WORLD QUARTERLY

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Five Methods of Maximizing Student Success in the Classroom

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As a professional teacher, one of the main goals in the classroom should be to maximize the success of the students and ensure a greater amount of learning takes place. Obviously there are several methods teachers can adopt to maximize the quality of their lessons, and this article offers five methods which have been proven successful through both research and classroom practice. Do all lessons have to have these five characteristics all of the time? Of course they do not. However, teachers may want to include as many of them as often as they can, in order to support their classroom goals. The following suggestions appear in no particular order, except the first one, because it encompasses everything that the teacher and/or students will do in the classroom.

UTILIZE STUDENT-CENTERED TEACHING APPROACH AND STUDENT-CENTERED METHODOLOGIES

The student-centered approach to education focuses on "the student's needs, abilities, interests, and learning styles instead of the others involved in the educational process, such as teachers and administrators" (Mermelstein, 2010, p.354). Student learning is the focus of the class (Weimer, 2002) and both cognitive and affective goals are emphasized (Bergquist & Phillips, 1975). Brown (2008) highlights that in student-centered classrooms, students are directly involved in creating strategies that teachers can use and Mermelstein (2010) believes that some of the best teaching strategies can be generated from students because they're the ones being taught. In the student-centered classroom,

there are fewer lectures and generally more pair work or cooperative learning. There are also multiple forms of assessment that can allow individuals opportunities to demonstrate their understanding and skills rather than the use of traditional exams.

Some suggestions for student-centered classroom activities include: cooperative learning, think-pair-share activities, extensive reading, games, and the use of scaffolding techniques.

Lesson Pacing and Movement

All lessons should be well-planned and well-prepared to include approximate times for students to complete each given task. Since not all students learn at the same pace, it might be necessary for teachers to provide additional challenges or add-ons for more advanced students. We don't want our students to finish too early, get bored, and lose their motivation, but on the other hand we want to ensure that all students have enough time to fully engage in a learning activity so they can benefit from it. Therefore, lesson pacing is quite important. In general, classroom activities should last somewhere between 10-20minutes in order to maintain the students' focus and attention. One can always go back to a previously unfinished activity later in the course of a lesson or even later in the week, so teachers should not feel the pressure to always have to have students complete each activity before moving on to the next.

One excellent way to break up a lesson or improve pacing is to incorporate movement. When people move, their blood re-circulates and this can improve blood flow to the brain by as much as 15% (Sousa, 2006). Jenson (2000) noted that studies involving adolescents indicated they were better learners when movement was incorporated into classroom activities. There are several ways to incorporate movement. Teachers could have different activity/task centers located throughout the classroom and then have students switch centers every 10-20min., or they could move to another center upon completing a task. Students could move from individual work, to paired work, to group work throughout the course of a lesson. Learning games can also incorporate movement.

In my communicative ESL/EFL classrooms, I use specific techniques to help ensure greater movement. Every week we have paired conversation and writing activities where students are required to have a new and different partner for each activity. Intentionally, these activities always begin with approximately 15 minutes left of class time at the end of the first hour of class, before we take a ten-minute break. After the break time we resume the activity during the second hour of class. Therefore, this ensures students are up and moving every 10-15 minutes. In general, most, if not all of the tasks in these classes are intended to last only 15-20 minutes at a time.

VISUALS

Humans are visual learners (Gutierrez, 2014; McCue, 2013). Many studies have demonstrated that both memory and learning can be improved through the use of visuals (Wolfe, 2001). In fact, human eyes contain 70% of our body's sensory receptors (Wolfe, 2001), and when written, verbal, and visual input is combined, our brains are able to construct multiple connections for future use (Willis, 2006). "Although we choose much of what students are to learn, the ideal process is to present the information in a way that allows brains to extract patterns, rather than attempt to impose them" (Caine & Caine, 1994, p. 89).

Using photos in connection with learning new vocabulary has been a teaching method used for decades However, photos can also "be used to promote higher-order thinking by having students generate questions about them and hypotheses about what they represent" (Ferlazzo, 2011, p.123). Learners can also create their own visuals that represent themselves or their way of thinking, which could be used in multiple ways within the classroom.

Today it is also extremely easy to incorporate visuals using technology in the classroom. Through the use of the internet, there seems to be an almost limitless amount of resources available to both teachers and students. Searching the internet for such resources can also be made into a learning activity. The internet can provide a multitude of sources for watching videos as well, although some caution should be taken with the style and length of videos used in the classroom. It is always recommended that teachers preview an entire video, commercial, etc. before incorporating into an activity.

FUN

According to Glasser (1988), fun is one of the five basic psychological needs that all humans have. Therefore, it is important to take advantage of this when designing lessons and/or learning opportunities. Even the simple act of *framing* a lesson or activity as fun can improve student achievement (DiSalvo, 2010). Examples of this would be introducing cloze vocabulary tasks or sentence sequencing as a game or a puzzle and telling the students it will be a fun activity.

Games can actually be an excellent method of incorporating both fun and learning. They can be used for all ages and for all ability levels, as long as they are well planned and prepared in advance. It is important to keep in mind the maturity level of the participants and perhaps their cultural background, so as to avoid any unfriendly conflicts. In my own classrooms, I always use games to review for mid-term and final exams, and often the students develop their own games throughout the year to engage with unit vocabulary or other aspects of the course curriculum. One large review game I developed is called *Give or Take?* (See Mermelstein, 2015 for a complete explanation). Every year it is easy to see the

students' enjoyment and motivation to be prepared in advance. Sometimes the shyest student in class can come alive during a game, and games can also be a way to bring classmates closer together through teamwork and light competition.

With respect to having fun in the classroom, a teacher with a sense of humor can also generate a "fun" environment by getting their students to laugh and smile more. Sousa (2006) points out that the physical aspects of laughter alone can generate more oxygen to the brain and release more endorphins into the blood stream. This in turn will enhance attention.

Use Formative Assessments

Formative assessments are activities which can greatly help both teachers and students. According to Marzano (2007, p. 13) they "might be one of the more powerful weapons in a teacher's arsenal". They should not be confused with summative assessments like mid-terms or final exams. Formative assessments are meant to provide feedback, often immediately, to both teachers and students on how well they are doing throughout the school year on various tasks. "Formative assessments are generally considered more useful to teachers" (Ferlazzo, 2011, p.125). Examples of formative assessments might be completing a cloze activity or as simple as nodding their heads up and down if they understand the concept being taught. The most important aspect of formative assessments is that they allow teachers to make adjustments or provide scaffolding throughout the course to match the students' needs and abilities.

Obviously there are more than five methods of improving lessons and maximizing student success, and a limited amount of space here for discussion. This article is only the tip of the iceberg and further investigation is suggested for those who are interested. Teachers may need to start out slowly making changes and should feel comfortable when adopting new/different strategies in the classroom. It is further suggested that teachers seek out other professional teachers and discuss successful classroom strategies that are currently working in their specific region or with similar ESL/EFL learners.

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