

VARIABLES TO TAKE INTO ACCOUNT IN THE ORGANIZATION OF THE ENGLISH CLASS: STUDENTS' GROUPING, SPACE AND TIME DISTRIBUTION, SELECTION OF METHODOLOGY, TEACHER'S ROLE, ETC.

VARIABLES A TENER EN CUENTA EN LA ORGANIZACIÓN DE LA CLASE DE LENGUA INGLESA: AGRUPACIÓN DEL ALUMNADO, DISTRIBUCIÓN DEL ESPACIO Y TIEMPO, SELECCIÓN DE METODOLOGÍAS, PAPEL DEL PROFESOR, ETC.

UNIT 22

MAESTROS ESPECIALIDAD DE INGLÉS

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1.- INTRODUCTION

At the Primary Education Stage, a basic level of competence should be taken into account, for both the understanding and the production of texts, as well as a communicative interaction. Therefore, it will be essential for the communicative interaction to always refer to familiar contexts for students of this age, taking into account previously acquired knowledge, abilities and experiences they have had. Based on this fact, a contextualized language use will be encouraged, framed in communicative situations of different fields and allowing a real and motivating language use. Using games, especially at early ages, and the fulfillment of group tasks, are not only essential elements to properly lay the basis for the language acquisition, but they can also contribute to that subject. Far from being limited to mere object of study, they also become an instrument of socialization at the service of the group.

Royal Decree 126/2014, which sets the curriculum of Primary Education states in article 17.2 that: “schools will develop and complete the curriculum and the measures to cater to the diversity established by the Education Administrations, adapting them to the students’ characteristics and their educational reality in order to attend to all pupils. Thus, schools will use a variety of methods that consider the different students’ learning processes, which promote the capacity of learning by themselves and through group work”.

This unit is closely related to most of the other units; due to the fact that aspects such as students’ grouping, space and time distribution, teachers’ and students’ roles, and the selection of methodology are all related to the legal framework, as well as programming must be kept in mind when teaching any topic in the foreign language class.

This unit is divided into **9 individual parts** which are all inter-related. Thus, we will start with an introduction followed by the analysis of the Communicative Approach when teaching English. Then, we will study the variables that influence the development of the teaching-learning process related to students’ grouping, and the space and time distribution. We will continue describing the methodology selection, and after that, we will explain the students’ and teacher’s roles. Then, we will talk about other important aspects which will influence the organization of the English class and ending with a brief conclusion and bibliography of the unit.

2.- THE COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH

The way of organizing the English classroom will influence the teaching-learning process, and since it is dependent on the individual approach of each teacher, the selection of methodology becomes very important regarding class organization.

Although there are some methods to consider when teaching English (Direct Method, Audio-Lingual Method, Community Language Learning, Cognitive Code Approach, TPR Method, Natural Approach, among others), we are going to focus our attention on the **Communicative Approach** developed by linguists such as Hymes and Halliday, who considered language a system for communication. This means that:

- The main aim of language teaching is to develop the students' ability to communicate in the target language.
- The teaching learning process involves not only linguistic structures but semantic notions and social functions.
- Students must work in pairs or groups so that they can transfer the meaning in communicative situations where one person has some information that the others have not.
- Dramatizations and role play are used to adjust the use of the language to different contexts.
- The use of authentic materials and activities will help us to reflect real life situations with communicative purposes.
- All skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) are integrated from the beginning as activities will involve more than one skill from the part of the students.
- The teacher acts as communication facilitator, and secondly as corrector. Thus, they should be able to use the target language appropriately and fluently.

The Communicative Approach is based on the idea that learning a language successfully comes through having to communicate real meaning. The teacher sets up situations that students are likely to find in real life. When learners are involved in real communication, their natural strategies for language acquisition will be used, and this will allow them to learn to use the language. Classroom activities guided by the communicative approach are characterized by trying to produce meaningful and real communication, at all levels. As a result there may be more emphasis on skills rather than systems, lessons will be more learner-centered, and authentic materials will be used.

Communicative language teaching organizes the teaching according to the notional and functional categories of language rather than according to its structures. It concentrates on the following:

- Interactions: using language to communicate.
- Tasks: using language to perform meaningful tasks.
- Learner: putting the learner's interests and needs first.

There are many advantages in teaching according to the communicative approach. Some of the reasons for using the Communicative Approach in the English class are the following:

- It is thought that students who learn new languages following a Communicative Approach are able to double their rate of learning, so **efficiency is increased**.
- Communicative Approach **accommodates all learning styles**. It allows for all students to climb to their maximum levels in the language, so that all students end up performing better.
- It helps students to learn in a **natural way** as it presents language following the natural route of acquisition "first oral skills, then the written ones; first receptive skills, then productive ones".
- It stimulates the students into asking **natural questions about language usage** rather than assuming grammar rules.
- A key component of Communicative Language Teaching is that it facilitates **internalization of the language**, rather than just studying about a language and only analyzing it. Thus language is a system for expressing meaning.
- It is a **holistic approach**. It doesn't focus only on the traditional structural syllabus. It takes into consideration the communicative dimension of language, since language structures reflect their functional and communicative uses.
- It provides vitality and **motivation** within the classroom as students have the opportunity to express their likes and dislikes, or feelings, as well as, share their opinions with others.
- It is a **learner-centered approach** and it focuses on the interests and needs of the learner.
- In a world where the use and importance of communicating information and information technology is increasing, it can play an important role in education.
- And finally, learning a language using Communicative Language Teaching allows students to **continue developing their language skills** and use them more efficiently, not only in school, but in other situations, such as when travelling abroad, or using the internet, for example.

Although the Communicative Approach will guide our teaching practice in the English class, it should be stated that sometimes we will use other methods, depending on the aim of the activity to be developed. For example, at early stages of Primary Education the TPR Method, named by James J. Asher, is very useful because it combines information and skills through the use of the kinesthetic sensory system to assimilate

them. For this reason, we need to use an **eclectic method** in the English class. This means we are going to follow one method or another depending on certain factors, such as the goal, the activity, the students' communication needs...

Once we have analyzed the main characteristics of the Communicative Approach we are going to explain the different aspects which will influence our daily practice. We will start talking about student grouping in the next section.

3.- STUDENT GROUPING

The way of grouping our students in the English class is one of the most important factors we have to bear in mind when designing activities. In the classroom we should reproduce the same language, oral or written discourse as in everyday life situations so the use of different groupings and ways of participating helps students to achieve this.

Therefore, we have discussed aspects related to group size and the selection of members for each grouping.

Concerning **group size**, it is useful at the presentation and practice stages of learning to teach students as a whole class, even at the production stage so that they can interact among themselves.

Sometimes, when we want to increase the amount of interaction we will divide the class into smaller groups. By creating smaller groups, our students will be able to work out values such as respect, cooperation and participation, favoring the socialization process. Another aspect to consider is that sometimes the teacher has to explain the materials necessary for the students to carry out the task successfully.

Apart from the size of the group, we must also consider the number of participants the task requires, bearing in mind that collaboration and coordination among the students is needed.

Depending on the number of students in each group, we can classify them under the categories we are going to discuss now:

- **INDIVIDUAL WORK** when students have to work on their own and at their own pace in activities such as reading, writing, or studying vocabulary. It helps students to internalize what they have learnt.
- **LOCKSTEP** refers to the traditional teaching. The teacher controls and assesses the class and all the students are working on the same activity. On one hand, the students get a good model from the teacher, but on the other, they get little chance to practice and it is not used in real situations. Although they are

concentrated, the development of the activity will be slow for some students and fast for others.

- **PAIR WORK** is useful in speaking activities such as mini role-plays or information gaps. This type of grouping increases the amount of practice promoting cooperation, participation, autonomy, responsibility and motivation, and thus, developing the socialization process of the students and favoring a good atmosphere in the classroom.

The teacher's role here is fundamental as they have to explain to students what to do, preventing the use of the mother tongue. They have got an active role as they must prevent breakdowns in communication when the students are interacting in English. This type of grouping is commonly used in the English class and we have made a distinction between pair and group work, although pair work can also be included within group work.

- **GROUP WORK** lets students use the language to communicate with each other, developing the socialization process and increasing their talk-time. A good idea when using group work is designating a leader for each group so that he can act as a link between the students and the teacher, who is coordinating the activity rather than dominating the group. This grouping is useful to carry communicative activities out and the teacher should select these activities consciously and carefully, monitoring student performance and providing feedback, when necessary. Cooperative learning activities can also be used for discussing a topic, debates, projects or performances.

Diversity in group composition is also important regarding the **selection of members for each group**, because depending on the aim of the task we will select one student or another. For example if we want our students to make a composition, we should group them taking into account that in each group there should be at least one student who is good at writing compositions. So, we will group students **ACCORDING TO ABILITY** into:

- **Homogeneous groups** when mixing students with similar ability level or...
- **Heterogeneous groups** in which high, middle and low ability level students are mixed together.

When grouping students **AT RANDOM**, there are some possible methods:

- The teacher can hand out numbers in a particular order and then ask students with the same number to go together.
- The teacher can ask them to form groups of a specific size and students choose the group they want to join.

- The class is divided according to likes and dislikes, colour of eyes, colour of clothes, or some other form of sub-categorizing.
- By giving students some cards related to different semantic fields (colours, food, means of transport and so on) and the students get placed in a group according to those categories.

We can also use other strategies when grouping students, such as mixing introvert with extrovert pupils, taking into account the relationships among them, or according to topics of shared interest, etc.

As we have seen, students get many benefits from working in groups in English class because language fluency is increased. The different ways of grouping helps them speak up and practice the language that they are trying to learn. When group work happens, collaboration is part of the process and students help each other learn. That means less accomplished students will become better speakers just by talking to others who are more advanced without help and without pressure. By working together, your students will also develop relationships with each other. They will share personal opinions and life goals and that means facing pupils with different values, expectations and beliefs. When our students can accept and appreciate their classmates, they will be on their way to doing the same for people all over the world.

Once we have dealt with the different groupings in the English class we are going to focus our attention on space and time distribution, aspects which will influence our diary practice.

4.- SPACE AND TIME DISTRIBUTION

Space as well as time distributions make reference to the learning environment including the characteristics of setting (personal, instructional and physical characteristics of the classroom) which will condition the teaching-learning process and the students' performance so we are going to deal with both aspects, beginning with space distribution.

4.1.- Space Distribution

The physical organization of the class is an important aspect to take into account in the English class, especially when following a Communicative Approach. As students play an active role and they are energetic and active as part of their developmental process, they need to move around the class, needing plenty of space to feel comfortable. The teachers also need to move around the class so that they can check the students' work and maintain control. For that reason we can use different arrangements, among them are:

- **TRADITIONAL ARRANGEMENT** in which the students are placed in rows facing the teacher (up-front teaching) and the teacher is at the front of the class. It is used in methodologies where students have a passive role and the teacher has an active one, controlling the class. It doesn't foster communication but it's useful for certain activities which require individual work: exams or tests, written exercises, compositions, silent reading... even at the beginning and end of the lesson. (Grammar Translation Method).
- **CIRCLE AND THE TEACHER OUT:** It fosters communication because the pupils can see each other, as everybody is facing one another. The teacher is out so the pupils feel more comfortable. This type of arrangement is suitable for debates, discussions, games, etc. (Communicative Approach, TPR, Silent Way).
- **CIRCLE AND THE TEACHER INSIDE:** It is appropriate for communicative activities and the role of the teacher is to provide help when necessary. They can guide and direct the students better than when they are out, but the students can sometimes feel intimidated.
- **HORSE SHOE, SEMICIRCLE OR U SHAPE ARRANGEMENT** in which the students are placed in a semicircle and the teacher is in the middle. It favors dialogue and the teacher acts as moderator. It can be used for every type of activities.
- **GROUPS OR BOARDING MEETINGS:** Within this arrangement the desks are placed together and the pupils sit around in groups of five or six. It is required in activities involving the use of a lot of materials such as reports or project works.
- **MIX AND MINGLE** used for oral games (i.e. "find someone who...") where students have to move around the classroom as they put their desks wherever they want. They are in different positions but facing the teacher.
- **LEARNING STATIONS OR LEARNING CENTERS** where students use instructional material to explore, alone or in working teams. A learning center or station is a space set in the classroom that allows easy access to a variety of learning materials in an interesting and productive way. It's appropriate for engaging independent and self-directed learning activities. This type of management provides a less intimidating environment for the students and gives the teacher the opportunity to focus on specific areas of study. It requires a lot of organization and preparation on the teacher's part. Students can learn reading, spelling and writing through learning centers. It's advisable that students rotate to the different learning centers planned and the groups will be flexible allowing movement among them.

We can distinguish three different types of Learning Centers:

- **Enrichment centers** created to offer our pupils a variety of learning alternatives after the presentation of important materials or concepts, providing them with the chance to enrich and enhance the appreciation and

understanding of the topic through individual experiences in the center. For instance, if we have worked with colour mixing, students will ask to do some related activities to mix colours, such as colouring a picture mixing the primary colours, making a poster using secondary colours, so that the understanding of the topic is promoted.

- **Skill centers:** are similar to enrichment centers but they are used after the teaching of a concept or skill, to reinforce the information presented.
- **Interest and exploratory centers:** are focused on the interests of students. It will not refer to specific contents of the school year or the curriculum but they will increase students' motivation and allow them to reach meaningful discoveries that match their individual interests. The success of this learning centre will depend on the teacher's knowledge about their students' interests.

Now that we have seen we can use different arrangements within the class, we will use one or another depending on the aim and the task we want to develop. This way, we are now going to follow with some aspects related to time distribution.

4.2.- Time Distribution

Time is also another fundamental aspect in language teaching. When talking about time distribution we must consider two elements:

- On one hand, we must talk about time management which concerns to methods and techniques used during a class, English programming or school year.
According to **Order 05/08/2014 of the Education, Culture and Sports Counseling, which regulates the Organization and Evaluation on Infant and Primary Education in the Autonomous Community of Castilla-La Mancha, (Annex I)** there will be four sessions of 45 minutes from the first to the third levels and three sessions of 45 minutes from the fourth to the sixth levels. Schools will implement two free sessions from the fourth to sixth levels with the curricular areas they consider properly.
- On the other hand, we must consider timing in reference to the time that the different activities or lesson plans should take. In this unit, this type of timing is more relevant in discussing the English lessons, so we will focus on it.

At Primary Education Stage, and bearing in mind the developmental stage of our pupils, activities must be varied and short but we have to consider the general school timetable.



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