

An Irregular Challenge

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This paper presents different strategies in teaching a foreign language. They are based on an audiovisual methodology. On the one hand, the student feels language alive from the very beginning, and in a parallel form, s/he plays an active role in her/his learning. On the other hand, the teacher becomes a learner in an irregular way.

Teaching a foreign language in a non-native environment requires more audiovisual resources than expected. I will try to go through this challenge aiming at irregular verbs. Taking a complete irregular verb list that includes the three forms- base, simple past and past participle form- , we select a number of them. The criteria to do this can respond to our teaching needs; that is, following alphabetic order, semantic field practice, phonetic exercise or sound repetition, for example.

In the first case, alphabetic order is good to bring students in this kind of activity if they are not used to it. In the second case, if we decide the practice of vocabulary, we can present or reinforce irregular verbs depending on the semantic field we would like to work with. Lastly, phonetics, most of the times the language teaching outcast, is the most profitable aspect. It provides a different perspective for both students and teachers. In this sense, language is studied through language itself in a sort of metalinguistic exploitation and exploration as seen below. In fact, it is this third aspect what controls the teaching-learning process and may even invert the elements in the binomial process. Since it gives students autonomy when studying a language not only in the classroom but also outside.

Regardless the criterion followed, the first stage in the teaching-learning process is the presentation of the selected items in an audio or audiovisual if possible. Since this first approach for students towards new elements is extremely remarkable, the teachers have to get students “hooked” on the contents of the lesson. In order to catch their attention is much better the use of an audiovisual

resource. That is to say, the teacher mimes, and at the same times s/he pronounces the three forms of the irregular verbs chosen and makes students repeat both action and sound.

Imitation is a primary and rudimentary way of communication. This is a reflection of the natural way we ourselves learn our mother tongue. When imitating, students take part in their own learning from the very beginning. Later, the teacher only mimes the verbs and students individually or in groups pronounce them. A variation could consist of getting most responsive students to mime by themselves in front of the class, while the others guess the verbs.

So far, we have just been working natural materials: our bodies, hands to feel, ears to recognize and mouth to speak. What is more genuine and familiar than our own body? Apart from being a rhetoric question, it points out the importance of considering the acquisition of a second language in a natural and secure method. Two main liabilities in the teaching foreign languages have come out: naturalness and security. The development of the lesson in a comfortable atmosphere has already been set. What about the second one, security, or better-said self-confidence?

On a second stage, we will introduce the written part by means of a transparency in which the three forms are shown different colours. Let us say: red for infinitive, green for simple past affirmative – that is something to be corrected in grammar books; authors should title the second column not simple past but affirmative simple past, - and finally, blue for past participle. Colours may seem a banal element. However, three aspects must be taken into account students' focus, choice of colours and diversity among your students. The use of colours will bring your students' attention on that new means of working with language they will be eager to practise. In employing colours, you should consider that some colours are not visible through a transparency; that is the case of yellow which becomes diffused. Besides, colours should be dark in order to create contrast among them. If you follow the proposed guidelines, you will teach language as a homogeneous corpus. On the contrary, your students are far from being homogeneous. I mean, some people have problems distinguishing colours, people suffering from a visual alteration called, daltonism or colour blindness.

Now, what can we do with that colour transparency? A wide range of possibilities open in front of us. On a first place, it is convenient to review pronunciation, that is why we should repeat the pronunciation of the three forms of the

irregular verbs we are working with. From this point on we are able to create different audiovisual based activities depending on the stage of the teaching–learning process, on the students’ attitude and on own state of mind. These guidelines may not seem satisfactory for non-dynamic teachers. But, precisely, the teacher is a he means of language transmission. If the teacher is not active, then there is no communication. Through these exercises, teachers and students always keep a point in common: their dependence on each other. Students feel they are needed by the teacher. This responsibility share makes then be a significant part and beneficial part in the teaching–learning process. Consequently, the self-confidence barrier can be surpassed.

This is a turning point . The teaching-learning process may be inverted (see previous reference on the first page of this article). As a result, students become the source of knowledge for the teacher. Students’ creativeness and attitude will guide the teacher in the planning of more activities of the seen kind. For example, using balls with the colours in the transparency. The teacher distributes the ball and mimes or names a verb in Spanish, then the students in the colour order of the transparency must say the forms.

Lastly, the application of the verbal forms consolidates of the acquired knowledge. Students arranged in a circular way are assigned a sentence in simple past affirmative beginning from the ends of the circle to the centre— on next activities we can work on negative past or questions.— There must be a couple of students with the same sentence. In turns we throw the ball to students, especially those we think are not good at memorising. The student with the ball says the assigned sentence and we try to correct the possible mistakes asking for classmates’ collaboration. Later, the teacher or a student if they are an odd number, holds a hankie and mimes a verb or says the verbal form in the sentences given. The quickest student gets the hankie and reproduces the sentence; he gets a point for that and two more if the sentence is well pronounced. Automatism and repetition lets language flow in a spontaneous form.

The practice of these activities does not imply a great effort but it does imply an approach to a methodology based on the teaching- learning interaction. For a structural methodology user, the lesson planning presented throughout these lines might seem inadequate. It is important to bear in mind that nothing is inappropriate but maybe not well accommodated. Far from being pretentious what I want to state is a change of sight towards insight in analysing established

methodological principles. It is not only the sense of being eclectic regarding pedagogical aspects but also the inversion in the teaching-learning binomial.

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