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BLENDING INNOVATIVE METHODS OF LEARNING FOR SUCCESS

The development of language competences in the times of deep socio-political crisis and pandemic threats poses some real challenges. The efficiency of learning process is dependent on the implementation and successful blending of innovative methods of teaching. The paper studies the ways various innovative methods of learning intersect creating a new strategy for combining learning methods to meet the changing demands of adult learners.

Key words: *Blended Learning, Innovative methods of Learning, competences, combinatorial creativity, problem solving, Transformative Learning*

Nowadays Blended Learning is becoming mundane. Of course, it can be argued that the choice of the learning approach is conditioned by the fact that most educational institutions had no other choice but employ either methods of distant learning or opt for Blended Learning under the ominous threat of Covid-19. However, world top notch universities had long before discovered the endless opportunities of online learning and had acknowledged the importance of combining the methods of instructivist learning with those of self-regulatory learning attained most efficiently due to the connectivity of Networks /Siemens, 2008/.

Moreover, self-regulatory learning develops learners' combinatorial creativity and critical thinking, thus, refocusing on those sterling competences that are most valued in the 21st century corporate world. Learners' enhanced leadership in the process of Competence-based Learning is characterized firstly with student-centrism, implementation of predominantly interactive method of teaching that appear to be of fundamental importance especially in language teaching.

Conversely, in some educational institutions, student-centrism remains to be a challenge mostly for those "laggard" teachers who used to practise little "interactiveness" in the offline academic environment of pre-Covid era, let alone at the online format of lessons dictated by the new reality of today's world.

In that regard one of the frequently mentioned extenuations is that the amount of language hours is plunging or the classes are getting larger and more inclusive in terms of students' language competence and motivation. Most language instructors highlight the urgency to uphold the use of online collaborative platforms that will make students "more visible" in terms of their participation in the synchronous

learning process, as well as their contribution to collaborative asynchronous activities.

A propos, language teachers righteously claim that such regulatory measures as the streaming of students in accordance to their language competence held in the preparatory stage of course design may actually improve the so-called "students' visibility".

Most popular online collaborative platforms per se suppose interactiveness, making the process of learning 'active' even though the participants of the learning process are deprived of much physical mobility. Active Learning is generally defined as an instructional method which focuses on student-orientation. "From pragmatic prospective Active Learning requires students to do meaningful learning activities and think about what they are doing. The core elements of active learning are student activity and engagement in the learning process. Active Learning is often contrasted to the traditional lecture where students passively receive information form the instructor" /Prince, 2004: 223/.

To put it simply the aim of Active Learning is to engage students in a way that they will challenge each other to think about and comment on the topic presented. Students develop skills in handling concepts related to the topic. They analyze, synthesize, and evaluate the presented information in discussion with other students, through asking questions, or through writing and eventually participating in a joint project. In particular, at a lesson of Business English, students are given a case that bears certain relevance to them. They are expected to analyze the details of the case, then synthesize ideas using the knowledge accumulated from other disciplines or their own personal experience. Afterwards, they evaluate first the probability/feasibility of the outcome, then self-evaluate the results of the groups' and their own efforts.

The ways of engaging the students in learning activities are varied and require mastery on behalf of the language instructor especially in case of Blended Learning. Particularly, to increase students' in-class productivity teachers should also introduce Collaborative learning method which develops learners' team-work competence. Most popular platforms have a breakout group activity tool, which enables students to work together in small groups toward a common goal. However, unstable Internet connection may pose some challenges in terms of the timeliness of the activity, as well as the likelihood that students might lose the focus and become demotivated because of the technical problems. In offline learning group activities prove to be quite efficient for team-building. The core element of Collaborative Learning method is the emphasis on student interactions.

Numerous lesson observations have revealed that Cooperative Learning method proves its efficacy when it is introduced after the learners have been exposed to some collaborative work, have had the experience of working in a team

and shared the joy of achievement. In Cooperative form of group work students pursue common goals while being assessed individually. The characteristic features of the given form of activity are individual accountability, mutual interdependence, practice of soft skills, and regular self-assessment of personal contribution, as well as the overall team functioning. When students are given a task to work cooperatively on a project, by the end of which they are anticipated to hand in a paper or a group presentation, it is recommended that in case of the paper they should enclose the self-assessment of their own contribution in the appendix of the paper. The idea was shared by Wim Van Petegem at the online KU Leuven University course session on "Digitally Supported Learning and the Digital Competence" held on February 16, 2021. The given practice makes the whole process transparent and highly motivating.

The recent irreversible developments in language teaching have made Problem-based Learning (PBL) a buzzword especially in the communities of innovative teachers where the instructional method is used to address relevant problems introducing them at the beginning of the instruction cycle. In particular, Master's program students demonstrate great interest when they are proposed to research a problem that seems meaningful to them (e.g. "Contributors to demographic changes in Armenia"). The vast opportunities of blended form of learning make PBL truly efficient as they enable the teacher to provide the students with materials (e.g. statistics on world population, Hans Rosling's TED talks, demographic trends in Armenia, etc.) way before the initial discussion of the problem giving students the chance to study the materials in their own time, then be "the sage on the stage" in the process of discussion. Actually, it also enables the students of lower language competence to be better prepared for the assignment, ergo more confident. Though PBL is not necessarily collaborative or cooperative, it involves significant amounts of self-directed learning on the part of the students, hence, it develops the competence of working independently as well.

In ESP Technology-Enhanced Collaborative Learning can be most efficient if it is blended with Interdisciplinary teaching method, when the learning is carried out in a trans-disciplinary field, where instructors of different disciplines collaboratively guide learners to explore the proposed project. The employment of a MOOC (Massive Open Online Courses) or even any accessible YouTube lecture that has a direct relevance to the project may turn out to be quite useful. Particularly, the ESP teacher may suggest students collect data on "Sustainability" from a free course available on edX platform, then identify 10 valuable tips in Cole Nussbaumer Knafic's "Storytelling with data" lecture /Knaflic, 2015/ to make their presentations on Green Business most memorable and factful.

These techniques aim at helping students develop combinatorial creativity, critical thinking and problem solving, upgrading their role in the learning process

to the point when the teacher becomes a “guide on the side” rather than a “siege on the stage”.

However, some of us might rightfully ask: “Are our students that are barely out of school ready for such level of control over the learning process?” The proposed learning methods may work well if the recipients are real digital natives and are ready to go beyond the acquisition of basic language skills.

Moreover, because of the exponential amount of preconceived ideas among a good proportion of undergraduate students, such methods as PBL and Interdisciplinary method of learning appear to work lamely. Consequently, to make them work a language instructor has to go extra mile first to identify the students’ pseudo perceptions on the proposed problem with the aim of turning them “factful” and afterwards encourage students to go into problem solving.

By the way, this kind of ignorance is common in other countries too, even among academicians. According to famous statistician Hans Rosling’s questionnaire-based research, humans do worse on high profile topics than chimps, because of their own preconceived ideas, which are disseminated as a result of insufficient social media hygiene /Rosling, 2013/.

All these may seem slightly complicated, particularly in the context of continuous reduction of language hours, or the imperative to focus only on what is considered practical from the spectrum of market demands. It is assumed that the set of recommended competences should include such communication skills as

- v/blogging,
- public speaking skills,
- debating,
- personal branding,
- the ability to learn independently,
- teamwork and flexibility,
- critical thinking, problem-solving,
- strategizing,
- knowledge management /Conference Board of Canada, 2014/.

As for knowledge management, knowledge should be created on the principle of “factfulness”, that often poses some real challenges not only because of the rapid dissemination of ideas over the Internet, but also the increasing number of sources of information that often confuse students and make knowledge management less efficient. The flooding data gets accumulated and under the pressure of social media it is molded into some biased or even preconceived perceptions. Hence, it seems but apparent the value, reliability and validity of newly acquired knowledge should gain greater urgency.

Considering the above mentioned, what Michio Kaku suggests should not seem surprising: “We need to undergo revolution in how we view education”

/Kaku, 2016/. He went even further claiming that in future the nature of teaching will change and plain memorizing will be substituted with problem-solving and development of creative thinking because those are the qualities the greatest blue-chip companies have been looking for.

However, in the context of highly publicized inefficient reforms in Higher Education, as well as the enhanced role of university students in every aspect of Higher Education, the argument that the teaching content must be designed in compliance with market demand, poses some real danger. It seems myopic to tie university programs too closely to immediate market needs, as market demand changes just as rapidly as data does.

Nevertheless, given the fact that similar concerns about the content and quality of higher education, as well as the gap between academic education and work market requirements have been high profile for the last two decades, "student-oriented" approach has gained undisputable value. Accordingly, language instructors feel obliged to customize the objectives of their language courses to the point that they become almost "effortlessly achievable", ergo somehow diminishing SMART formation of the learning objectives. They refocus on the development of basic communication skills overlooking the importance of developmental competences. Consequently, the learning process appears to be devalued of cognitive procession, reflation and evaluation of the context, which should seem germane to the topics that may give learners purpose to communicate.

Furthermore, practices recently encouraging inclusive teaching are often used as excuses for fostering in-class "student productivity" that lacks creativity or any sort of "quality". Getting students to work for meaningful results and letting them have their time to ponder in silence, and only afterwards encouraging them to cooperate in the class is a serious challenge, especially when teachers are expected "religiously" to execute their lessons plans. Hence, under the pressure of limited class time, as well as the realization that the provided context should be factful and relevant, novice teachers "tell" their students, rather than guide them in the process of exploration, in result the depriving them of the chance of discovering the facts after peeling off one after another their own preconceived ideas. Thus, teachers often find themselves conducting a teacher-centered lesson especially in case of online learning.

While more or less experienced teachers understand that being the 'sage on the stage' is not necessarily "the best" way of engaging students in the ideas and information they plan to present, they are not very enthusiastic about exploiting the possibilities of Blended Learning. They should accept that there is no going back to the 'old' way of teaching and that the heydays of instructivist learning have gone for good.

With the restart of offline learning in most educational institutions, language instructors should consider using more of their learners' digital competences doing online much of which traditionally used to be done in class at the expense of students' collaborative in-class activities. What is more, instructors should keep on introducing more online study elements into their classroom teaching upgrading online learning to being an invaluable supplement to the technology-infused learning.

Some elements of Flipped Classroom can be used in language teaching in a truly effective way. As language classes are mostly inclusive nowadays, an instructor can record some grammar or business English vocabulary tips to reduce the common errors. Learners can watch or listen to the recorded materials in their own time, or as many times as they need.

With Case-based Learning, students develop their analytical thinking and reflective judgment by reading and discussing real-life scenarios. Sometimes it is considered a variation of PBL, and uses a guided inquiry method, but usually requires the students to have a degree of prior knowledge that can assist in analyzing the case. Case-based Learning is particularly popular in ESP. The ESP teacher starts with storytelling using any available infographics and focuses on an interest-arousing issue, e.g. student loans. Then having built learners' empathy with the borrowers, the teacher provokes a conflict introducing them with Jordan Peterson's criticism of university education and his views on online learning /Peterson, 2016/. In the end the teacher steps aside giving the learners the floor to formulate their own opinion on the subject matter.

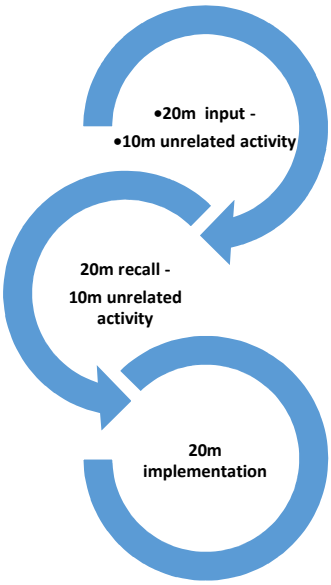
Project-based Learning is similar to Case-based Learning, but tends to be longer and broader in scope, and with even more student responsibility. Projects are usually based around impending problems like supporting the women of Artsakh to succeed in their small business. It gives students a sense of responsibility and ownership in their learning activities. Larmer and Mergendoller argue that every good project should meet two criteria:

- students must perceive the work as personally meaningful, as a task that matters and that they want to do well;
- a meaningful project fulfills an educational purpose /Larmer and Mergendoller, 2010/.

Thought Inquiry-based Learning (IBL) is similar to project-based learning, it allows greater empowerment on the part of learners. Particularly, in Project-based Learning, it is the instructor who decides the "research statement" practicing a more "hands-on" approach in the management of the Project-based Learning. In IBL, learners are able to demonstrate greater independence in exploring the topic for research. They make a questionnaire for their peers to establish the actual value of the topic aiming at increasing the practical value of their research, the

significance of appears to be most noticeable when learners share the outcomes of the research at the ultimate stage of IBL. Even though the learners develop a plan of research and come to conclusions, the instructor should be there to provide help and guidance when needed.

Contrastingly, no matter how alluring learners' empowerment might seem, language instructors often have no other choice but face the uneasy reality of learners' short attention spans: their attention slips from high to low and very few rebounds during the course of an hour. To fight against the passivity of thought, or to challenge the students to move beyond memorization of grammar rules or active vocabulary, teachers are often encouraged to use Spaced Learning technique. However, teachers sometimes do not have the luxury of following the formula of 20-10-20-10-20:



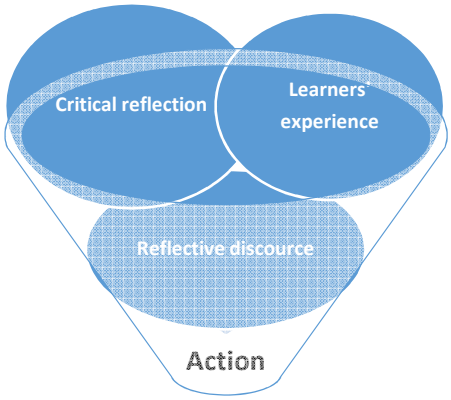
Nevertheless, the last stage can always come to life at the beginning of the next lesson.

Whilst including Active Learning techniques in the teaching repertoire teachers often overlook the fact that the implementation of all those techniques leads to just momentary effect and does not guarantee a long-term student engagement unless teachers make the conscious choice to target development of Symphony Thinking skills in students hoping that they eventually will be able to put their students on the track of Transformative Learning /Pink, 2006/.

Mindmapping (e.g. Ishikawa Fishbone diagram available on MIRO) appears to be quite a handy tool in *establishing the logical connections* between ideas. The associative links are important for *identifying, constructing and evaluating arguments*. It is the instructor's responsibility to guide them in *detecting inconsistencies* in reasoning which is done most efficiently in group discussions. Collaborative approach develops combinatorial creativity in the process of *combining different ideas* to form new concepts. The level of learners' activeness is directly bound to the extent of the *relevance* and importance of the developed ideas.

As one of the developments of Constructivism /Rogers, 1969/ and recently influenced by Connectivism /Siemens, 2004/, to whom knowledge per se is independent and connections form through a process of association, and are not intentionally constructed /Downes, 2007/, Transformative Learning theory goes far beyond the boundaries of these theories. Moreover, in contrast to behaviorist ideas of treating learners as a "black box", where inputs into the black box, and outputs from the black box, are known and measurable, Transformative Learning analysis the inside of the black box. It identifies the conceptually separable areas of self, worldview, epistemology, ontology, behavior and capacity that intersect to create stability of change /Mezirow, 2000/. The change comes in all its power on the crossroads of Blended Learning. In particular, to help learners adopt a "factful" rather than biased stance on patent laws, they are asked to brainstorm ideas (calling up their past *"experiences"*) to seek common ground between the song "Happy birthday to you" and Gary Kildall's tragic history, who died in poverty though he was the one who had the first operating system created way before Bill Gates did. Once the students see the analogy, they are provided with some active vocabulary pertaining to Intellectual property, as well as a short extract about the copy right disputes around the mandatory song of all birthdays. And there comes the moment of the "*critical reflection"* when the students express their views using the proposed the active vocabulary. They analyze and challenge the validity of their own preconceived ideas on the given aspect of Intellectual property.

Then the instructor uses one of the great features of Blended Learning, i.e. the possibility of providing students with necessary online resources on Intellectual Property, which they can learn on their own time. At the follow-up lesson learners challenge each other's assumptions and negotiate alternative perspectives using extended vocabulary and better formulated ideas, hence, demonstrating an improved competence of conducting the "*reflective discourse"*:



The qualitative research about the efficacy and sustainability of Transformative Learning in 8 countries (USA, Brazil, Serbia, Latvia, South Africa, Spain, Syria, UK) from 1997 to 2015 conducted by Department of Educational Leadership, Policy & Human Development of Columbia University under the supervision of Doctor of Education in Adult Learning Chad Hoggan has revealed that Transformative Learning helps teachers engage students of various backgrounds more effectively and stimulates students' continuous learning and self-development /Hoggan, 2016/. Hence, among all known learning competences, language instructors signify more the developmental competences.

Transition from traditional teaching to Transformative Learning helps teachers smoothly become "guide on the side". Teachers may just provide "distant" guidance even after the completion of the course, which keeps students much longer in the learning process and motivates them to achieve more making their learning experience truly meaningful.

Thus, to turn those "window-shopping" students into active explorers, the teacher should give them the "content" in "the proper packaging". In the context of collaborative problem-solving student should be able to "unwrap, rummage" and probably transform the "content" using whatever skills and knowledge they have. The learning process, the teacher's guidance and the content itself are in their turn going to transform students' perceptions too and put them on the path of sustainable self-development.

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Լ. ՍԱՐԳՍՅԱՆ – ***Նորարարական մեթոդների համադրումը որպես հաջողության գրավական.*** – Լեզվական հմտությունների զարգացումը հանրային և քաղաքական խորը ճգնաժամի, ինչպես նաև թագավարակի համաճարակի պայմաններում մարտահրավեր է բուհերում օտար լեզուներ դասավանդողների համար: Կրթական գործընթացի արդյունավետությունը կախված է նորարարական մեթոդների կիրառումից և ճիշտ համադրումից:

Սույն հոդվածում քննարկվում են նորարարական մեթոդները համադրելու ուղիները՝ ուսումնառողների պահանջները բավարարելու համար ուսուցման ավելի արդյունավետ մոտեցում մշակելու նպատակով:

Բանալի բառեր. համադրական ուսուցում, նորարարական ուսումնառության մեթոդներ, լեզվական հմտություններ, համադրային ստեղծագործական կարողություն, «խնդրի լուծում», տրանսֆորմատիվ ուսուցման մեթոդ

Л. САРГСЯН – ***Сочетание инновационных методов обучения – залог успеха.*** – В период глубокого социально-политического кризиса, а также пандемии коронавируса, возникают определенные сложности для развития языковых компетенций в процессе преподавания иностранных языков. Эффективность учебного процесса во многом зависит от правильного выбора методов обучения. В данной статье рассматриваются способы сочетания инновационных методов обучения, что может способствовать созданию комбинированного метода обучения с целью удовлетворения меняющихся требований взрослых учащихся.

Ключевые слова: смешанное обучение, инновационные методы обучения, компетенции, комбинаторная креативность, «решение проблем», трансформативное обучение

Ներկայացվել է՝ 23.03.2021
Երաշխավորվել է Անգլերենի թիվ 2 ամբիոնի կողմից
Ընդունվել է տպագրության՝ 14.04.2021