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The English Teacher: a Professional under Question

This bulletin has been designed to offer secondary school teachers theoretical and practical contributions for their work, in this case, as English teachers. Therefore, the reader expects to find concrete discussions on topics dealing with Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language, and suggestions about the development of specific tasks, such as oral comprehension activities, dialogue presentations, evaluation, etc.

The above guidelines will be violated in this article because its purpose is to focus on the wrong feeling people have about the teachers' command of English. That is to say, there will not be any pedagogical hints or theoretical discussions on the orientation of teaching. Instead, the idea is to comment on an aspect which affects the English teachers emotionally: the way most people question, unjustifiably, the professional level of English teachers.

Very frequently the English teacher is asked, "Are you able to communicate in English? Do you understand English songs? Can you hold a conversation with an American or an Englishman?" And even, "Do you really know English?" This clearly shows his status as an English speaker is under question, whereas other professionals do not face similar situations too often. Nobody would ask a mathematician, "Do you know geometry?" Or "Do you understand differential equations?" People take for granted that they master their field.

Besides this discouraging situation, English teachers are also questioned regarding the amount of English their students learn. The writer remembers the words of a high school principal who constantly remarked about the failure of English teachers to make their students speak that target language, "después de cinco largos años" (his own words). He was neither concerned about the insufficient results obtained by the teachers of other subjects, nor interested in discovering the cause of the weak results in English. What was obvious for him was that at the end of high school, the students could not use English.

Nobody can argue that these feelings are exclusive of uneducated people. Everywhere, at all levels, one listens to people asking for English teachers, but native speakers. The idea behind this attitude is that non-native English speakers can not carry out this task successfully. It follows from this that our opportunities for professional development are inherently constrained.

It is impossible to ignore the existence of these limitations. The truth is that the English teacher does not attain a proficiency level close to the linguistic performance of a native speaker, nor has he been able to "produce" English speakers in secondary school.

These considerations, however, fall into the category of mere intuition. More clearly stated, people who know nothing about the nature of second or foreign language learning/teaching give opinions and even judge the English speakers' performance. Unfortunately, although we can suppose those opinions are not ill-intentioned, they do affect English teachers since they make them lose their

self-confidence, due to the objection to their ability as speakers and teachers.

A clearer understanding of the language learning/acquisition process could eliminate some of these misconceptions. The very nature of foreign language learning does not allow the learners to achieve the native speakers' proficiency level, especially but not exclusively, regarding the phonological features. This is highly significant because the aspect which most obviously denotes our level of command of a foreign language is the mastery of the phonological rules: what is referred to as "a foreign accent". It has been widely proven that after puberty it is almost impossible to reproduce accurately the phonological structure of a second/foreign language. People engaged in such a situation can not really avoid a foreign accent, as is the case of most of the English teachers in our country. In addition, as a natural consequence of the phenomenon we are involved in, we have a limited --but acceptable-- mastery of the English language structure. The same is true for everyone learning any foreign language.

The implications of the characteristics of foreign language learning are evident: it is a particularly difficult task, so it is a goal which people, after the age of puberty, can hardly have access to. This does not mean that English teachers should not continue improving professionally, but that there is a scientific explanation for our limited proficiency in English. Besides, English teaching in Costa Rican high schools presents other complications which can be made explicit in another article.

It is worth indicating that the nature of

our field of specialization is quite different from all others. It does not seem to belong to any real area of knowledge or thought. Our aim is mainly to learn, and eventually teach, a linguistic code. Our goal is then just a means for others. Perhaps this is why many people feel free to express their views regarding our proficiency in English. Because everyone is able to use his native language appropriately, most people tend to assume that a foreign language is acquired and not learned. Thus they underestimate the achievement of foreign language speakers because they think it is an easy process.

Summarizing, what is not attained by the English specialists is not determined by their lack of concern but rather by the difficulty resulting from the nature of this intricate yet interesting phenomenon.

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