

The Art and Science of Teaching EFL

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The concept of the art and science of language teaching is usually nonexistent in the minds of teachers who lack a wholehearted interest in their work and relationship with students. However, there are those who do care about their professional development including their knowledge, skills and interaction with learners. This genuine concern about the art and science of teaching EFL or any other subject matter.

This article presents first the viewpoints of noted authors who differentiate and at the same time blend the art and science of language teaching. They have written books on teaching English, teacher education, linguistics and teaching in general. The second part is the writer's point of view on this distinction and also merging, all of which is based on the writer's experience of teaching different levels and areas of EFL such as teacher training, phonetics, literature, conversation, writing and the history of the English language in the United States and Mexico City. Much experience was also gained from workshops given at MEXTESOL conventions in various Mexican cities.

Noted Authors' Viewpoints

"If language teaching is in the hands of an enthusiastic, competent and caring teacher, it will always be an art, but it is a science in that it can be described in detail and be evaluated objectively," (Finocchiaro, Bonomo 1973).

"Language teaching is an art because it is a highly skilled activity which is learned by careful observation and patient practice. Linguists provide a growing body of scientific knowledge about language which can guide language teachers." (Corder 1985).

"Teaching is both a science and an art because it demands a delicate balance of many factors while the teacher is performing. The art of teaching involves personal style, developed largely through the decisions the teacher makes." (Pullias, Young 1968).

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“The art of a language lesson lies rather in detecting the first possible moment when learners want to break out of the mold and use language for themselves... to say something, to communicate.” (Celce-Murcia, McIntosh 1979)

“The craft (science) of teaching is related to the teacher’s specific knowledge of the subject matter, knowledge on teaching that subject matter and knowledge on teaching in general. The art of teaching involves the combination of knowledge and experience in the many decisions that teachers make as they interact with learners.” (Lange 1990).

“I believe that teaching is an art, not a science... teaching is not like inducing a chemical reaction: it is much more like painting a picture or making a piece of music, or on a lower level like planting a garden or writing a friendly letter. You must throw your heart into it...” (Heighet 1950).

The Writer’s Viewpoints

The art and science of teaching EFL are linked to teacher development. The art of teaching is the development of personal qualities and attitudes and their effect on the students and the students’ effect on the teacher. These are love for students and the English language, enthusiastic outlook, encouragement and praise, firmness, friendliness, sense of humor and creativeness. They help form the appropriate classroom atmosphere for arousing the students’ interest, challenge and enjoyment. All of these factors lead to the idea that “to teach is to touch all life forever”. Perhaps it would be more fitting to say “to teach well is to touch a life positively”.

Although the art and science of teaching are distinct, they combine to form a completeness. From my point of view the science embraces the teacher’s skills, knowledge and related activities which can be described in the following manner:

1. Being a reflective teacher, concerned with what happens in the classroom: alternative means of achieving goals or aims: assessing origin, purposes, consequences of teaching at all levels. (Barlett 1974)
2. Knowing the students’ human and language needs—self-esteem, belongingness, self-realization, security and the basic skills, the appropriate class level, choice of learning styles, preference for participation or observation in class level, multiple intelligences.

3. Knowing Spanish or L1 speakers' problems with English – L1 interference with vocabulary, structure, pronunciation and culture and ways to surmount them.
4. Knowing Spanish or L1 and English languages on a comparative basis.
5. Knowing the history and modern development of English.
6. Applying an eclectic approach in methodology—all approaches have their positive and negative features.
7. Planning lessons, examinations, tests (oral, written). (Nunan 1994).
8. Applying pedagogical, psychological, linguistic principles of learning and teaching—student's need to communicate; functions and structure analysis: task based instruction; clear objectives for students; formal and informal registers.
9. Knowing paralinguistic aspects of teaching and learning EFL—proxemics (use of space), haptics (sense of touching), oculistics (use of eyes), (Farre-Rigau 2001).
10. Knowing how to manage the classroom—the roles of the teacher: manager, model, monitor, counselor, informant, facilitator, social worker, friend: organization of activities; individual, pair, group work, discipline.
11. Using the teacher's listening ear and listening heart (Finocchiaro, Bonomo 1973) – error correction, understanding, compassion, insight into students' problems.
12. Applying different methods of error correction – teacher's correction, self correction, peer correction, and feedback; errors causing communication breakdown, recurring patterns.
13. Using creative materials and electrical (electronic) equipment – anecdotes, stories, jokes, posters, realia, skits, role plays; video, TV, tape recorders, computers, internet, OHP.
14. Including the content of various texts, not only one- different illustrations, presentations, exercises.
15. Meeting with other teachers to discuss problems, making decisions and having new insights.
16. Knowing one or more of the liberal arts: philosophy, history, science, literature, the arts, languages.

17. Differentiating between teacher training (TT) and teacher development (TD)—TT and TD: two complimentary components of a complete teacher education; TT: essentially knowledge of topic to be taught, its methodology, classroom skills and techniques. TD: classroom atmosphere, effect of teacher on learner and vice versa, related to presence and people skills. (Head, Taylor 1997)
18. Participating in professional activities – attending conventions, special lectures: reading journals, books on language, teaching, learning: giving talks workshops, demonstrations; writing articles: observing other teachers.

Conclusion

Although we have seen that the art and science of teaching EFL are two distinct sides of the same coin, we can also see that personality traits, classroom atmosphere, skills and knowledge merge into a harmonious whole. Thus, an awareness of this art and science as a means of development is the way to become a professional teacher.

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