

LIFE-LONG LEARNING AND TEACHER DEVELOPMENT: CAN STUDENTS TEACH THEIR TEACHERS?

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The paper is centered upon the student as a source of learning for the language teacher and the biunivocal, teacher-student, student-teacher knowledge and experience transfer, in the context of life-long learning and the development of motivational strategies related to military foreign language education.

Key words: life-long learning, adult education, teacher development, motivational strategies

1. INTRODUCTION

The role of the teacher has changed in recent years. From a provider of knowledge in the target area and of language standards, he/she has turned into a facilitator-mediator-enabler of knowledge acquisition and a creator of opportunities for students to develop into good users of the target language.

My thesis is that while for any student life-long learning is a must, stipulated in the national education laws of most countries, be it done through attendance of successive and gradual training forms, self-study as follow-up of the organized course, or as autonomous learning – the student being trained by the teacher to know how and what to learn, the latter, in his/her turn, is being faced with another must, in the sense that he/she also adopts a particular type of life-long learning strategies using the students as a resource for day-in-day-out learning. Far be it from me to minimize the importance of teacher training and development done in the traditional manner. My point is

that the students are reservoirs and enablers of knowledge acquisition (either methodologywise, military languagewise or else) for their teachers.

2. DESCRIPTION OF THE GROUP

Name of the course: *Information and Public Relations* postgraduate course, organized by the Department for Joint Operations, and for Strategic and Security Studies.

Student profile: Higher education graduates belonging to the national defense system, i.e., the Ministry of National Defense, the Ministry of Administration and the Interior.

Number of students: 8 (eight), out of which 3 female-officers and 5 male-officers, ranking from junior-lieutenant to colonel.

Level of linguistic competence: mixed abilities, ranging from B1 to C1.

The activity I used and which I intend to refer to in the present paper involves integrated skills: reading, speaking, listening and, to a little

extent, writing. It is of the case study type, highly appreciated by students in general, no matter the course they are taking, because it relates to negotiating in a foreign language, supporting opinion and joint decision making. The activity, presumably well known by teachers of English delivering upper intermediate and advanced courses is called “Who Gets the Heart?”

What was my role as a teacher in the opening phase? To announce the role the students will take during this activity, the setting and their task, as follows: “*You are the members of the heart transplant team at the University Hospital. At the moment, you have seven patients who desperately need a transplant if they are to have any chance of living. All seven patients are classified as ‘critically ill’ and could die at any time.*

You have just received the news that the heart of a 16-year old boy has become available. Consequent to a car accident, he is brain-dead. Speed is extremely important in your decision as to which of the following patients is to receive the heart. Not only might one of the patients die, but the donor’s heart will also begin to deteriorate”.

The handout the students then receive contains a list of 7 (seven) potential receivers of the heart plus an extra 8th option, (i.e., *None of the above, save the heart for someone else*).

Under each brief description, there are four lines to be filled in after individual familiarization with each medical file, as follows:

1. Reasons for recommending the patient to receive the heart.
2. Reasons against recommending the patient to receive the heart.

3. Individual ranking, and, eventually.
4. Group ranking.

3. SUMMARY OF THE DESCRIPTION OF POTENTIAL RECEIVERS

A pattern is followed in order to describe briefly each case, consisting in the patient’s name; sex; age; marital status; number of children (if applicable); education; current occupation; personal/ professional achievements; medical evaluation conducive to the assessment of survivability.

Last, but not least, no medical experience or knowledge is required from the participants. On the contrary, being as objective and unemotionally involved in the case is highly preferable.

4. THE ACTIVITY “WHO GETS THE HEART?”

The activity is complex, insofar as it integrates all four skills, involves reading the material (scenario), taking notes, listening to each other, expressing opinion, and discussing/ debating on an abstract topic. All the students had the opportunity to work closely together during the 90 minutes the activity took to unfold.

On the whole, the goals of the activity were of two kinds:

1. Language-related:

- 1.1. To develop the students’ sub-skill of understanding spoken and/ or written materials on abstract or complex topics;

1.2. To develop the students' sub-skill of delivering a speech or presentation on a complex topic, integrating pertinent examples, secondary arguments, and specific points so that to reach an adequate conclusion;

1.3. To develop the students' capacity of leading and taking part in a discussion using various language functions in order to hypothesise, support opinion, agree and disagree, etc. so as to reach an agreement and build consensus.

2. Intercultural education-related (keeping in mind that the scenario is based on a US setting, fictitious characters of the North-American environment against which the Romanian-bound culture will be used in order to solve the task):

2.1. To develop the students' capacity of adequately interpreting cultural resemblances and differences and mediating cultural misunderstandings;

2.2. To increase their effectiveness in working as a group by developing interpersonal skills, sharing beliefs and experience, becoming thus more flexible.

Step 1 was based on individual reading, followed by the individual choice. The students had 20 minutes to read the information and to make an individual choice, according to his/her personal reasons, objective or not.

Step 2 involved the following sub-skills:

- sustaining opinion related to the individual choice,

- careful listening to each participant,
- asking for clarification,
- contradicting,
- justifying,
- negotiating,
- compromising if necessary
- reaching consensus.

The students felt it necessary to design together a set of criteria in order to help them make an objective choice, to judge with the mind and not with the heart, as the scenario might lend itself to emotional involvement with one potential receiver of the heart or the other.

The criteria created and set by students in order to make an objective choice were as follows:

- Age
- Family
- Health evaluation
- Value for society
- Is the investment worthwhile?

The group discussion which followed observed the set of rules which are always taught by teachers and internalized by students for this kind of activity. The final decision was that reached by the group and which in only one case out of the 8 participants coincided with the original individual choice.

Finally, the students went back to their original individual stand. They were asked to think back on their work as a team and discuss what they found useful, challenging, interesting in working together. After this stage, I carried out a debriefing of how the group had functioned. The questions asked depended upon the learning

I wanted the students to achieve from the exercise, by encouraging reflection on their experience. Some examples of questions I submitted to their attention are given below:

- How did you reach the joint decision?
- What role do you think each member adopted?
- Did you listen to each other during the supporting opinion phase?
- To what extent do you consider that the preliminary individual proposal resembles the final proposal?
- How did you manage to come to a common decision although in the beginning you had different ideas with respect to the person who will get the heart?
- What did you learn about the functions of a group?
- What would you do next time in order to improve joint decision-making?
- What made your group work and your group as such successful?

4.1. REMARKS

The answers the students produced were more or less the same for all participants who, by stating them for the whole class, became the more so aware of what makes a group successful. The key issues pointed out were:

- They felt close to each other and responsible for each other and for the accomplishment of their tasks;
- They built a supportive, positive atmosphere;

- As everyone was willing to listen to, and learn from, the others, communication was open;
- Group members could compromise and make decisions together despite their initial differences of choice;
- They also could learn about each other's assumptions and beliefs (most of which were culturally induced);
- As members understood, trusted, and accepted each other, there was cooperation;
- Possible differences of opinion were confronted openly and contradictions were settled constructively;
- There was a sense of fun.

When introducing the case study type of activity in the course syllabus, the expected outcome was to operate adjustments on the teaching material in order to make it meet the students' real needs, namely to serve their language objectives, to facilitate their communicative and social development as well as to increase their motivation. From my teaching experience, I can state beyond any doubt that in any group there is a range of interests for the different members, so that, for a teacher, it is almost impossible to predict what kind of activity will arouse the students' intrinsic motivation. Anyway, due to the fact that in the group under discussion the course members came from the same professional background, namely public relations, the case could – even slightly modified if need be – inspire maximum involvement.

In the student evaluation stage, each participant received an evaluation sheet followed by a discussion. Some important observations could be made afterwards, as follows detailed below.

The case under discussion was highly appreciated by all 8 participants because it mainly involved productive skills and creative use of the language, although 60 % considered there was a balance of utilizing receptive (reading and listening to the participants' opinion) and productive (speaking) skills;

The negotiation phase was by far the most attractive and popular task, because the course topic, as stated in the Description of the group chapter, was Information and Public Relations postgraduate course in which negotiating skills in Romanian were focused on; The case under discussion was considered by everybody difficult to solve, in the sense that the participants' emotional involvement could not be avoided;

The case study is not a transmitter of knowledge method per se, but rather a way of developing/reinforcing certain skills and sub-skills (supporting opinion, contradicting and justifying, negotiating, compromising, building group consensus, team work and joint decision making).

4.2. LESSONS LEARNED

The lessons I learned from this particular group performing the activity under discussion are presented below.

From the development of this activity and the discussions which followed, new observations and suggestions emerged. This taught me, once again, that each group

is particular and the teacher's expectations of a certain outcome for the same activity should never be determined a priori.

There are, nevertheless, some overall conclusions to be highlighted in point of methodology as a result of using this particular activity in a range of groups made up of students coming from different institutions.

The teacher's role in 'Who Gets the Heart?' – as in any other similar scenario based on joint decision making – is necessarily based on fostering ongoing interaction between individuals and/or teams or the whole group. The teacher should by no means interrupt or take over control, even if at some moments we might feel that some important aspects or points have not been touched upon.

It is the group who makes the final decision. With every group, the winner of the heart is different. Who gets the heart becomes less important: the decision making process is thus more important than the outcome.

What I always tell my students (the Information and Public Relations postgraduate course students included), from the very beginning of the activity, is that there is not one right solution: the process they follow is right or proves wrong, in case there is no consensus. How many times have we, teachers, not made conscious effort not to be judgmental about students' remarks or ideas?

Let me refer now to the use of language during the activity: my idea is now to adopt a relaxed attitude as to it, insofar as group dynamics is focused on and what we want to get, in the end, is a sense of achievement and ownership, as well as a sense of responsibility, on behalf of the students, of the success of the overall activity.

Of great importance is the choice of the topic, which should be tailored to the group's professional background as much as possible. On this occasion, it is worth mentioning that one student shared his professional experience by enumerating the usual criteria commonly used in Romania by the transplant boards, but these criteria were not imposed on the group and, moreover, the students considered they did not sound satisfying for their approach to the topic (insofar as the criteria were unanimously considered too schematized and based on bare scientific, social and sociological data). The idea is to identify and provide diverse and challenging input along with complex topics for groups with similar professional background, experience and interests.

Of equal importance is that such activities based on case studies require an appropriate level of linguistic competence. If this requirement is met, students confess they find it very stimulating to deal with this type of activity.

5. CONCLUSION

The behavioral and communication aspects of case studies should be given extra emphasis as the individual students' self-awareness of their communication strategies could be raised as a consequence of using them, which, in their turn, may lead to systematic self-improvement of these skills.

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