

BECOMING PROFESSIONALLY COMPETENT LANGUAGE TEACHERS - Some Suggestions

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ABSTRACT

The article attempts to identify the salient features which are essential for successful language teaching as well as efficient language learning. Effective language teaching can be conducted by all practising teachers when there is commitment to, and professionalism in our line of duty. A good language teacher would be able to produce students who are able to use the language meaningfully if he/she strives for continuous quality improvement. The factors identified in the paper are based on the writer's research and current thinking on the subject.

Introduction

The word teacher can be referred to anybody who is involved in the business of teaching regardless of what we are known as - teachers, instructors, lecturers, associate professors or professors.

How can we excel in language teaching? Is there a magic formula? Good language teaching is a topic which is very broad. I have, therefore, identified a number of internal as well as external factors for our present discussion. Experienced language teachers may have additional suggestions.

Preparation

It goes without saying that a fairly well-prepared lesson will enable us to conduct a class better rather than one which is conducted with a little preparation. We may be good speakers of a language, even first language speakers, but that does not necessarily qualify us to become good teachers of the language without doing adequate homework ourselves. We must be committed to our profession. If a reasonable amount of commitment is not forthcoming, we would be doing a disservice to the profession. Stepping into the classroom unprepared is a sign of our lack of commitment.

Confidence

Having confidence in ourselves is important. But this confidence must be coupled with our preparedness to face a particular group of learners. Teaching advanced learners or adults needs a lot of confidence. I have heard even native speaker lecturers teaching English admit that they sometimes lack confidence to meet their postgraduate students in class. That is because among postgraduate students there are mature people with teaching experience. And they may be able to correct their lecturers if they provide the wrong information. Our confidence to teach a language will grow with experience, increased exposure to the language, using it productively, awareness of recent developments in the field of language teaching, etc.

Motivation

We often hear and talk about motivation. But it is always about the lack of motivation among our students to learn a language. But how motivated are we as language teachers? Motivation cannot be a one-sided affair. It has to be mutual. How can we be motivated to teach English, Bahasa Malaysia, Mandarin, Arabic, Tamil, etc.? The value a language has in a society should be sufficient motivation to teach the language. One can understand if neither a teacher nor his students in Malaysia are interested in languages like Gujarati or Wolof. Helping students to become proficient in the national language is motivation for teachers. Helping students to become proficient in the most widely used international language should also contribute to teacher motivation. Helping students to acquire competence in their own native language is also a motivating factor.

High degree of proficiency in and knowledge of the language

It is a fallacy to assume that a language can be taught effectively by people who have specialized in disciplines which do not have a language, linguistics or literature component. A teacher who has majored in economics would be able to teach economics well. But can he be expected to teach Bahasa Malaysia equally well? If teachers who have not specialized in languages or language teaching are asked to handle language classes to meet the shortage of qualified language teachers this would unfortunately lead to the misconception that languages are easy to teach and almost anybody can teach English or Bahasa Malaysia, for instance.

We must have a high degree of proficiency in the language we teach. We should be constantly striving for near native speaker competence in the way we speak or write in the language we teach. Language teachers "ought to aim for the closest approximation to native... speech because of the very nature of their occupations" (Tench, 1981:17). Acquiring such competence is not too difficult if we make the effort. We have to keep trying and practising to attain near perfect command of the target language.

In terms of speech, we should be highly intelligible to our students and colleagues. Our speech should not be characterized by a strong local accent if intelligibility is not to suffer.

We should make an effort to be linguistically competent, i.e. acquire sufficient knowledge of the language to talk about, to be able to produce grammatically acceptable sentences; have discourse

competence, for example, how a paragraph or text is developed in the language; what are the cohesive links we can employ; how is coherence achieved, and so on.

We should be constantly aware of contemporary or current use of language. If we aren't, we will begin to "correct" our students even when they are right. The following are a few examples of acceptable English usage which many of us may find new or strange.

- a. If you see a blind person who looks in need of help, ask them if they would like a hand (Observer Sunday, 10 March, 1991)

An expression which indicates singularity can take a plural pronoun to provide unspecific general reference.

- b. My mother collects Alexandra from school (Sunday Times Magazine, 9 February, 1992)

The word collect co-occurs not only with stamps, letters, etc but also with people.

- c. Everybody must do their part to make a success of the project.

Everybody can take a plural pronoun, contrary to what many teachers may think.

Exposure to good models of the language

After we have earned our qualifications we must not rest on our laurels but rather should continue to be exposed to good models of the language. One definite way of performing well as English language teachers is for us to continually keep in touch with excellent users of the language. We should tune in to the British Broadcasting Corporation, Voice of America, or any good radio station. With published materials we should analyse the language used. What I am stressing here is constructive imitation of good models of the target language in the productive language skills of speaking and writing for our own advanced language development.

Familiarity with methods of teaching

There is an array of language teaching methods. Which one should we use? There is no one method which is the most effective. If we are lecturing to postgraduate students, for example, the method involves mainly talking and writing. But can we do the same in schools? Dealing with secondary and primary school students needs a different approach. Teachers must be familiar with the methods in vogue as well as those which have been around for a long time. When we introduce the various techniques, there is variety in the classroom - the use of videos, tape recorders, language games and communicative tasks will certainly make learning much more enjoyable and less boring for the students. The teacher is the classroom manager. As such he/she should bring in his/her pedagogical skills to facilitate language learning. The students rely on their teachers' training and experience with classroom materials and techniques with regard to the efficient use of the students' time in class (Stevick, 1982).

A contrastive approach to teaching

If a teacher has a working knowledge of the first language of the students, it would help the teacher vastly and facilitate learning. The teacher would be able to compare the language he is teaching with the pupils' mother tongue and bring about an awareness as to how the two languages function. Where there are similarities in the areas of grammar, lexis and discourse, this could facilitate language acquisition. Where there are differences between the two languages, this can be explained where necessary, contrastively. For example, one conspicuous difference between Bahasa Malaysia and English is that while in the latter the verb has to agree with the subject as in

She walks to school everyday
They walk to school everyday

subject-verb agreement does not exist in Bahasa Malaysia grammar. Observe the two following sentences:

Dia berjalan kaki ke sekolah
Mereka berjalan kaki ke sekolah

A bilingual teacher would be able to explain mother tongue-influenced errors. Many researchers agree that the interference from the pupils' first language is one of the important contributory factors to production of errors (Smith and Swan, 1987). In fact, research on Malay students shows this. (Mohideen 1991).

Some linguists notably Burt et al (1982:269) are opposed to the use of the mother tongue in the classroom. Their advice is "Do not refer to a student's L1 when teaching the L2". Perhaps what they are against is extensive use of the students' first language in a second language classroom. We can use the mother tongue sparingly.

Consultation with colleagues

For some reason, some of us think we know enough. But consultation with colleagues is important for our professional development. It is not something to be shunned. Peer consultation is not humiliating. As a community of professionals we should consult our fellow professionals as often as it is necessary. When I discuss with a colleague something which I am not very sure of, I become more confident about it. I am not ignorant about it anymore. And the colleague by explaining becomes more authoritative about the item discussed.

Effective error correction

How important is error correction? A fairly substantial amount of time of language teachers is spent on error correction. However much we correct, we cannot completely eradicate errors, but only hope to minimize their occurrence. Instead of spending too much time as error correctors, I would suggest that we should be providers of quality input. I am not in the least suggesting that we do away with error correction altogether. But we need to be familiar with effective correction techniques. (See Mohideen, 1993). The solution to an abundance of errors in the students' productive mode lies not so much on error correction, but on effective remedial treatment.

Offer of Praise

Offering praise or compliments to students for a work which has certain strengths will build and boost their confidence. Some teachers may feel that praising may make them feel contented and as result they become complacent. But praise is something that pupils yearn for and praise encourages and reassures them and contributes to their interest in the subject. Praise is a form of reinforcement which strengthens and motivates language development (Mohideen, 1995). Always pushing students without due recognition is psychologically damaging and not being fair to them. Praises should be seen as rewards for a job well done and they increase motivation (Nunan, 1991).

Getting feedback about teacher performance

We must get feedback from our students about the effectiveness of our teaching. Alternatively, we can ask one of our colleagues to come to our class and evaluate our teaching. For this purpose we should get some well-designed reliable questionnaires. If we are not comfortable with either of these, then we should evaluate ourselves objectively. This is essential for our continuous quality improvement.

Conducting research

If time permits, we should conduct small-scale research, for example, action research with our students or colleagues. We can, for example, study the tests we administer, and our criteria for evaluation. By being involved in research related to our immediate environment, we can improve ourselves and arrive at solutions in a professional manner. Conducting research is not the preserve of academicians teaching only at university level. That action research ought to become an integral part of any teacher's professional practice has also been emphasized by Kemmis and Mc Taggart (1988). Please refer to Wallace (1993) for some useful tips on action research.

Ongoing training

Whatever our background is, we should be eager for ongoing training. This can be in the form of attendance at seminars, participation in colloquiums, presenting papers at conferences or workshops, reading professional journals and educational columns in newspapers. This is important because some of us are so set in the ways we teach and are convinced that they are the best that we do not want to be exposed to techniques which are recognized as effective. We should be prepared for change and innovation in language teaching.

Conclusion

We often say that our students are very weak in a particular language, they are not motivated to learn the language, they need more contact hours and so on if their performance is not to our satisfaction.

These are quite true. But at the same time we also have to upgrade our professionalism and become quality teachers. As teachers, we are professionals. We ought to set high standards for ourselves and strive to attain them. If we love our profession, I think we can do it, By becoming professionally competent language teachers, we can contribute our part in helping Malaysia achieve excellence in the field of language teaching and learning. This is in line with our government's efforts to make our country a centre of educational excellence.

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