

EFL: An exploration of the novel aspects of learning and using English as a Foreign Language

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Abstract

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is an expanding field of research that has been prompted by the adoption of English as the international language of the world. Non-native speakers have their share of needs, perceptions, and preferences for their learning process that is currently under extensive research. Since EFL is applied in different countries, the instructors are advised to retain a measure of flexibility that can accommodate these dissimilarities as well as the changing face of the 21st-century classroom. Furthermore, EFL is a mixture of speaking and writing skills, so it is important to provide for both needs as some who have one preference over the other. Levels of education will exhibit variable needs and difficulties within the parameters of EFL, so educators are encouraged to account for them while preparing their curricula. Students often cite the lack of time and proper teaching strategies as hindrances for advancing in their EFL courses. They demand a more critical and analytic approach to teaching that utilizes the advancements of technology as aiding tools. It seems imperative that as the teaching skills evolve, the principles and guidelines of teaching EFL must also undergo the same changes that would give instructors and learners the necessary tool to excel in learning English for both social and academic purposes.

Keywords: *EFL, learning needs, analysis, adaptability*

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Introduction

Globalization had a very important role in promoting English to this status of a global language since it created the need for a common communication language between the various nations, and the countries with the most political and economic power happen to speak it (Mansfield & Poppi, 2012). Since they were the center of most of the decisive events and decision-making centers, it was natural that English became the language of choice for this role. English as a foreign language or EFL is a relatively new field of study that deserves closer examination because of the elevated role the English language is now playing on a global scale. This is not the first case of an international language. For example, Latin became a worldwide phenomenon because of the great influence the Roman Catholic Church exerted; English, French, and Spanish were all spread around the globe in the age of colonization a few centuries ago (Dawkoska, 2018). The influence of language on the very culture and history of nations can still be noted even centuries down the line. For example, there are many nations in Africa that still speak French or English even though colonialism has ended in their countries for many years. These languages are still regarded as one of the main, if not the main, tongue spoken and official governmental language used for records. Language is a fluid concept that adapts to the demands of the era and the needs of those who are shaping it.

In a general sense, EFL can be defined as “the teaching or learning of a nonnative language outside of the environment where it is commonly spoken” (Moeller & Catalano, 2015). There must be a clear distinction between a foreign language and a second language. The first is taught in countries where it is not a common language. A second language is when an individual learns how to speak

a new language because it is commonly used in the area where they reside; and therefore, it is needed for proper communication (Moeller & Catalano, 2015). This is very common in countries that use more than one language such as China and India where the ethnic diversity will create specialized language but the geographic proximity will, in turn, create the need for understanding each other. It is very common that citizens to learn more than one language and for the government to have more than one official language. Even within the same nations, those who live near the borders of another country will adopt some of the words and expressions of the neighboring country (Velazco-Cortez & Contreras, 2013). In our Arab world, one can notice commonalities between neighboring such as Syria and Iraq where bordering counties have similar expressions and accents.

The shift in the English language occurred during the second half of the 20th century where major changes happened about the philosophy of teaching English (Dawkoska, 2018). Learning English became a practical need for the sake of communication not only in written form, but there is now a need for the oral back-and-forth. With the onset of communication technology and social media platforms, this direct and intimate interaction meant there is a need for more fluency and ease when dealing with people from other nationalities.

The importance of the language goes beyond the literature sense because virtually all the other subjects ranging from mathematics and science to sociology and philosophy are taught in English, so difficulties in language can compromise the understanding and performance of students in other subjects (Crawford, 2004).

This new central role has created many challenges when it comes to teaching it because the purposes for learning English have shifted. The teachers who are responsible for this education must reevaluate their methods and adapt to the new demands of the 21st century.

Adapting Teaching Methodology

The teaching method of languages used to be left for the instructor until the 19th century where serious research was conducted regarding this important topic. Rabbani (2015) explained the highlights of this evolution that started in the late 19th century when Berlitz came up with the Direct Method that relied on oral engagement and student participation. During the 1950s, the Audio-Lingual Method built on Berlitz's techniques but added the use of tapes and various other visual aids. As the field received more interest, learning developed into a concept of intuitive perception that regards teaching language as a dynamic and fluid pursuit that needs proper conditions in what is known as the Communicative Language Teaching method (Howwat & Widdowson, 2004).

While every methodology has its own merits and downsides, the fault lies in the approach that is taken when teaching the millennial generation and those that came afterward. The new millennial generation cannot be content to utilize the traditional methods and thus they are hostile in an education setting they feel is ill-suited for them (Rabbani, 2015). This has sparked a new research field to properly understand the new psychological orientation of the new brand of students that inhabit today's classroom.

This is hardly a new concept because teachers have always been concerned about finding methods that will simplify the material and make it easier for students to assimilate. An example of this was

during the 16th century when Latin was being introduced to Anglo Saxon natives. To aid the pupils, each lesson was accompanied by an Anglo Saxon translation, and the exercises given were always based on everyday topics such as farming and hunting to familiarize the audience with the subject matter (Howatt, 1985).

The layout of the traditional classroom is no longer conducive for educating the millennial generations because they expect a different kind of dynamic when interacting with their teachers. This generation expects to be taught using digital tools and focus on teamwork (Pinder-Grover & Groscurth, 2016). They cannot sit and be passive receivers of information. They want to be able to exchange ideas with others and share opinions. They need the validation and support of those who work with them. They need to know that what they are learning will benefit in changing the world around them because they have started to regard them as global citizens that are concerned with what happens to other nations (Eckleberry-Hunt & Tucciarone, 2011).

Teaching the English language has always been a challenge, and the new perspective is something that all educators must tackle to come up with new and innovative teaching strategies.

EFL and Immigrants

The issue of immigration is a worldwide phenomenon that has evolved into a global concern due to its severity. In 2016, there was an estimate of over 250 million first and second immigrants with almost 10% of them being younger than the age of 14 (United, 2016). However, there is evidence that these students score significantly lower in reading, science, and mathematics than students native to the country (OECD, 2015). This can have lasting impacts as indicators show that deficiency in English proficiency will likely take years to be compensated, and this had affected the likelihood of these students venturing further into their secondary and tertiary studies (Fenoll, 2018).

There is some empirical evidence that if English education is made compulsory during basic education, it will increase the likelihood of these students migrating towards other countries that speak this language as a native tongue especially if the economic situation and political freedom in the later is better than the first (Fenoll & Kuehn, 2019). Immigrants, in general, will gravitate towards the nations where their skills are scarce whether that their set of skills is basic such as hard labor or sophisticated such as STEM. Having no language barrier is always an asset as it facilitates their integration (Berg et al., 2014).

The importance of learning languages is justified when one considers the evidence that if an immigrant can properly speak and understand the native language, it will have a significantly

positive effect on the social and economic standing of the said immigrant (Bleakley & Chin, 2010). Today, the English language can be the conduit and medium through which more people can properly connect. In many countries, you may not be able to speak the native language, but if you have proficiency in English, it will be much easier to integrate and interact with people until you can learn the new language. In some cases, people change careers for many years, and they get by through speaking English as a means of communication.

Therefore, EFL is a necessity that will enable social and economic growth. It becomes a bridge between different cultures and civilizations. It cements the idea that we have evolved into global citizens that should think of the collective good instead of narrow personal interest.

A Vision for the New Classroom

If there is a real desire for a concrete change to occur, we must start by listening to what the learners are saying (Vattoy & Smith, 2019). Many researchers have verified that when there is formative assessment is utilized properly, it can have a very powerful and impactful effect on the pedagogic process (Winstone et al., 2017; Hayward, 2015).

The first feedback is that the millennial generation wants to work in groups in school and in the professional workplace. There is unclear if they think that collaboration is superior to the efforts of one individual. It might be that the millennial generation likes to be seen as an effective team player by those who are in power because it validates them (DeBard, 2004). Whatever the reason, it seems that teamwork is something they truly believe in and enjoy. However, it might always be easy for instructors to properly implement. Some students are leaders by nature, and they might take over the group work. In an ideal situation, each student should be assigned a role within the group, and this position should be rotated so that each benefits from all aspects of being a team. This allows the students to benefit from their various skills as well as discover new ones when they are put in a position they are not normally comfortable with. Another challenge is the chaos that will invariably occur when group work is a success because the students will become boisterous and involved. They might even get sidetracked because of the confusion that would occur. Before we ask students to do group work, we must teach them how to work as a team. There are etiquette and structure for group work that must be respected and learned. They must be aware

of the responsibilities that are associated with their role within the group. This type of education will also benefit them outside of the classroom because it will help their communication and organizational skills in the other world (Nathan, 2005). This is particularly important when teaching EFL because fluency is one of the major issues that face students. Memorizing vocabulary and grammatical rules will hardly be beneficial unless they are paired with constant practice. It is even more beneficial to have students communicating with others within their age groups which will prompt them to further conversation. It is certainly more stimulating to them than talking to older people.

The term “techno literate” is a new amalgamation that captures this generation’s affinity and comfort with technology (Taylor, 2005). They are more connected to family, friends, and the world through the use of the Internet. Although most of them are most versatile with their smartphones, their innate ability to assimilate technology makes it simple for them to adapt to new software and programs that they have to utilize in their academic pursuits (Shirky, 2008). In light of this fact, teachers can no longer rely on lectures as their primary delivery mode for the information they want to impart (Eckleberry-Hunt & Tucciarone, 2011). Failing to incorporate technology means our students will become passive listeners that barely register any information. It is an invitation for chaos within our classrooms because boredom will cause them to misbehave. Today’s students do not need us to provide answers they can easily find by typing on their phones. What they need is to be stimulated by the right questions that will motivate them to go search for answers. To spark that interest, we must employ technology to our service with constant visual stimulation. Most students do not want to read a long paragraph but would rather look at a schema that details the process. They want to see a schema for an outline and not pages full of endless words. It might be more tasking for us to constantly preparing new graphics and videos for their pleasure, but ask any

teacher, and he/she will tell you that avoiding the headache of trying to manage unruly millennial students is worth spending an extra hour searching for a video. Simply put, they are going to use their smartphones or be preoccupied with their gadgets, so why not make sure they are using it for a better purpose? When it comes to EFL, there is no doubt that it can benefit from the Internet because the majority of the content is available in English. The engagement with the Internet will necessitate the employment of English. However, a cautionary thought should see us maintain some technology-free sessions. In an age where even basic calligraphy is becoming challenging for most students, we must maintain some basic practices.

Conclusion

There is no denying that English proficiency is a must. There is no denying that the landscape of academia is changing. There is no denying that those who do not fall in with the time will be left behind. We need to reconcile the increasing need for English with the new mentality of the students. While the techniques mentioned are directed mostly towards the younger generation, the same can be carried on to adult teaching as well because it falls in line with the integration in the advanced first world countries. There is no place for complacency in academia because knowledge has become the currency of life and its power and influence are expanding exponentially with every breakthrough and new specialization fields. As instructors, we have to bow gracefully to the call of our students and pave the way for the future of mankind.

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