
Teaching English in today's high schools

I try to teach them... but they learn little. What can I do? Some answers to English teachers' identity crises.

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We have been invited to talk about how we see the teaching of English in high school nowadays. Our reference is our own experience at this level and, especially, the conclusions and ideas which come from a workgroup¹, made up of secondary school teachers, who have analysed this question over the past four years.

The realities of high school teaching have changed noticeably. The causes are well known but complex. These changes affect teachers' work directly and come in the form of practical problems : on a daily basis they must face hassle and situations which they don't feel prepared for because they were not included in the preparation they received and they contradict the professional self-image teachers have formed of themselves.

When we analyse a teacher's performance during an hour's class, we notice that teaching implies working on a series of teaching skills parallel to the mastery and pedagogy of the language. We call them "class management skills".

We'll talk briefly about the different issues, which contribute, to the development of general class management skills and we will suggest a work plan for the initiation and continuous training of teachers based on the analysis of recurrent situations in high school classrooms. It is only possible to improve professionally if we start from the reality that teachers experience in their classrooms with their pupils.

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1. High school teaching has changed.

High school teaching has gone through radical changes these last years and this has entailed changes in the essence of the work of those who teach English at this level. (CABELLO, 1996. This is a clear, palpable, reality observable every hour of the day in secondary schools.

In the attempt to get to the roots which explain this change, you get a glimpse of a multitude of issues which are related, interwoven and mutually influenced. (TIRADO, 1993). To point some of them out :

a) Educational policy struggles between the undoubted social progress represented by obligatory schooling until the age of sixteen (the LOGSE, with its idea of the comprehensive school was its bulwark) and the aim of more quality, measured by academic knowledge, with greater pressure and “selection” of pupils (the recent LOCE and the orders in council which will apply it are in this line.) At bottom it is a question of two conceptions of social reality and two opposing educational answers.

b) The Education Authority is submerged in a sea of contradictions between the theoretical need to give greater institutional autonomy – as stipulated by the LODE, the LOGSE and the LOPEGCD – , the mechanics of its own internal workings (the tendency to bureaucracy, stability, and “coffee for all” politics) and the era of budget cuts in education. Everyone recognises that schools are “the basic unit of improvement” but won’t give them the necessary autonomy for its self-improvement.

c) High schools have turned into massive entities, chaotic to manage, where pupils and teachers from a diversity of backgrounds, interests, ages and professional cultures coexist, where it is difficult to establish deep educational relationships because management comes first : credits, the 50 minute hour, playground surveillance, too many meetings... etc

d) Pupils and hence the society that protects them, (family, neighbourhood, town...) have also changed : loss of certain social values, the break up of the traditional nuclear family; working mothers, instability in employment; the information society; massive immigration from the Magreb, black Africa, South America, Central and Eastern Europe etc..., the increase of social “diseases” (drug addiction, alcoholism, delinquency, violence, prostitution...).

We could back up each of the issues mentioned with statistics, graphs or sociological studies. We could also add more issues... but to what end? They exist. They undoubtedly affect the composition, atmosphere and programming

of “our” English classroom... They are general aspects which, in each town, district, school, take on a unique, specific, reality. Faced with this situation, with “their” reality, the teacher of English thinks :

--"Right, these are my pupils, for better or for worse, now what do I do?"

This leads us on to the next question.

2.- What does teaching English in high school involve?

It depends.

What does it depend on?

On the pupils, of course.

Just imagine two first-year groups. Both have pupils with different backgrounds in knowledge, ability and performance (DOLZ & SOLER, 1996). The groups have always been like that. This first group is made up of pupils who had a normal primary education during which they acquired certain habits (attendance, punctuality, bringing their stationary, respect for the teacher, good behaviour, work habits in class...). They have a basic knowledge of English, are willing to study and come to school expecting to pass... In the second group, on the other hand, you find some pupils with negative school experiences and who, in some cases, have fallen into a pattern of clear rejection of school, a negative attitude towards the subject (“English! Why? We are Spanish!”), who have low or negative expectations of academic success and with poor motivation.

It is obvious that we can't treat both groups in the same way, we can't do the same exercises and we can't create the same class dynamics. The problem is that most teachers of English have a professional self-image which is based on getting groups like the first one. This has been the case for years. They think, from a basically technical perspective, how they are going to teach irregular verbs, work on a text or analyse a grammatical structure... assuming that their pupils, in general (with different abilities, interests and motivations) will follow the pre-planned teaching sequence. The problem crops up when, once the group has been sized up, we realize that our initial assumptions were erroneous : quite a number of students show no will to learn, do not adopt a work attitude in class : are nuisances, exasperating or even, “don't give a damn” and when, for some unexplained reason they take an initial interest it soon fades with the first difficulties. A teacher from Extremadura put it this way :

"I spend forty minutes of the class trying to get them to sit down, stop fighting, pay attention, keep quiet, get out their work (if they bring it) introducing the activity and explaining the work at hand... After all that, with a little luck, there's twenty minutes left for some English."

When we ask the question what is the job of a teacher of English in today's high school, it is difficult to find an answer. We often have recourse to sociological answers : "teaching kids English", "educating future European citizens", that is, we reply to the question what's it for (in terms of expected social usefulness), instead of facing the basic question of what is it about.

To understand what it is about we must start from the analysis of the actual work teachers do. Only in this way will we be able to get an idea of what they really do and what skills they need to have to do it well. Here is a shortlist taken from the practice of a teacher of English during one hour of class :

- a) I arrived in class on time – not an easy matter since I was on-call the period before in the "room for expelled pupils" and there is always some problem.
- b) I had reminded the students (verbally, by gesture,...) that I expected them to be there before me.
- c) I greeted the students. I gave Luisa a special smile because we had a little tiff yesterday and I know she had a bad time.
- d) I waited until a couple of kids who came in slightly late had entered while replying to Tomas's whispered comment that I shouldn't allow them in since he wasn't allowed in late last week.
- e) I introduced the work we were going to do during that period : it's a reading today called "It's Friday.". It is the same work for all except Pablo who will continue to do the special dossier I prepared for him. He knows what to do and seems happy with his work and his classmates accept this situation well.
- f) I have given the necessary instructions for getting started : grouping, steps to follow in doing the task, material required, etc... Mary and her friends have hardly listened, I scolded them... but I also know I will have to repeat it to their group so that they are not lost all the time.
- g) I intervened when Jenny arrived half an hour late. She knocked and explained why she was late. I understood her reasons but I did not let her in. I felt uncomfortable. Perhaps I ought to talk to her during the break.
- h) I reprimanded Nani for his attack on Luís. I am sure he is not the only one at fault but I only saw him. The attack merited a bigger punishment but my doubts and wish to resolve the situation quickly led me to take the easy option. Perhaps it will happen again. I have to be on the alert.
- i) I have resolved Pilar's doubts. I realize that the help was unnecessary and I wonder why she does this... perhaps through insecurity; perhaps to be noticed...

- j) I helped Pedro's group to look for information they couldn't find and so I realized that I'll have to make some changes in this activity for next year.
- k) I asked Jesús about his mother's health.
- k) I encouraged Ana to make more effort at homework. I told her that tomorrow I would review the exercises.
- l) I reminded Tony that he couldn't keep his cap on in class.
- n)

Looking at the list we can see that the task of the teaching English goes well beyond content. It includes small interventions which, taken as a whole, are intended to manage a series of issues that contribute towards creating a climate for learning. The teacher tries to influence pupils so that they feel comfortable in class and can actively participate in the learning process. To achieve that teachers have to take many things into account : the curriculum, the contents, the activities... but also interpersonal relationships, justice and equality in the group, classroom rules... The sum of all these will create a certain classroom atmosphere which is the uniquely personal way in which each teacher is with students. This leads us to consider classroom management.

3. What is classroom management?

Among the different issues that influence teaching-learning there is one which has been, is and will continue to be essential to education : the relationships between people and, fundamentally, the teacher-pupil relationship² (MEDINA, 1990) within the context which we generally call classroom.

No matter what we want to teach it is fundamental to create an atmosphere of learning. This is clearly not possible without content because the atmosphere is created while learning is taking place. To do this we must start from a hypothesis of what behaviour we expect from pupils and how to achieve it. We can never completely foresee individual and group behaviour, nonetheless we must go into the classroom (be it the language room or a normal classroom) with a clear idea, adjusted to the characteristics of our pupils, what we are going to do, what we expect they will do and the types of interaction which will take place.

² In a person's development many more figures clearly play a part : the family, the coach, friends, etc... Limiting ourselves to the school context we have to take into account the relationship with classmates, with the janitor... What characterises the relationship between teacher and pupil is that it's intentional and systematic : the teacher prepares and envisages beforehand the fundamental points of contact with pupils in class with the goal of improving their learning. Whether or not this goal is met is another question.

The term “management” is risky; some might interpret the phrase *classroom management* as a recipe or magic formula. Nothing is further from reality. When you start teaching you realise that, as well as content, you have to acquire a series of professional skills which will give you confidence in your work, which you will build up (or not?) from experience, from thinking about your own practice, from exchanging knowledge etc... They are a group of skills, a *know-how* which, quoting one teacher we can summarise thus :

“When I go into class I am fully aware that many unforeseen things can happen, that problems will arise, etc... but I go in with the conviction that I will be able to react adequately, that I can rely on a series of resources that I can use at any moment and that, in the event that I myself am dissatisfied with my performance, I will have an excellent opportunity to improve as a teacher. The everyday task offers opportunities to improve continually, you just have to take advantage of them...”.

Classroom Management includes the skills of preparing a work plan, choosing, or allowing students to choose, topics which interest them and help them learn, using time and space efficiently, being aware of all that is going on in the classroom or in areas which might spin out of control, making suitable decisions according to the context, intervening immediately to establish norms that aid work and learning, using resources appropriately, recognise, interpret and use correctly the many influences that affect the group (school management, parents, new teachers, the community...) and so on.

Developing strategies of class management has to be done at the same time as you acquire other disciplinary skills : the explanation of new concepts, questioning, listening to students... You cannot break teaching into small particles. It has to be seen as a whole which requires the development of differing, yet complementary, areas of competence which are to be acted out together. (ROS, 1989).

In sum, we believe that :

- a) *Classroom Management* is everything teachers do so that their pupils can follow the learning activities presented.
- b) Classroom management is a basic professional skill.
- c) There are many and varied ways to achieve pupils’ integration to the rhythm of the class and this leads to teaching styles.
- d) The issues which affect the building of a learning atmosphere are multiple. We can establish five big groups :
 - d.1. The subject : curriculum, content, methods, etc...
 - d.2. Interpersonal relationships
 - d.3. Rules and behaviour control

d.4. Management of space, time, materials and class group.

d.5. Dealing with conflictive and pre-conflict situations.

e) All these issues are intimately bound together and so are mutually interdependent.

4.- Improving teaching procedure

Based on what we have just said we have established (TEIXIDÓ ET AL., 2000), a combination of what we consider key issues in the creation of an atmosphere for learning in the classroom. These can (should?) be put into practice by every professional teacher. We present them here one by one³ and describe them briefly.

4.1. PREPARING

Teaching in high school is organized around credits, subjects and curricular areas which, in theory, are controlled by the different levels specified in the curriculum. The role of preparation (while understanding and agreeing with criticism of the sterility of official planning) is clear : to plan ahead, envisage the contents to be taught, look out the activities, time them, have material at the ready... You obviously cannot plan for everything. There is always the unexpected. Despite this, expertise in the subject and planning throughout the course give initial confidence. A colleague put it this way :

“The first months of class were terrible. I am a graduate in English but I had to give some Technology classes. I spent the first months just preparing classes. First I had to learn for myself the contents and strategies we would work on. I dived around all day : looking for books, making photocopies, asking colleagues, experimenting in the workshops... I didn't stop to think at all about how to give class, how my pupils saw me etc... My prime objective, at that time, was to know what I would do the next day.”

Dealing with to a problem, an incident, the unexpected or, simply, paying attention to the development of other class management skills implies giving them time, attention and effort, from the point of view of security and with

³ The simple fact of delimiting a combination of issues which contribute to the building of an atmosphere of work in the classroom carries the risk of being branded as *techie* or *pseudoscientific*, since human behaviour is a whole which cannot be chopped up into little pieces.

Despite this, challenged with writing a text for laymen which gives some hints for the professional development of other high school colleagues, we think it necessary to present them analytically, one by one. When you consider the multiple circumstances which coincide in a real case, it is clear that in teacher training all these issues must be considered as simultaneously affecting each other.

regard to content and teaching angle. When you have got some things straight about the work to be done with the pupils, the way to do it, the resources at your disposition, the activities, class grouping... is when you can pay attention to other aspects of teaching. When you are still not at this level of self-confidence, everything else is secondary. The time that we invest in preparing classes in June, summer, September... will pay off in greater confidence and tranquillity during the course and that will allow us to be more attentive to other aspects : norms, tutoring, use of space, group control, etc...

4.2. FORMING FIRST IMPRESSIONS

In establishing relationships between people (also between teachers and pupils) we know that first impressions are of crucial importance. When neither knows the other (always relatively) you must pay particular attention during the first days of class to the relationship aspect, that is, to creating a favourable atmosphere for work and establishing rules of conduct.

This fact is corroborated by an inexperienced teacher :

“The pupils formed an opinion of me, though I was not really aware of this at first. Little by little I discovered that they thought I allowed them to do things which others did not, that I was not too demanding about homework, etc... So I realized that certain things had to change. But it was too late. I managed something, but little. Next year this won't happen. I now know which aspects to insist on and which I have to show that I am serious about right from the beginning.”

In planning the first days of class you have to pay attention to how the pupils receives the situation, new for them, to the presentation of how the class will work, to learning pupils' names, to showing the content and activities to be done, to answering questions and, perhaps... to pupils' teasing. You must be aware that the pupils will, intentionally or not, try the teacher out, observe her reaction and form an idea of what they can and cannot do, of how far they can go. You will have to pay attention to these “trials”. The results of this process will last in time, for the whole course, for successive courses, and might even be considered a characteristic of the teacher which the students will pass on to one another.

4.3. INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Educating, like any other activity based on human contact brings together people who form opinions about each other, arouse feelings, value behaviour, etc... it is a reciprocal process (the teacher forms an opinion of each pupil and in turn the students make appreciations and judgements about the behaviour of the teacher) that is done from different positions and levels of

legitimacy, according to whether it affects an academic question (the power of the expert is on the teacher's side), class management (based on collectively established pacts), of a social kind (that transcend the school), of mutual expectations (the teachers' expectations of pupils which are sometimes confirmed and sometimes not, and equally teachers have to realize that their pupils will formulate expectations on their behaviour)...

Educating implies establishing relationships and so cannot be viewed only from the point of view of rational techniques. There is a combination of personal, emotional issues, of interpersonal contact which must be taken into account : personal attention, positive reinforcement, bonding, emotional contact, equal treatment, dealing justly with awards and punishment, transparency, congruence between saying and doing, confronting problems and classroom conflicts directly... all form part of a combination of aspects to be developed in classroom management.

I remember one occasion on which I was explaining this aspect to a group of teachers. I gave the example of a teacher who felt uncomfortable making eye contact with pupils. This teacher always contrived to avoid looking at them face to face. If he passed them in the corridor he would stare down at the skirting board and so avoided smiling or looking at them... In the group discussion they concluded that this teacher should improve his relationship skills as part of his professional development. Nothing unusual, until now. The surprise came at the end of the session when one of the participants waited behind, approached me and said : "I am the one who always stares at the skirting board. Listening to you has brought to mind something that I already knew and was at pains to hide."

This is the starting point. From here there is a long way to go. This teacher will have to put in time, effort and, above all, enthusiasm. However, improvement is possible and, remember, you notice it immediately.

4.4. ESTABLISHING RULES OF CONDUCT AND CLASSROOM OPERATION

When a group of people live together in a small space for a considerable number of hours, this implies establishing a series of norms which regulate their interactions. As we have already said :

"Classroom rules come from the idea that to work together in a classroom, workshop, etc... it is necessary to have established clear norms to enhance life together : what can be done, what cannot be done, who is in charge of what tasks, how to do things, at what time. In sum, they are an attempt to organize, in a rational

way, a mix of people, objects, spaces... so as to obtain the required results : pupils' learning and socialisation.

You cannot do any activity which involves a group of people without rules. It would lead to chaos. Social progress is achieved when certain habits are accepted."

(TEIXIDÓ ET AL., 1999)

Teachers of English have to think about what rules or norms they want to introduce into their classes, which way to establish them, what the pupils' roles will be, what transgression will mean, what part pupils will play in righting wrongs, what the professional implications are of establishing classroom rules and, finally, how the norms and rules of conduct of the different classes conform to or contradict what is done in the rest of the school.

In sum, establishing and building on rules of operation and conduct is one of the key points in classroom management to which educators should devote constant attention and effort, avoiding bureaucracy and squaring up to the conflicts which inevitably appear in the running. It is of little use to draw up great regulatory documents if they are not the fruit of collective consensus and don't implicate everyone in their fulfilment. It would seem preferable to agree on some general principles of behaviour within the organization and make sure they become normal conduct.

4.5. CONTROL AND SURVEILLANCE.

The tendency to encourage taking on greater levels of individual autonomy, with the corresponding demands of responsibility from pupils, must obviously be accompanied by the development of control and surveillance skills on the part of the teacher who has to be aware of all that is happening in the classroom all the time.

A typical procedure consists in a sweeping glance at the different areas : classrooms, playground, corridors, library... and at the same time moving around.

When an unusual situation is detected something must be done to right the situation. The usual way is to attract attention verbally : a word, a warning, a shout, a threat, etc... This procedure is inconvenient because it alters the rhythm of work in the whole group. One procedure that has proved valuable in groups used to it is based on visual contact : staring into the eyes of the other speaker, locking eyes, can transmit different messages : it is a reminder to observe a classroom rule, it warns the pupil that their behaviour is inappropriate, it demands silence... But this is not to be improvised. You must think about it beforehand, you must work on it, you must try it out in the classroom.

4.6. TIME MANAGEMENT

We always have limited time in education and so we must optimise it. At the beginning of a period the teacher has prepared the activities, the grouping of the pupils... and also the timing. However, she must be prepared to take sudden decisions to change course.

When you analyse incidents of misbehaviour among pupils : verbal clashes, arguments, etc..., one of the dilemmas which the teacher has to size up is the opportunity to devote more time (ten or fifteen minutes) to discussing the occurrence. On the one hand, you consider the opportunity value of the situation (a key element in eradicating conflicts lies in immediacy); on the other hand, you take into account the time (devoting special attention to the conflict supposes less time for work).

Finding formulae for improving the use of time implies, logically, analysing how we actually use it : systematic note taking at the end of each period, sharing doubts and worries with colleagues, asking for pupils' impressions and, if possible, counting on the help of an external observer : a department colleague, a trainee student, etc... The conclusions we obtain from the systematic analysis of the use we make of time will allow us to begin improving.

4.7. MANAGING SPACE

Space is another element to which we do not attach the importance it merits. The organizational tradition in high schools (often accompanied by lack of space) has meant that classrooms are inhospitable, practically bereft of resources, where space is considered only globally.

As we gradually introduce grades of diversification in the tasks done by pupils, giving them greater autonomy and responsibility, and consider doing different activities at the same time... we must envisage different solutions in the use of the space which has to be planned and agreed on previously with the group.

Looking for new ways of managing teaching space (both within the classroom and in the use of other specialised spaces : the library, courtyards, stairs) has to begin by a self-analysis of the actual use, introducing criteria of flexibility which, through testing, will generate progressive levels of professional confidence. We must move from envisaging space as something limiting, intimate, secret... to see it as a resource which suits different creative, public tasks.

4.8. MANAGING MATERIALS

The specialization of teaching areas is determined by the type of activity that is done in them (the gymnasium, the labs., the workshops...) and also by the fact that they contain certain material which favours a given type of work. This is usually the case in language rooms or labs.

Having a specific room for teaching English implies, first, the comfort of having a permanent place to keep and classify material; textbooks, readers, index cards, grammatical structures, maps, illustrations, cassettes, videos, games... and so have them easily to hand.

Efficient management of learning material is not to be confused with having a specific place for it. One helps the other, but is in no way enough. Managing materials is subject to the type of activities to be done during the class period; the key lies in deciding what each one is going to do, how it is to be done and the objectives set. Once these aspects have been established we must think of the materials and about managing them efficiently. Reversing the order, giving pre-eminence to the means (use of the computer because it is the fashion, because it is easier, because the Education Authority has invested a lot of money in them, etc...) means starting to build from the roof.

4.9. GROUP MANAGEMENT

One of the most important decisions that a teacher has to make is the mix of activities which make up the work of the whole class, work in small groups and working alone. This is directly related to the type of activity expected from the pupils : listening, searching for information, solving a problem, asking about doubts, guessing a spelling rule, listening to a dialogue...

One dilemma that the teacher finds is how to manage the group in such a way that the move from working alone, or in pairs, to working in groups doesn't entail an uproar, loss of time, etc... if the teacher sees this as a risk, as a possibility of losing control, he tends to avoid it thinking that working in groups is a waste of time and is meaningless. He confuses the possibility of working in groups with the creation of the conditions needed to achieve it.

Regrouping pupils during a class period implies having explained clearly what is expected of each pupil, trusting the group to put it into practice and acting as controller in case something crops up.

4.10. DEALING WITH PUPIL MISBEHAVIOUR

The issues which we have just alluded to go some way to achieving smooth working in a group where the behaviour of the pupils fits the teacher's

expectations, with small interruptions or incidents (background chatter, movement, small arguments or provocations, silly jokes, giggling...) typical of an adolescent group.

Despite this, and however much classroom manners have been worked on and however clearly the pupils know what behaviour is expected of them, we must be prepared to deal with unexpected misbehaviour which deeply alters the normal working of the class : fights, aggression, arguments with the teacher, insults and aggressive behaviour, violent use of the classroom furnishings... or perhaps, even more annoying, the direct challenge of not wanting to do anything.

These crises periods are typical of high school and have increased in these last years. Breaking a basic working rule of a group implies a serious alteration in its running and the teacher is forced to intervene decisively. It is a test, a big one. It often ends up as a teacher-pupil confrontation and the rest of the group sits by like first class spectators waiting for the outcome. The teacher must be aware that she is in a delicate situation, must know that it is her credibility and the respect of the group which is at stake and, at the same time, she has to interpret the motivation or circumstances that have led the pupil to be disruptive. Dealing with these situations may be accompanied with physiological symptoms : sweating hands, red face, tension in neck muscles, shaking legs, etc...

Dealing with conflicts is part of teaching and so teachers must acquire the professional skills to help themselves : over-acting, changing voice, giving yourself time to think, self-reassurance in the face of conflict ... All this is part of the teaching profession.

5. SUMMARY

In the preceding headings we have reviewed a series of issues which, together with knowledge of the subject and its pedagogy (in this case English) are part of the profession. They are like the arms of balance which must be in equilibrium. It is of little use to be an expert on Byron if you don't have basic teaching skills; on the other hand, however good a teacher you are, it is of little use if you do not command and do not communicate enthusiasm for the contents you are going to teach. Both sides of the balance must be developed together.

To be a teacher of English in high school, involves making careful choices about each of the issues talked about, mixing them adequately and building a global teaching competence which must be adapted to the different teaching-learning contexts and situations. There is no general recipe, only steps for improvement which each teacher, in the measure that he feels

stimulated by it, must adapt to his personal style and his perception of the profession. However, improvement in these issues cannot be approached in isolation, it cannot be understood as the sum of different issues. Educational reality is holistic : the different issues interact among themselves and so a good way of empowering the professional development of teachers is the analysis of situations in classrooms experienced by the participants of the training group. It is a method which takes the form of a self-training workshop and which we have practised with noticeable success in Girona for the past four years.

(Translated from the original Spanish version by Tom Maguire)

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