FACTORS AFFECTING QUALITY IN TEACHING ENGLISH (AS A SECOND LANGUAGE)

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SUMMARY

This paper examines four factors that can have a significant impact on the success of teaching English as a second language at a college level. The focus of the paper is how quality teaching can be achieved and maintained in a language program. Quality teaching is achieved through a complex assurance process that consists of four main factors.

Teacher factors include teachers' skills and qualification, their preparation for teaching process and professional development. Teaching process itself, including proper input, interaction and motivation, is the second factor that affects quality teaching. Working conditions and environment, supporting staff and creating context for students to use the language, can also facilitate good teaching. Finally, quality-assuring mechanisms, evaluation and monitoring to support quality control is the fourth and one of he most important factors in language learning and teaching.

Each of these factors is examined and suggestions offered as to how they can contribute to the achievement of quality language teaching.

Key words: quality language teaching, teaching process, evaluation.

1. INTRODUCTION

With the global economic integration, it is obvious that foreign languages, especially English, have great effect upon all the aspects of human life. Therefore, there is a constant demand to learn and grasp the English language which has nowadays become a universal, *Esperanto* language, used both for business and pleasure. Teaching English at schools and universities is an important bearer of such a process. It is supposed to be based on effective study strategies and established on the basis of sustainable development, with a high quality result as a final outcome. There is no doubt that scientific and effective teaching assessment is the important means by which teachers and learners can check whether the aim is well realized.

2. QUALITY TEACHING

"Quality is never an accident, it is always the result of high intention, sincere effort, intelligent direction and skillful execution; it represents the wise choice of many alternatives."

William A. Foster

Universities worldwide all share a commitment to assuring high quality teaching and learning and emphasize the maintenance and constant development of quality. No matter what a language course a teacher may use while teaching, to maintain quality, teaching and learning must meet learners' needs. That it, the process must be creative, with inevitable usage of up-to-date information technologies, employing different resources to support good practice, and as a final step, the process must end up with evaluation of teaching and learning outcomes.

Not only does quality teaching represent the developing trend of foreign language teaching in modern times, but it is an actual demand for students wishing to fit into real business communicative environment. Quality teaching must lead to one aim – to train students to become effective and confident language users, to get involved into problem-solving easily and independently, to become cooperative and excellent workers and integrative thinkers. Setting guidelines and motivations for life-learning process is equally important.

3. FACTORS AFFECTING QUALITY TEACHING

As teaching is mainly unpredictable and dynamic process, since it involves people with all their human needs, aspirations and pre-knowledge, achieving and maintaining quality is a difficult task. Therefore, a careful planning is crucial. Getting to know your students better is the first step, and the final one is getting their feedback about what they have learned.

The complex quality assurance process thus can be examined from four main aspects:
1) Teacher's skills and qualifications
2) Teaching process
3) Working conditions
4) Evaluation and monitoring

Each of them is equally important in quality assurance, and if they are successfully integrated into one optimal process which is constantly being upgraded, we can say that a real learning is surely taking place.

3.1. Teacher's skills and qualifications

While many things can be done to create a context for good teaching it is teachers themselves who ultimately determine the success of a program. Good teachers can often compensate for deficiencies in the curriculum or the resources they use in their teaching. However, their role can be supported and improved as well.

Universities vary greatly in the type of teachers they employ. In some situations, there may be a choice between native speakers of English and non-native ones with different levels of language competence. However, we commonly understand that an expert language teacher is a highly

skilled professional. But, what does skill and expertise in teaching English as a second language consist of? Core components of teacher knowledge include the following:

a) *practical knowledge*: the teacher's repertoire of classroom techniques and strategies
b) *content knowledge*: the teacher's competence of grammar, phonology, second language acquisition, teaching theories
c) *contextual knowledge*: familiarity with the school context, norms, cultural and other relevant information
d) *pedagogical knowledge*: ability to restructure content knowledge for teaching purposes and to plan, adapt, improvise
e) *personal knowledge*: the teacher's personal beliefs and principles, and his/her individual approach to teaching
f) *reflective knowledge*: the teacher's capacity to reflect on and access his/ her own practice

When describing teacher's skill it is possible to compare teachers according to whether they are novice or experienced. For example, the UCLES Certificate in Language Teaching to Adults – CELTA (UCLES, 1996) a widely thought initial qualification for language teachers focuses on 6 areas of basic teaching skills:

1) language awareness
2) the learner, the teacher and the teaching/learning context
3) planning for effective teaching of adult learners of English
4) resources and materials for teaching
5) classroom management and teaching skills
6) professional development

It is suggested that, compared to experienced teachers, novice teachers tend to work from the textbook rather than in terms of pupil attainment levels; they lack routines to keep pupils on task, they are less able to select which information is more important when planning a lesson, and they lack knowledge of what to expect of pupils, what challenges to set and what difficulties to anticipate.

Opportunities to develop these skills and try to obtain more quality teaching can be provided in different ways, including observation of more experienced teachers, practice teaching under the mentor's supervision, taking specified courses (ELTA or similar), watching training videos.

Both novice and experienced teachers are obliged to strive and further develop their skills and deepen their understanding of teaching themselves. They need to be given opportunities to engage themselves in self-reflection, to take on new roles and responsibilities (such as mentor teachers, teacher-researcher, materials writer), identify their areas of strength and weakness.

If teachers are expected to teach well and maintain quality teaching, they definitely need ongoing support. This may take a number of forms:

Adequate materials: Nothing is more de-motivating to teachers than having to use a textbook that no one likes, or poorly prepared and presented materials.

Division of responsibilities: Teachers have many different responsibilities apart from teaching, like course-planning, testing, course-coordination, administrative work. Deciding when and how to do these tasks is important, as well as delegating such tasks to different members of a team.

Further training: It is important for teachers to be sent to workshops or sessions (specialized, from the staff or not) where new skills should be adopt.

Feedback: Teachers need to be told when they are doing well and when there are problems with their performance. Good teaching sometimes goes unnoticed. In case of negative feedback ways need to be found for providing constructive feedback.

Mentors: A system of mentoring is often helpful in a school where there are teachers of different levels of experience or training. Mentor is typically a colleague in whom the teacher has confidence and trust to share ideas and get advice.

4. THE TEACHING PROCESS

The focus in this part is on the teaching process itself and how quality teaching can be achieved and maintained. A language curriculum can be viewed as a network of interacting systems involving teachers, learners, materials, administrators and curriculum planners and choices at one level affect other elements in the system. Thus, the choice of a particular curriculum philosophy implies a particular model of teaching. Teaching models are often based on particular methods or approaches. For example:

- *the communicative approach:* the focus of teaching is authentic communication, fluency is a priority, extensive use is made of pair and group activities
- *the cooperative learning model:* students work in cooperative learning situations and are encouraged to work together on common tasks, to coordinate efforts
- *the whole-language approach*: language is taught as a whole and not through its separate components. Students ate encouraged to read and write naturally with a focus on real communication, authentic texts, and reading and writing for pleasure.

No matter which approach a teacher chooses, there is a set of principles that reflect how quality teaching and learning should be approached. The following statements describe the teaching philosophy:

- Students are engaged in practical tasks that relate to world uses of English.
- Teachers serve as facilitators of learning rather as presenters of information.
- Realistic and communicative uses of language are given priority.
- Students develop the ability to monitor their own learning process and ways of setting personal goals for language improvement.
- Maximum use is made of pair and group activities where students complete tasks collaboratively.

At the same time teachers should have the opportunity to teach in ways that reflect their own preferred teaching styles. Teachers teach in different ways. Even though two teachers work towards identical goals they may choose different ways of getting there.

Many authors agree that successful learning takes place when:

1. learners are exposed to **rich input** of the target language
2. they have many opportunities to **interact** with the language
3. they are **motivated** to learn

4.1. Input
Without comprehensible input language learning is impossible. The input must also be varied and as intense (rich) as possible. Some very interesting research by the University of Southampton has shown how learners seem to acquire in the first instance "in chunks", assimilated through exposure to the language. The importance of input for language assimilation puts additional attention to the development of spoken English ("education of the ear"), understanding the relationship between spoken and written language, the need for a wide range of input stimuli (teacher, native speaker, significant access through technology, authentic materials etc).
It should further be noticed that the importance of quality input also places considerable pressure on teacher confidence, competence and energy.

4.2. Interaction
If comprehensible input provides the raw material for language learning, then interaction in all its forms is the way students assimilate and internalize that language so that they can re-use it. It involves any process in which the learner is actively working with language ("thinking skills"). The challenges for quality teaching include: linking the input to the interaction in a creative way; using an appropriate range of interactive processes (the most obvious of which is a *dialogue* with a colleague, teacher, and interlocutor, or interaction with a *written text*); and finally, helping learners develop strategies for learning (learning to learn).

4.3. Motivation
However good the teacher and his teaching process, only learners can learn and they can do that when they are ready or willing to do so. Teachers can create the conditions for this. Motivation is thus a major issue for all qualitative learning processes.
We usually distinguish between two kinds of motivation – *extrinsic* (which is to do with factors external to the learning process itself) and *intrinsic* one.
Extrinsic motivating factors, which are usually stronger ones, include: present or future career, job prospects, examination success, social life, holidays and leisure. Intrinsic motivation includes: love of learning (knowledge), love of the language, love of the content, love of the teachers.
An experienced teacher who wants to assure quality teaching in his classroom should support and promote both motivations, with intrinsic being surely more fruitful.

5. WORKING CONDITIONS AND ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

Universities vary greatly in terms of how they view their educational mission. Hopefully majority of schools are committed to providing quality educational services. Each of them has a strategic plan, a description of the long-term visions and goals of an institution and the means it undertakes for fulfilling them. Quality assurance mechanisms are thus needed to ensure the quality of the practices. Some of the issues concerning this problem are given as follows:
   a) **Equipment** – where investment is lacking (DVD, stereo, photocopier) there may be a negative impact on teacher's work.
   b) **Teaching facilities –** where does teaching takes place? How adequate are the facilities? Is there a multi-media lab, or a self-access center?

c) **Class size** – Common sense suggests that the class size should not exceed 15 although you sometimes have to work with bigger groups.

d) **Support staff** – adequate support staff can also facilitate teacher's work. Is there administrative staff to help with typing, duplicating and administration?

6. MONITORING AND EVALUATION

Quality teaching cannot simply be assumed to happen. One of the final, but greatly important steps in the quality assurance cycle is monitoring and evaluation. Information needs to be collected regularly on all aspects of the program to find out if the quality teaching is taking place. It is usually done through formal and informal mechanisms such as group meetings, written reports, classroom visits, and student evaluation.

The teaching evaluation is the key tie in quality English teaching. Teaching assessments, to be precise, should contain the evaluations towards the students, teachers and the school. Evaluation is, in fact, obtaining the feedback of teaching, revising and guiding the teaching process. When teachers review their teaching in the light of students' feedback, it is important to be positive and accept the complaints or suggestions, and as a result, some changes in teaching should be made.

7. CONCLUSION

Teaching and learning are complex matters and, as this paper has argued, language learning has its particular and quite unique challenges. Although these do not lend themselves to one exclusive and definite methodological solution, which could be counter-productive, there is nevertheless more that could be done in terms of raising the capabilities of teachers and competence of learners. Factors which considerably influence teaching are teacher's skills and qualifications, the teaching process itself, working conditions and monitoring. Every teacher, bearing in mind that learning is a dynamic and complex process, has to plan carefully and use all available mechanisms to assure quality teaching. The reward is mutual satisfaction and the joy of success.

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