THE NOTION OF A 'STRATEGY' IN TEACHING FOREIGN LANGUAGES

The Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics defines ***a strategy*** as:

" (...) procedures used in learning, thinking, etc. which serve as a way of reaching a goal ." (Richards et al. 1992)

Another definition is given by Stern (1991), who explains the notion of ***a teaching strategy***. He interprets it as representing all the procedures which are intended to bring about language learning; everything the teacher does to induce learning. The teacher sets up the conditions for learning the foreign language and employs different kinds of materials. Stern claims that a 'teaching strategy' is a broad concept under which a large number of specified teaching techniques can be subsumed. Despite admitting that it is not possible to propose a definitive and exhaustive list of teaching strategies, he presents us with the major ones. One of them concerns the use – or non-use - of the mother tongue in teaching the foreign language. Another refers to the teacher's treating the foreign language and culture as objects of study and mastery, or as something which should rather be experienced subjectively through participation in personal contact and communicative acts. The third teaching strategy presented by Stern relates to techniques which the teacher uses to encourage his students to learn the foreign language in a cognitive way, or techniques he employs to develop more 'intuitive' learning - what Krashen (1982) calls 'language acquisition'.

Additionally, Stern (1991) makes us aware that teacher-centred or student-centred ways of teaching, as well as human relationships in language learning, should also be taken into consideration while analysing teaching strategies.

DESCRIPTION OF SELECTED STRATEGIES USED BY TEACHERS

STRATEGIES INVOLVED IN BUILDING A GOOD RAPPORT WITH STUDENTS.

The definition of 'rapport'.

The teacher's knowledge of the target language and of methodology seems to be, on its own, insufficient if we want learning to take place. An aware and sensitive teacher, who respects and listens to his students, and who tries to find ways of enabling his students to learn, rather than performing on his own, creates ideal learning conditions.According to Scrivener (1994), such a teacher is able to create a stronger relationship between him and his students, the communication between them becomes much more open and honest, and the educational climate positive, forward-looking and supportive. The students are able to work with less fear of taking risks or facing challenges. This is what ***rapport*** refers to. Scrivener defines rapport not as a skill or technique that we can mimic, but as building a good relationship with other human beings which is rooted at the level of our genuine intentions. Scrivener (1994: 7-8) proposes that in order to improve the quality of our relationships in the classroom, we need to look closely at what we really want for our students, and how we really feel about them.

”It is our attitude and intentions rather than our methodology

that we may need to work on.” Scrivener (1994: 8)

The strategy of being just.

We have to remember that students bring not only pen and paper to school but also a whole range of other, less visible things: their needs, wishes, life experiences, home backgrounds, worries, angers, fears and moods. The teacher’s attitude will unquestionably affect the way each student will react to him, to the school subject he teaches, and to school-life in general. Smith (1962) claims that if the teacher loses his temper, has favourites, or acts in an overbearing way, he is likely to stir up resentment among the students, which will hence give rise to disciplinary problems. It is possible that the existence of problems which indicate poor teacher-student relationship and lack of classroom rapport may be due, in part, to socio-economic factors in society. Students from lower-class homes, in their vocabulary and attitudes, tend to differ widely from those from middle - or upper-class homes. Smith also points out that differences in race, religion, nationality and rural versus urban backgrounds create similiar barriers. Where such social barriers exist amongst the pupils themselves, the effectiveness of the social forces at work in the learning situation is reduced. When any barriers of such a kind stand between the teacher and a student, the teacher’s chances of creating an effective learning situation for that pupil may be seriously jeopardized. Therefore, Smith emphasizes that we have to remember that teaching demands an ability to communicate with every student. According to Janowski (1994), in order to avoid such problems the teacher has to undertake *the strategy of being just*. He admits it may sometimes be difficult to adhere consistently to this strategy, because the teacher, in common with every human being, likes some people more than others. He has of course the right to have some favourites among his students but he is not allowed to act in a way that would indicate favouritism. On the other hand, Janowski notes that the teacher should pay attention to every single student individually in order to know him better and be able to distinguish his potential problems. When a teacher does not know his students very well ‘labelling’ (as Janowski calls it) may take place, i.e. a situation when an opinion (especially negative) about a particular student is shared with other teachers who do not even have the opportunity to create their own views about this student. It may happen that the belief becomes stable and the student is thus stereotyped.

Strategies aimed at reducing student anxiety.

Rivers (1983) claims that if the spontaneous use of the target language is not to be inhibited, and the teacher-student rapport is to be positive, the atmosphere in the classroom should be relaxed and there must be no tension between student and teacher, or between student and student. A common belief shared by many methodologists is that a good relationship between a teacher and his students puts an end to most of the problems concerned with the process of learning. Many teachers also consider good teacher-student rapport to be an indispensable factor in contemporary teaching. That is why foreign language teachers take up different strategies aiming at reducing student anxiety. According to Rivers, the silence which falls over second language students in a classroom where individuals who do not feel at ease with each other, or with the teacher has nothing to do with the ability to speak the target language. She suggests that silence in a foreign language classroom can easily result from similiar tensions. Harbord (1992) gives us some examples of strategies aiming to reduce student anxiety. They may include, for example, telling simple jokes or chatting to the students in the foreign language. We can easily relate Harbord’s suggestion to River’s statement that the ability to communicate freely in the foreign language will develop more quickly in a classroom where students, at ease with the teacher and their classmates, are always actively involved and feel free to divert the conversational line of the lesson from time to time to the areas of their own interest - provided that the discourse is consistently carried on in the foreign language. According to Rivers, communication in the foreign language becomes then an effective way of reaching certain goals: obtaining the attention of the teacher and classmates, sharing ideas and interests. The foreign language teacher can ask his students, for example, how they spend their

evenings, what books they like to read, what radio and television programmes appeal to them, what movies they go to, what friends they spend their time with, what hobbies they have, and what they do when they are with their family. Harbord (1992) advises, however, that a teacher interested in facilitating teacher-student relationship should also be prepared to reveal as much personal information about himself as his students do. Janowski (1994) persuades us, on the other hand, that a very important role is played by talking to students individually, a strategy undertaken by teachers to help their students, or to support them during a difficult time rather than settle a disciplinary problem. He also gives us the example of younger teachers who very often try to build a good rapport and reduce student anxiety by means of their appearance, the way they dress, behave, or talk; they try to use the foreign language in a more informal way, the same way that students would use it amongst themselves while talking.

The strategy of becoming a democratic teacher.

Smith (1962) emphasizes the fact that since the primary job of the school is to induce learning, the teacher's need is to know as much as possible about the nature and development of learning ability. He needs to know what factors influence the development of learning ability, and how to build effective learning situations to promote it. As the foreign language teacher is familiar with teaching methodology, he is able to use appropriate teaching and organizational procedures and techniques to help his students learn the subject matter and guide them towards educational achievement. The foreign language teacher must have a clear conception of the objectives towards which he is working, and he must be able to set goals that will stimulate each student to make maximum use of their capabilities. The teacher has to try to involve his students actively and find appropriate and interesting activities that will enable this, while still retaining clear control over the classroom. According to Smith, the teacher who wants to build a good rapport in his classroom cannot be authoritarian, exercising overly firm control and telling his students what to think as well as what to do.The teacher who feels it is important to have a good relationship with his students undertakes *the strategy of becoming a democratic teacher* which promotes such relationships. Bayles (1960) defines a democratic teacher as one who has respect for his students' ideas, which are subject to both student and teacher criticism just as his own are. The democratic teacher is no longer the central focus of the class, he takes part in the classroom activities without domineering or telling the students strictly what to do. In this way both the teacher and the students learn together. Brumfit (1980) complements this view by noting that the teacher only indicates the possible ways in which the students can approach a particular problem. Although he may be an authority on the language he teaches, the situation is arranged so that students are encouraged to think for themselves. Scrivener (1994) shares this opinion, contending that where the teacher has regard for the students' ideas, they feel that they are important in the process of learning the foreign language as they have had a hand in creating some of the teacher's techniques or approaches towards teaching the language. Owing to the fact that the students are actively involved in their own learning, it seems possible that more learning will actually take place. Bigge (1976) agrees that democratic groups definitely work in a more friendly and confiding atmosphere than those led by authoritarian teachers. They work on a higher level of efficiency and are much less dependent on the teacher.

Strategies involved in the correction of student errors.

As far as student errors are concerned, the teacher who is interested in building a good rapport in the classroom involves particular strategies in this area to achieve his aims. Scrivener's (1994) statement that students are often ashamed when they make a mistake, or error and, therefore, they avoid volunteering answers to the teacher's questions is certainly true. Students very often consider errors to be a definitely bad thing, suggesting that they have not been working properly, that they are lazy or even stupid. However, Scrivener further adds that in most things humans largely learn by trial and error, experimenting to see what works and what does not. It is furthermore suggested that if fear of making an error prevents our students 'experimenting' with the foreign language, then they are very unlikely to move forward or learn anything at all. It was in the 1970s that Bigge expressed his opinion about student errors, writing that:

”It is much more educative to let students do something their own way, experience the consequences, and see their mistakes than to tell them the ‘right way’ which they then follow more or less blindly.” Bigge (1976: 354-355)

Wenden (1987) also agrees with these views on student errors by noting it is a ‘good way’ for students to learn from their own errors. Therefore, it is of the utmost importance for the foreign language teacher to approach the problem of errors in a way which would enable the students to realise that making errors is nothing wrong or shameful. Scrivener informs us further that many teachers nowadays regard student errors as evidence that progress is being made. He tries to convince us of the notion that we have to make our students aware of the fact that errors often show us that a student is experimenting with language, trying out ideas, taking risks, attempting to communicate, making progress. As far a *strategies involved in the correction of student errors* are concerned, methodologists, such as: Brumfit (1980), Gołębiowska (1990), Johnson (1985), Scrivener (1994), Hill and Lewis (1992) make a distinction between fluency and accuracy aims. They all agree with the view that if the objective is fluency, the teachers should correct the mistake after the activity has finished or even later, but if the aim is accuracy, then immediate correction is more likely to be useful. Grittner (1977) advises that in conversational situations, the teacher should avoid public correction of student errors, as interrupting the activity could very easily make the student feel humiliated and inhibited, and the activity itself could easily be killed. Instead of causing such effects the teacher who cares about a friendly atmosphere in the classroom should instead allow the conversation to flow freely. However, he should also take notes of the major patterns of errors and discuss them subsequently without identifying (and hence disgracing) any given student in front of the class.

” (...) perhaps the teacher should lay aside the red pencil with which he scored any departure from perfection and replace it with a word and a smile of encouragement.” Macnamara (1973: 61)

Referring again to Scrivener (1994), we learn that when the aim is directed towards accuracy teachers frequently encourage student self-correction or student-student correction of errors. Related techniques indicate that an error has been made, they may also indicate what kind of error it is, or where in the sentence the error is. They either invite correction or help the student towards a correction. To indicate an error the teacher may tell the student directly where the error is, use facial expression (e.g. surprise, frown, raised eyebrows, interest), gesture (e.g. a hand outstretched to ‘hold’ the sentence), repeat the sentence up to the error (e.g. They looked for a...?), echo the sentence with changed intonation or stress (e.g. You **go** to a disco yesterday?), and other techniques. In order to promote student-student correction, Scrivener advises us to elicit a correction from one of the students, if he also fails to get it right the teacher chooses another student to help the previous one. The student who succeeds in giving the correct answer, corrects the former one, and only when this student has got the idea, does he correct the one before him. This student then gives the correct answer back to the teacher. The effect of the ‘student-student correction’technique, as Scrivener calls it, is to involve many students in thinking about the problem and finding a solution. Johnson (1995), however, makes us aware of the fact that sometimes the quickest, most appropriate and most useful way of helping the students is just giving them the correct form. Where written work is concerned Grittner (1977) expresses his idea of the correction of student errors. He recommends that the teacher should avoid massive use of red ink and negative judgemental remarks on the students’ paper. Instead, comments should be directed towards those parts which are correct. Remarks such as: ‘Good, you used the Past Perfect correctly in this paragraph,’ and ‘Fine progress on the use of Passive Voice,’ should tend to predominate.

Building a good rapport with the students is a strategy which is a necessity for the foreign language teacher. When there is no tension between the teacher and his students, they participate in the process of learning the target language in a more comfortable way, with no place for fear, shame, embarassment, or any other kind of discomfort. However, as Janowski (1994) writes, the teacher has to be aware that even in a classroom with the most friendly atmosphere possible, he is the most mature person. He is responsible for the students and for the knowledge they receive. That is why he has to think of the best possible ways to help his students learn the foreign language and teach them how to make use of relevant strategies.

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