ENGLISH LESSONS – REINFORCERS OF STUDENTS’ AUTONOMY

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Abstract

This paper presents a case example of developing students’ autonomy and literacy in a foreign language class in Slovene grammar school. Students are aged 15-19 years and after completing their final (fourth) year, they have to pass the final examination (called Matura) in 5 subjects. Three of them are compulsory (Slovene, Math, English) and two are optional (German, Spanish, Physics, Chemistry, Biology, Psychology, Sociology etc.). English final examination is on the B2/C1 CEFR level. Students are examined in all four skills: reading, writing, speaking and listening. Besides grammar, they have to show rich vocabulary in a variety of topics (relationships, environment, sports, industry, education etc.) including literature. Therefore, teachers are obliged to provide the necessary input and motivate students for an effective output.

Teaching discussed in the paper aims to enhance students’ autonomy, broaden their vocabulary related to environment, boost students’ environmental awareness, and improve students’ writing skills. Students are given instructions and needed materials. Each task is related to environment: global warming, reasons and consequences of global warming, pollution, ecological disasters, endangered species etc. Students are given 4 lessons to complete the set tasks. The order of performing the tasks is their autonomous decision. In addition, it is the students’ decision whether they prefer working individually, in pairs or in groups. The tasks are based on different taxonomical levels – from the basic to the most complex ones: sequencing, comparing, applying, analysing, origination etc. The most complex task is an individually written discursive essay, a skill which students are required to master in the final examination. The theoretical guidelines on how to write such an essay have been pre-taught. In the fifth lesson, the teacher checks completed tasks, gives additional explanations and corrections. Written assignments are marked and analysed according to the final exam criteria.

The added value of such lessons is reinforcing students’ autonomy, independence and responsibility for completed tasks. Furthermore, as students may choose group-work or cooperative learning, relationships among them are strengthened and the skills of making compromises, accepting other people’s opinion and expressing theirs are developed. In addition, the content of the lessons discussed in this paper, raises student’s awareness of a healthy and safe environment, the effects of pollution and their own influence on the world they live in.

Keywords: English language teaching, environmental awareness, motivation, student autonomy.

1 INTRODUCTION

One characteristic of an accomplished teaching in the 21st Century is not only explaining the content but also to equip students with certain life skills. For instance: responsibility, resourcefulness, adaptability and self-reliance. These characteristics enable young intellectuals to prosper in their future studies and career. In the last decades, student autonomy has become an important factor in the learning process, especially in the process of learning a foreign language. The responsibility to acquire knowledge has been partially diverted from teachers onto students. This, however, did not happen overnight but due to different, modern ways of teaching and changes in the core curriculum.

[1]

Foreign language teaching has changed tremendously and has accepted modern methodology and approaches to language teaching. For example, learning for life, communicative approach, the use of native speakers, and cooperative teaching / learning. Such learning is far more interesting and appealing to students and it positively influences their internal motivation for studying. It has a long term effect on students as their knowledge and awareness of the subject matter is increased if they are more active and have to reach some conclusions on their own. It might seem more convenient to students when teachers lecture and provide straightforward answers but in the long run such teaching does not have the desired effect. Students are able to efficiently use gained knowledge only when they are actively involved in the learning process. Students of the 21st Century should be able to...
conduct autonomous research, explore, forecast, state their opinion and support it with reasonable arguments.

All in all, it does not mean that teachers have lost their role. Their role has merely changed according to the needs of a modern student. Teachers nowadays have to devote more time to planning activities that can be conducted by students themselves. During lessons the teacher’s role is not only lecturing, but monitoring students work, offering necessary help and giving feedback.

2 METHODOLOGY

In order to ensure student motivation for learning, teaching methods should vary. In the academic year 2016/17 it was decided to take a different approach to teaching the topic of environment to our final year students. There are two underlying reasons. Firstly, students often struggle with this topic as it is a very demanding one so it was thought that a new approach might help them overcome the difficulties. Secondly, it seems reasonable to take an approach that requires self-reliability when learning about the environment. The latter is also the case in real life situations as each individual makes autonomous decisions about how to treat the environment and later has to face the consequences of (inappropriate) actions.

The case example presented in the paper is based on the philosophy of cooperative teaching. Using cooperative teaching is a typical win-win situation. Students not only study the subject matter but also learn how to support each other, state their opinion, make critical comments, share their ideas etc. When planning the set of tasks presented in the paper, Bloom and Marzano taxonomy of teaching aims were used. [2, 3]

Students were given a booklet of various tasks and activities. The estimated time for completion was four to five lessons but could have been prolonged if necessary. Exercises were distributed according to their taxonomic levels – from the most basic to the most complex ones. Thus students were advised to complete them in this order. However, they were not forbidden from doing them randomly. Students were allowed to choose the preferred way of performing a certain task – individually, in pairs or in groups. This was not the case only in two tasks: the discussion and the written assignment. The former had to be done in (at least) pairs and the latter individually.

3 RESULTS

Here, the tasks given to students are presented in detail along with students’ reactions.

3.1 Warm up

“If you spend too much time warming up, you'll miss the race. If you don't warm up at all, you may not finish the race.” Grand Heidrich

The first task of this section is a picture based discussion “Fig. 1”. [4] This task is a simulation of the oral part of the final examination, where in one of the tasks students are expected to talk about a picture for three to five minutes. Students were a bit reluctant at first, but gradually they relaxed and successfully expressed their thoughts and opinion on the picture.

![Figure 1: Picture based discussion.](image)
The second part of the Warm up section is a quiz titled *How environmentally conscious are you?* The aim of this quiz is to enhance student motivation and to prepare them to embrace an unpopular and demanding topic of environment. As expected, students found the quiz appealing and some were seriously appalled with the result. According to the quiz results, they are not as environmentally conscious as they had thought.

### 3.2 Vocabulary Builder

> “Those who know many languages, live as many lives as the languages they know.”
> Czech Proverb

This section includes various exercises that build students’ vocabulary on the topic of environment (pollution, green house effects, endangered species, alternative sources of energy etc.). There are three types of exercises: gap fill, word formation, word match (eg.: global + warming) and active usage of words in sentences [5]. The majority of students have a very basic level of environmental terminology. It is therefore essential to equip them with vocabulary needed to successfully complete more demanding tasks. Students carried our vocabulary builder tasks with the help of dictionaries and internet. In addition, all of them spontaneously chose cooperative learning in pairs or small groups of three to four people.

### 3.3 Reading Comprehension

> “A child who reads will be an adult who thinks.” (unknown)

An important part of the final examination is reading comprehension. Thus teachers try to develop students’ reading skills as much as possible. In this section they were given three texts about air pollution, endangered species and alternative sources of energy. [6] Generally speaking, students like reading comprehensions and see them as a challenge and an opportunity to learn something new about a certain topic. On average nowadays teenagers read much less than they used to, thus teachers should cease the opportunity in our lessons.

### 3.4 Discussion

> “A good rule for discussion is to use hard facts and soft voice.” Dorothy Sarnoff

In this section students are obliged to work with at least one more students, however, group discussions are preferred. The set tasks are similar to the oral final examination tasks: discussing the pros and cons, expressing opinion and supporting it with reasonable arguments. Slovene students are usually shy and reluctant to speak but for no reason. An average Slovene student is namely quite fluent and has no major difficulties with pronunciation. The more they speak in the classroom, the more self-reliant they become and lose the fear of speaking in real life situations.

### 3.5 Online Research

> “If at first you don’t succeed, search, search again. That is why we call it research.” (unknown)

This section includes two sets of tasks. The first task are environmentally oriented questions, for example:

- Which sea is the least polluted and why?
- Name some ways of saving endangered animals.
- Should people make the development of renewable sources an economic priority? Why (not)?

Students used school iPads to get relevant information and write detailed answers.

The second task “Fig 2” is a list of web-links to various articles. Students skim-read the articles, then focus on the one that has caught their attention, write a short summary and express their critical opinion.
Browse the following links or any environmentally oriented link of your choice. Choose one article, briefly summarize it and write your opinion in about 70 words.

https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jan/16/paris-vehicle-pollution-sticker-scheme-comes-into-force

**Figure 2: The second part of the Research section.**

### 3.6 Writing Comprehension

“If you wait for inspiration to write, you are not a writer. You are a waiter.” Dan Poynter

One of the skills students are required to master in order to pass their final examination is writing a discursive essay. [6] Therefore, the last and taxonomically the most demanding task is writing an essay. The guidelines on how to write an essay have been pre-taught.

This section begins with the task based on revision of linking words and continues with instructions for the essay. Two titles are offered and students choose one which is also the case on the final examination. Having completed their essay, students hand them in. The essays are later marked according to the final examination criteria. This feedback gives students relevant information about their writing skills and guidelines for further improvement.

### 4 CONCLUSIONS

At first, students were slightly taken aback when they realized how they are expected to study the given material. Some of them were insecure and even afraid of failure. The difficulty is them being used to receiving feedback instantly. Not knowing what is correct and what is not pushed them out of their comfort zone. Getting out of the comfort zone had a positive effect. Students quickly organized themselves and became very resourceful. They cooperated with each other, used dictionaries, smart phones and iPads to get to the relevant pieces of information.

Some students, who are generally quite fluent in English, faced non-linguistic obstacles. The difficulty was the fact that they did not know much about the topic of environment regardless the language. This is the added value of this approach – students gain on so many levels: they study topic vocabulary and simultaneously broaden their horizons and acquire important and useful knowledge. Additionally, as they are allowed to act autonomously, they gain self-esteem and improve interaction skills.

### REFERENCES


