



Learning for Life, a Structured and Motivational Process of Knowledge Construction in the Acquisition/learning of English as a Foreign Language in Native Spanish Speakers

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ABSTRACT

As language learning theory has shifted from a highly guided to a more open learning process, this paper presents the teaching/learning philosophy called Learning for Life (L for L) as a great way to motivate native Spanish speaker students learning English as a foreign language, and to help them be the constructors of their own knowledge.

The Learning for Life philosophy was created by Patricia López de Jaramillo, M.A. and Fernando Miño-Garcés, Ph.D. at the Andean Center for Latin American Studies (ACLAS) in Quito – Ecuador.

In the Learning for Life philosophy, the learner is the center of the process and becomes the creator of his/her own knowledge. To get to this new dimension in learning, acquisition is emphasized, and the principles of this philosophy are applied in the EFL classroom.

The definition of the philosophy and its principles are presented, and explained in detail as to how they can be applied in the teaching of a foreign language.

This paper also explains the difference between acquisition versus learning, and what process should be applied in the classroom to emphasize on acquisition, and not so much on learning.

KEYWORDS: Open learning process, Learning for Life, Teaching/learning philosophy, EFL.

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I. LEARNING FOR LIFE DEFINITION

Learning for Life is a teaching-learning philosophy which integrates all areas of knowledge, and human values in a unit. The student, considered as a whole, is the center of the class activity, and incorporates to his/her life everything that he/she has learned, and/or acquired.

The first thing to consider is that Learning for Life is not a method but a philosophy, a body of principles underlying the teaching – learning process. We are going to focus on the teaching – learning process of English as a foreign language, specifically as it occurs when native Spanish speakers learn English as a foreign language.

Not being a method, any teaching method for English as a foreign language may be applied in the classroom, as long as the Learning for Life principles are considered and observed.

The definition states that Learning for Life incorporates all areas of knowledge and human values in a unit. Nothing is isolated, the human being is one, and all areas of knowledge are interrelated in life. There is no reason to separate each area: physics relates to chemistry to mathematics, and even to literature. The same way, when learning a foreign language, there is no reason to use only metalanguage, everything that is communicable should be used: culture, literature, general knowledge, etc. It is important to notice that not only all areas of knowledge are considered as a unit, but human values as well. In Quito, Ecuador when I mention this to English teachers, they are puzzled: for them, there is no need to mention human values to language teachers, they think that in teaching a language they should focus on the four skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing, and nothing else.

For the Learning for Life philosophy, human values are an important part in the teaching – learning process, not only in the primary or secondary education, but in the process of language teaching as well.

In the Learning for Life philosophy, the student is considered as a unique individual, as a whole. The teacher should know the student in all aspects of his/her life: his/her likes and dislikes, hobbies, family situation, etc. In Ecuador, the teachers call the students by their last names, and, in general, do not know anything about them; the student is not an individual, but one more in the group. In this philosophy, that is inconceivable.

The student is the center of the class activity. Everything that is done in the classroom should be done by the student. The teacher is a facilitator, who is around helping the student act, giving the student activities so that he/she performs. The teacher prepares his/her lessons focusing on having the student act. In the Learning for Life philosophy the classroom should be an amusement place, where the student can move around with a purpose, designed by the teacher, can interact with the classmates, and participate in a foreign culture and language experience.

The student incorporates to his/her life everything that he/she has learned, and/or acquired. A very important aspect to consider in this philosophy is that the student must be

given all elements so that he/she constructs his/her own knowledge. The idea is that the student must internalize whatever he/she learns or acquires during the process. This internalization will help the student not only have everything in his/her brain, but in his whole being, so that he/she can use instinctively what he/she has learned and/or acquired.

II. LEARNING FOR LIFE PRINCIPLES

II.1. Learning proceeds from whole to part

No matter what method you use, you have to keep in mind that the learning of a foreign language takes place when the individual faces whole situations, with whole language.

In Ecuador the students “learn” English in schools starting when they are five or six years old until they are eighteen, when they finish high school, then they continue studying it at the university, and the result is terrible, since they end up not knowing how to use the language, and even worse with bad habits and “fossilized” bad structures, which prevent them from really learning the language afterwards.

We discovered that one of the reasons for this bad result is because teachers try to teach grammar and vocabulary, with no connection to real life, the students learn the grammar to be able to use it later, but that later never comes.

The Learning for Life philosophy states that the students should be presented with real whole situations, where real whole language is used, so that whatever is spoken has sense for him/her. From whole sentences with meaning, the parts will come later. The student out of curiosity will ask about the structure, or the teacher will elicit that curiosity, so that he/she can explain grammar points.

II.2. Human values are present in all activities

As stated before, human values are central to the philosophy. All areas of knowledge and human values are integrated, and considered a unit. In the teaching of English as a foreign language to native Spanish speakers we consider that the four skills and human values are really integrated; human values, listening, speaking, reading and writing are treated as part of the whole.

II.3. Lessons should be learner centered, learning is the active construction of knowledge by the student

The student is the center of all class activities. The teacher is a facilitator who will try by all means to have the student as the one who performs all the activities in the class. The so called “TTT” (teacher talking time) should be minimized to give opportunity to the students to talk. For being able to accomplish this, the teacher has to work very hard before the actual class, to be able to have all the materials ready for the class, so that no time is wasted during the class, and his/her work in the class is minimum since the students are the ones who are active all the time.

The teacher has to focus on helping the student incorporate to his/her life everything that he/she has learned, and/or acquired. The student must be given all elements so that he/she constructs his/her own knowledge. All efforts should be made so that the student internalizes whatever he/she learns or acquires during the process. This internalization will help the student not only have everything in his/her brain, but in his whole being, so that he/she can use instinctively what he/she has learned and/or acquired. Only then we can say that the student is building up his/her knowledge, and not only repeating or memorizing the material. He/she can really speak and understand the language because it is now part of him/her.

II.4. Lessons should always have meaning and purpose for learners

If the student does not see purpose for what he/she is learning, there is no need to put effort on what he/she is required to do in the class. No matter what the age of the students, knowing exactly the purpose of what they are doing will enhance their learning. There should be a real meaning for every activity in the class.

One of the best ways to put meaning in the activities is to work in projects. In this philosophy; a project is a task that has to be fulfilled in an assigned period of time. The result of a project must be something visible, tangible, and useful for life.

When working in projects, the first principle, learning proceeds from whole to part, is applied. The whole would be the result of the project, and the parts everything the student has to face to get the goals proposed.

II.5. Learning takes place as groups engage in meaningful interaction

In society we work in groups, every activity we perform in life has to do with group work. The same should be done in the class; when the students work in groups they have a better chance for learning, since they help each other, there is peer correction, there is no fear of making mistakes, and they enjoy the activity.

The work they do in groups should have meaning; an important part of the learning process is the sense and purpose of the activity. When the students are working in groups in a project, they focus on the result of the project, on its meaning, and not on language itself, thus a lot of acquisition takes place.

II.6. Knowledge is enhanced by exploring themes, solving problems, and working in projects

A project in the Learning for Life philosophy is a short-term educational assignment, related to life, necessitating personal initiative, and undertaken by an individual student or a group of students. It is a task that has to be fulfilled in an assigned period of time.

The result of a project must be something visible, tangible, and useful for life. A project must be done and evaluated by the students, with the guide of the teacher.

If a student explores about a specific theme and tries to solve all the problems involved on getting results, he/she will be so concerned on getting those results that will really enjoy the process in which learning and acquiring is taking place.

II.7. Learning takes place in a free environment, where the learner takes risks in identifying and solving problems

In the Learning for Life classroom, the students' place is called an amusement place. The student must feel so comfortable and secure in the classroom that he/she can take the risk of speaking, making mistakes, asking questions, answering the teacher's or other classmates' questions. The teacher should make all effort not to put any pressure on the students, make the student feel free to make mistakes.

Mistakes are part of the process of learning, the student should not be afraid of making them.

I have seen teachers in the Ecuadorian system of education, especially in the public sector, who act like a boss, a military chief, not a person whom the students trust and care for. Some English as second language teachers do not let the students make mistakes, if they make a mistake the teachers usually punish them, be overtly or covertly, but the students feel uneasy and prefer not to talk to make a mistake.

The idea at the Learning for Life philosophy is that the classroom should be a place to have fun, to be able to act freely, and learn and acquire the language in a free environment.

II.8. Learning potential is expanded through faith in the learner

We think that this is one of the most important principles. If the teacher shows that he/she believes that the student can learn, that the student will be able to speak the language no matter what difficulties he/she faces, the student will feel self confidence, and will make all efforts to get what he/she wants.

If there is no self confidence, self pride, self motivation, it is very difficult if not impossible to fulfill tasks. The acquisition – learning process of a foreign language requires students who know they can do it.

III. IN THE LEARNING FOR LIFE CLASSROOM

As the Learning for Life philosophy for the acquisition/learning of a foreign language is based in whole language, language learning builds around whole learners, learning whole language in whole situations.

The focus is on meaning, and not on language itself, in authentic speech and literacy events, learners are encouraged to take risks and invited to use language in all its varieties, for their own purposes. The final product – the “answer” – is not as important as the process of learning to define and solve problems.

The student, as a whole, is the center of all activities and the focus is on “acquisition”, not so much on “learning”.

IV. ACQUISITION VS. LEARNING

In the Learning for Life philosophy there is an emphasis on acquisition, but learning should also take place. We can see the difference between both in the chart below:

ACQUISITION	LEARNING
Is an unconscious process of internalizing concepts and developing functional skills, as a result of exposure and comprehensible input	Is a conscious process of memorizing rules, forms, and structures, usually as a result of deliberate teaching.
Focus is on the need to communicate a message	Focus is on the form to be mastered
Success is based on getting things done with language	Success is based on the demonstrated mastery of language forms
Forms develop out of communicative needs being met in real life contexts	Forms are learned for later functional applications
Lessons are organized around the needs, desires, and interests of the students	Lessons are organized around grammatically based syllabi
Errors in forms and structures are accepted as developmental	Error correction is a critical feature to promote the mastery of linguistic forms and structures
Rules and generalizations are not taught unless specifically requested by students	Rules and generalizations are taught deductively or inductively
Lessons are characterized by student-centered situational activities	Lessons are characterized by teacher – developed drills and exercises
Students develop the four language skills naturally, by participating in functional communicative activities.	Students develop the four language skills by following a teacher-directed calendar
Lessons are characterized by low student anxiety, as production and eventual mastery are allowed to occur on the student’s own schedule after sufficient input.	Early emphasis on production skills may produce unnecessary anxiety in students in initial stages

So acquisition is an unconscious process which requires a good exposure and a meaningful input. It is the way little children acquire their mother tongue. From the real beginning of their life, their mothers repeat words showing, at the same time, the meaning to the children; for example a mother will say “teta” in Ecuadorian Spanish to the little baby, thousands of times, showing him/her the bottle of milk she is about to give him/her. This input of the sound plus the actual bottle, is what makes the baby acquire the sound and associate it with the bottle of milk, so the baby repeats “teta” whenever he/she needs it.

If we give a comprehensible input to our students, which will be easy if we work in projects, where we have to use the language with a purpose, they will unconsciously acquire the language.

When we put emphasis on acquisition our focus is on the need to communicate a message; the student knows that what is important is to be able to say what he/she wants, not the form itself or if he/she is saying it correctly, but if the listener is understanding what he/she wants to say. In that sense, both the teacher and the student know that success is to get what you want just by expressing it in the foreign language. What is important is to express yourself, if you make mistakes, later on you will be able to correct them because of the input the teacher will give.

If a student faces a real life context, and he/she needs to communicate a message, he/she will try to find out the best way to do it, he/she will realize that there are appropriate ways of forming the sentences, and with the help of the teacher he will ask and finally consciously learn how to use the forms correctly. That is why we say that acquisition should be combined with learning to have a complete domain of the foreign language.

Traditionally, lessons are organized around grammatically based syllabi, but when the emphasis is in acquisition, lessons should be organized around the needs, desires, and interest of the students. Only doing that we will have students who are really interested in speaking the foreign language, since they will be talking about what they want, what interests them. That is why lessons are characterized by student – centered situational activities.

When the teacher puts emphasis in acquisition, he/she knows that errors in forms and structures have to be accepted as part of the development process of the learning of the foreign language. If the students make a mistake when uttering a sentence, the teacher should only reword it correctly as many times as needed for the student to realize what the correct form is. The teacher should never interrupt communication nor react to the mistake in a form that the student will feel uneasy to the situation. The teacher has to remember that he/she should create a safe and enjoyable environment for the students to be able to take the risk of making mistakes, of solving problems.

Lessons, then, are characterized by low student anxiety, because production and eventual mastery of the forms are allowed to occur on the student's own schedule after sufficient input.

In this sense, in the acquisition process the teacher should wait for the students to ask about rules and generalizations to give them. The student would ask for rules when he/she feels the need to know the rule to be able to say sentences correctly, because the student feels that need he/she asks, and because of his/her interest he/she will really learn the rule.

Therefore, students develop the four language skills naturally, by participating in functional communicative activities. Listening, speaking, reading and writing are developed

because the students need the four skills to fulfill a project or to work on a theme of their interest.

V. MICRO PLANNING IN THE LEARNING FOR LIFE PHILOSOPHY

A typical class when the Learning for Life philosophy is applied, no matter what method is used, should have three segments: a warm up, the activities, and a wrap up.

The warm up is a period that should last no more than five minutes and is designed with various goals:

a. Motivate the students.

The teacher should prepare fun and interesting activities to introduce the students to the theme that is going to be explored in the class. The activities should be designed in such a way that all the students should be really motivated to start the class and learn about the topic of the day's lesson.

b. Wake students up.

Sometimes the students are tired, either because they had a difficult class before, a game during recess, or whatever reason. The teacher should start the class with activities that should wake the students up and be ready for the class with joy.

c. Connect past knowledge with new one.

There are occasions when it will be needed to connect what was studied before, say last class, with the new topic we are going to start in the class. The teacher should prepare activities that will help the students see the relationship between the topics.

d. Establish a nice environment.

One of the main advises for those who follow the Learning for Life philosophy is to keep in mind that the classroom should be a place where the students have fun, enjoy every activity, are motivated enough to feel happy with whatever goes on in the classroom. As we stated before the student must feel very comfortable and secure in the classroom so as to be able to take the risk of participating, of making mistakes, of asking whatever comes to his/her mind without being punish or pointed out as a dumb.

e. Reduce or eliminate anxiety level

As production of sentences, statements, and communication in general, and eventual mastery of forms are supposed to occur on the student's own pace after sufficient meaningful input, the anxiety level of the students is reduced to the minimum. When teachers put too much emphasis on production skills, an unnecessary anxiety is created

in the students, who want to satisfy what the teacher wants, but cannot because they are possible not ready.

The activities are the central part of the class, after the five to eight minutes of a warm up, the teacher should start the class activities which should be designed following the teacher's previous planning. The activities should be prepared to develop all language skills, to relate them with the topic or theme currently under consideration, to take advantage of the momentum, to develop projects, etc.

The wrap – up should also last no more than five minutes; it is a time for reflection and projection on what has been learned, how it relates to the students' own life, how they can use it outside of the classroom, etc. It is, then, a time for relating what has been learned to the real life.

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