

# The practice

## The practice of hope

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In 1998 the UNESCO adopted “The World Declaration on Higher Education for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century”. This document established four pillars of education: **“Learning to know”**, **“Learning to do”**, **“Learning to be”** and **“Learning to live together”**. This paper shows a reflection of a student and English teacher-to-be on the concepts of being a teacher and an educator. She concludes that in order to be real educators we need to apply these four pillars of education and we need to include a fifth pillar that she has named **“Learning to change”**. Since the immersion program is for English teachers, this document contributes to the reflection on their responsibility as educators and not just as instructors of a language.

*Education is not the filling of a vessel, but the kindling of a flame*  
Socrates

The concepts of teacher and educator are concepts that, at first sight, are separated by a very thin line. In fact, many people would say that both concepts mean the same and therefore are interchangeable. However, as a Modern Languages student, I have seen myself obliged to think carefully about those two concepts and to try to separate them.

One of the problems that we, as language teachers, have to deal with is the assumption that “anyone can be a teacher”. As modern languages students, every day we see people entering our classrooms to teach a language without having

the slightest idea of what being a language teacher means. Just because these people speak a language, they assume, as do we, that it is all they need to go and face the challenges of being a language teacher. However, teaching takes more than just knowing the subject matter.

The world conference on higher education for the twenty-first century issued by the UNESCO (The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) took place in Paris in 1998. In there the World declaration on higher education for the twenty-first century was adopted. This document established four pillars of education which are: **“Learning to know”**, **“Learning to do”**, **“Learning to be”** and **“Learning to live together”**. Understanding each one of these pillars is crucial

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to identify the difference between a teacher and an educator.

To begin with, **Learning to know** implies learning how to learn; having the ability to concentrate, developing memory skills and developing the ability to constructing knowledge. Learning to know is then a matter of mastering learning tools. This can be understood as a means and as an end. Mastering learning tools works as a means because it helps us learn to understand the world around us. It also works as an end because through the mastering of these tools, there raises a subsequent pleasure for understanding and knowledge. There is no doubt that learning to know is strictly related to the concept of autonomy. This matter will be seen more in detail in the next pages.

Secondly, **Learning to do** refers to the concept of personal competence. It is then, learning to use knowledge in a real life context; making knowledge useful to human beings. In the *Common European Framework of references for languages; Learning, Teaching, Assessment* (CEF) (2001) it is stated that learning to do “depends on the ability to carry out procedures and not on declarative knowledge. But this skill may be facilitated by the acquisition of “forgettable” knowledge and it may be accompanied by forms of existential competence (for example relaxed attitude or tension in carrying out a task)”

In addition to this, **Learning to live together** implies learning to accept that there are differences among people; differences that make up for human diversity. Despite tendency we all have to be competitive, we should learn to live together and accept that we are all equal and naturally different.

The fourth pillar of education stated by UNESCO is **Learning to be**. Education should contribute to every person’s whole development; it should

provide individuals with the necessary tools to develop critical thinking and critical judgment to construct knowledge based on freedom. Henry Giroux in his book “*Lessons from Paulo Freire*” defined critical pedagogy as an educational movement guided by passion and principles to help students develop consciousness of freedom; to recognize authoritarian tendencies and to connect knowledge to power so they have the ability to take constructive action”. Giroux’s definition is quite appropriate to understand the importance of learning to be. Perhaps the need of learning to be is justified by our fear of becoming dehumanized due to all technical processes that surround us. Education should then contribute to one’s individuality. That’s the starting point of everything in life. We build all kind of relationships based on who we are.

When a teacher uses these four really complex concepts in his/her classroom, he/she is becoming an educator. These four pillars are the “thin” line that separates a teacher from and educator. Nevertheless, the difference is not as thin as we may think.

For what I’ve seen as a human being, as a student, and as teacher-to-be, I would dare to say that the fifth pillar we need is “**Learning to change**”. Why don’t we challenge ourselves to look inside us and to try to modify aspects of our own perspective of life, of our own conception of the others and of the world?

What does **Learning to change** mean? Learning is an ongoing process. It is a lifelong experience. The fact that knowledge is continuously changing makes it imperative to constantly re-evaluate ourselves and the world around us. Since the world is not static –neither are we–, we cannot live in the past. The liquidity of our current world has made everything so ephemeral, that if we do not learn how to change, we will be condemning ourselves to be ghosts.

If that is so, we might see ourselves forced to keep up with the speed of change. Nowadays the need of exploring new horizons, of knowing other cultures and new people is definitely something we, as language teachers, cannot ignore. Opening our mind to other beliefs and cultures will become an asset in the language classroom that not everyone will have.

A problem arises when trying to use the concept of “Learning to change”: changing is not easy. Teaching to change is even harder in our language classrooms. However, it is not impossible. It requires time and a constant reflection. In order to change, teachers and students should have a critical perspective of the world and of the specific contexts they might see themselves involved in. Henry Giroux, in his book “Post-modern Education: Politics, Culture, and Social Criticism” (1997), established some principles of critical pedagogy, that in my perspective, should be followed in order to being able to change. These are: *“Ethics are central to education, Education should pursuit new forms of culture and knowledge, and Education should include a vision of a better world”*.

The process of changing can start in our classes; we can do it, for instance, by accepting that we as teachers do not have the absolute truth. Perhaps we do have more experience, but that does not exclude students to be right. Respecting students’ opinions will make them realize we will always have something to learn from others.

Another way of overcoming the challenge of learning to change could be accepting that we as humans make mistakes. Being able to openly accept we are wrong does not make us less of a teacher. It makes us real educators. Pedro Gomez in his book “Profesor no entiendo” (1990), makes special emphasis on the matter of accepting our “ignorance”. As it was said before, the teacher does not know everything. There will be moments

in which the teacher will have to accept he/she is wrong in front of his/her students. Some teachers may see this as an aggravating factor in the opinions that students have of them. However Pedro Gomez (1990) wisely says that having the courage to “accept and confess ignorance is something that brings the teachers closer to the students”. Perhaps the pursuit of knowledge can be done cooperatively. The students may feel motivated as they realize they can contribute to the class just as the teacher can.

A very useful tool to take the first steps towards change in our language classrooms can be the permanent addition of the cultural element. Comparing and contrasting cultures through the use of the language can serve as a “mind-opener” and as a “language-improver”. Understanding the relationship between (similarities and distinctive differences) “our world” and “their world” may contribute to intercultural awareness. It is, of course, important to note that intercultural awareness includes awareness of regional and social diversity in both worlds. It is also enriched by awareness of a wider range of cultures than those carried by the learner’s L1 and L2. This wider awareness helps to place both in context (CEF, 2001).

There is one important aspect that should not be forgotten: new technology. The inclusion of new technologies for communication in the language teaching sphere has provoked a really big change in education. Perhaps it is the biggest one that history has seen in this field. The fact that classes can now be taught using computer-generated platforms has completely changed the structure of a class as we knew it. To start with, the authority the teacher may have in a classroom will definitely change in the virtual classes. He/she cannot control the class as efficiently as he/she could in the regular ones. It could also be said that the underlying aspects of a class are completely eliminated; the sitting arrangement,

body language etc. Not to mention that students will definitely have more autonomy in the virtual classes. At first sight, for some people the idea of having a virtual language class may not appear to be the best idea. However, daring to change and to at least include some technological elements in the practice of language teaching is a gradual process that will definitely need analysis and an open mind.

Are we going to become the same teachers we had? Are we going to perpetuate the same models? We need to break the mold and demonstrate to our students and, more importantly, to us, that we can always be better.

Learning to change is not an isolated concept with none relationship with the four pillars of education that were mentioned before. On the contrary, it complements each one of those and enriches them.

Since we all live in a socialized world, the need of learning to live together is something we cannot ignore if we want to have a non-violent environment. We need to accept that the world is changing and therefore social relationships are changing too. A century ago it was completely unimaginable that women could go to school and become professional. Even more unimaginable was that women could go to work. People's mind, then, had to change and accept that women were not inferior to men, and that they could do exactly the same as they did. Learning to live with the new social dynamics and therefore learning to live with women (envisioned as equals to men) implied learning to change.

Another case that exemplifies perfectly the need to change so we can learn to live together is the gender problem in our present days. It could be said that people now have to learn to coexist with homosexuals, transsexuals, bisexuals etc.

Although it has been a very slow and difficult process, people are starting to realize that they should have the same rights as everybody. As it was said before, changing is not easy and accepting that there is more than two genders could be more challenging than it seems at first sight. It is necessary to differentiate gender from sex. While the second one is a biological categorization based on reproductive potential, gender is something we do, is something we perform. In other words, gender is a social construction that we nurture through life. Penelope Eckert in her book "Language and Gender" (2003) says: "The world swarms with ideas about gender- and these ideas are so commonplace that we take for granted that they are true, accepting common adage as scientific fact (...) It is precisely because gender seems natural, and beliefs about gender seem to be obvious truth, that we need to step back and examine gender from a new perspective". Learning to change these perspectives will allow us to live together more peacefully.

Learning to be is very related to what was previously exposed. Through knowledge, among other things, we develop as individuals. This means that if knowledge is constantly changing then we should be changing too. Irreparably, we will be changing the conception of our essence.

Learning to change is definitely important when it comes to learning to know. We need to change the way we learn, the way we acquire knowledge. In our language classrooms then, we need to break with the idea of the teacher as a mere transmitter of knowledge. It will be a fallacy to say that the teacher has the absolute truth and that there is nothing beyond what is given in the class. We need to change that perception, and learn that the teacher's role should work more like a guide: "Terms proposed to describe the role of the teacher within the framework of interpretation teaching include facilitator,

helper, coordinator, counselor, consultant, adviser, knower and resource. Voller (1997), in a detailed review of the literature on teacher roles in autonomous learning, reduces these to three: *facilitator*, in which the teacher is seen as providing support for learning; *counselor*, where the emphasis is placed on one-to-one interaction; and *resource*, in which the teacher is seen as a source of knowledge and expertise” (Benson, P., 2001). The students could find knowledge by their own using the tools the teacher previously gave them. This means that the teacher should give the necessary tools to the students in order for them to develop their autonomy. According to Benson (2001):

“I prefer to define autonomy as the capacity to take control of one’s own learning, largely because the construct of “control” appears to be more open to investigation than the constructs of “charge” or “responsibility”. It is assumed that it is neither necessary nor desirable to *define* autonomy more precisely than this, because control over learning may take a variety of forms in relation to different levels of the learning process. In other words, it is accepted that autonomy is a multidimensional capacity that will take different forms for different individuals, and even for the same individual in different contexts or at different times”.

Restricting knowledge to an abstract sphere will refrain us from *Learning to do*. We need to change the assumption that knowledge is something you cannot apply to real life. We need to contextualize knowledge and learn to discern when to use it.

Perhaps when we first started to get involved in this field, we didn’t think of the implications that our job was going to have. Without any doubt, it could be said that education is a powerful weapon than can be used for good and for bad.

Gérard Fourez (1994) argues that an ideological discourse is always generated in a specific “place”.

This means that these discourses are produced by certain social groups. Somehow discourses are interested in showing things in a very specific way. The purpose of an “ideological discourse” is to legitimize a representation of the world rather than describing it.

When we are in a class, being a teacher or as a student, we all have ideologies. Subsequently the language teacher carries ideologies. Whatever they are, they irreparably get into conflict with the students’ ideologies. This is one of the factors that make the classroom such a wonderful place to be. The teacher cannot lose his/her ideologies and neither can students. However, the language teacher, in the class, can give the tools so that students, through their autonomy and freedom, could decide what to choose and what to believe in. The teacher cannot impose any ideologies or beliefs. That is for sure. However, it would be important in the language classrooms to teach and develop students’ critical thinking and judgment. The fact that we, as teachers, cannot change a person’s mind does not mean that we cannot make them aware of certain dynamics of the world.

If we have all the tools to change in our hands, why don’t we use them? Why just restricting ourselves to be the person that teaches only the formal aspects of a given language? Differently from other professions, from our daily effort, we can contribute to change. We can learn how to change and therefore we can teach to how change.

Let us embrace our profession and teach our students that learning a language is more than learning the formal aspects of it. As language is the soul of a culture, we should be teaching students that learning a language also means opening up to a whole different world, full of life and therefore contradiction.

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