

IMPORTANCE OF DEEP APPROACH IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

The given article investigates the issues of learner-centeredness, deep approach to teaching and learning as well as the inclusiveness in educational process and provides with practical examples of application of these principles while teaching English at the UWED.

Keywords: Learner-centeredness, deep approach to teaching and learning, inclusive teaching, High Order Thinking.

INTRODUCTION

A learner-centered teaching approach is crucially important for higher education and teachers create a learning environment encouraging students to engage in actively and take ownership of their learning experiences. In the given article a reflection on provision of the student-centeredness and deep approach to learning in the teaching area will be carried out. Some comments on inclusiveness and student-centeredness of the approach which is applied in the module I teach will be made.

Contemporary method of teaching English implies integration of the four skills and it is concerned with realistic communication and integrating the four language skills as well as it enhances the focus on realistic communication, which is essential for developing students' competence in English. Integrated language learning can be more motivating, because the students are using the language for a real purpose, and it is employed at the UWED while teaching English.

METHODS

The given article aims at focusing on the lesson of practical English that was conducted last year. The lesson was divided into three parts and it had a vocabulary episode, a reading episode and a listening episode.

The vocabulary episode consisted of several activities and was structured logically and sensibly. Analyzing the given episode, I came to the conclusion that the teacher reached the Learning Objective for the given part because the learners could use and apply these new fifteen words in their speech after a number of various exercises. The easy tasks were followed by more difficult ones that confirms the theory of Piaget (1950).

The reading episode was comprised of a number exercises ranging from skimming and scanning exercises to preparing questions of Higher Order Thinking, related to the text. The group presentations were made by the students when they introduced their questions and other groups provided the answers. The Learning Objective for this episode was to identify specific details in the text while reading and it was achieved by the teacher.

I organised listening learning activities which were aimed at enhancing students' listening skills while watching TV news reports about water hazards as well as developing their abilities

to express and rationale arguments related to the topic. There were several activities to cover two learning outcomes which were mentioned above and all of them were based on authentic video material “*Instability at a dam in California*” provided by CNN, which was a current problem of those days.

In the first stage the students were tasked to think about the region of California in the USA and conjecture what this state is famous for. To facilitate the learning process, the learners were demonstrated a list of suggested words and word combinations on PPT and they were asked to predict the theme of discussion connected with one of the states of USA California. The learners were given 3 minutes to talk in their small groups about their predictions on the topic and later nominate a person who could express the opinion of the whole group. The students were engaged in a group discussion, made their predictions and negotiated them with their peers. Afterwards, the learners were given a chance to watch the video report and check to what extent they were right.

The next stage was listening for details. The students were distributed handouts with open-ended questions on the video report. This task was aimed at focusing their attention on facts while listening. The learners were asked to watch the news report again and subsequently answer 12 open-ended questions related to the information from this report. Peer checking in small groups was done after finishing watching the video. To verify the answers the teacher’s correction was performed as well by eliciting the right answers from the students in case of learners’ mistakes. Having finished checking, I asked students to count and tell the number of their correct answers out of 12 questions. Majority of students told that they had had 9 or 10 right answers. That fact that the number of correct answers was not less than 7 informed me about a quite high level of learners’ listening comprehension skills.

The next task was given to students to increase their ability to express and rationale arguments. The students were asked to prepare one-minute speech making suggestions on the topic: “*What measures should have been undertaken by the government of the USA to avoid the situation at an Orville Dam*”. The students were asked to work in their four small groups of three or four members and discuss the problem depicted in the video report for five minutes. The presenter made a speech where he or she expressed the viewpoint of the group.

The final stage of my learning episode was self-evaluation of learners. During 5 minutes students had to think and write a paragraph of 50 words about one or more than one thing they had learnt that day during the lesson.

The given listening episode encouraged a deep approach to learning and the following factors will be the evidence of it.

REFLECTIONS

Teaching Listening using real news supported deep approach to learning as it encouraged learning with understanding and the students were aimed at handling authentic materials. The information that people come across on the daily basis was used in the episode and that allowed the learners to use in practice the theoretical experience which was gained during the previous lessons when they watched real news reports. According to Al Azri and Al-Rashdi (2014) authentic materials stimulate students to learn language effectively, because they notice that they work with the real life language.

The final part was dedicated to increasing students' listening abilities and the tasks varied from simple ones on eliciting information about the topic to more sophisticated tasks where learners had to present a rationale on the topic of water-related hazards.

Prediction and evaluation exercises were intentionally used in the episode to ensure developing listening skills. Higher education supposes producing the final product both theoretical and practical and this process does not imply simply remembering and understanding. That is why the intended outcomes which require students to reflect, hypothesize, apply, evaluate and create (Biggs & Tang, 2011) are crucial for them. The skills mentioned above are essential for creating a diploma paper that is the final product for the students of our university.

The theory of cognitive learning that suggests that learners should not be perceived as "empty vessels" and according to Marton & Säljö (1976) they are able to correlate theoretical ideas to everyday experiences which initiates deep approach as well. At the first stage of the episode the students expressed their opinion on the problem in English using their background knowledge. The young people of this group accumulated quite enough life experience and they were pretty competent at the things they were talking about. As stated by Piaget (1958), the youngsters are able to think about numerous variables in systematic ways they can put forward their hypotheses as well as consider abstract relationships and concepts.

The topic of discussion and listening raised great interest and students were extremely motivated and involved that is why contributed to the discussion enthusiastically. According to Marzano (2007) keeping learners engaged during the learning process is one of the most important considerations for the teacher.

The final assessment task also initiated deep approach as it encouraged the learners to summarize all the information that they got during the lesson and produce a brief, but a highly-informative piece of writing in English. In order to cope with this task students should master critical thinking abilities as well as writing skills and using new vocabulary that is why this task was presented as a concluding one. As claimed by Ramsden (2003) deep approach to learning is associated with grasping a subject.

At this stage there is a need to proceed with the discussion of how student-focused the class was for which I intend to bring evidence that I used a combination of teacher-centered and learner-centered approaches.

The dominance of the latter was more evident as learners were mostly involved in the process of solving problems and making their decisions. It was more evident when students came up with their decision on measures, which should have been undertaken to prevent the dangerous situation in the region. The learners were autonomous not only in making their decisions, but also in role distribution and choosing the format of the presentation. When teaching is learner-centered, the role of a teacher changes, the teachers become facilitators, and designers of learning experience (Weimer, 2002).

The task of elaborating suggestion and solving the problem raised discussion where the learners were deeply engaged in the activity. Small group teamwork to accomplish an important learning task intensifies cognitive presence within a subject (Reeves, 2013). Learners actively and productively collaborated within their small groups as well as with a teacher in order to get the result that was the final decision of the dilemma. A variety of ideas were generated and different approaches were applied.

It is possible to call the episode inclusive and the following facts can prove that. Variety of activities used throughout the episode such as making prediction, listening for general information, listening and watching the video for details, a rationale producing and short summary writing allowed to be inclusive in teaching. According to Murray and Moore (2012) a variety of activities allows students to determine their individual preferences in learning style.

CONCLUSIONS

Options for choosing the methods of giving presentation about “The measures that could have been undertaken to prevent the situation“ as well as sharing responsibilities gave opportunities to all students to be involved in the activity during the episode. The contribution to the discussion of all group members was evident and taken into account, when the learners were making suggestions or adopting the final decisions. It resulted in different strategies for different groups ranging from a traditional presentation to a very unusual non-verbal one. And this diversity is appreciated because it demonstrates a variety of students’ interests and viewpoints (Broughan and Hunt, 2013).

The decisions of the groups were quite different, that demonstrates a variety of cognitive abilities of learners and diverse attitude of students towards the problem. None of the ideas was disregarded and the students were directed by their teacher. It supports the Idea of Tomlinson (1999) that the role of a teacher is being an efficient leader, who involves her or his followers thoroughly in the journey.

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