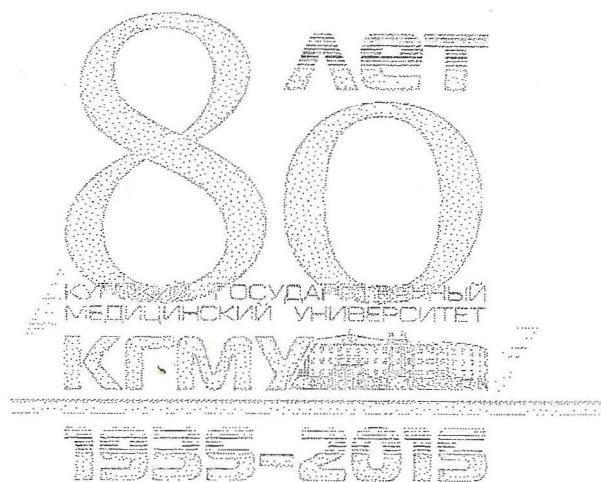


Государственное бюджетное образовательное учреждение  
Высшего профессионального образования  
«Курский государственный медицинский университет»  
Министерства здравоохранения Российской Федерации



## **«ЯЗЫК. КОММУНИКАЦИЯ. КУЛЬТУРА»**

**СБОРНИК МАТЕРИАЛОВ**

**IX Всероссийской научно-практической электронной  
конференции с международным участием,  
посвященной 80-летию КГМУ  
(22-28 апреля 2015 года)**

**Курск – 2015**

## **MODERN PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES IN LANGUAGE TEACHING TODAY**

*Dr Mario Pace, Ph.D*

**University of Malta**

**Faculty of Education**

Over the years, the concept and philosophy of teaching has changed drastically. In today's world, the role (or rather various roles) and duties of any teacher, not least the language teacher, have become, not simply complex but, above all, very demanding.

A number of pertinent questions to begin with are: what are the main disappointments, the major difficulties a language teacher has to face in class, and what are the main challenges and the greatest satisfactions he/she can derive from teaching? There are no simple answers to such questions. I strongly believe that each and every professional teacher should ask these questions irrespective of his/her years of experience and even if he/she is in the initial teacher training and formation.

In today's world there is an ever-increasing need for good communication skills in foreign languages. Parents around the five continents strive to ensure that their children achieve a good command in a number of foreign languages. Even the European Commission fosters multilingualism and language learning and its goal is to have a Europe where everyone is taught at least two languages in addition to their own mother tongue from a very early age. The 'mother-tongue +2' objective was, in fact, set by EU heads of state and government at the Barcelona Summit in March 2002. For this reason a large number of opportunities to learn languages have been provided in many different ways such as through formal instruction, travel, study abroad, as well as through the media and

the Internet. Such learning experiences, have, without doubt, brought about positive changes in foreign language teaching, Vandergrift and Goh (2012) say that learners still face challenges in the classroom and beyond, especially as they try to improve their ability in specific language skills. This has also brought about a demand for quality language teachers, capable not just of providing students with motivating, interactive lessons but also of providing and/or choosing the best language teaching materials and resources for their students.

Richards (2006) correctly maintains that today the majority of language teachers employ a communicative approach to language teaching in their classrooms and that such a methodology also implies new roles in the classroom for teachers and learners.

*Learners now had to participate in classroom activities that were based on a cooperative rather than individualistic approach to learning. Students had to become comfortable with listening to their peers in group work or pair work tasks, rather than relying on the teacher for a model. They were expected to take on a greater degree of responsibility for their own learning. And teachers now had to assume the role of facilitator and monitor. Rather than being a model for correct speech and writing and one with the primary responsibility of making students produce plenty of error-free sentences, the teacher had to develop a different view of learners' errors and of her/his own role in facilitating language learning".* (Richards. 2006: 5)

Very often we meet people who believe that teaching languages is quite a cushy, stress free job, characterised by good working conditions and attractive working hours. However reality shows that this is a myth. Tuffanelli and Ianes (2011) argue that whoever works in schools today feels a certain amount of annoyance and discomfort as a result of the great challenges they face in class when it comes to motivate the students, maintain discipline and create/stimulate adequate learning programmes. They maintain that these challenges are bringing about a "teaching fatigue" being felt by an ever increasing number of teachers in general, not least foreign language teachers.

Becoming a foreign language teacher today does not simply mean developing one's knowledge of and proficiency in the target teaching language and learning how to teach a foreign language. Although, as Pachler, Evans and Lawes (2007) state, subject knowledge is the basis of a teacher's professional experience, I strongly believe that mastering positive classroom management techniques is a fundamental prerequisite for today's language teacher. Mollica and Nuessel (2009; 67-68) firmly believe that "the good language teacher fulfills numerous important roles both in and out of the classroom that facilitate optimal second-language learning opportunities". They distinguish between "Out-of-Class Roles" and "In-Class Roles". Amongst the roles that fall under the first category, they mention, for example, doing research, planning, directing and organising, whilst in the second category they include teaching, motivating, evaluating, facilitating and disciplining. Mezzadri (2003: 54), on his part, when speaking about the various roles that a foreign language teacher has to assume when using a communicative approach in class, affirms that the role of the teacher changes continuously according to the particular moment of the lesson, according to the didactic objectives and to the classroom dynamics: "... il ruolo dell'insegnante si modifica a seconda del momento della lezione, a seconda degli obiettivi didattici e delle dinamiche della classe". On his part, d'Alonzo (2012: 19) argues that in front of the various complexities that exist in classrooms, the language teacher needs to ask himself a number of questions on various aspects of teaching:

Di fronte alla complessità del lavoro nelle classi e agli innumerevoli problemi che gli allievi presentano è necessario riflettere su chi è e che cosa è tenuto a fare l'insegnante in una scuola che cambia e in un mondo in continua evoluzione.[...] occorre saper gestire in modo idoneo un gruppo di bambini o di ragazzi in uno spazio ben delimitato come la classe, favorendo le giuste motivazioni per l'apprendimento, un'adeguata partecipazione alla vita comunitaria e la soddisfazione dei bisogni di ogni allievo presente.

In today's world, one of the greatest challenges language teachers have to face is not presented by the information and knowledge they need to pass on to their students. In this aspect there is no doubt that technology has definitely taken the upper hand. The language teacher's priority in class is how to communicate with his students, how to pass on to his students the love and passion for learning the language. This can only be achieved if the teacher succeeds in passing on to his students in class the emotions, the passion of language learning by means of a positive relationship in which the student is not simply a "spectator" in class but h/she becomes the protagonist of that same learning experience. In other words, the biggest challenge in language teaching is the organization and delivery of the teaching and learning materials and how these are applied in class, according to the needs and abilities of the students. This is by no means an easy job and becomes even more complex when one considers that such a process has to take place continuously not just with one student but with a whole class of students, all having different abilities, different learning difficulties, different needs and, maybe also having reached different levels in the language being studied. All this implies that today, the teacher of languages cannot afford to dedicate and concentrate his/her efforts only on what to teach but also, and to a larger extent, more on who the learner is and on the teaching and learning processes. In other words, emphasis is made on how h/she can lead the students to this learning process creating the best environment that is conducive to learning. This can only be successfully achieved if h/she fully understands the complex situations in which some, if not most, of the students live and that often have a telling effect on their levels of attention, motivation and learning. Csizér and Dörnyei (2005) assert that motivation is one of the key factors that determine the rate and success of L2 attainment.

To arrive at this, the teacher has to first and foremost define the students' needs. Sometimes this needs' analysis of the students has to be done on an individual basis. Once the needs of the students are identified, the envisaged learning outcomes can be formulated. Such learning outcomes can vary, not just from one class to another, but also from one student to the other within the same class, given that these should be formulated not just on the basis of the different needs but also on the level of motivation and the predisposition of each student towards the foreign language being studied. And in order to reach the established outcomes, the teacher has to, not simply select carefully the content and notions to present in class but also to plan and organise in detail the methods to adopt in order to create a meaningful and fulfilling learning experience.

A question worth posing and considering here is: why are students in many countries, notwithstanding all the efforts being done in favour of multilingualism, quitting foreign languages at school? There may be various answers for this question. One of the main reasons is the perception among adults and students that learning a foreign language can be an important prerequisite for just a few. The teacher of foreign languages has the added burden of having to convince students that in today's era, multilingualism has become more than just 'important'. Knowing a foreign language other than one's native language has evolved to be extremely beneficial. Pace (2015) argues how whether viewed

from the financial or social aspect, being able to communicate in a foreign language helps to make 'real' connection with people and provides a better understanding of one's language. In today's European society, multilingualism and intercultural play a fundamental role in order to communicate effectively, to extend one's circles beyond the local dimension, to develop an open disposition towards diversity and change and, therefore, also to enhance professional and economic development. When students are learning a foreign language, it inherently involves learning not only about the language but also about the culture (Kumaravadivelu 2008). In this respect, the Modern Language Association (2012) affirms in its statement that learning another language 'serves as a portal to the literatures, cultures, historical perspectives, and human experiences that constitute the human record'.

Another reason why students might opt to quit languages is that they very often see little connection between what is taught in class and real life situations, especially in places where there still exists a system of assessing foreign languages based almost entirely on writing skills. Furthermore, students who in their first years of studying a language fail to grasp the basic concepts, find it very difficult, if not impossible, to keep the pace with the other students in their year group as the years go by. This leads to students becoming demotivated. It is a known secret that motivation is a key factor in foreign language successful learning. Pupils' perception of the usefulness of the languages they learn can clearly contribute to increasing their motivation.

Many students are nowadays falling back in their foreign language studies even because there is a lack of exposure to the language being studied. It is a known fact that many school aged students prefer chatting and surfing on the net to reading or watching TV programmes in the target language. Just like babies learn to speak a language by hearing and parroting sound, foreign language learners can significantly benefit from practising to listen in order to learn, given that, as stated in the main findings of Eurydice-Eurostat (2012) high exposure to foreign languages facilitates the acquisition of language skills. Listening is the communicative skill we use most in daily life, yet it can be the most difficult to practise unless one lives in a foreign country or attends immersive language classes.

Johnstone (2003) argues that progression in language learning is dependent on a range of variables that go from social factors, like exposure and status, to process factors, including the teaching/learning/interaction, to individual/group factors, which include the aptitude, the motivation and the learning style in both teachers and students. This implies that according to Johnstone, progression could be improved if teachers provide the right opportunities for learners to "acquire understanding of the grammatical structures of the language; to expand their vocabulary beyond the basics; to marshal and re-use existing language knowledge in new and wider-ranging situations; to take the initiative, ask questions, offer comments, justify opinions; and more generally, to develop independence in tackling and completing learning tasks" (Hunt et al 2005: 3).

Classroom variables like the teacher him/herself, the curriculum and the learning group can have a tremendous impact on motivation. Various studies show that there is a close connection between the level of students' motivation and variables linked to the learning experience in itself. Nikolov (2001) shows how the students' lack of success in foreign language learning can be the result of the negative perceptions they have of classroom practices. On the other hand Donitsa-Schmidt, Inbar and Shohamy (2004) argue that the quality of the teaching programme has a telling effect on the motivation of

students studying foreign languages. All this emphasises the fundamental role of the language teacher in class and the importance of motivational teaching practices. As Ruesch, Bown and Dewey (2012) put it, the learners' level of motivation is strongly influenced not just by the classroom climate but also by the relationship between teachers and students and consequently language teachers "should focus on setting a positive example, building a solid rapport with students, creating a pleasant relaxed atmosphere in the classroom, and making sure that students understand the tasks in which they are engaging" (Ruesch et al. 2012: 24-25).

It is evident that social, political and economic changes in today's society require a transformation in the meaning and the orientation of the work of teachers of foreign languages. Rapid and profound social change deeply affects present-day teaching methods and approaches and for foreign language teaching to be successful it is important that teaching systems and programmes are continuously remodelled. Most countries have moved from a system of foreign language teaching designed to educate just a few, to one of mass education. Furthermore, multi-cultural classrooms have become very common in the 21st century, bringing new challenges and realities for the language teachers. Such changes have not only increased the numbers of foreign language teachers and students but they have, above all, brought complex and intriguing problems related to quality in teaching and learning. To be able to respond to these evolving needs, teachers of foreign languages need to combine theoretical knowledge with practical application. Foreign language teachers need to achieve very high standards in their teaching and learning. This can only be achieved by means of creative thought and determination. Teachers of foreign languages need not only possess knowledge and research tools, but above all the ability to cope with heterogeneous classrooms in a multicultural society. All this makes teaching foreign languages today a much more difficult and challenging profession, but at the same time much more fulfilling and rewarding.

### References

1. Csizér, K., and Z. Dörnyei. 2005. The internal structure of language learning motivation and its relationship with language choice and learning effort. *The Modern Language Journal* 89: 19 - 36.
2. D'Alonzo, L. 2012. *Come fare per gestire la classe nella pratica didattica*. Giunti Scuola S.r.l., Firenze.
3. Donitsa-Schmidt, S., O. Inbar, and E. Shohamy. 2004. The effect of teaching spoken Arabic on students' attitudes and motivation in Israel. *Modern Language Journal* 88: 217-28.
4. Eurydice-EUROSTAT. (2012). *Key Data on Teaching Languages at School in Europe*, Bruxelles: EACEA.
5. Hunt, M. Barnes, A. Powell, B. Lindsay, G. and Muijs, D. 2005. "Primary Modern Foreign Languages: an overview of recent research, key issues and challenges for educational policy and practice". University of Warwick institutional repository.
6. Johnstone, R. (2003) Progression, paper presented at CILT ITT conference, Enabling Change, Homerton College, Cambridge, 6.9.03.
7. Kumaravadivelu, B. 2008. *Cultural Globalization and Language Education*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
8. Mezzadri, M. 2003. *I ferri del mestiere*. Edizioni Guerra Soleil. Perugia.

9. Modern Language Association. 2012. "MLA statement on Language Learning and United States National Policy." Accessed 12<sup>th</sup> March 2015. [http://www.mla.org/ec\\_us\\_language\\_policy](http://www.mla.org/ec_us_language_policy)
10. Mollica, A, and Nuessel, F. 2009. "The Good Language Learner and the Good language Teacher: A review of the Literature and Classroom Applications". *Teaching and Learning Languages*, edited by Mollica A. Guerra Edizioni, Perugia. pp. 63 – 91.
11. Nikolov, M. 2001. A study of unsuccessful language learners. In *Motivation and second language acquisition*, ed. Z. Dörnyei and R. Schmidt, 14772. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
12. Pace, M. 2015. "Speaking their language. Reviving the teaching of foreign languages in secondary schools in Malta. The language proficiency assessment national project" in *INTED 2015 Proceedings*. Edited by L. Gómez Chova, A. López Martínez, I. Candel Torres. IATED Academy. Pp. 609-617.
13. Pachler, N, M. Evans and S. Lawes. 2007. *Modern Foreign Languages: Teaching School Subjects 11–9*. Oxford: Routledge.
14. Richards, J. C. 2006. *Communicative Language Teaching Today*. Cambridge University Press.
15. Ruesch, A., Bown, J. and Dewey, D.P. 2012. Student and teacher perceptions of motivational strategies in the foreign language classroom, *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching*, 6:1, 15-27.
16. Tuffanelli, L. and Ianes, D. 2011. *La gestione della classe*. Edizioni Erickson, Trento.
17. Vandergrift, L. and Goh, C.C.M. 2012. *Teaching and Learning Second Language Listening*. New York. Routelage.