

**E-THEMES
IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING**

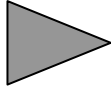
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Motto

Knowledge is a powerful resource that can enhance appreciation, interpretation and meaning ... and enable you to be articulate in your explanations and teaching. Knowledge is therefore a tool, rather than an attribute to be collected. (Johnson, 1998: 6)

Introduction

This article is an attempt to explore e-learning and management culture in search of analogies which could be used by English Language teachers for the purpose of strengthening the teacher's grasp over the students' learning process. If one accepts the analogical approach as a possible theoretical basis, one may come across findings regarding the student-computer interface that could be taken into consideration by the teachers themselves, to the extent teachers replicate such computer functions as resource providers or evaluators.



The language teacher's search for 'the real picture'

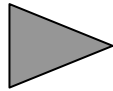
Any teacher is in constant charge of a series of self-controls required to tune in the skills and knowledge of the trade, once she/he has met a series of personal pre-conditions. Spelt out in more detail, the teaching job prerequisites cover an almost astounding series of tasks to be accomplished. As pre-conditions, one could mention control of voice, posture, breathing, own state of security or insecurity as a result of student or peer perception or keeping a variety of feelings in check (foremost anxiety). As for the conditions to be met by the language teacher, these include such aspects as activating knowledge concerning the language system, general and language learning theories, together with curricular design principles; expertise in lesson planning, materials design, presentation and evaluation techniques, classroom management.

The communicative approach in language teaching – whether in Howatt's *soft* or *hard* version (quoted in Richards and Rodgers, 1986) – has added to the above repertoire of caveats the imperative of taking the learner's needs as the starting point of all related decision making. The basic philosophy underlying this switch has targeted the move from learning by being told to experience-based learning.

To add up to the problem, for more than a decade now, our students' learning experience itself has come under the brunt of the ITC revolution, with its basic choices: knowing a little about a lot (the *hyperknower*, in Seymour Papert's terminology, 1996) and knowing a lot about very little (the *microknower*). Most students now are developing their own ways around making the best of the Internet facilities in both their learning and consumption of Internet services.

The circumstances of computer based learning and classroom learning are naturally dissimilar. On the one side, we have to deal with autonomous learning, on the other, with directed learning promoting autonomy. However, research into student - computer interaction and other particulars could provide the English Language Teacher with some insight into the kind of problems and needs of a learner actively involved in his/her own learning.

In other words, some such e-findings or procedures in organizing information could be capitalized upon by the teacher, as a means of keeping in mind if not the *big picture*, at least the *real picture* of the learning taking place behind surface processes. The question is: could such an analogy between computer-based and teacher-directed learning be acceptable? Are there any standards in accepting analogy as a viable working tool? To answer such questions, the following section looks into some analogy related issues.



Analogy –the state of the art

The Greek word *analogia* meant *proportion* and it came to be interpreted as *an identity of relation* between two ordered pairs, whatever their nature. In common terms, analogy is a thinking device or its linguistic expression based on the assumption that two or more things that are similar to each other in some respects are also similar in other respects. In doing so, one transfers information from a more familiar area of experience, the source (the e-culture in our case), to what is typically the more problematic area of experience, the target (the student's learning process in this case). This transfer facilitates better understanding of old knowledge and the formation and inference of new knowledge.

Analogical thinking is being made steady use in a variety of fields, as a current working tool or for fostering creative advances e.g. law, business, politics, science, engineering and education.

Some examples of the way analogy is used in a handbook teaching computer literacy (Andras and Roman, 2001) are given in *Annex 1* at the end of this paper. If you already have some experience with computers as a user, you might try – in order to test out the illuminating power of analogy – to work on the two tasks provided.

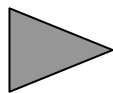
Artificial Intelligence designers have even attempted to map out the process of analogical thinking into tailor-made programmes. However, such programmes have come under substantiated criticism. A case in point is the argument between Douglas Hofstadter, an Indiana University professor (1995) and the proponents of



the model put forth by Keith J. Holyoak and Paul Thagard in their well known book, *Mental Leaps: Analogy in Creative Thought* (1996).

While the latter have attempted to break down analogies into formalized objects, likely to make comparison possible, the former claims that these objects are totally devoid of significance, while the crux of analogical thinking lies in the human mind of determining the *gist of a situation* and the way we handle concepts. Up to now, no programme has been devised to map the *finesse* of such a process, claims Hofstadter!

That basically means that people will continue to use analogy as a thinking tool, even if the metacognition of the process is still a moot point. As far as the theoretical background of this paper is concerned, one might conclude from the above that each attempt at producing an analogy should be judged pragmatically on its specific merit.

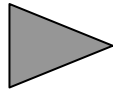


Rationale

It often happens nowadays that students are more proficient with the e-world than their teachers. That is why, the language teacher might try to become more proficient with behaviours and problems facing students in the computer-based learning (CBL) environment, and check whether research findings about them might be relevant in a teacher directed environment.

Using the theoretical framework above, this kind of approach means turning things upside-down: the e-world becomes the source of old experience and the real classroom practice becomes the target object of application.

This paper further provides a list of tips, based on both experience and the selection of documented computer-related behaviours, the *soft* side of e-culture, that might give support to specific teaching decisions in the real classroom (see sites in the reference list) if the analogical approach is accepted.



E-Tips for the IT-free classroom

Tip 1 – e-mail addresses

Get your students' e-mail addresses. They can help you set up a more personalized relationship when needed and you can also learn more about their cherished self-image you should cater for as a teacher. For example, can you predict any strong points in a student whose e-mail address reads 'Alina_scumpik' or 'the blackraptor'?

Tip 2 – e-mail names

Social research has substantiated the view that interpersonal relations are enhanced in case you use somebody's first name (Horgie, 87). The public use of a trainee's mail name by teacher or peer might be beneficial in consolidating self-image and group cohesion. Language-wise, it could also be exploited in a variety of ways depending on group proficiency level, group formation stage (old or newly formed), goal of skill getting or skill using, etc. The seemingly insignificant change of making use of e-mail names instead of real names could give substance to already known activity formats. For a few scenarios for capitalizing on this kind of input see *Annex 2*.

Tip 3 – banner blindness

Banner blindness is the tendency of people to ignore banner ads on Web sites. 1998 studies reported by Benway and Lane focused on users required to find specific information located in banner ads. Contrary to expectations, i.e. the larger an item on a Web page, the greater its perceived visual importance and likelihood of attracting attention, it was found that users had more difficulty finding information when it was located in a banner ad. It was Benway and Lane again that called this phenomenon "banner blindness."

This behaviour has been attributed to the fact that experienced Web users are in "*search mode*" and tend to ignore banner ads as irrelevant for their search. Teachers too are often eager to drive home some point or another by emphasizing it in a certain way (visual, voice, repetition etc). While that is not altogether reprehensible, one might refer to the banner blindness syndrome as a reminder to trigger the students' own search mode rather than articulating the teacher's findings!



Tip 4 – feature creep

Feature creep (or *requirements creep*) is a tendency to allow for product (whether or not electronic) or project requirements to escalate and acquire new features as they develop, under the pressure of clients or developers. In order to prevent this from happening, special management tools have been designed, such as the *requirements stability index* (RSI). It is not rare that teachers are attracted toward digressing from a certain teaching path. Maybe, the teacher too should develop a *requirements stability index*!

Tip 5 – crippleware programmes

Crippleware is any software programme involving limited use (of the number of features or duration), unless certain terms of registration or purchasing have been complied with. Similarly, teachers might promote *halfware teaching*, i.e. boosting student interest by withholding certain teaching areas until certain conditions have been complied with!

Tip 6 – cocooning

The act of insulating yourself from the normal social environment perceived for some reason as unwelcome is called cocooning (term coined by Faith Popcorn in *The Popcorn Report: The Future of Your Company, Your World, Your Life*). Nowadays, technology has provided a lot of means to achieve this target – from the telephone to the Internet – and yet socialize at the same time. The teacher may be faced with a real classroom policy dilemma in case students bring cocooning devices to the normal classroom: laptops, mobiles etc. Should one make room for e-cocooning moments, just like employers are invited to let employees take a mid afternoon nap, should the teacher consider cocooning a natural need that should be somehow answered during the real classroom routine, or should the teacher totally prohibit it? There are no obvious answers yet, however, the question invites consideration.

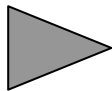
Tip 7 – the breadcrumb trail

The net dictionary defines a breadcrumb trail on a web site as a navigation tool that allows a user to see where the current page is in relation to the Web site's hierarchy. The term breadcrumb trail comes from the story of Hansel and Gretel, who left a trail of breadcrumbs as they walked through the forest, so they could trace their way back home. If the internet user feels the need to take her/his bearing

from time to time, the teacher too might provide consistent feedback on the path travelled so far and the results! That may come in the form of cognitive or mind maps, group interviews or tailor-made evaluation tools!

Tip 8 – the nagware

Pop-up windows or alerts that invite the Web user to get involved – when opening or closing an application – in a certain action of registering or purchasing are features of the so called *nagware* or "*annoyware*" programmes. Have you ever considered your own teaching stereotypes as a possible source of *nagware* for your students? If so, do you think it is time you designed an *antinagware* policy?



Conclusion

Few things in the teaching industry are as difficult as breaking down a poor routine or forming a good one. The e-tips above might be used as a daily kit for revigorating our relationship with the learner, a new one every day. If we saw the kit in the framework of the three Aristotelian tools of persuasion – *the logos* (the message), *the pathos* (the listener’s emotions), *the ethos* (the speaker’s credibility) – the above tips might become more than mere prompters of our awareness of learning needs. They could help us freshen up our craft, whether in training for language skills or system knowledge, by finding ways to tap at the logical, emotional and social implications of e-culture research.

Annex 1

Task 1

Finish the following statements with words of your own:

1. *The relation between the computer hardware and software is like.....*
2. *The computer microprocessor is like.....*
3. *The computer software is like.....*
4. *The computer operating system is like.....*
5. *A directory is like a*



Task 2

Compare your answers in Task 1 above to the following answers provided by computer experts:

1. *The relation between the computer software and hardware is like the driver of a car and the car / tune and cassette.*
2. *The computer microprocessor is like the soul, as it monitors the whole computer operation via decoding, interpreting and memorising devices.*
3. *The computer software is like a set of files.*
4. *The computer operating system is like a conductor or principal of a school assigning resources.*
5. *A directory is like a tree with branches.*

Annex 2**Alina_skumpik**

Type of resource: emotional contact

Uses – grammar practice (question formation), speaking, collective writing

Activity 1: Ice breaker with newly formed groups

Divide the class in two groups, A and B, then ask one half to write their mail names on two different stickers or slips. They have to keep one and put the other in a common pile. Their peers draw lots and are assigned the task to find the face behind the name by complying with a certain constraint: no *wh*-question, a certain time limit or number of questions. They could follow up on the discovery with further questions about the choice of a particular name.

Example:

“Why irinella@?”

“I once saw a movie with Jane Fonda who starred in Barbarella and I like recalling those days...”

Activity 2: Chain story telling/writing

Each participant has to continue the story by referring to a mail name taken from the common pile. The chain ends when all the names have been used.

Example:

Teacher starts: One fresh Monday morning

Student 1: Alina skumpik woke up and took a great decision.

Student 2: She would call the Black raptor

Activity 3: *Literary contest on the topic “What’s in a name?”* Ask students to make a public presentation based on the topic, relying on group or peer lists of the ways names determine certain human relationships, with focus on how e-mail names have had a bearing upon that.

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