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## GAPS IN TEACHER EDUCATION

The results of the study on the development of FL teachers' professional careers allowed the author of the present paper to list the moments and/or periods of the teaching-learning process when the teachers feel most unsafe. These moments are: the 1st lesson of a FL, correcting and discussing student errors, the development of language creativity and evaluation of student progress. The aim of the paper is to establish whether these periods of unsafety are caused by gaps appearing in the course of preparing students for their future profession of teachers.

### 1. Introduction

The idea of the present paper is based mainly on the results of an interview devoted to the development of FL teachers' professional careers, the analysis of which was completed in 1998.

There were 30 teachers with a minimum of 8 years of teaching practice who agreed to act as respondents. Part of the interview described the quality of both their education and their teaching. The data was collected chronologically from the time the teachers started learning English, through their school and university education, up to the present time. The respondents were asked detailed questions concerning particular aspects of the teaching-learning process, with the special task of describing how their approach to these aspects had changed in the course of their careers. In this way I obtained a picture of a FL teacher including his education, his professional activity at school and his individual work devoted to the further development of his language competence and teaching potential.

However, it was not only this study which revealed to the character of the FL teachers' education that is offered at the universities and teacher training colleges. Other means used to confirm the existence of the phenomena described below were: my own experience in constructing the FL teaching methodology syllabus for University of Silesia students of English, conducting lectures in this field for these students as well as for in-service teachers, numerous lesson observations, and more or less formal discussions with teachers and school authorities.

Still, the results of the study supplied concrete data that allow us to list the moments of the teaching-learning process when the teachers feel most unsafe. The aim of the present paper is to find out whether these moments or even periods of unsafety are caused by gaps that appear in the course of preparing students for their future profession.

The elements of the FL teaching-learning process presented and discussed below were and are described by teachers as the ones in which they considered themselves unsuccessful. Our analysis here will try to show whether and to what an extent these failures are caused by gaps in teacher education and what possibilities we have to reduce them or eliminate them completely.

## **2. The first lesson of a foreign language**

On the basis of the above mentioned study and my own observations I suggest that the teachers' experience connected with the first lesson of a FL could be discussed within the frames of two main categories:

- teachers whose first lessons took place either during their classes on FL teaching methodology, in the presence of their teachers and friends, or later during their teaching practice;

- teachers who started their teaching prior to completing their academic course in FL teaching methods, and who were thus deprived of any experience or theoretical knowledge necessary during their first contacts with the students.

Teachers belonging to both groups describe their first lessons as a very traumatizing experience. The members of the former group point to the fact that the presence of so many “foreign bodies” in the classroom must make the lesson artificial and stresogenic for all the participants. The persons who started teaching as students admitted that they had been nearly paralysed before their first lesson. They reported such symptoms of nervousness as headache, upset stomach, trembling voice, rapid pulse and lack of appetite before the lesson. During the whole event they tried to speak English only, and they deliberately spoke so quickly that the students had to make an effort to understand them. (It was only after the lesson that they learned that the majority of students could not understand them at all).

Fear of the first meeting with a new group of students remains with these teachers up to the present. It might be assumed that they would not be able to get rid of it to the end of their teaching practice.

According to Janowski (1995: 88-99), the first meeting of teachers with students, especially in the situation when it is combined with the start of their professional careers, is so significant that it frequently becomes one of the factors determining their future course.

A lot can be done to address this problem during university lectures and classes. Students can and must be told of the differences between the first lesson and all the other lessons and taught what is expected from them at that time. In this way it will be possible to inform them in advance about the nature of this unique situation. Although it does not seem possible to eliminate the stress completely, future teachers can be informed about the remedies that they can apply to make it as mild as possible. It can be stated here that the teachers in the study were not equipped with this kind of knowledge and this could be called the first gap in their education.

The abnormal situation in which university or college students assume the work of professional teachers at schools is caused by the general lack of qualified teachers in the whole country. The students often cannot cope with the difficult situation of the first lesson, and this definitely contributes to the attitude of teachers towards teaching, which is generally negative. It can only be said at this moment that schools will soon start to employ FL teachers with full qualifications, whom they will be able to select according to their needs.

### **3. Correcting and discussing student errors**

It is seen both from the study referred to in the present paper and from my own observations that the teachers represent a certain phase in an evolution from the audiolingual approach to the identification and correction of student errors, to their tolerance, which is recommended, as they say, by the communicative approach to language teaching, the principles of which they claim to follow. This tolerance is definitely reinforced by the negative experiences of the teachers themselves, which goes back to their student classes. They remembered their own teachers constantly interrupting their spoken texts. This procedure evoked so much stress that they decide never to do the same to their students.

Although the interviewed teachers point out that they possess the necessary theoretical knowledge about the nature and sources of language errors, and they show their own systems of error correction, they seem to be too tolerant. In other words, FL teachers, especially young and inexperienced ones, do not always seem to know in what circumstances students' improper utterances must obligatorily be corrected. Their lack of sensitivity in this matter seems to be the second gap in their education. Moreover, the teachers do not feel their duty to discuss their errors with the students. Some of them even admit that such discussions are in a way troublesome for them. They are afraid of student questions which they might not be able to answer. Thus, knowledge about which errors must be corrected, in what moments, and by means of what technique, as well as the ways in which they have to be discussed, must receive more attention during the FL teaching methodology lectures and classes.

### **4. Language creativity**

The development of speaking and listening comprehension skills is treated as most important in the course of the global FL teaching-learning process by the majority of in-service teachers. "Dialogue exercises" are the strategies most frequently applied to achieve this aim.

It is not clear, however, what students are expected to do during these activities. Exercises devoted to grammar receive much less attention. The respondents talk about "language drills" and translation exercises in general and they consider them to be very "traditional".

Although it seems obvious that both the form and the content of the texts produced by the students are equally important and equally contribute to the ultimate success in FL learning (cf. Komorowska 1993:35-63, Ellis 1986:122), the average in-service teacher often seems to forget about the content. When talking about "global language abilities" and "general language practice" they concentrate only on the communicative values of the texts



produced by the students evaluated subjectively. Students talk about standard subjects regardless of their levels and they do not exert the slightest effort to go above the standard. Advanced learners recite speeches prepared from lists of topics known to generations.

Special language creativity exercises that could and should be administered to all the students seem to be abandoned by teachers, who concentrate too much on skill development and do not encourage their learners to practice creative thinking.

## **5. Evaluation of student progress**

This aspect of the teaching-learning process forms probably the biggest gap in teacher education, since the teachers have problems both with construction of language tests and with their evaluation and grading.

### **5.1. Types of tests applied**

As in the case of correcting student errors, here too the interviewed teachers spoke of some kind of evolution from audiolingualism to communicative language teaching. In the beginning of their work they concentrated mainly on written tests devoted to grammar. Now they organize oral tests aimed at the evaluation of global language behaviour during the production of learners' spoken texts. If the interviewees decided to give a written test to the students it most frequently took the form of "writing a dialogue", "summarizing a text from the textbook", "writing what they saw in the picture", or "translation". They supplied no details about these tasks. When beginning to teach, the interviewees said that writing in a FL was developed and tested by means of a dictation (!). Later they abandoned this method and now mostly do not offer any compositions or any other writing exercises to students, since, as they say, "it is very difficult and time consuming to correct later".

The oral tests applied now most frequently by our teachers are considered by them to be much better than the written ones because they allow them "to evaluate the global communication in a FL represented by their learners much better". The testing techniques are: answers to questions, the preparation of oral summaries of texts or, in advanced learners, the presentations of problems they were earlier asked to prepare. "Discussions and dialogues" were also treated as tests by the respondents.

The interviewed teachers avoided talking about the principles and methods of constructing their tests. They took as it were the opportunity to concentrate on "testing global language abilities", which allowed them to escape from the strict and organized measurement of the learners' knowledge of particular components of language. "Students' ability to communicate" is the key phrase used by the majority of teachers and teacher trainers. In fact the establishment of the learners' progress by means of regular measurement has been lost.

### **5.2. Evaluation of test results and grading**

Increased tolerance of language errors made by students involves imprecise testing, which in turn involves imprecise scoring and grading of test results. Both the members of the interviewed group, and other teachers with whom I had the opportunity to discuss this problem admitted that they did not know how to cope with it. Again, the key phrase "students global ability to communicate" allowed them to escape from the trouble. As soon as the teacher thinks that s/he understands what the student wanted to say the latter

is given a good mark, and the problem is solved. The teachers expressed the opinion that it was not recommended to give lower grades to the learners since it may cause stress and discourage them from further work.

My general observation is that teachers evade the strict evaluation of student progress. The idea of Communicative Language Teaching seems to justify such an approach to this element of the teaching process and probably this is the reason why the teachers feel justified. Still, they intuitively feel that something is wrong with this component of their work.

I consider it possible that the curricula of FL methodology lectures and classes do not pay the necessary amount of attention to this problem.

## 6. Summing up

On the basis both of the opinions of the respondents that took part in the study to which I refer in this paper, and, of the opinions of other teachers as well as university students, I concluded that all of them expected from me ready “recipes” about how to behave in particular situations in the classroom and are very much disappointed when they hear that such a “recipe” cannot be offered to them. What a FL methodology teacher is able to do is to supply the students with general rules of behaviour that they will later be able to adapt to their particular needs.

On the other hand, there exists a certain amount of theoretical knowledge that the future teachers must possess prior to their regular work at schools. The study devoted to teachers’ professional development showed us the gaps in this theoretical knowledge which may easily be filled during their university or college education. The problem is to distinguish what can be taught and what must be left to the future teachers’ intuition.

Definitely it is possible to instruct the students both theoretically and practically about how to behave during their first lesson in their lives, as well as during all their later meetings with the students whom they see for the first time. This can easily be done in the course of the FL teaching methodology lectures. Although the moment when students experience their first lesson in the presence of their teachers and other students has been described as very traumatizing (cf. Wysocka 1999), it seems to be a good preparation for their later real first meeting with the learners, when they start their regular teaching practice. Of course, we must assume that no university students will be employed in schools.

The lack of exercises devoted especially to language creativity seems to be rather dangerous in the teaching practice. The “creative aspect of language use” contributes to the learners’ general intellectual development and evokes and/or stimulates their individual search for knowledge. I think that the necessity of discussing the application of special language creativity exercises in the course of FL methodology lectures is absolutely crucial. Simultaneously, the optimal amount of time must be devoted to practical aspects of the problem, during the classes.

FL teachers’ and FL future teachers’ knowledge about the construction, application and evaluation of student performance is very poor. The result of this situation is that teachers generally avoid testing; this behaviour is reinforced by the assumptions of communicative language teaching which consequently produces generally greater tolerance of language errors committed by the students.

That this situation is a problem in FL teaching is confirmed by teachers insisting on post graduate lectures and workshops on this subject. We should realize then, that FL

departments graduates leave the university with quite large gaps of knowledge in this respect. On the basis of the results of the study quoted here it must be said that the following problems need the separate attention:

FL methodology lectures:

- typology of language tests
- planning of FL tests
- principles of FL test construction
- principles of FL test evaluation

FL methodology classes:

- construction of particular types of tests
- application of FL tests
- FL test evaluation and grading

In addition, the construction, application and evaluation of different types of tests must be included as an obligatory task for particular students to be completed during their teaching practice.

I hope that filling the above described gaps in teacher education will contribute to the development of the creative aspect of language teaching.

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