

**(C-21)**

**ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS WHICH EASE THE  
TEACHING-LEARNING PROCESS**

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**Indique uno o varios de los siete Temas de Interés Didáctico:** (Poner x entre los [ ])

- Metodologías didácticas, elaboraciones de guías, planificaciones y materiales adaptados al EEES.
- Actividades para el desarrollo de trabajo en grupos, seguimiento del aprendizaje colaborativo y experiencias en tutorías.
- Desarrollo de contenidos multimedia, espacios virtuales de enseñanza- aprendizaje y redes sociales.
- Planificación e implantación de docencia en otros idiomas.
- Sistemas de coordinación y estrategias de enseñanza-aprendizaje.
- Desarrollo de las competencias profesionales mediante la experiencia en el aula y la investigación científica.
- Evaluación de competencias.

### **Resumen.**

La clase de lenguas extranjeras es un buen contexto en el que la comunicación real tiene lugar, y la lengua inglesa se puede usar para ello con un sinnúmero de propósitos. No importa cuán intenso sea el uso de la lengua extranjera usada en clase, siempre habrá un papel estelar para la L1, normalmente complementario. Para que un input aceptable se ofrezca en el idioma extranjero, es necesario que éste este contextualizado, sea repetido y variado.

Los alumnos por tanto necesitan una exposición continua y prolongada al idioma extranjero antes de sentirse cómodos usándolo. Por tanto, los profesores deberíamos usar las mismas expresiones una y otra vez evitando introducir variaciones hasta que los alumnos no tengan dificultades con las expresiones originales.

Es esencial pues familiarizar a los alumnos con el uso frecuente del idioma extranjero, como por ejemplo por medio de frases cortas fáciles que los alumnos puedan usar en las situaciones apropiadas. Por tanto, lo que pretendemos mostrar

en este artículo son los diferentes factores que intervienen y facilitan en el proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje de la lengua extranjera en clase.

**Palabras clave:** lenguaje de clase – contexto – input – exposición a la L2 – agrupamientos – papeles de profesor & alumnos

**Keywords:** classroom language – context – input – exposure to L2 – groupings – role of teacher & students

### **Abstract.**

The foreign language classroom is a good context for real communication to take place, and English may be used in it for a variety of purposes. No matter how intense the use of the Foreign Language may be in the classroom, there will always be a role for the L1, ideally a complementary one. For an acceptable input to be provided in the Foreign Language, it is necessary that this is contextualized, repeated and varied.

Learners need continuous and prolonged exposure to the language before they feel confident in its use; therefore, teachers should use the same language again and again, and avoid introducing variation until children have no difficulty with the original expressions.

It is essential to make children familiar with frequently used language, like ready-made phrases in L2 that children can use in the appropriate situation. Henceforth, what we aim at showing it in this article is the different factors which intervene and count on the teaching-learning process of a FL.

## **Texto.**

### *“Environmental factors which ease the learning process”*

#### **1. Introduction.**

The teaching and learning of English as a Foreign Language is carried out in a specific context characterised by the regular meeting under certain conditions of teacher and a number of children. These are occasions for interaction, since all classroom procedures have to be verbalised. It is sadly common that English is not generally the language of interaction in our Primary classrooms; this fact is due to a feeling of insecurity in some teachers, or perhaps to the perceived pressure for efficient covering of syllabus content –since using the L1 makes things easier and faster for everybody- the fact is that lack of L2 interaction in the classroom is a crucial factor in the high failure rate of Foreign Language learners. A suitable remedy would involve the explicit training of teachers for the linguistic demands of the classroom situation so that a much larger part of those interactions is regularly carried out in the L2.

However, the Foreign Language classroom is a communicative context which is not taken full advantage of. This is unfortunate, since: it is possible to use L2 for all the transactions; the classroom situation is a concrete, genuine situation in itself; the English used in the classroom is directly transferable to other real world situations; the English used by the teacher in the FL classroom is a source of real input for children.

#### **2. Guidelines to the teacher-student interaction in the classroom.**

Traditionally, the relationship between teachers and learners has been the result of a hierarchical situation, in which roles were clearly identified: whereas the teachers have played an active role as speakers, the learners have adopted a passive one as listeners. However, the communicative approach to the teaching and learning of second languages has involved the adoption of an active role by the learners, so that the linguistic acquisition and the development of the communicative competence may take place. Within this new situation, the teacher should not play the main role anymore, but he/she will have to guide, coordinate and help the students during their learning process.

If the learner becomes the centre of the teaching and learning process as a whole, therefore, the teacher will have to carry out a critical analysis of some aspects related both to the students and to the second language: learner's motivation and interest, their level of competence, the different personal relations among the students in the classroom, etc. All these aspects must be taken into account if teachers want to get the best results of their personal and professional efforts.

Traditionally, FL elements were frequently presented in isolation, with little or no social context, in separate sentences which did not form a complete discourse. Present day curricular activities tend to present the language contextualized, in more realistic and natural situations. So the paradigm of structuralism is abandoned in favour of the pragmatic and discourse paradigm which focuses on language use as the result of acts of communication. A special emphasis is placed on speech acts, linking devices, text structure, social contexts and communicative situations.

The students are considered the centre of the teaching and learning process. Consequently, the communicative situations proposed must satisfy their needs and interests and should be related to their personal experiences. Thus, connections are established between what is taught and the linguistic and sociolinguistic knowledge that the students already possess.

The previous goals assume that students build up their own competence quite autonomously and independently, not following the stages established by the FL syllabus. In this long process, it is vital to promote learning strategies that help the students to learn how to learn, learn autonomously, control and become responsible for their own learning.

Great emphasis is placed on pair work and group work in order to encourage collaborative working habits and promote socialization in the classroom. The student is not only supposed to learn from the teacher or by him/herself, but also from the contribution of the other students.

### ***3. Sequencing language work in the classroom.***

A traditional way of organising language work in the Foreign Language classroom has long been the PPP approach (presentation, practice, production). Each stage in this linear sequence entails differences in the teacher's and learners' roles, in the activity focus and in the instructional aim.

### **3.1. Presentation:**

At the presentation stage, language teachers introduce new language items (words, structures and sounds) by identifying, repeating and manipulating such items. Besides, the teacher needs to make the input comprehensible, motivate the students to take in the new language and create a context in which students perceive the need for the language before it is presented. As soon as possible at this stage, the teacher should adopt a cyclical approach and integrate previously taught material.

The presentation stage is often a non-communicative activity. We can work with drills and other types of controlled techniques. We insist on accuracy, correcting our pupils whenever needed. At this stage we try our pupils to see how the structure works and get them to store it in their short term memory.

### **3.2. Practice:**

Before the learners are able to use the language freely, teachers need to provide them with ample opportunities to practice. At the practice stage, the teacher usually proceeds from providing controlled manipulation of the language to a more guided production.

Repetition and drilling (first as a group and then individually) together with correction by the teacher –all common features in this phase- aim to shape the language produced by the students so that it conforms to the model provided by the teacher. The instructional focus is, therefore, on accuracy (correct pronunciation, word order, word choice and/or linguistic form). At this stage, teachers may need to insist on the auditory and articulatory components of the linguistic forms (e.g. by asking children to close their eyes as they listen to the model they are asked to repeat, teachers can facilitate the children's concentrating on how language sounds; and by asking them to guess the word the teacher silently articulates they will pay attention to the mouth movements).

### **3.3. Free practice and production:**

At the production stage of the PPP model, the learners' attention is diverted away from form by means of a freer, less controlled practice where the focus is primarily on communication and meaning. Activities where attention to form is 'distracted' by the need to produce and process language in real time are required at this stage which is primarily

concerned with the development of fluency. Pair and group activities (such as class surveys on classmates' likes, abilities, habits, etc.) in which students mingle with other pupils and repeatedly ask the same formulaic question demand the fluent use of the language that facilitates automatisisation. The teacher's role during this type of activities is to monitor the learner's performance and check that communication is actually taking place.

#### **4. Groupings.**

When we design activities, one of the most important issues to consider is the type of pupil groupings we are going to use. If we only use one type of grouping, we are wasting valuable opportunities for our pupils to get maximum practice and for the teaching/learning process to be, therefore, more efficient and communicative.

We are now going to consider the merits and uses of various pupil groupings. Jeremy Harmer distinguishes between: lockstep, pair work, group work and individual study.

##### **4.1. Lockstep**

Lockstep is the class grouping where all the pupils are working with the teacher. In traditional teaching environments, lockstep was the normal situation. However, it is also used in communicative approaches, especially in the presentation and practice stage.

This grouping has certain advantages. First, we can say that the whole class are or should be concentrating and hearing what is being said. Our pupils are getting a good model as they are listening to us or to the tape recorder, and we can move the class at a fast pace.

On the other hand, we can also find some drawbacks. First, pupils working in lockstep don't practice very much. Another problem is the lack of heterogeneity of lockstep. Lockstep usually goes at the wrong speed. Some pupils will find it very quick, while others will be bored. A final problem we face is the lack of effectiveness as far as communicative work is concerned. Our pupils won't be able to use language in real life situations if the only practice they get is in lockstep, teacher-controlled interactions. Lockstep doesn't foster autonomous learning, and the only kind of communication is from the teacher to the learners.



#### **4.2. Pair work**

Pupils can be put in pairs for a great variety of work. It has obvious advantages: it increases the amount of pupil's practice; pair work allows our pupils to use language and it also encourages pupils' co-operation. During pair work, teachers normally act as assessors, prompters and resources, leaving our pupils to work on their own. We thus foster autonomous learning. However, certain problems may occur.

On the one hand, we are worried about the use of Spanish in the activities. This won't be a problem if they are motivated to use English and we explain our pupils the purpose of the activity. Our main concern is not accuracy; communicative efficiency and fluency are also important and pair work encourages such communicative abilities.

Noise problems may also arise when pair work is used with our pupils. It is important to familiarize them with pair work at the beginning of the year by giving them very short, simple tasks to perform. This can be done by means of pair work drills or asking and answering questions, and using language that has just been presented.

We have to decide how to group our pupils in pairs. We must decide whether to put strong pupils with weak pupils or whether to vary the combination of the pairs. There is no conclusive evidence about the ideal combination for pairs, so we can make our decision based on every particular class. To sum up, we can say that pair work is a way of increasing pupils' participation and language use. Therefore, it is used in the practice and production stage.

#### **4.3. Group/team work**

Group work seems to be an extremely attractive idea for a number of reasons. First, we can mention the increase in the amount of pupils' talking time. It also gives pupils opportunities to use language to communicate with each other and to co-operate.

On the other hand, group work is more dynamic than pair work: our pupils are faced with more people to react with or against in a group. There is also a greater chance that at least one member of the group will be able to solve a problem, when it arises. Because of this fact, working in groups is usually more relaxing than pair work. Moreover, tasks can be more complex and, therefore, more exciting and motivating than pair work tasks. In group work, the teachers find the same worries that apply to pair work, that is, the use of Spanish and noise.

Motivation, clearly defined goals and previous adjustments to this type of grouping are the solutions to these problems.

One of the biggest problems is the selection of group members. One possibility is to group weak and strong pupils mixed together. However, sometimes it may be interesting to make groups of strong pupils and groups of weak pupils and give them different tasks to perform.

As far as the size is concerned, the biggest size we can have is half class. This type of grouping is called team. Teams are not very frequently used because the amount of pupil participation obviously falls. However, we can use them in competitive activities in which it is convenient to split the class in two units.

#### **4.4. Individual study**

Individual study is a good idea because our pupils can relax from outside pressure and because they can rely on themselves. Our pupils need some time on their own to fully internalize what they are learning. Ideally, if the conditions of our classroom and the materials we use permit, there would be stages at which our pupils could have a choice of different individual activities.

Various reading and writing activities are particularly appropriate for this. When planning our classes we must take this factor into consideration. Teachers must try and let students work on their own and at their own speed at some stage. Both reading and writing work can be the focus for individual study.

### **5. Context.**

#### **5.1. Teacher's role**

The basic role of teachers is to create the adequate conditions for learning. Thus, their work will be that of helping their students to develop their communicative competence. The teachers will also be responsible for the creation of a certain relaxing atmosphere in which pupils take part in the decisions about the learning process.

The function of the teacher is no longer that of being an absolute controller of the classroom, explaining and directing every single activity, but one of preparing and organizing the oral and written work of the pupils, and helping them to carry it out in groups, in pairs or individually. The teacher will encourage the positive attitudes towards the second

language, and the cooperation of the pupils among themselves and with him/her.

In order to create the adequate atmosphere, emotional factors must be taken into account, because they may have a great consequence on the learning process. The main objective will be to make the pupils responsible of their own learning. That is why avoidance of negative criticism, tolerance and constant encouragement will become essential for an effective learning. Likewise, variety and appropriateness are very important in order to catch the pupils' interest.

The role of the teacher will depend to a large extent on the function he/she performs in different activities. Therefore, we can identify different roles for the teacher as: controller, assessor, organiser, prompter, participant and resource, according to Jeremy Harmer in his book "*The Practice of English Language Teaching*" (1986).

**A. The teacher as controller:** the teacher has got the role of controller when he/she is totally in charge of the class. He controls not only what the students do, but when they speak and what language they use. Clearly, the introduction of new language often involves the teacher in a controlling role, particularly at the accurate reproduction stage. It is important to realise, however, that this control is not necessarily the most effective role for the teacher to adopt. During communicative activities and the practice of receptive skills, the teacher as controller is wholly inappropriate.

**B. The teacher as assessor:** a major part of the teacher's job is to assess the students' work and performance, and to provide the students with important feedback, so that the students can see the extent of their success or failure in their performance. The teacher waits until the activity or the task has been completed and, then, tells the students how well they did and how to improve or correct the mistakes, but in a "gentle" way. It is vital for the teacher to be sensitive to his students in his role as assessor and to realise when correcting is inappropriate.

**C. The teacher as organizer:** the main aim of the teacher when organizing an activity is to tell the students what they are going to talk about (or write or read about), give clear instructions about what exactly the task is, get the activity going and, finally, organize feedback when it is over.

There are several things that should not be done when organizing an activity. Teachers should never, for instance,

assume that students have understood the instructions. It is very important to check that students have grasped what they have to do and, if needed, the teacher can use the students' native language for this purpose.

D. **The teacher as prompter:** the teacher often needs to encourage students to participate or he needs to make suggestions about how students may proceed in an activity when there is silence or when the students are confused about what to do next. This is one of the teacher's most important roles, the role of prompter.

E. **The teacher as participant:** there is no reason why the teacher should not participate as an equal in an activity, especially when simulations or role-play activities are taking place. The danger is that the teacher will tend to dominate, but the teacher should not be afraid to participate, since not only will it probably improve the atmosphere in the class, but it would also give the students a chance to practice English with someone who speaks better than they do.

F. **The teacher as resource:** the teacher should always be ready to offer help if it is needed, after all, he has the language and knowledge that the students may be missing, especially in writing tasks. However, the teacher should not be available as a resource for certain activities, such as communication games or role-plays, that is, certain activities where the teachers want to force the students to perform in English entirely on their own with no outside help.

### ***5.2. Students' role***

Traditionally, the teacher's role has been to provide models, to set the task, and to provide a corrective feedback, whereas the learner's role has been a passive one of imitating the use of the correct target language forms.

However, in a communicative classroom, the roles of the teachers and learners are in many ways complementary, giving the learners a more active role. Providing students with a greater initiative in the classroom requires the teacher to adopt a different role. Foreign language learners vary on a number of dimensions such as: age, aptitude, affective characteristics and personality:

**AGE:** It has been traditionally assumed that children learn a second language more easily than adults do. The child's greater ability to learn a language could be explained by the greater plasticity of his brain. In accordance with the demands of brain psychology, the time to begin learning a second language is between the ages of 4 to 10.

However, it is not age at such, but the learning situation in combination with affective and cognitive factors can account for some of the variations of success between child and adult in L2 Learning. Adolescent learners do better than children or adults in grammar and vocabulary learning, when the length of the exposure is held constant. Both the number of years of exposure and the starting age of learning affect the level of success. The number of years of exposure contributes greatly to the overall communicative fluency of the learners, but the starting age determines the levels of accuracy achieved, particularly in pronunciation.

**APTITUDE:** aptitude seems to influence the rate of development in second language acquisition, particularly where formal classroom learning is concerned. Those learners with a gift for formal study are likely to learn more rapidly. In general, success in second language learning is not only a matter of ability, but there are other factors such as the learning environment, method of teaching, course content, and learners' attitude.

**AFFECTIVE CHARACTERISTICS:** they can be described as the learner's predisposition to respond in a consistently favourable or unfavourable manner with respect to a given object. Attitudes are learned and capable of modification by further learning, but they are relatively enduring.

Regarding motivation, there is a distinction between intrinsic motivation (interest in the task itself which leads to long-term success), and extrinsic motivation (based on external stimuli such as parental approval, offer of a reward, threat of punishment, a good grade, etc., which leads to short-term success).

**PERSONALITY:** one intuitively appealing linguistic hypothesis that has been investigated is that extrovert learners learn more rapidly and more successfully than introvert students. It has been suggested that extrovert learners would find it easier to make contact with other users of L2 and, therefore, will obtain more input.

### ***5.3. Physical setting***

Careful planning of our classroom is very important as it helps to create an ORGANISED AND SECURE ATMOSPHERE. In an ideal situation, we would be able to organize the classroom in the way we think is most effective for children's learning. Here are some points to consider:

- A plan made to scale is especially useful if we have a large class in a small area.
- We have to think carefully about whether we want the children to sit in rows or groups. Primary schools often have tables arranged in groups to seat 4-6 children, which makes pair and group work easier.
- If we decide to have a “teaching base” we have to make sure we have a clear view of the whole room.
- We may also like to include a quiet corner for listening to cassettes of stories or pre-recorded listening activities.

## **6. Conclusions.**

Nowadays, the teacher’s role in the classroom must mainly be the promotion of learning. For that purpose, teachers must be trained in a number of different and useful techniques and skills that will enable them to take decisions, in accordance with the heterogeneous reality of the classroom: different levels of linguistic knowledge, different rhythms of learning and different levels of motivation, diverse expectations among students, etc. Thus, the daily teaching practice will have to face that heterogeneity, but in the most individual way possible.

As we have somehow observed before, learning outcomes will be influenced by learners’ perceptions about how they should contribute their views about the nature and demands of the task and their definitions of the situation in which the task takes place.

One way of dealing with this learner centred approach is to involve learners in designing and selecting tasks. It should also be possible to allow learners to decide what to do and how to do it. This, of course, implies a major change in the roles assigned to learners and teachers. The student has the possibility of planning and monitoring learning and, therefore, breaking down hierarchy barriers.

For many students the opportunities of communication in the language that they are learning will mainly appear in the context of the classroom. Then, it is essential that this foreign language becomes the main way of communication in the classroom, both between the teacher and the pupils and among the pupils themselves.

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