

Capturing “Flying Minds” in the ESL Classes

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Abstract:

The current paper is meant to throw light on one of the hardest tasks of the English teacher: captivating students' interest up to the point where they give up any other distractions and get involved in the teaching act. For surely, this is not a new topic, on the contrary, it is as old as the teaching profession; only that, nowadays, it has become a „real” burden. How can a teacher be the focus point of the students when there are so many modern gadgets that provide endless opportunities of “virtual entertainment”? How can the teacher compete with such delightful ways of spending the time? This modern era has brought a wide range of attractive digital activities that catch the interest on the spot. No wonder the lessons don't appeal to students anymore unless they are really ready to put up with modern, new, up to date methods. The aim of the present paper is to shed some light on all these aspects and make suggestions on how such barriers can be overcome.

Keywords: interest; distraction, barrier, attractive; activity

Rezumat:

Articolul de față are drept scop identificarea unor metode și strategii de bază utile în atragerea studenților care sunt distrași în timpul orelor de predare a limbii engleze. Cu siguranță nu este ușor să captivezi atenția celor din clasă în zilele noastre când există atât de multe modalități de a te conecta cu tot ce este nou, prin intermediul tehnologiei. Cum mai poate oare un profesor să stârnească interesul în așa fel încât studenții să fie activi și implicați? Răspunsul stă în crearea unor lecții atrăgătoare din punct de vedere al conținutului, dar și a metodei de prezentare, în abordarea unei strategii de predare flexibile și a unei atitudini potrivite.

Cuvinte cheie: distragere, atenție, abordare, conectare, implicare

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Flying Minds

„Flying minds” have always existed in classes and all teachers should be aware of this. In most cases it is not connected to the lessons, the teacher or the subject and, thus, should not be taken personally. The reasons why people become distracted are numerous: some students have part time or full-time jobs and do studies at the same time so they are quite tired when attending classes, others just have difficulties in keeping focused for a long period of time so, no guilty parties should be looked for. In other cases, students simply shift their concentration if not activated in a proper way. The reasons why students lose their focus in the class are various and depend on a large number of factors. Nowadays this tendency has become more acute and that is mainly because of the temptation generated by the appearance and development of modern gadgets. Being all the time around us, keeping us connected to our loved ones and to the latest news in the world, they simply attract us and make us forget the fact that we are in the middle of a learning act which involves attention and dedication in order to acquire information. Just as Lang used to say:

“If you have been teaching for any length of time, you will have direct experience with this problem in your classroom: you will have seen students’ attention drifting out the window, waning over the course of the day, or disappearing into their phones and laptops. If you have now also taught online, at least temporarily, you will likely have witnessed attention failing and flailing in those environments as well. Perhaps you noticed students eyeing their phones or checking email during your Zoom sessions (...) distraction comes in many forms. We can be as distracted by our fears and anxieties (...) as we can be by our phones and laptops. (Lang, M. 2020: 3)¹

The causes of the lack of attention during classes vary from individual to individual and it is difficult to precisely identify them. If they are just merely noticeable and do not have a bad influence on the others, then they should not be given any importance. It’s in our human nature to be dreamers sometimes. Focusing for a long period of time without a break may be harmful for our mood, therefore, short periods of distraction may be beneficial for our recovery and for “regaining” our energy and concentration. Such pauses are temporary and do not affect the normal course of the day or the participation in class. They pass really quickly and

¹ Lang, M. James, *Distracted. Why Students Can’t focus and What You Can do About It*, Basic Books, New York, 2020.



connection is regained almost instantly. Just as Guantarana mentioned, such sensations are a “come and go” and are simply natural:

“The distraction itself can be anything: a sound, a sensation, an emotion, a fantasy, anything at all. Whatever it is, don’t try to repress it. Don’t try to force it out of your mind. There’s no need for that. Just observe it mindfully with bare attention. Examine the distraction wordlessly, and it will pass away by itself. You will find your attention drifting effortlessly back to the breath. And do not condemn yourself for having been distracted. Distractions are natural. They come and they go”.² (Gunaratana, 2011:118)

However, not all distractions are spontaneous, short and beneficial. Most of them occur as a result of external factors and the trouble is that they last for a long period of time if they are not handled correctly from the start. They may be really difficult to deal with, if the teacher is not aware of them or tries to ignore them. Such issues should be as a sort of priority during the lesson, the main reason being that one “flying” spirit may engage others in their relaxed mood and turn the entire activity into a chaos. What could be worse than that? Once the connection teacher-students is lost, the recovery requires a double effort and success is not guaranteed. Distraction may be destructive if not taken into consideration in time. Still, if a teacher finds himself/herself in such a difficult situation, a key solution is not to panic. This will make things worse. As long as you are calm and patient, solutions may appear.

Don’t “fight” with “flying minds”, challenge them

Getting nervous when interacting with a “flying mind” is a wrong step. It is hard to deal with somebody that ignores your teaching act, but working wisely and adopting the right attitude may be of great help. Several aspects are to be taken into consideration and, for sure, the list of them can continue since each teaching act is a particular one and teachers should be flexible and identify the best measure that apply to his/her class.

* Considering emotions is essential. The difficulty of acquiring a foreign language may lead to a mix of feelings that are not always easy to confront. They are related to the level of the student’s ability to learn new structures and to master them as well as to the social aspect, since, practising a foreign language, involves communication and interaction with peers. Shy or sensitive learners experience high level of anxiety unless they are constantly supported by a teacher who knows how to “remove” the barriers that such people feel. Being sympathetic will hinder the students’ fears and will make them become more willing to cooperate

² Gunaratana, Henepola, *Mindfulness in Plain English*, Wisdom Publications, USA, 2011.



and to engage in the class activities. Still, “being sympathetic” should not be associated with becoming “friends”. The teacher is in the class to teach students, therefore, when mistakes appear and are repeatedly used, the teacher should intervene. After all, the language goals are vital and should not be put aside just to give the students the sense that they do excellent all the time and to give them a permanent state of “comfort”.

“Remember that your job as a teacher or tutor is not to be the students’ friend. It’s possible to set up a classroom climate that doesn’t stigmatize students’ accents or mistakes, and that also doesn’t tolerate inaccuracy on targeted grammar/pronunciation points. Students come to class wanting- and often needing -to improve, which usually means changing their accents or grammar. As teachers, we are not serving students well if we don’t call attention to inaccuracies and provide the means for them to change their language patterns to reach the language goals”.³ (Reed, M., Michaud, C., 2010:12)

Goal driven lessons

When conceiving a lesson, a teacher should always have in view the students’ interests and the reasons why they are learning a new language. If the English teacher teaches students in a technical faculty, then the lessons should include all kinds of technical terms that can be of great use for them when they graduate and get a job. English for business students should contain commercial correspondence or business vocabulary that will help them to interact with other business people in the future. The benefits that students may have as a result of studying English are numerous and, revealing them along the lessons, may enhance their curiosity and desire to become better. Sometimes, they are not fully aware of the advantages of knowing it; thus, emphasizing its advantages, either by inviting successful people from their field of interest that could provide a speech in English or simply posting videos with people that students admire and that master English at a high level may be highly stimulating.

Meaningful Introductory Outline

Perhaps one of the most important aspects is to prepare your students for what you are going to teach. It is a useful way to get them ready for what comes next and to mentally pre-stimulate their thinking. It is much easier to know what to expect and what you are going to work on in the following moments. It gives students a feeling of comfort and they

³ Reed, Marnie, Michaud, Christina, *Goal- Driven Lesson Planning for Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages*, Michigan Teacher Training, The University of Michigan Press, 2010, p. 12.



may gather their thoughts in advance, in a more efficient way. Make them ready, and they will be ready for you. Making an introduction which warms students, and organize the rest of the lesson into clearly established points will support students in remembering everything in a more accurate way.

“Providing an introductory outline for your class session is a simple way to help students organize their thoughts about that day’s concepts and notes. You can refer to your outline as you move from one topic to the next during the class session. Moreover, providing verbal clues to your students (...) when presenting new material may result in increased learning”.⁴ (Baepler, Paul, Walker, J.D., Saichaie, D., Petersen, C., 2016:42)

A well-structured material will enhance an easy and smooth acquisition and will lead to systematic understanding. The main target of a lesson is to provide students with specific information that is easy to reproduce and that is well-defined in terms of being systematized. This way the knowledge is transmitted and accumulated without major impediments.

Communicate Information Effectively

English is a highly idiomatic language. For beginner level students, it is quite difficult to keep the pace with all the meanings of the various expressions that make up the English vocabulary. Therefore, the teacher should try to explain each and every issue that they may find confusing and offer adequate examples of their use. Prior to teaching them, it is better for students to become familiarized with them, by handing a short list (connected to images if possible) to be subsequently used in various debates and exercises. Knowing idioms, collocations or other expressions allow students to use the language more naturally and to become competent users. Teaching English lessons without such vocabulary items would not be a positive experience since English is a “rich” language in terms of their presence and use; thus, it is not about learning new words, it’s about learning the right combinations and uses of them. Mastering such items will generate fluency and generate language productivity.

“The acquisition of collocations represents a major aim in teaching English to civil engineering students. Our students have low-proficiency in producing real English language. They confirm the lack of productive ability in the target vocabulary; therefore, we need a new approach that would improve the students’ spoken fluency. An alternative is a theme-based approach in which the students would engage in speaking tasks

⁴ Baepler, Paul, Walker, J.D., Brooks, Christopher, Saichaie, D., Petersen, Christine, *A Guide to Teaching in the Active Learning Classroom. History, Research and Practice*, Stylus Publishing, 2016.



designed around a specific topic or situation. Prior to the speaking tasks, the students will study a collection of individual words useful when discussing the given theme”.⁵ (Ispas, L. D, 2022:236)

However, the teacher should have in view the fact that expressions should be connected to the thematic interest of the students. If the teachers deal with students from technical faculties, then, the main target should be the acquisition of specific terms, collocations, phrasal verbs or expressions that are included in the students’ area of interest. Students are eager to involve in activities that are linked to their zone of study. By repeating such terms under a wide variety of practical exercises will generate a stronger focus on attention and will make students acquire them without even realizing.

Create Enjoyable Lessons

Besides having in view grammar structures, vocabulary items, activities of listening and speaking, the teacher should, more than anything, turn the lesson into an attractive one. Allow students to ask questions whenever they feel the need to do it, offer them a large variety of activities in which they may work in groups or individually, stimulate them with the use of modern devices, be at the same time a virtual coordinator and a real teacher, be next to them, but also in the back when the situation requires it. Be respectful, include a “smile” in your presentations, engage disruptive students constantly so that they don’t allow themselves a moment to “get distant from the class”.

“There are significant benefits to professional educators who create exciting, engaging classrooms and curriculum where students’ attention is focused. The results will more than offset the additional planning and prep work involved. Smiles will replace groans, eyerolls and disruptive behavior, students will be more cooperative and responsive (...)”⁶ (Willy, J., 2006:53)

In conclusion, the English teacher should spot “the flying minds” in his/her class and find the right ways to bring them back to the activities done in class. There isn’t a fixed strategy to adopt in order to do that or strict rules to follow; however, it is essential to identify them and engage them in the lesson in such a way in which they don’t feel embarrassed in front of their classmates. Distracted students don’t do it on purpose; there are numberless situations that can make students like that. The main point is to find the right solutions to re-become active in class. This can be

⁵ Ispas, Loredana Daniela, *An Alternative Approach in Teaching Collocations for Construction Industry*, Analele Universității din Craiova, Seria Științe Filologice, Limbi Străine Aplicate, Anul XVIII, Nr. 1/2022, p. 236.

⁶ Willy, Judy, M.D., *Research-Based Strategies to Ignite Students Learning*, ASCD, Alexandria, 2006.



done only when the teachers provide enjoyable lessons in which all students interact. No one is left behind and cooperation is the key.

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