**Didactics and the Teaching of English as a Foreign Language**

 Introduction

Language teachers are always concerned with their practices in the classroom. This is why practitioners are looking for opportunities to talk, discuss and share experiences about their beliefs.

The goal for this section is to make participant analyse the principles that describes the roles of teachers, the characteristics of learners, and the class planning. A reflection about how the teacher and the learner behave in the classroom will lead practitioners to make better decisions about the class planning and management. Therefore, the actions performed in class should help students be successful in the learning process.

In order to reach the section goal, it will be firstly talked about the didactics and its impact in the classroom interaction. Then, the teacher’s role in the class room will be discussed. Later, the student’s characteristics will be described. Finally, class planning is the last element addressed.

In the development of this section, it is expected to your active participation when performing the activities proposed. Your participation is important because sharing experience will make this course very enriching.

2.3 Didactics in the EFL Classroom

2.3.1 Study Questions

2.3.2 Defining Didactics

Teaching and learning are processes which have happened from ancient times. One of the disciplines in charged of the description of these processes, and the relation of them to different elements in the classroom is didactics.

According to Gutiérrez (2001), didactics is a discipline which studies the relationship between teaching and learning. Pansza (1986) also comments that didactics approaches differently to the classroom work. In the following chart, it is possible to look at it clearly.

Then, it can be said that didactics may be defined in two ways, as the art of teaching or as the discipline about teaching. In the first sense, the art, it is being expected that didactics explains the process as the “practical cognitive quality, the inner skill to produce specific tasks” (Gutiérrez, 2001:14). This is, the ability teachers show to communicate knowledge to others, to make easier for students to understand the content they are learning.

In the second sense, didactics as the science refers to “clear, ordered and supported concept in theory” (Gutiérrez, 2001:15). It is also believed that to know about the methodology is not enough to acquire the art of teaching. But, it is a required step to reach that art, if a teacher is not a born-gifted. From this perspective, it can be stated that this discipline has two objects of study (Gutiérrez, 2001:15):

1. The teaching – learning process
2. The teaching – learning techniques and methods

Therefore, according to Gutiérrez (2001:15), didactics is the “science which studies the teaching – learning phenomena as prescriptive aspects of an efficient methodology.” That is to say, this discipline deals with the formal aspects of teaching, methodology and all elements that interact within the classroom.

2.3.3 Didactics in the Class Planning and Management

Since didactics describes the procedures to be followed in class to cause learning in students, some areas of reflection arise as well. Didactics concerns about objectives, teaching, motivation, discipline in class, communication, evaluation and, methods and techniques.

Objectives play a key role in the learning process because they lead the actions and activities to be performed so that learning happens. That is why, questions such as the followings are formulated: What is learning? Is there anything else to learn?

Teaching is defined as the way a topic is clearly explained. It is worried about the way students may understand the topic and how they internalise knowledge. Didactics tries to research if teaching is reduced to explanations, or if it goes beyond, the role of teacher in the class, as well as the content to be addressed.

Motivation is also an affective factor that usually concerns teachers. Teachers wonder why, if they give clear explanations, the class shows no interest. That is what this discipline wants to explain.

Discipline in class is also an element which exerts some influence in variables like behaviour, attention, effort, punctuality among others. These are some elements which should be considered when planning the class and organising the group work.

Interpersonal communication is basic in this learning process since human beings are the main actors in this course of action. This implies an active interaction between them – teachers and students. Besides, human interaction is also vital to be aware about how different elements interact with each other and how they affect the communicative process.

Evaluation is an important part in this process because it let us know how much the course objective was fulfilled. It describes the output students reached. Evaluation is also used as an instrument that provides information not only about students, but also about the course organization itself.

The last elements concerned with didactics are the teaching – learning methods and techniques designed. What is intended is to explain which methods, techniques or approaches are better if students’ characteristics are taken into account.

In conclusion, it does not matter if didactics is an art or a science, but it tries to explain the relationships hold among the different elements in class, it does not prescribe, it rather describes procedures to approach and understand the education phenomenon. It also set a series of questions with the purpose of making people grasp why these or those results are obtained in classroom.

2.4 The Teacher and the Learner in the EFL Classroom

2.4.1 Study Questions

2.4.2 The teacher’s Role in the EFL Class

Teaching and learning is a dynamic process in which many elements interact to make this act possible and successful. One of these factors is the role teachers play in class. As teachers of EFL, it is vital to be aware of attitudes shown towards the students’ performance in different moments of the class.

A role, then, can be defined as the “actor’s part; one’s function, what person or thing is appointed or expected to do” (Concise Oxford Dictionary, 1982 in Wright, 1987:3). This is, teachers play different roles depending on the class plan and the activities to carry out. Teachers sometimes lead the class, organize students, and monitor students’ work among others.

As it can be observed, roles are defined according to the following characteristics (Wright, 1987:3):

a) Doing – it describes what a person does, for example, being a pilot (occupation).
b) Talking – it describes the decisions made when interacting with others, for example, when the teacher becomes an organiser, a manager, or an assessor.
c) More than one role – different ‘roles’ depending on the course of actions they have to perform.
d) Expectations – it describes how the others look at you.

Based on the features described above, it is possible to distinguish three kinds of teachers (Scrivener, 1994:6):

a) The explainer – [He knows] their subject matter very well, but have limited knowledge of teaching methodology. This kind of teacher relies mainly on ‘explaining’ or ‘lecturing’ as a way of conveying information to the students. (…) this teacher’s lessons can be very entertaining, interesting and informative.

b) The involver - [He] also knows the subject matter that is being dealt with [-] (…)… essentially the English language and how it works. However, [he] is also familiar with teaching methodology, (…) the use of appropriate teaching and organizational procedures and techniques to help their students learn about the subject matter. This teacher is trying to involve the students actively and puts a great deal of effort into finding appropriate and interesting activities that will do this, while [he] is retaining clear control over the classroom and what happens in it.

c) The enabler – [He] knows about the subject matter and about methodology, but also has an awareness of how individuals and groups are thinking and feeling within her class. [He] actively responds to this in her planning and working methods and in building affective working relationships and a good classroom atmosphere. [His] own personality and attitude are an active encouragement to learning.

Therefore, it can be explained that teachers may play several roles, depending on the different phases of the class as well as the activities planned. Besides, their personality influence in determining the sort of teachers and the roles played in classroom. In this sense, it is possible to say that teachers may play the following roles:

Teachers’ Roles
Role The teacher
Planner prepares and thinks through the lesson in details before teaching it so that it has variety and there are appropriate activities for the different learners in the class.
Informer gives the learners detailed information about the language or about an activity.
Manager organises the learning space, makes sure everything in the classroom is running smoothly and sets up rules and routines.
Monitor goes around the class during individual, pair and group work activities, checking learning.
Involver makes sure all the learners are taking part in the activities.
Parent/Friend comforts learners when they are upset or unhappy.
Diagnostician is able to recognise the cause of learners’ difficulties.
Resource can be used by learners for help and advice.

In the following table is possible to have a picture of the teachers’ role during the class (Spratt, et. al. 2005: 146):

Teachers’ Role & Class Planning
Stage Role

Before the lesson
Planner
Diagnostician
During the lesson
Presenter
Informer
Manager
Monitor
Resource
Parent / Friend
After the lesson
Diagnostician
Planner

As it has been discussed, teachers play different roles according to the activities they perform and the relationships they establish with the students, the contents, the activities and materials. The roles they play exert some influence in the classroom communication.

2.4.3 The Learner

In formal context of instruction, there are two subjects who interact in the process of teaching and learning. The former – the teacher – was described in the section above. The focus of this section is the characteristics that shape a language learner.

Language learners are not equal. So, the learning process becomes individual, and this way to approach to this process makes the learner be successful or not when learning a foreign language. These characteristics “are differences between learners which influence their attitudes to learning a language and how they learn it. These differences influence how they respond to different teaching styles and approaches in the classroom, and how successful they are at learning a language” (Spratt, et.al, 2005:52). These characteristics refer to learners’ learning styles and learning strategies. This is to say, the routes learners take to reach their academic goals.

The learning styles can be defined as “the ways in which a learner naturally prefers to take in, process and remember information and skill. Our learning styles influences how we like to learn and how we learn best” (Spratt, et.al., 2005: 52). Then, it is important that students identify their styles because if they are aware about their learning preferences, success will be almost sure.

According to Spratt, et.al. (2005: 52), [learning styles] are related to the physical sense we prefer to use to learn, our ways of interacting with other people and our style of thinking.” Based on this, learning styles can be classified as follow:

Learning Styles
Styles Description
Visual It involves seeing.
Auditory It involves hearing.
Kinaesthetic It involves the use of the body.
Group It involves working with others.
Individual It involves working alone.
Reflective It involves considering choices.
Impulsive It involves an immediate respond.

Learning styles are dynamic. This means that students may use more than one learning style, and these may change or adequate through time. Besides, students have an opportunity to work on those styles identified as weak, and improve them (Spratt, 2005: 52).

As learning styles become an individual matter, class planning is affected if the teaching goal is to make students learn. In other words, when planning the course; teachers should identify and take into account their students’ learning styles to help them grasp the concepts taught.

Besides learning styles, learning strategies may be another variable that affect the students’ language acquisition. As learning styles, learning strategies are more to the actions students’ perform “to learn, process a new language and work with other people” (Spratt, et.al., 2005:52). If students identify their learning strategies, which match with their learning styles; they may become successful language learners. Learning strategies are also individual ways to intake and process information, and these are going to be different from student to student. Learning strategies are not static as well. Variation or changes in the strategies may happen due to the circumstances in which learning is taking place. In the same way as learning styles, learning strategies may be improved; there are no best or worst strategies. The use of different strategies may help students become “more independent and autonomous learners” (Spratt, et. al., 2005: 53).

2.5 The Class

2.5.1 Study Questions

2.5.2 Class planning

Planning is a key element in every day life. Without planning, life would simply be chaotic. The teaching of English as a foreign language would not be the exception. In the EFL class, planning becomes important because it guides teachers about their performance in their professional practice to reach their course goals.

According to Hammer (1998), planning helps teachers lead their work in class. It serves as a remainder about the course activities and tasks designed to reach the intended objectives. Planning helps teachers not to lose their teaching and learning focus during the course development.

However, it does not mean that planning should be taken as a rule, something inflexible. As well commented by Scrivener (1994: 44), planning “prepare[s] thoroughly. But in class, teach the learner – not the plan.” What this means is that plans are just a guide that may be modified. It should fit with the learner’s needs and respond to contexts. Therefore, changes during the performance of the plan are possible to happen.

When planning a class, the following elements should be taken into account:

- The learner
- The aims
- The teaching point
- The teaching procedures
- The materials
- The classroom management
(Scrivener, 1994:44)

Harmer (1998: 123-124) proposes teachers think about the following questions when planning:

- Who exactly are the students for this activity?
- Why do you want to do it?
- What will it achieve?
- How long might go wrong?
- What will be needed?
- How will it fit in with what comes before and after it?

When planning a class, two moments should be considered:

a) Before the lesson – This is the familiarisation with the material and activities.
b) In the lesson – Those aspects related to the lead-in, running and closing of the activity.
(Scrivener, 1994: 30)

Besides these moments in the lesson planning, Scriveners (1994: 32 – 36) identifies four types of lesson plans:

Lesson Plan Type
type Description
Logical Line This sort of plan organizes a set of sequenced activities around a clear objective. Since the class is organized in steps, evaluation of the plan is easy to make.
Topic Umbrella These plans consist of series of activities around a topic. Any of the activities may be the class starter. There is no sequence of the class performance.
Jungle Path Teachers plan the class with any resource available in the classroom. Teachers have to find activities and materials that may respond to student’s interests and needs. There is no pre-planning.
Rag Bag A variety of separated activities are used in this sort of lesson plans. Activities do not clearly set language objectives.

Lesson plans can be constructed by following two designs: a formal lesson plan, or an informal lesson plan. In the table below, both plans are compared.

Lesson Plan Design
Formal Lesson Plan Informal Lesson Plan
1.Outline of procedures
2.Description and order of the activities
3.Time
4.Background information
a) Aims
b) Target language
c) Materials
d) Predicted problems 1. A list of activities
2. Notes of language prints
3. A list of materials
4. No time consuming when planning

Both ways of planning are valid. However, its effectiveness may depend on the teacher’s expertise. If a new practitioner is starting to teach, a detailed formal lesson plan would help a lot to keep focused. Experienced teachers, on the other hand, most of the time prefer and informal way of putting his plan down.

2.6 Conclusion

As it has been revised through this section, there are some elements that may have an impact in the teaching and learning process. These elements are mainly concerned with teachers, learners and class planning. As studied in this section, teachers play an important role because they are the ones in charge of orienting and helping students’ learning goals. Learners, on the other hand, are responsible about their own learning process. However, raising awareness about the students’ learning styles and strategies is also useful. If learners are aware about their learning preferences and how they do it, learning will be successfully. Finally, as discussed in the last section, planning exert some influence in the class development, consequently, in the teaching and learning process as well.

2.8 References

Gutiérrez Sáenz, Raúl (2001) Introducción a la didáctica México: Editorial
Esfinge.

Harmer, Jeremy (1994) How to teach English Madrid: Longman

Pansza, Margarita y otros (1986) Fudamentos de la didáctica Volumen I
México: Gernika

Scrivener, Jim (1994) Learning teaching Oxford: OUP

Spratt, Mary; Pulverness, Alan William, Melany (2005) The TKT Course
Cambridge: CUP