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THE “IDEAL” LANGUAGE TEACHER

ABSTRACT. In this brief article I would like to bring all the readers face to face with an important issue, which I have been dealing with for a very long time: the roles and characteristics of the “language teacher”.

The first section will be a brief background based on my experiences. The second part will be dedicated to the new roles the language teacher must be aware of, and finally there is a part that explains the “new” abilities the language teacher should possess.

KEYWORDS: Language teacher. Teaching FL or L2. Teacher’s qualities. Language teaching.

SINTESI. In questo breve articolo vorrei porre tutti i lettori di fronte a una questione importante, di cui mi occupo da molto tempo e che concerne i ruoli e le caratteristiche dell’“insegnante di lingue straniere”.

La prima sezione sarà un breve background basato sulle mie esperienze. La seconda parte sarà dedicata ai nuovi ruoli di cui l’insegnante di lingua deve essere a conoscenza e infine vi è una parte che esplica le “nuove” abilità che l’insegnante di lingue dovrebbe possedere.

PAROLE CHIAVE: Insegnante di lingua. Insegnare FL o L2. Qualità dell’insegnante. Didattica delle lingue.

1. Talking about the language teacher

As a student, in my past education, like everyone else, I had good teachers and bad teachers. People that were very dedicated and devoted to their role and

their students and from whom I had the great opportunity to learn a lot of new and interesting things. On the other hand, I had also a lot of bad experiences to deal with: some teachers who just entered the classroom, called the roll, sat in their comfortable chairs behind their big-triumphant desks and read the newspaper for all the 50 minutes of the lesson.

I am not sure if I should thank more the first or the second type of teachers, because each of these two types created in me the desire to make a difference and to become a teacher, and thanks to my hard work I am a teacher now.

In my field of studies – teaching a foreign language –, the type of professional factors that are required are very different from past generations.

The figure of the teacher is no longer a human walking-dictionary with a lot of knowledge. The students, the schools, the societies around them request much more of them. These requirements are what we will discover in this brief but information-packed article.

2. *The “ideal” language teacher*

In the past, the professor or *magister* (the teacher) was not necessarily a teacher: “*he knows Latin, so he knows how to teach it*”. This was Gentile’s¹ motto, still tragically alive in schools and, above all, universities in Italy. At that time the teacher was the only interpreter of the “*sacred textbook*” and the only judge, starting with the contents in the textbook and finishing with the students’ evaluation.

Even now, that I live far from Italy, outside of the European continent, overseas in Japan, this kind of “*stereotyped-concept*” does not leave me alone. Here the match “country + language” is still alive and causes many problems of discrimination. I had the experience of working with very talented teachers with great potential, and sharp critical minds. And of course with some types of less professional “teachers” who showed “the sit behind the desk” attitude, because,

¹ Gentile: Giovanni Gentile (30 May 1875-15 April 1944) was a neo-Hegelian idealist philosopher, educator, and fascist politician. He was the Minister of education in Benito Mussolini’s first cabinet, and in 1923 he carried through a reform, the Gentile Reform; a series of normative acts officially recognized 21 universities in Italy.

as I always heard: “*he/she is a native English teacher... of course he/she can teach English*”. Nothing could be more wrong than this sentence. Being a native speaker it is not the same as being a teacher.

Based on my personal experience I could notice that, many of them could not even read the IPA² written in the textbooks, or understand the difference between an adjective or an adverb; I had to assist many of them that struggled to get along with the students or, the worst category for me, it was to deal with those who always said to me: “*This is not my job!*”

Of course, being a native-speaker gives you a lot of advantages in terms of confidence, from a psychological point of view, and a practical way of considering the act of teaching: a native-speaker can make corrections faster. However this is just a small part of the job.

During the second half of the twentieth century, new concepts were proposed, turning the teacher into an expert in disciplinary teaching. The

² IPA: International Phonetic Alphabet.

evolution of the role of the teacher of foreign languages requires new skills and knowledge. Skills that, though in some aspects can be considered from the point of view of an individual, should rather be understood as characterizing professionalism. The language teacher must be a tutor, a director or a facilitator: a very reliable ally of the students against the difficulties of learning and acquiring a foreign language. We are talking about:

- **Facilitator**: according to the logic of Dubin and Olshtein³. A facilitator, the one who has the task of keeping the motivation high and incorporates the learner's wishes into the learning act. The facilitator must be responsible for creating great learning experiences and encouraging participants to roll up their sleeves and learn by doing. The course design and, of course, every single lesson must be human-centered, and proposed to the students under a creative approach to problem solving, that aims to get the students thinking outside the box. A facilitator should be ready to coach the students to overcome feelings of nervousness and encourage them to try new ways of thinking and doing.
- **Counselor/advocator**, who has the task of putting himself in the position of

³ Fraida Dubin and Elite Olshtain (1986), *Course Design: Developing and Materials for Language Learning*, Cambridge University Press.

the learners and trying to act as a cultural mediator in the act of interaction. This role is well considered by Curran⁴ at the end of the 70s' when he proposed the Community Language Learning (CLL). The teacher in this role, places himself/herself outside of the learning process; instead he/she gives advice, tries to help and to find a better way of learning for their students who match their skills and personalities. Empathy here is the key.

- **Maieutics**⁵ / **creator** of the course design, according to the *Silent Way* method developed by the Swiss Gattegno⁶, and further developed in the Natural Approach of Krashen and Terrell⁷. The teacher gives a model and then keeps silent and says nothing. He must consider the students' psychological state of mind and put it before anything else. Extending this idea, expressed in these learning methods, I would like to move your attention to Socrates' method of discussion or debate. This is a form of

⁴ Charles Arthur Curran (1913-1978) was a priest of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Columbus, a psychologist who is best known as the creator of Community Language Learner (CLL), a method in education and more specifically in Second Language Teaching.

⁵ Discovery method.

⁶ Caleb Gattegno (1911-1988) is one of the most influential mathematicians and educators of the twentieth century.

⁷ Stephen Krashen (born 1941-) is professor emeritus at the University of Southern California. Tracy Dale Terrell (1943-1991) was an education theorist and with Krashen wrote *The Natural Approach*, a comprehension-based language learning methodology, which emphasizes the idea of exposure and the lowering of effective or emotional barriers to learning.

cooperative and argumentative dialogue between the members, based on asking and answering questions to stimulate critical thinking and draw out ideas and concepts.

- **Tutor/Instructor** promotes dialogue in solving problems related to learning a foreign language; starting from the 90s', widely adopted for adult-learners and for blended-learning situations.
- **Coordinator/director** is the teacher who has the task of putting together situations of contact with the foreign country. In this role, according to Freddi⁸, the teacher stays behind the scenes, in the background and guides the students/actors. The teacher is a point of reference for the students, a means and a connection between him/her and the target language.

All these types of expertises are necessary in the classroom and outside of the classroom. The profile of the “ideal” language teacher should be linked both to the scholastic and national context and the range of skills, interests, and gained-experiences. It is appropriate to consider these three aspects: the nation, the human resource and the type of educational institution.

⁸ Giovanni Freddi (1930-2012) was the founder of the Venetian School of language teaching research.

In the first place, the country: national or local contexts may favor certain objectives or values, thus modifying the balance or the desirable dosage of the teacher's quality.

Secondly, the human resource, which must be highly qualified, and finally the school, where the social background of the students, the availability of resources and material structures determine the real possibilities and the favorable conditions to quality teaching. From the very first moment you are in the classroom, embarking the role of a language teacher, you must understand that between the students and you, there is one tiny invisible thread, that links everything in a very fragile net. In Japanese this is expressed with the word KIZUNA (絆, きずな) that means *ties, bonds*.

3. The “IDEAL” language teacher’s “qualities”

The “IDEAL” language teacher’s “qualities” must be *savoir, savoir-faire, et savoir-être* (Altet, 1993, 8) The good teacher knows the subject and knows

how to teach it. He/she can transmit to the students concepts, skills and knowledge. He/She uses the subject as an opportunity for his students to acquire general skills aimed at critical reflection. The teacher must have a large repertoire of effective techniques, which sometimes is difficult, especially when the teacher has to respect the constraints of an imposed school program, which in most cases ends with an examination.

According to Margiotta (2001) the qualities of a modern language teacher must be the following:

● **To be able to work in a team.**

The teacher is not the only one, of course with the student, involved in the act of learning; the school, the family and most of all other teachers might be involved. So, knowing how to work and collaborate with other teachers in a team is crucial.

● **To learn to change and grow.**

Learning to change and evolve: in harmony with the evolution of history,

culture, and more specifically with the autonomy of the school in which he/she is an integral part of.

● **To be aware of the importance of the experiences.**

Knowing how to grasp the value of experiences, knowing how to propose innovations to solve new problems: the “ideal” language teacher does not (only) acquire innovation, but (above all) produces it and customize it.

● **Management skills.**

Having management skills; having the ability to manage and monitor several roles; developing different services starting from the pure and the simple act of teaching in the classroom. In the classroom, especially where the environment is international, the teacher must be aware of their students’ language level; the teachers have to understand their temper, their desires and be able to avoid any inappropriate situations, for example, in pair’s activities which students’ pairs matching better, or students’ cultural backgrounds or thinking.

A lot of teachers would like to be “only a teacher”, however they have to

try to understand also the schools' bureaucracy when required to fill in documents; understand the law of the country where they teach; be aware of the different rules and laws. Starting with classroom performances, a lot of teachers assume that the best way of teaching and managing the classroom is by using only the language target in the classroom. In the very beginning this "teachers' talk" and also considering "teachers' talking time" can be long and tedious. The more the teacher talks the less the students learn and *ipso facto* they won't acquire the language. The teacher in class must be aware of the never old fashioned quote by Confucius: "*tell me and I will forget, show me and I may remember; involve me and I will understand.*" The rhetorical idea that the teacher must use only the target language is basically wrong, because it does not consider the aim, or the emotional filter behind the communicative act. For example, if the teacher has to make some corrections and explain why, it would be less stressful and easier to understand for the students, if the teacher has to use their mother tongue.

● **Guarantee the connections.**

Ensuring the link between the institution and the world of the target language outside in which he/she works: organizing students' exchanges, participating in international projects, trying to establish agreements with foreign institutions, and incorporating cultural, social, and political topical information, etc. of the country of which he/she teaches the foreign language and culture.

As it can be seen by this list we must consider the psychological, pedagogical and emphatic, etc. competencies the “ideal” language teacher must have.

4. Conclusion

The main aim of this article was to give a general idea of what it means to be a language teacher nowadays. The teacher must be a professional with a lot of skills and knowledge inside his/her toolbox.

My ideal language teacher is a person with great integrity who can make

the students comfortable and aware of the complexity of learning. He/she is a person who, *in primis*, knows how to guide the students and help them to get a meaningful experience from every single moment, in which they both will take part in the discovery of a new language and culture.

The good teacher feels involved in his work, demonstrates commitment, involvement and dedication. A strong desire to help their students leads them to seek the most effective methods incessantly, even in the presence of difficult social situations. The teacher's commitment goes beyond the classroom and leads them to collaborate with other teachers of the institute where he works. The greatest desire is to see the success of their students. Good teachers are trying to communicate with warmth, even if students do not reciprocate. I met a lot of frustrated and stressed teachers, in conflict with the students. Even if the students are against the school and the idea of "studying", the high quality teacher stands however with sympathy, respect and dignity. Students are neither a danger nor a threat. The teacher is able to create a comfortable atmosphere and,

in cases of hostility, is able to transform the classroom in order to make it cheerful and comfortable. Students need to feel confident; they need to trust and then risk and face the difficulties of learning. It also helps to build self-confidence, self-esteem and awareness of one's own abilities, creating opportunities for success. The fact of knowing that you can succeed stimulates the desire to try and succeed, if the students are continually encouraged to learn. The quality language teacher is concerned not only with the students' intellectual growth, but also with the development of their moral sense, with a social sensibility, and to do that the teacher must assume the "role of a model". Love for students, and commitment to helping them learn, are powerful motivations for continuing to teach. The support of colleagues in the workplace is essential to maintain this motivation. Nonetheless, the local environmental and scholastic contexts that support this motivation, also filtering the effects of central policies, play a non-marginal role for this purpose.

Finally, I would like to remember to all of you that the most important

ingredient for any kind of activities, any jobs or any little thing is: PASSION. It does not matter how well you know the techniques or the process; if you are not passionate, if you do not love what you are doing, your job will be useless. *Au contraire*, if you love and care about your job – in this case the act of teaching – so I can say that you can make the difference for a better world. Because I am one of those people who firmly think that only education, in its wide meaning, can help us to evolve. Education can empower, can create peace and can make anyone free.

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