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in
a Multi-Cultural School in Thessaloniki.

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The First Day

I had heard the expression ‘to be thrown in at the deep end’ and I thought I knew what it meant. After all, I have been teaching English for about thirty years. In my time, I have taught all levels, all ages, both in the private and the public sector, in big cities, small towns and villages - all over the country: I have taught primary and secondary education, general English and special English: students preparing for exams, mechanics, engineers - and beauticians - at Vocational Schools. I survived the experience of teaching in a mountain village in Crete.

I have had the pleasure of teaching well-behaved, highly motivated students and I have seen them make real progress in acquiring English. However, I have also experienced the horror of coping with rowdy adolescent young men - and a few rowdy young ladies – whose hormones seemed to be totally out of control and who seemed incapable - or unwilling - to learn anything: their only reason for coming to class seemed to be to make my life difficult; there were times when I even felt genuine fear.

But no students I had ever taught before could have prepared me for my first classes at the Multicultural School in the centre of Thessaloniki at the beginning of the current school year. My experience in this school would require me to rethink much of what I had taken for granted as a teacher and - in some cases - as a person.

My new school is one of the two in Thessaloniki which hosts refugees from countries at war (Syria, Afghanistan) but also children of economic migrants from countries as diverse as China, Albania, Turkey, Pakistan and Russia. Some of my new students live in the neighbourhood of the school with their immigrant parents while others are brought in to the city centre on buses arranged by NGOs. There are some Greek students, too, all with difficult home backgrounds.

From the very first day in my new school, I was impressed by the fact that the prefix - 'multi-' was relevant to every aspect of the work done at the school: it covered a wide range of diverse people and situations; it literally contained 'multitudes'.

The cultural context

Diversity was the name of the game, and I would need to learn to cope with this diversity in all its dimensions in a very short time.

For example, I had students of various ages in the same class, ranging from 12-18, and in some cases even older. At least in the past, my classes were, more or less, homogeneous, from the point of view of age. But things were more complicated than the age of the students. The really Big Issue was Culture.

Cultural differences in Greek schools have always existed - in mild forms - affecting a relatively small number of students. They had begun to appear towards the end of the 20th century as a result of increasing globalization and the shifting populations in a world without borders or porous borders which could no longer 'keep out' the casualties of globalisation.

Greece had for many years been a more or less homogeneous country from the point of view of language and religion, with the exception of the ethnic minorities in Thrace. With the fall of the Berlin Wall, the end of the Cold War and the sudden collapse of Soviet communism, Greece began to be more and more multi-cultural, with economic migrants from the Balkans, Eastern Europe and as far afield as China.

But the Arab Spring - and the series of conflicts in the Middle East that followed - led to new waves of political refugees, asylum seekers and economic migrants. This time, war and its consequences (death of loved ones, homelessness and exile) were not to be 'somewhere else', at a safe distance from our own daily routine; this time the impact of war was much closer to home and indeed reached our own classrooms: when these changes on the world stage are translated into everyday reality on the ground, for teachers it means a uniquely different set of challenges: my new students come from different countries, cultures, religions and, in some cases, even when they come from the same country, they often speak different dialects. It is vital not to forget that most of the students in these multi-cultural classes have fled from countries either engaged in war (Syria) or struggling to recover from war or civil conflict (Afghanistan). Quite a large number of them have lost their families during the war and have miraculously managed to survive and reach Greece on their

own. As a result, they are vulnerable and traumatized and have had experiences that no child or teenager should ever have to suffer. Now, in Greece, they are striving to get by in a foreign country – some still alone, with no relatives or host families to support them. A large number of my students are living in refugee camps on the outskirts of the city. This means that they have a very early morning start. By the time they come to school, they are already tired and hungry - and anxious for the 10 o'clock breakfast provided by NGOs.

Pedagogical implications

These students need not only *physiological* support – food, water, warmth – but constant *psychological* and *emotional* support - they seem to welcome every word of praise. One encourages them to pursue their dreams and never give up. A simple word of encouragement, like 'well done + *name of student*' can have a significant impact on motivation.

In Maslow's model of motivation (Maslow, 1954), the needs we have to meet are initially physiological but they also include the need to belong to a group and feel welcome in that group; the need to be loved and be given self-esteem. All this 'theory', which I was familiar with from my University days, suddenly became urgently relevant.

Time and again, there are incidents amongst students which may undermine the cohesion of the group and their motivation. For example, the Afghans complain more often than the rest because they think the Syrians are given preferential treatment over other nationalities.

Another peculiarity of refugee classes is the fact that the composition of the classes is constantly changing since some of them leave when they are sent to other countries while new students are arriving all the time; this makes the situation even more complex and perplexing to deal with. One has to start planning from scratch every so often.

The English Teacher

Where does the school subject of English and the English teacher fit in to this mosaic of misery, diversity and resentment? The first week was really hard, as I tried to adjust to a completely new environment – I had had no previous experience at all in dealing with what turned out to be acute social and psychological problems. In some cases, I was faced with the resentment and resistance of the students, partly because of my insistence on using only English in the classroom; I

discouraged them from using their mother-tongues during the lesson in the hope of promoting language acquisition.

In fact, it was sheer Babel when they did use their mother-tongues: Chinese, Russian, Arabic, Albanian, Georgian, Farsi, Turkish etc were often spoken simultaneously and serious discipline problems very quickly came to the surface. On the level of English competence, most of my motley crew of refugees and immigrants have very limited vocabulary but somehow manage to communicate. Forced by the circumstances they are faced with, they do use English with the other teachers, but they seemed reluctant to use English in my classes let alone pay attention to grammar and vocabulary exercises; some of them even pretend not to speak English at all during the English lessons. I reminded them of the usefulness of English in helping them integrate into the new home country, whether they decided to stay in Greece or even more so if they migrated to northern European countries in search of better prospects. In this light, English was not just another subject but an essential tool for Greece and other European countries in dealing with the huge waves of settlers who could hardly communicate with members of the host community. Command of a major western language and, above all, English as a Lingua Franca, would help the refugees not only to blend into the local community but to find work and defend themselves against discriminatory practices.

Course material

The situation was initially exacerbated by the complete lack of teaching material at the school. No textbooks were provided and no supplementary materials of any kind. The coursebooks 'provided' by the Ministry of Education for Junior High School students are completely inappropriate. They are not suitable for my multi-cultural students since they are aimed at teaching Greek students of a specific level (beginners or intermediate) – students who have attended Greek Primary School and have been taught English for a certain period of time, through the use of specific course books.

This situation demanded that decisions be made to remedy the lack of material: there was an urgent need to find material and organize a syllabus adjusted to the unique characteristics of each class. For example, I needed texts that would interest the majority of students, taking into consideration their differences in linguistic level, age, L1, cultural background, religion, previous experience and learning styles.

Lesson plans had to be drawn up based not only on the students' ability but also their personal aspirations and plans for the future. For instance, some of the refugees are planning to stay on in Greece and to study, while others long to move on to other countries, especially European countries like Germany or Sweden where jobs are available, or even further afield, such as the USA or Canada. Texts needed, therefore, to be chosen that would meet their diverse needs and match their varied interests.

In short, lessons would have to be carried out in different 'gears', that is to say, pitched at different levels, with material chosen and organized according to the different contextual factors I have outlined. On the one hand, for lower level students, I would have to choose easier texts and exercises – but my teaching skills would be stretched to enable me to present and explain the material in such a way that I would not discourage the students; the last thing I wanted was to make them give up the effort to learn; on the contrary, I wanted to give them the feeling that, like all students, they are able to make progress in learning English. I had to gain their trust both as a teacher and a person.

So for beginners I started to use simple tasks, drawing on everyday vocabulary items, which they may already use in their daily lives, often without noticing that they are doing so. This encouraged them to believe in their potential to learn.

On the other hand, intermediate and more advanced students could be expected to work on texts with more complex vocabulary, including collocations, and to perform more complex tasks. So I gradually started to 'differentiate' my teaching according to individual needs and styles.

In terms of classroom management and interaction, pair and group work seemed completely impractical to begin with; but gradually, as the students grew more confident and rapport improved, we managed to overcome some of the difficulties and actually did carry out some of the tasks using pair and group work. I will come back to the fundamental issue of rapport later in this article.

But the lack of coursebook material meant I had to – at first – use my intuition and make the lessons up as I went along. Apart from the lack of direction this gave my lessons and, consequently, the increase in discipline problems, I couldn't just improvise from lesson to lesson. It was hard work and ineffective. Moreover, the insistence on the exclusive use of English in the classroom was also counterproductive. Hearing only English in class seemed to make them restless and

frustrated. For some of them, their English was simply not good enough to benefit from an 'English only' policy. And of course, I could not draw on their diverse mother-tongues. So I had to rethink the use of 'Greek as a lingua franca' in the classroom.

Lesson planning

I decided it was important not only to have a regular source of material but to have a lesson plan and *to be seen* by the students to have a lesson plan. Going in to class with handouts and a step-by-step strategy I hoped would give my lessons purpose and me, the teacher, confidence and increased authority. And so it came to pass... First of all, I ransacked old textbooks in my collection and others contributed by a colleague to find appropriate texts for my mixed group of Arabs, Chinese and Russians et al – any texts which mentioned the Arab world, China or any other country relevant to the group I considered potentially useful and earmarked it for future use. The level I considered appropriate was elementary to intermediate. Here is Phase 1, the warm-up stage, in a lesson about China, with comments:

Lesson about China

1Warm-up

Aims: To revise countries and nationalities – to build rapport by using their names – and getting them to use *each other's* names.

Activity

Students give short oral responses to questions – 'where are you from/ where is X from? I'm from ...what is your nationality? I'm Chinese...', using vocabulary from previous lessons.

'My name is...I come from ...I'm'; focus on 3rd person

'His name/Her name is...'

Check difference between country and nationality (China – Chinese) and add language (Chinese).

Comments

It was important for me to have specific language aims – this gave my lessons a sense of purpose and direction which had a positive knock-on effect on discipline. Students tend to get swept along by a well-structured lesson, with clear aims.

Building rapport: names

Above all, I wanted to create positive rapport, by making extensive use of 'nomination' techniques. When students are not sure of each other's names and rarely hear their own names they tend to 'switch off'. I needed not only to know the students' names well and to know how to pronounce them (not as easy as it sounds) but I needed to use the names with confidence. The rapid alternation of names and the choice of names from different parts of the classroom (front/back, left/right) kept students alert – as well as giving them ample opportunities to answer questions and get them right; a process which builds students' self-esteem and fuels further language acquisition. On hearing the names of students from other countries and cultures, the class was given a chance to learn each other's names and to get closer to each other, in a word, to 'bond'.

Phase 2 of the lesson was largely one of pre-teaching vocabulary. For example:

1Presentation of new lesson

Aim: to pre-teach vocabulary from reading text.

Activity

Write on board and ask students to copy:

'million' = 1,000,000

'billion' = 1,000,000, 000

'population': the population of Thessaloniki is 1 million... the population of Greece is 11 million

'border': Greece has a border with Albania, Bulgaria, Turkey....

'capital' 'capital city': the capital of Greece is Athens; the capital of China is...? The capital

Comments

At this stage, I was still trying to avoid the use of Greek as a lingua franca to explain 'difficult' vocabulary to students; it was, therefore, important to make my explanations in English clear and simple.

Secondly, I made a habit of asking students to *write* more, whether it was words from the board (as in this phase of the lesson) or dictation or short pieces of writing. There are two advantages of writing in classes such as my multi-cultural classes: first, the students will have a record of work done during the class and this over time would help them develop a sense of progress. This, in turn, should increase motivation.

Secondly, writing - *any* writing – tends to be discipline-friendly. It helps to keep students quiet.

Phase 3 of the lesson focused on developing reading skills as well as dealing with the - by now - familiar classroom management problems.

1Reading Comprehension

Aim: to develop reading comprehension skills

Activity

Look at questions 1-5: X (name) read question 1, Y (name), read 2, Z (Name) read 3 etc

Now read the text and find the answers – silently!

Elicit as many correct answers as possible (especially from Chinese students, but not only)

Read the text again – aloud - bit by bit, with students taking it in turns to read – check answers as you go along; make a point of including the weaker students at this stage.

Comments

I tried to involve the maximum number of students by *naming* them and getting them to read both the text and the questions aloud. I made use of the Chinese students a little bit more as they had previous knowledge of the subject (China) and this gave them a chance to shine and share their culture. But it was important to involve non-Chinese students in a lesson about China, so feelings of mutual exchange and respect would be reinforced.

Phase 4: In developing reading skills with any group, but especially a group as varied culturally as my new refugee/immigrant classes, it is vital to make the content of the text interesting and valued in the eyes of the students. The students' reaction to the text is, in this phase, crucial.

1After reading

2Aim: to generate follow up activities after reading.

Activity

Before leaving the text, ask: is there something you don't understand? Any questions? Any comments? Involve other students in trying to come up with the answers to any queries: nominate, across the room, back and front and side to side, and keep up the pace – use the technique of 'surprise' nominating.

Comments

As in all phases of the lesson, I was attempting to keep a balance between teaching language and content, on the one hand, and effective classroom management, on the other. Thus, in the lesson notes above, I encourage students to learn from each other ('scaffolding') as well as from me, but I also make maximum use of naming techniques, to get the students' attention and, hopefully, keep it.

HOMEWORK *even if most of them don't do it – it looks good to give it and ask for it.*

Write 10 facts about your country/Greece/Germany/the UK/any European country.

Comments

Giving homework adds to the seriousness of the course and sense of purpose. When students are taken seriously, as people who can work autonomously, even if they do not always respond by actually doing the homework, their sense of self-esteem is boosted. Teaching refugees and building self-esteem become parallel processes.

This was confirmed when I set them the task of translating a poem into their mother – tongue. This is the subject of the last part of the article.

December

It is winter. Christmas is approaching. Lessons are scheduled to end and the traditional festivities will have to be held. My classes are largely non-Christian. I will have to come up with something both festive and appropriate.

While searching on the internet for suitable texts to teach at this time of year, I came across a poem by Mahmoud Darwish, a well-known Palestinian poet, which I decided to use in my classes: the poem is called 'Think of the others', and with its theme of pity for those less fortunate than ourselves, the text seemed to be appropriate for the festive season. Moreover after having used the lesson about China and Chinese language I wanted to teach a poem originally written in Arabic.

Think of the Others

As you fix your breakfast, think of others. Don't forget to feed the pigeons.

As you fight in your wars, think of others. Don't forget those who desperately demand

peace.

As you pay your water bill, think of others who drink the clouds' rain.

As you return home, your home, think of others. Don't forget those who live in tents.

As you sleep and count planets, think of others. There are people without any shelter to sleep.

As you express yourself using all metaphorical expressions, think of others who lost their rights to speak.

As you think of others who are distant, think of yourself and say 'I wish I was a candle to fade away the darkness.

The poetry lesson

Arab students were given the original in Arabic and English; the rest of the class were given the text in English translation. Students were asked to translate a verse or two into the L1 but to my surprise they were touched by the lyricism of the poem and offered to translate the whole poem each in his or her L1. Thus, we ended up with numerous translations – in Georgian, Turkish, Chinese and Albanian.

When two newly arrived refugees read the poem they told me about the hardship of war and what they felt as the bombs were falling: their only concern was to survive. Now, having reached the relative safety of Greece, their thoughts went back to those left behind in Syria and how lucky they themselves felt to be given a chance to restart their lives in Greece, including going to school and doing English – an opportunity to make a fresh start. The poem helped to make them see more clearly what they had been through and where they found themselves now.

The student translations were read aloud on the last day of lessons (23rd December) just before schools closed for the Christmas holidays and it was very emotional.

This task turned out to be very useful in another sense too: as the mere mention of 'Christmas' among Muslims may be considered offensive by some the choice of a text from the students' world allowed me to celebrate the Christian event in a culturally neutral way.

In this way, in collaboration with the Religious Education teacher and the Music teacher, the Christmas celebrations were carried out successfully.

Wishes for the future

In addition to this activity, as part of the same series of 'Christmas' lessons, students were asked to write down a wish for the New Year. They were excited at the idea.

Having written down their wishes in their L1, we translated them into English.

The most moving text was written by a Syrian girl who found it very difficult to make any wish than for peace in the world. Having experienced the atrocities of war at the sensitive, innocent age of thirteen, her words brought tears to everyone's eyes. The young Arab girl read it in English and Arabic: the text speaks for itself:

What I wish for The New Year, 2017

I feel awfully sad, when I think of the new year that is coming; thinking about our life and about life in Syria...the way life used to be before the war – during the war – how life is now for Syrian people ...How will it be in the future?

What can I wish for the new year with all the blood in Syria, with all the lost dreams for the thousands of kids that were killed. You can see it all over the world. The happiness of the children when they choose the trees, the cookies for the Christmas while the Syrian kids are dying every day and those who survive are crying because they are left alone after the death of their family.

There is only one thing I can wish for. I wish for peace to return to Syria so that Syrian people can go back to their country – their homes. Peace in the world in every country! Love and happiness for every human being and for Greek people who were so kind to us, showed us respect and support and proved that we can all be humans.

(Student's original text – language errors have not been corrected).

Conclusion: four lessons

I began the new school year feeling shocked: the challenges of teaching in a multi-cultural school seemed insurmountable: the move from a Professional High School (EPAL) with its routine problems of discipline and motivation to a multi-cultural school with a pupil population made up largely of refugees from war and civil strife was overwhelming. The motivation of the students seemed to be non-existent and their respect for me minimal. After the first term, I now look back and see it has been a steep learning curve for me as a teacher and as a learner. In this article I have tried to share my experiences with colleagues who may find themselves in a similar situation or be able to draw lessons from this special and unique situation to the teaching of English in more conventional contexts. I would like to finish by summing up what I have learnt and by making one or two suggestions for improving a very difficult situation for Greece and especially for the teachers who bear the brunt of the pedagogic consequences of a global problem – with acute local consequences.

Lesson 1: team teaching

First of all, the problems inside the kind of multi-cultural classroom I have described can best be dealt with if teachers work together, not alone. In practical terms, this means team teaching would be a very useful strategy in dealing with the problems that arise when a teacher faces a large class of rowdy students; this problem is more acute when the teacher is a female and may lack the confidence of male students for cultural or religious reasons. If there is no discipline there can be no learning. At least occasionally, two teachers should be assigned to the same class: not only will this reduce outbreaks of misbehavior and disrespect towards the defenseless teacher but will make lesson planning more productive: two heads are better than one. The actual teaching can be shared, with each teacher delivering a different part of the lesson and the rest of the time helping with the considerable task of classroom management.

Lesson 2: evaluation

Evaluation being a very important issue in the Greek Educational system, makes it one more thing that worries me as the new four-month school term reaches its end. How am I going to deal not only with designing tests of different level in the same class – what worries me the most is the fact that many of the students will be discouraged at their low marks and all the effort we have been making to motivate them could be in vain. One therefore must rethink the role of evaluation and the importance of giving marks, grades, numbers - and handing out potentially devastating reports to students like mine.

Lesson 3: the role of the mother-tongue and ‘Greek as a lingua Franca’

When I began teaching these classes, I treated the use of Greek and the students’ L1s as taboo. Wanting to adopt a ‘communicative approach’ – I expected students to *use* the language not to *talk about* it; so I refused to use Greek to give instructions or explain grammar and vocabulary. I ignored their protests – expressed in broken, but effective Greek. However, the disruption and demotivation got worse, not better.

Having re-thought the role of L1 and the class lingua franca (Greek) in the light of the special characteristics of the classes (multi-lingual, multi-cultural, mixed ages, mixed levels etc) I decided to take a more ‘creative approach’ to the problem.

First, it came as a relief to most of the students when I made limited use of Greek to make sure they understood instructions and explanations of grammar and vocabulary. After all, some of them had so little English, they could not follow what was going on. It is true that a couple of the top students in my classes were not

happy with my adoption of even limited Greek in the classroom. But I had to prioritize the interests of the majority of students and in particular the weaker ones.

Secondly, as in the example of the translation of the Palestinian poem, the practice of English was facilitated by my activating the students' mother-tongues. We were moving from 'other tongue' (English) to the 'mother-tongue' (their L1s) and back again, in a creative flow from one culture to another. This process I find is good for students' understanding of English but also good for building their self-esteem and respect for each other.

Lesson 4: Love and belonging

Most of my students are victims of hate and cruelty. The trauma of war, loss and alienation may have taken from them the trust in their fellow human beings and - at the end of a long day - their will to live, let alone to learn English! As their teacher of English, I have found that if they come to believe that you are not there to punish them, but actually respect them, believe in them and like them, then pedagogic miracles are possible.

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Reference

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