feel some kind of frustration at not being provided with the lessons they need, which should be more challenging. The teacher has to manage adequately with them because they may be bored, waiting for the rate of the below –level students.

What was stated previously demands from English teachers the design of methodologies and strategies to work with multi-level classes in order to keep the students learning.

Strategies to use in Multilevel Classes

With the aim to facilitate the learning process, the following strategies are recommended:

Needs assessment. Teachers must find out what learners need and want to learn. In order to assess this, one-on-one interviews with learners, group discussions, and learner observations can be used, as pointed out by Alexander, (1993); Holt, (1995); Isserlis, (2000); Wrigley & Guth, (1992). The needs assessment process permits students to express their individual needs and gives teachers clear information that permit the adjustment of contents to teach.

Lesson planning. Teachers can organize parallel lessons for learners at different levels. Planning should comprise strategies for directing diverse group, pair, and individual activities (Shank & Terrill, 1995).

Using native languages. It is recommended to use learners' native language when an exercise or activity is going to be developed in order to clarify instructions. This facilitates students' engagement. Besides, teachers may provide students' negotiation of meaning by means of peers interchange (Condelli, Wrigley, Yoon, Cronen, & Seburn, 2003; Wrigley, 2003).

Method

The investigation carried out followed the mixed paradigm: qualitative and quantitative, with the methods of analysis and synthesis and the hermeneutic method, and the technique of observation. A quasi-experiment was done with the use of a pre-test and a post-test.

The population consisted of a family of refugees, from whom two were illiterate adults, two were adolescents and two were children. The adolescents and one child had different levels of schooling, Junior and Senior High School. One child was in the first level of Basic Education. They were taught English for six hours a week in the Pontifical Catholic University of Ecuador in Esmeraldas, Ecuador, as part of a project of connection of the university with the community.

The techniques were applied to the students, though in the observation, the role of the students-teachers were also assessed. Ten observation sections were carried out. The results obtained were written in the investigator's diary. A diagnostic test was applied to the students at the beginning of the course and at the end.

The instruments used were the observation sheet (Appendix 1), and the test questionnaire with three items: a) an oral interview to know general information in Spanish concerning the students' awareness of the importance

of English, b) an oral interview in English for assessing knowledge of some basic communicative functions and c) an oral exercise for assessing knowledge of the alphabet and numbers (Appendix 2).

Results

The results of the observation revealed that the mother and father did not know how to express with the English language. They were illiterate, not only in English, but also in their native language, Spanish. Fortunately, they were interested in the English-language teaching-learning process, so they participated actively in the collaborative work, imitating their sons and elder daughter when they interacted with the students-teachers. They could repeat the words and phrases under the supervision and direction of the latter.

The students-teachers used the board to explain words and phrases, illustrating the meaning with pictures and drawings, also miming. They also used the native language to be understood, mainly when any grammatical structure was explained.

The adolescents enjoyed participating in the class and helping their parents. The child who was in Basic Education also liked to repeat together with his parents.

In order to achieve this collaborative work, the whole family worked together, as a group, and for some exercises the students-teachers organized the students in pairs, but never letting the parents be a pair. The students-teachers intelligently placed each parent with one adolescent in order to benefit interaction and learning.

The students-teachers were always very much active in the classroom, promoting interaction, using material aids, realia, and mimes. They used a combination of the Ludic Methodology with the Grammar Translation Method, the Direct Method, the Audio-Lingual Method and the Communicative Approach to Language Teaching. As two student-teachers worked together, one of them was instructing and the other one was monitoring the students' work. They used motivational activities as warm ups, as well as for the development of the class.

Test (Needs Analysis)

The first part of the test revealed that the students were conscious of the importance of English for their resettlement; but they had difficulties in the language. The two adolescents referred that they had basic level; they were in Senior High School. The children also reported they had basic level of English, what means that they

could greet, introduce themselves, and talk about general topics. The adults did not know anything about English. They also expressed that they had never been to school, so they were illiterate in Spanish as well.

The second part of the test, which was applied in English in order to assess the students' knowledge of communicative functions before and after the course, as can be seen in table 1, showed that all the students, no matter the level, after being taught, passed the evaluation, which is shown by letter P (Passed). In the pre-test, it was noticed that although some students said that they had some knowledge of English from school, they failed the initial exam, what is indicated in the table as letter F (Failed).

Table 1

Test on communicative functions before and after the course

	Before			After		
	Adults	Adolescents	Children	Adults	Adolescents	Children
Communicative functions						
Introducing themselves	F	P	P	P	P	P
Greeting	F	P	P	P	P	P
Expressing origin	F	F	F	P	P	P
Expressing abilities	F	F	F	P	P	P
Expressing occupations	F	P	F	P	P	P
Asking and talking about where they live	F	F	F	P	P	P
Asking and talking about their marital status	F	F	F	P	P	P
Expressing how they feel	F	F	F	P	P	P
Expressing likes and dislikes	F	F	F	P	P	P

Source: pre-test and post-test applied

Something similar happened about the topics the alphabet and numbers (as shown in table 2). Before introducing the contents, the students who were illiterate failed, as expected. The students who had some level of English also failed, but after the course, all of them passed the post-test.

Table 2

Test on numbers and alphabet

	Before			After		
	Adults	Adolescents	Children	Adults	Adolescents	Children
Numbers from 1-10	F	P	F	P	P	P
Numbers from 10-30	F	F	F	P	P	P
Numbers from 30-100	F	F	F	P	P	P
Numbers up to 1000	F	F	F	P	P	P
Letters from A-G	F	P	F	P	P	P
Letters from H-P	F	F	F	P	P	P
Letters from P-Z	F	F	F	P	P	P

Source: pre-test and post-test applied

Description of some activities the teachers used for teaching

Content: the Alphabet

First, the students-teachers presented the letters and the students repeated after them, then they started a kind of substitution drills, to practice and memorize the letters. Finally, with the ludic Methodology they practiced the alphabet by means of the song ABC. A video was played, the teachers helped the students repeat several times.

The other turn of lessons, the students-teachers used some cards with different letters to check if the students remembered the ABC. The students worked in pairs first, then the students-teachers asked and the students participated actively. The pairs were organized in the following way: each adult with each adolescent, and the two children.

Another exercise was “spelling your name”, which consisted on spelling each one`s name, first in pairs, then individually. A guessing game was also carried out in the following way: one letter was presented, either at the beginning or in the middle and the students had to guess the name of the student, also the names of famous personalities.

Regarding the topic of introductions to people, the students-teachers illustrated a conversation first, then started with an interaction with the students, finally they got the students to work in pairs and ask each other similar questions. After about 40 minutes of practice, some pairs performed the conversation “meeting someone”.

Discussion

The results obtained in this study coincided with those provided by Condelli, Wrigley, Yoon, Cronen, & Seburn, (2003); Wrigley, (2003) in relation to the importance of negotiation of meaning by means of peers interchange in order to learn. In the investigation carried out, the teachers organized the class in pairs, always sitting the elder students with the young ones who had studied English before at school. This permitted the development of interaction and the improvement of learning, in meaningful activities.

In relation to the importance of needs assessment by means of observations, the results of this investigation coincided with the ones provided by Isserlis, (2000); Holt, (1995); Alexander, (1993); Wrigley & Guth, (1992).

The needs assessment process allows the teacher to know the individual needs of the students and plan the lessons according to them. In this investigation with refugees, needs assessment was also carried out by means of an interview.

In the case of this study, the assessment of the students` needs showed that they needed to learn English for survival: numbers, the alphabet, and the communicative functions: expressing origin, expressing abilities, occupations, asking and talking about where they live, about their marital status, expressing how they feel, and likes and dislikes.

There was also coincidence with the results obtained by Shank & Terrill, 1995, who stated that planning should make use of some strategies that permit group, pair, and individual activities. In the present investigation, the students-teachers always arranged the class into pairs, because there were only six students. They carefully placed the students with a very low level in the language with a more advanced student in the language, so that they could interact. The activities were planned from basic to middle level.

In order to teach, the students-teachers used a combination of methods: the Ludic Methodology, by means of songs and videos, the Grammar-Translation Method, since it was necessary to explain the grammatical structure

deductively so that the students could understand; the Direct Method because the students-teachers always asked questions and let the students talk the target language and give long answers; the Audio-Lingual Method, because drill repetition was carried out to benefit learning, and the Communicative Approach to language teaching because the students were encouraged to practice the four main skills of the language: listening, speaking, reading and writing, in pairs, trying to make use of the language.

Conclusions

The English-language teaching-learning process to refugees in a multilevel classroom demand creativity on the part of the teacher, motivation, needs assessment in order to find out the contents the students need to learn.

The contents refugees required more were related to the language of survival: numbers, the alphabet, expressing origin, abilities, occupations, asking and talking about where they live, about their marital status, and consequently others in the area of survival, what means looking for jobs.

The teachers used a combination of methodologies depending on the classroom situation: the Ludic Methodology, the Grammar-Translation Method, The Direct Method, the Audio-Lingual Method, and the Communicative Approach to Language Teaching.

In order to promote interaction, the students were organized in pairs, placing the students with different levels in the language together, so that the more advanced ones may help the others in the learning process.

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