

Breaking Barriers: Innovative Approaches to Teaching English to Novice Language Learners in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

In the rapidly evolving landscape of English language education in Azerbaijan, this article offers a comprehensive look at the teaching methodologies and challenges encountered in a foundational English language course at Nakhchivan State University's Foreign Languages Faculty. This first-year, first-semester course comprises 14 female students with diverse language backgrounds and skill levels. Led by a seasoned lecturer boasting over 15 years of experience in language teaching—seven of which were in higher education—the course aims to lay a strong foundation for future academic pursuits in English. Primarily focusing on speaking skills, the course employs a blend of the Direct Method, storytelling, and listening exercises to maximize first-time English exposure. With students ranging from complete beginners to more advanced learners, the article scrutinizes the complexities of varying skill levels and outlines practical strategies for tackling these challenges. In doing so, it offers invaluable reflections and insights for educators navigating similar pedagogical terrains.

Introduction

The Changing Landscape of English Language Education in Azerbaijan; As countries around the globe increasingly recognize the importance of English as a lingua franca in both academic and professional settings, Azerbaijan is no exception. In recent years, English language education has been experiencing a renaissance of sorts, becoming more prioritized than ever before. Schools and universities have started to overhaul their curricula to incorporate English in a more integrated manner, recognizing its critical role in shaping global citizens.

The Setting: Foreign Languages Faculty at Nakhchivan State University

Within this burgeoning educational landscape, the Foreign Languages Faculty at Nakhchivan State University serves as a microcosm of larger shifts in language pedagogy. This faculty, unique in its approach, offers a range of language specialties including Russian, French, German, Arabic, and Farsi. However, an interesting trend has emerged over the years. While these languages have been staples in academic offerings, their popularity among students has dwindled significantly. In stark contrast, the English language specialty has witnessed exponential growth. So much so that the number of students choosing languages like French, German, Russian, and Arabic has shrunk to merely two or three per specialty.

This escalation in the demand for English education reflects a broader societal shift. Regardless of

their initial proficiency in the language, more students are opting for English as their bachelor's degree specialty with the anticipation that mastery over this global lingua franca will pave the way for lucrative career opportunities. As a result, the faculty faces a unique challenge: equipping a diverse range of students, with varying levels of English proficiency, to become the next generation of language teachers.

The Challenge: A Diverse Student Body

The course under scrutiny consists of 14 female students, most of whom have some foundational knowledge of English. However, a significant outlier exists—a student with zero prior experience in the language. Further complicating the teaching environment are two students struggling with extremely low self-confidence, affecting their willingness to participate actively in class. Despite these challenges, the course aims to develop comprehensive English language skills, with a particular focus on speaking abilities.

In the sections that follow, we will delve deeper into the methodologies employed to meet these diverse learning needs, evaluate the complexities of varying skill levels, and proffer pedagogical insights valuable to educators facing similar challenges.

Student Demographics: A Diverse Microcosm

The first-year English language course at the Foreign Languages Faculty, Nakhchivan State University, features a diverse student body, both in terms of linguistic background and academic aptitude. In the specific group under examination, there are 14 female students, a typical class size when compared to other groups within the faculty which generally consist of around 15 students. These young women hail from various parts of the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic and are predominantly from middle-income families.

Aspirations and Motivations

In line with the growing trend of English education in Azerbaijan, most students in the class aspire to become English teachers. They view their university education as an investment in their future careers. Understanding the upward trajectory of the English language in both local and global contexts, these students have strategically chosen this path to secure better career prospects.

Varied Linguistic Backgrounds

While most students have a foundational knowledge of English, the group does include outliers that present unique teaching challenges. One student had zero prior experience with English, having focused on French and Russian during her school years. Additionally, there are two students who, despite some foundational knowledge, have extremely low levels of self-confidence which impacts their class participation.

Instructional Strategies for Diverse Learning Needs

To tackle these challenges, specific strategies are employed. Students with lower skills and confidence are encouraged to sit in the front rows to foster a closer teacher-student interaction. Authentic texts and multimedia resources, such as YouTube fairy tales, are carefully selected to align with the students' proficiency levels. This not only aids in comprehension but also serves to boost their self-confidence.

The Exceptional Few

Among the group, there are also two exceptionally gifted students whose grasp of English is notably advanced compared to their peers. Their presence provides an interesting dynamic and contributes to a positive classroom atmosphere, testifying to the effectiveness of the teaching methodologies employed.

This heterogeneous mixture of linguistic abilities and confidence levels, combined with their strong motivations, makes teaching this group both a challenge and an opportunity. It allows for the

implementation of a variety of teaching techniques aimed at meeting the needs of each student, thus enriching the overall educational experience.

3. Methodologies Employed: Fusing the Direct Method and Storytelling for Optimal Results

Embracing the Direct Method: Fostering Conversational Skills

The cornerstone of our instructional approach is the Direct Method, a technique that champions the teaching of grammar and vocabulary within the milieu of everyday dialogue. This method is particularly instrumental in fostering rapid thinking in English and forming articulate sentences, essential attributes for effective spoken communication. Drawing on the insights from Hasan Alisoy's "Connect with English A1-A2 Speaking Handbook," the Direct Method serves as a reliable framework that aligns seamlessly with the class's key aim: enhancing speaking capabilities.

Incorporating Storytelling: A Cognitive and Emotional Catalyst

In addition to the Direct Method, storytelling becomes another arrow in our pedagogical quiver. Storytelling, as a teaching strategy, galvanizes students both emotionally and cognitively through the power of narrative. It not only offers authentic language in a contextual framework but also makes the new vocabulary and grammatical structures more impactful and memorable. This aligns well with the techniques suggested in "Connect with English A1-A2 Speaking Handbook," where the emphasis is on authentic language usage and context-driven learning.

Rationalizing the Choice of Methodologies

The amalgamation of the Direct Method and storytelling aims to accommodate the diverse learning needs within the classroom. While the Direct Method lays the foundation for building robust speaking and conversational skills, storytelling brings an element of dynamism and interest, enriching the educational experience. This dual-method approach is not just a pedagogically sound choice but is also empirically validated. As illustrated in "Connect with English A1-A2 Speaking Handbook," a multi-dimensional approach to language teaching can significantly enhance the learning outcome, particularly in classes with a heterogeneous student population.

In summary, the methodologies utilized in this course are not merely effective but also underpinned by academic rigor, particularly as supported by Hasan Alisoy's "Connect with English A1-A2 Speaking Handbook." These methods offer a compelling model for educators grappling with similarly diverse educational settings.

4. Challenges and Solutions: Addressing Heterogeneity and Emotional Barriers in the Classroom

Challenge One: Starting from Scratch

The classroom's uniqueness is marked by a student who has had no prior engagement with the English language. In the context of English language pedagogy, this is an uncommon scenario that requires special attention. According to Hasan Alisoy's "Connect with English A1-A2 Speaking Handbook," employing a differentiated instructional approach can facilitate effective language acquisition even for beginners.

Challenge Two: Navigating Low Self-Esteem

Low self-confidence serves as another major barrier to active participation and language acquisition for two students in the class. According to H.D. Brown's "Principles of Language Learning and Teaching," an affirming classroom atmosphere can make a considerable difference in mitigating language apprehension and bolstering self-esteem.

Challenge Three: Inclusivity in Pedagogy

To manage these challenges adeptly, strategies such as allocating front-row seats to less confident students, exposing them to authentic textual and audio-visual materials, and customizing topics to suit their cognitive levels have been implemented. These tactics not only enhance self-assurance but

also underscore the need for tailored teaching methodologies. The importance of this individualized teaching strategy is further corroborated by Lightbown and Spada in "How Languages are Learned," which emphasizes that every learner's journey is distinct and requires a unique pedagogical approach.

Implementing Solutions

These challenges have guided the pedagogical approach to be more inclusive and adaptive. Utilizing a mix of these research-backed methods has proven beneficial in encouraging active class participation and accelerating language acquisition.

5. Adaptations and Solutions: Navigating Diverse Proficiency Levels Through Methodological Innovations

Methodological Shifts for a Heterogeneous Classroom

Recognizing the diverse linguistic backgrounds of the students, the course strategically integrates storytelling as its linchpin (Wright, 1995). While the curriculum incorporates conventional textbooks, the focal point remains the authentic materials, including videos and auditory aids. These materials not only complement the structured learning but also immerse students in the practical applications of English, enriching their comprehension and speaking skills (Ellis & Brewster, 2002).

Tailoring Approaches for Novices

A noteworthy challenge in this educational setting is the inclusion of students with no previous exposure to English. For these individuals, the course adopts a listening-centric model that features authentic materials as a principal resource. This strategy enables the students to internalize the pragmatic aspects of English, thereby reducing their reliance on mental translation before articulating sentences (Krashen, 1982).

Boosting Self-Confidence: A Classroom Arrangement Strategy

Students experiencing low self-confidence are strategically positioned closer to the instructor to facilitate better communication and build self-efficacy. This layout is instrumental in not only enhancing their language proficiency but also elevating their self-assurance levels (Bandura, 1977). Opportunities for these students to express themselves verbally in class are deliberately integrated into the course structure to bolster their self-confidence.

6. Case Studies: Metrics of Progress and Pedagogical Trust

Quantitative Indicators: Measuring Success

The range of teaching methodologies employed in the classroom has led to discernible improvements in students' academic achievements. Initial diagnostic tests exhibited a wide disparity in scores, with some as low as 25% and others reaching up to 85%. Following the mid-semester assessments, the lowest grade awarded was a 60%, indicating even the less proficient students have shown measurable improvement. The top performers continued to thrive, achieving grades that exceeded 95% (Hattie, 2009).

The Beginner's Triumph: From Zero to Conversant

A case that remarkably stands out is the journey of a student who initially had no prior exposure to English. Through the systematic incorporation of authentic listening materials and storytelling methods, she has undergone significant growth. She is now capable of basic communication skills and has excelled particularly in story retention and recitation, underscoring the effectiveness of the chosen pedagogical techniques (Krashen, 1982).

The Grade-Centric Student: A Pedagogical Hurdle

Despite these successes, challenges remain. One student, whose primary motivation appears to be grade-focused, has displayed reservations about the teaching methods deployed. Her skepticism has injected a layer of discord into the classroom dynamic, affecting her own learning trajectory and

posing a complication in the teaching environment (Dörnyei, 2005).

Building Pedagogical Trust: A Two-Way Street

To alleviate concerns of skeptical students, extra measures are employed to demonstrate the efficacy of the teaching methods. These often include revealing peer progress as a testament to the success of the chosen approach. One additional strategy worth considering could be the institution of a mentor-mentee framework, allowing the skeptical student to glean insights from classmates who have prospered under the current teaching modality (Bandura, 1977).

7. Authentic Materials: Bridging Theory and Real-World Applications

Selection and Usage

A cornerstone of my pedagogical approach is the extensive use of authentic materials to simulate real-life linguistic scenarios. By incorporating resources such as authentic texts, YouTube videos, and podcasts, the curriculum offers students an enriching tapestry of language as it is naturally used, rather than in the often artificial constructs of textbooks (Kilickaya, 2004).

Efficacy in Skill Development

These authentic materials provide multifaceted benefits, serving not only as learning aids but also as tools for cultural immersion. For example, the use of YouTube videos, often containing everyday conversational language and current slang, gives students insights into the nuances of spoken English (Guariento & Morley, 2001). Podcasts, meanwhile, offer structured yet conversational presentations of complex topics, helping students develop listening comprehension skills for different accents and speaking speeds (Harmer, 2007).

Relevance to Learning Objectives

These materials are meticulously selected to align with the course's learning objectives. The authenticity of the materials helps to dissolve the boundaries between classroom learning and the real-world application of language skills. Students are consequently more engaged and find the learning experience to be both relevant and practical (Peacock, 1997).

Real-World Connections

Furthermore, the authentic materials serve to bridge the gap between theoretical understanding and real-world applicability. By exposing students to language in its natural context, it preempts the issue of translation-based thinking—a common obstacle in language acquisition, especially among students from regions where foreign languages are viewed as separate from daily life (Galloway & Rose, 2015).

8. Reflections and Lessons Learned: A Journey of Continuous Improvement

Effectiveness of Current Approaches

Upon reflection, several aspects of the current teaching methodologies stand out for their effectiveness. The use of authentic materials has consistently proven beneficial in engaging students and providing a real-world context to the theoretical foundations of language learning. According to research by Galloway and Rose (2015), authentic materials not only aid in skill acquisition but also help to debunk stereotypes and dissolve cultural barriers.

Challenges and Adaptations

However, the journey has not been without its challenges. Catering to a diverse student body—ranging from complete beginners to more advanced learners—has required constant adjustments. Students with low self-confidence or zero prior knowledge of English presented unique challenges. Interventions, such as providing additional scaffolding through storytelling and authentic texts, were found to be beneficial (Peacock, 1997).

Areas for Future Development

Moving forward, there are several areas where I would consider making changes. While authentic materials have been effective overall, there may be a need to further curate these resources to better match the varying skill levels within the class (Kilickaya, 2004). Additionally, more structured feedback mechanisms could be employed to gauge student reception of the teaching methods more precisely.

Student Trust and Methodology

Another lesson learned revolves around the necessity for students to trust the teaching methods employed. While the majority have been receptive, a few have been resistant or skeptical, impacting the learning environment. Future iterations of the course might benefit from an introductory session explaining the pedagogical choices and presenting evidence of their effectiveness to build trust from the outset (Harmer, 2007).

This section aims to encapsulate the complexities, challenges, and victories experienced in this evolving educational setting. Each reflection serves as a stepping stone for future pedagogical endeavors, perpetually guided by both evidence-based practice and the real-world results observed in the classroom.

9. Conclusion: Mapping the Road Ahead

Key Takeaways for Educators

The experience of teaching a diverse student body in the Foreign Languages Faculty at Nakhchivan State University offers several key takeaways for educators in similar settings. The importance of flexibility in teaching methods cannot be overstated, especially when catering to a range of skill levels and backgrounds. The use of authentic materials has shown significant promise in engaging students and in making the learning experience more relatable and enriching. Storytelling, as an integral component of the direct teaching method, has also played a crucial role in boosting students' language acquisition and self-confidence (Wajnryb, 2003).

Future Prospects

As for the road ahead, several adaptations are already in the pipeline. The plan includes a more granular curation of authentic materials to better cater to each student's skill level. More structured feedback mechanisms, perhaps in the form of anonymous student surveys, will also be introduced to collect more comprehensive data on the efficacy of the teaching methods (Brown, 2004).

Trust and Skepticism

Addressing issues of student skepticism and building trust in the teaching methodology will also be a focal point. Future courses may begin with an introductory session outlining the rationale behind the teaching methods, thereby setting the stage for a more harmonious learning environment (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

By reflecting on these experiences and planning targeted strategies for the future, the aim is to continue to offer an enriching, effective learning environment for students in the Faculty of Foreign Languages and beyond.

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