

8 GIVING INSTRUCTIONS AMONG FACTORS THAT SHOULD BE CONSIDERED FOR EFFECTIVE LANGUAGE LEARNING

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RESUMO

Este artigo enfoca a maneira utilizada pelos professores ao dar instruções como um elemento que interfere no sucesso ou fracasso de uma aula. Abordamos também fatores que devem ser considerados pelos professores para a eficácia de suas instruções.

Palavras-chave: dar instruções; professores; inglês.

ABSTRACT

In this article, we focus on giving instructions as an element that interferes in the success or failure of a lesson. We also talk about the factors that should be considered by the teacher for giving instructions effectively.

Key words: giving instructions; teachers; English.

One of the most efficient ways of learning a language is when learners are undoubtedly involved in a lesson. The success or failure of a lesson depends on a number of factors that I would like to mention briefly.

Lesson planning: it is an important tool that helps teachers to think carefully about the aims and procedures of lessons they are going to give. It also helps them to become more aware of what works and why. Although we cannot predict how learners will respond to every stage in a lesson, the better prepared we are, the more likely we will be ready to deal with whatever happens.

Classroom management: teachers have to put into practice different kinds of management strategies to create the best conditions in which learning can take place. These strategies must be effective and efficient, although there is not only one correct way to follow, there are some ways that may in the end show they are more efficient than others. For these reasons, teachers have to decide carefully on the actions to take, when to do them, how to do them, who will do them, etc.

Materials: besides the coursebook, a wide range of resources is important. Teachers should make use of supplementary materials (magazines, pictures, articles, games, real objects, OHT, video recordings, etc.). These materials keep students' interest and motivation. If we do not provide students with something appealing to them, they will seek and find it in other things that have nothing to do with the lesson and consequently get distracted.

Activities: the activities teachers add to their lessons must be interesting enough to keep students' motivation. As Ur (1996) emphasises, motivation is strongly related to achievement in language learning.

Explanations: they make a big difference to the success or failure of a lesson. One important kind of explanation and also one of the most important qualities of a good teacher is *giving instructions*, which can be given orally or written. Oral instructions will be the focus of this article.

When giving instructions teachers create an English atmosphere in the classroom. Knowing what to do helps students to carry out activities more easily, keeps their motivation and interest in the task and does not let them get distracted. Teachers also benefit from good instructions: they avoid discipline problems because students will be concentrated on what they have to do; it helps them achieve their aims; it helps them keep to time set for each activity of the lesson because re-explanation will not be necessary; their monitoring will be much more effective since they will be available to help students with problems related to the activity itself rather than being busy giving instructions again and again.

Parrott (1993, p. 100) mentions an important fact, which reinforces the importance of the English atmosphere mentioned above:

The giving of instructions in the classroom is one of the few genuinely communicative acts which takes place. The teacher should thus exploit this opportunity by making her instructions as natural as possible. If they are complicated and difficult for the students to understand, learners and the teacher are consequently obliged to ‘negotiate meaning’ to achieve an authentic communicative purpose.

For effective *giving instructions* there are a number of factors that should be considered by the teacher:

- It is of great value preparing the instructions in advance as well as being aware of the language which will be used, since it should not be too difficult.
- When *giving instructions* teachers should call everybody’s attention and make sure they are listening before the beginning of the explanation and also keep eye-contact with students. If the instructions are not written for the students, and the teacher is reading them, she should avoid looking down at the paper for too long.
- If the teacher needs to show a picture or something else on the material, she should hold it up and point at what is important for the students.

- Only after the instructions have been given should teachers hand out task sheets or divide students into groups or pairs. Otherwise, students will concentrate on the material rather than on the teacher's instructions or start talking to each other.

- Teachers have to have in mind that some students might have missed an important part of the explanation and should, therefore, repeat or paraphrase it. This is a good procedure to reinforce the instructions in a different way.

- Instructions must be as brief and clear as possible, in order to keep students concentration. Teachers must think carefully about what they are going to include or omit when *giving instructions*, having in mind that meaningful chunks are better than long sequences of instructions. They must also know how they are going to give them: a clear way would be to give an overall idea of the sequence of tasks first and then, before each step, teachers remind students of what they have to do.

- Demonstrating rather than explaining is sometimes really helpful: depending on the complexity of the task, the teacher and a good student can demonstrate it before the whole group carry out the activity.

- Teachers must get a concrete evidence from students that they know what they have to do and should never act as if they have understood everything. "*Do you understand?*" is not enough to check instructions because students say *yes* when in fact their answer is *no*. Regarding the misunderstanding of instructions, a good suggestion to overcome the problem is to ask some questions such as "*What do you have to do first?*", "*And then?*", "*Are you going to....?*"; to ask the students to repeat what they have to do and to paraphrase or depending on the level, allow students to use L1¹.

To become more aware of ways we are set in to give instructions Parrot (1993) suggests that we record part of our lesson in which

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we give instructions to our students. If a recording is not possible, we can invite a colleague to observe it and write as many sentences we generate from giving instructions as possible, so that they can be analysed later on. Parrots (1993, p.110) adds that while analysing the transcripts we should address the following questions:

1. To what extent do you explain, as opposed to demonstrate, what you want students to do?
2. To what extent (if at all) do you use the learner's first language?
3. How simple/ complicated is your use of the target language in relation to the students' linguistic ability? You may like to consider factors such as *sentence length*, *use of idiom and vocabulary*, and *speed of speech*.
4. Do you repeat or modify instructions?
5. Do you use any means to check that students have understood the instructions?

It is worthwhile stopping and listening to what and how we are saying things in the classroom because many times we, teachers, are unaware of the way we are giving instructions in our lessons. We should become aware of our own giving of instructions since this is an important tool for effective language learning and therefore, plays an important role in the language classroom.

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