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ELT in Libyan Universities - A Pragmatic Approach

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Abstract

Teaching English language and literature is an uphill task in Libyan universities. Not only are the students first generation learners but they have also been affected by the pull of their mother tongue and special writing style. The experience of a foreign teacher in the universities of Libya is challenging and enriching as well. Lack of interest and motivation and competitive spirit on the part of students, non-availability of study materials, books, journals and news papers, absence of scholarly ambience and some of the blocks which hinder the process of learning the English language.

However, there are also special attributes found in them such as their amazing memory power, communicative English, their eagerness to listen to stories their sense of humour, etc.

Teaching English could be a rewarding experience in Libya if the teacher is imbued with understanding, appreciation, encouragement and the skills for using appropriate, pragmatic teaching strategies so that the inherent talents of students could be brought out and enhanced. Hence, this paper focuses on the pragmatic approach to the teaching English to the Libyan students at the university level.

English in Libya

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In Libya, English language skills are now recognized as indispensable not only in schools and universities but also in the armed forces. Ian Black (2007) reports: “After years when foreign language teaching was banned, Libyans are now queuing up to learning English.”

English is a compulsory subject from the 5th grade of elementary school in Libya. There is a great desire amongst young professionals in Libya for developing English language skills for their betterment and favorable placement in the competitive global world. In short, the need for learning English is intensely felt for the social and economic development and for the advancement in the field of science and technology in the country.

Difficulties in Teaching English in Libya

But teaching English in the Libyan universities is a Herculean task. Except in the language class, students find no opportunity to learn or use English anywhere. Not even name boards of shops, hospitals, banks etc., are written in English.

Invariably Arabic is used everywhere. It is surprising to note that the university students fail to understand the meanings of even the commonly used English words like ‘post office’, ‘money’, ‘street’, etc.,. The complete lack of exposure to English of the students makes even more the task difficult to the teachers. Students seem to have no idea of proper sentence structure in English. They do not know the correct spellings and grammatical rules.

As Arabic is a stressed language like English, students use stress in speaking English but stress in the wrong syllables making their English unintelligible. The students seem to be less motivated and uninterested in English language classes. Still as a silver lining in a cloud, the Libyan students have excellent memory, interest in humour, communicative language and stories. The students seem to have no reading habit. This may be due to the absence of news papers, weeklies, monthlies and journals in English.

Foreign Teachers of English in Libya

As a foreign teacher of English, one is teaching English to the first generation learns and also living amidst different social, cultural and climatic conditions. One may feel that different culture and society affect the efficiency of teaching as the researchers like Portes and Rambaut (2001) maintain that home culture and language are associated with higher educational achievement. One need not worry about the socio- cultural difference for effective teaching because a study conducted by the National Literacy panel on Language Minority Children and Youth concluded that there is surprisingly little evidence for the impact of socio cultural variables on literary learning (August and Shanahan 2006). So, an effective teacher can teach effectively to students of any social and cultural back ground.

The Role of Books

There is a general belief that text books are indispensable for teaching English. Contrary to this belief we are teaching English in Libyan universities without a text book. Haeidub Idris, our head of the department of English, Jalo often tells us that an effective and efficient teaching of English can take advantage of combination of methods and approaches to accomplish our goals which the text books do not provide. Teacher himself/ herself has the privilege of acting as the text book. Hence, there is more flexibility in teaching and learning.

Pragmatic Approach

Recent research claims that the use of a single method or approach is not appropriate for good teaching and learning. Such findings propose to base teaching on the combination of diverse methods to achieve the objectives. I always combine different methods or approaches appropriate for effective teaching, which I call the pragmatic approach and find myself successful as a teacher. This practical approach comprises of motivating the students to learn, creating interest in what they are learning, using humour and stories in the class room.

Let us see how these factors followed in this approach are important and how best they can be used.

Motivation and Interest

The most important thing in teaching English is about motivating the students to learn and create an interest in what they are learning. Some students are enthusiastic learners but many depend on the teacher for enthusiasm. For them the interest lies in the teacher, what is being taught and how it is being taught.

Effective learning depends on the teacher's ability to maintain the interest that brought the students to the course in the first place (Erickson, 1998). The main idea of motivation is to capture the students' attention and curiosity and channel their energy towards learning. Intrinsic motivation is motivation from within the students that is of much importance. To boost positive attitude and motivate learning, an environment conducive to learning must be created (Finocchiaro, 1982; Ngeow, 1998). Factors that create conducive learning environment include non-threatening fun environment, providing various types of input which are auditory, visual, sensual, verbal and non-verbal in nature.

Motivation is the backbone of any classroom. When the students are motivated the teacher performs his/her job the best. "Don't give your students fish, but teach them how to fish". This proverb is true in language learning.

But how do we go about teaching English and how do we maintain their interest in language learning? Research has shown that factors such as positive learner and teacher attitudes must be sustained for successful transfer of language learning. Many teachers are interested in teaching the students how to read and write well along with the rules of grammar. Though this approach is useful to some extent, it will not sustain the interest of the students in the long run. Interest in the subject matter, perception of its usefulness, general desire to achieve, self-confidence, patience and persistence are major factors of motivation. (Keri Kosach,2006).

Get Them Motivated!

To encourage students to become motivated Keri Kosach (2006) gives the following suggestions to the teachers.

1. Give frequent and early feedback of the student's progress and understanding.
2. Always ensure opportunities for student's success by giving tasks that are not too hard or too easy.
3. Try to help each and every student find the personal meaning and importance in the material.
4. Make students participate actively by asking a lot of questions.
5. Make them work in pairs.

When the class is restless, some students are indifferent and some are not attentive, we know that the students are uninterested and not motivated. A striking feature of the Libyan students is that they are free, frank and fearless.

So, when the teacher asks them the reason for their indifference or lack of interest they would frankly come out with the real cause. Sometimes, the cause may point to the fault in teaching and sometimes to their personal reasons. The teacher should be positive in his/her approach. If the cause is concerned with teaching, the teacher should make adjustments or modification of his/her way of teaching.

If it is concerned with their personal reasons, the teacher should try to help them through suggestions, comfort and counseling. If the teacher cannot do anything in that matter, he/she should at least acknowledge his/her inability in such situations. Once the teacher does this, the teacher would be surprised to note that students show keen interest in learning with rebound vigour.

Humour

Any teacher can use humour as an effective tool in teaching. We should dispel the myth that one must be a comedian to use humour in a language classroom. Classrooms in which laughter is welcome help bring learning to life (Dickinson, 1998). The psychologists Loomax and Moosavi

(1998) and Provine (2000) suggest that the use of humour in the classroom reduces tension, improves classroom climate, increases student teacher rapport and even facilitate learning.

One reason for using humour is that as a human trait it is self-effacing behavior and it can allow the shy or timid students in the class to participate with the group. It is a way of reaching out to those students who are nervous to attempt expressing themselves in their second language (Provine, 2000). Humour decreases anxiety and stress. Hence, it contributes to positive learning and teaching.

Emile Chiasson (2002) has given the following guidelines for using humour in the classroom!

1. Don't try too hard. Let humour arise naturally, encourage it, don't force it.
2. Do what fits your personality.
3. Don't use private humour or humour that leaves people out.
4. Make humour an integral part of your class, rather than something special.
5. Humour may be used to solicit dialogue, conversations and develop vocabulary.
6. The extent to which you use humour will vary on your class. Interpretation, discussion and analysis will vary on the proficiency of your class.

As a teacher, I often use humour and humorous articles in my class. To give a practical example, I mention an imaginary letter written by a mother to her son who is living in his college hostel.

Before using any such thing, I always ask myself "What knowledge do I want the students to demonstrate by using this material?" I never try to deal with multiple aspects at one time. Here you can read the letter below which I use in my semantics class.

A mother's letter to her son

My dear J,

I am in a well here and hoping you are also in a well there. I am writing this letter slowly because I know you cannot read fast.

We changed our house. It is really nice. It even has a washing machine situated right above the toilet. I am not sure it works too well. Last week I put in three shirts, pulled the chain and not seen them still.

The weather here is not bad. It rained twice last week. The first time it rained for three days and second time four days.

The coat you wanted me to send you, your aunt said it would be too heavy to send in the mail with all the metal buttons. So we cut them off and put them in the pocket.

Your father has another job. He has five hundred men under him. He is cutting the grass at the cemetery.

Your sister had a baby, this morning, I have not found out whether it is a girl or boy, so I do not know whether you are aunt or uncle.

Your uncle, fell in the nearby well. Some men tried to pull him out, but he fought them off bravely and drowned. We cremated him and he burned for three days.

There is not much more news. This time nothing much has happened.

With love
Mom.

The students find it interesting. I ask them why this letter is humorous. How does the intended meaning differ from the explicit meaning ? What are the errors in the use of words and reasoning. As an outcome, the students learn the intended objectives with enthusiasm.

Critical thinking

To foster learning a teacher should make the students think critically. Critical thinking is a disciplined manner of thought which assess the validity of things such as statements, news, stories, arguments, research etc. (Richard R. Day, 2003).

Richard R. Day (2003) limits critical thinking to the following :

1. Differentiation between facts and opinions.
2. Examination of assumptions.
3. Flexibility while looking for explanations and solutions for problems.

There is no need for conducting special courses on critical thinking for the students to learn English. A teacher can make the students think critically by using simple techniques like encouraging them not to accept anything for granted, asking questions with multiple answers, creating a strong argument, provoking thought and adopting pair work and group work. These techniques make the students excited and become active learners.

Thinking Hats

Edward de Bono devised *six thinking hats* as a strategy to develop thinking. I read his six hats technique of developing thinking in [http:// wwwfp.education-tas.gov.au/English/sixhats.htm](http://wwwfp.education-tas.gov.au/English/sixhats.htm). The colours help students to visualize six separate modes of thinking. The purpose is to make the students learn to reflect on their thinking and recognise different things required in different

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learning situations. For example, the students are posed with a problem and asked to think of a particular coloured hat. They will start thinking in line with the particular colour:

- White hat - facts and information available.
- Black hat - negative points and difficulties
- Yellow hat - benefits and values
- Red hat - emotions and feelings
- Green hat - imaginative thinking
- Blue hat - the effects of the problem and the need to manage thinking process.

This six hat thinking technique can be effectively used to make the class active.

Stories

Psychologists believe that children need stories, legends and fairy tales when they grow up. Stories are part of their intellectual life. When stories are important for students in learning their mother-tongue, they are equally important in learning English as well. All students, from elementary schools to universities, benefit from the use of stories. Stories are an ideal introduction of the foreign language as they present language in a familiar context to the students. Stories help develop positive attitudes towards the foreign language, culture and language learning (Ellis and Brewster, 2002).

Stories deal with human relationships. Students can interpret them and gain insight in their own thinking. Stories enhance vocabulary competence, critical thinking and gain greater control and confidence in the use of the language. Stories include short stories, fables, fairy tales, folk-tales, legends and myths. In India, a great named Vishnu Sharma taught the foolish princes through animal stories and made them the wisest men.

The teacher can use the stories can be of any country. The culture of that country may not be an obstacle in enjoyment of learning. The case for the use stories is that they are funny, engaging, remind us of ourselves, help us emphasise, inform us, take us on journeys (Spiro, 2006).

The teacher can narrate stories or ask students to read stories by supplying the reading material. Students respond positively. Stories are thought provoking and they provide interest and variety in terms of content, language and themes. After the students complete listening or reading the stories they may asked different questions to kindle their intelligence. They may discuss in groups and come out with answers. By doing so, they develop confidence in speaking the target language. They may be asked to write down about some characters in the story or to write down a new ending to the story. This would help them improve their writing skills. On the whole the students develop all the four skills of English. Stories enable the students to differentiate between varieties of the language- standard and non-standard language. Students can recognise the formal

and informal use of language, register, slang and metaphors used in the stories. Using short stories, novels, and plays helps to sustain the students' interest in language learning (Thirumalai, 2002). Students become fluent speakers as stories evoke an emotional response. For teachers allow to use an acquisition- based methodology by providing optimal input (Ellis and Brewster, 2002).

Conclusion

The pragmatic approach stated here is an easy, effective and efficient method that can be adopted by the teachers of English in the universities of Libya for developing the students' proficiency in English.

As stated earlier, this pragmatic approach is not a single approach or a method but a combination of several approaches or methods. The most important factor in this approach is motivating and creating interest for learning to the students; once interest is created teaching and learning become delightful. This becomes a strong foundation for building this approach with humour, stories and critical thinking. It utilizes the Libyan students' inborn interest for the enrichment of English language skills.

I conclude with the assertion that the pragmatic approach discussed here makes the students improve the skills of the target language by creating a positive environment and becomes a source of joy and enjoyment to students. By adopting this approach, students are made to achieve a high level of proficiency in the four skills of English- listening, speaking, reading and writing by reducing the stress and anxiety of students. Students tend to use English more. I look forward for more research and theoretical development of this approach to provide, better teaching of English to students.

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