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**WHAT REALLY WORKS FOR UNDERACHIEVERS?
STRATEGIES FOR EFL TEACHERS OF UNDERACHIEVING
STUDENTS**

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Abstract

The search for the most efficient methods to teach English as a foreign language (EFL) to under-achieving students (UAS) in high-school has kept many teachers and educators busy. Research shows that learning a first language (L1) is a complex and special skill that humans of all places, types, races, religions and gender can do with little effort. It is quite astonishing that while learning a language to such a high level is accomplished by every cognitively intact human being, it has to do with most complex and high level abilities. Studies of good language learners (GLL), indicate that the human ability to learn a second / foreign language is as bewildering as learning L1, and that our amazing brain is capable of acquiring more than one foreign language to a high level of proficiency. Focusing on UAS, researchers advocate working in small units and the salient role of mediation. In the wake of these claims, this case study brings about the interviews of six experienced EFL teachers who point at the absence of specific support and constant counselling when working with UAS, and the substantial urge for a clear-cut tool box, established on breaking down the same materials all students learn, into small portions. The findings further expose some beneficial and efficient methods used by these teachers, and suggest a basic tool-box for EFL teaching

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1. Introduction

“Every person wants to be a success, and the underachiever wants desperately to be part of the educational mainstream.” (Joseph Ciaccio, 2004).

Teaching a foreign language is a challenge, and more so when teaching UAS. In Israel, it is mandatory to learn English starting from 4th grade all the way through high-school and pass the final EFL BAGRUT Examination, (EBE). Without passing the EBE, students do not receive a certificate of having completed the high-school requirements. Those who enrol in higher education will have to cope with more exams showing their abilities in EFL. Similarly - without an exemption test in EFL, a Bachelor or Master's degree cannot be granted (The Ministry of Education, Israel, 2013).

Many articles have been written on the best methods for teaching EFL, yet few articles have related to the UAS who have to successfully pass the same EBE as their peers who are good language learners (GLL). As a former EFL teacher and as a pedagogical counsellor for EFL teachers in Israel, the shortage of guidance and a curriculum tailored for classes of UAS is indispensable. In the wake of this call, this paper presents a case study in which six experienced EFL teachers are interviewed sharing the methods they have found most efficient and beneficial when teaching EFL to Hebrew speaking UAS. This is followed by a discussion based on the findings, with practical recommendations. The terms 'methods' / 'approaches' / 'designs' / 'pedagogies' / 'strategies' in this paper, refer to the instructional systems, the plan for presenting the language material to be learned, organizing the contents, the tasks to be performed and the roles of both students and teachers. They are used randomly, usually following the term used by the researcher quoted.

2. Literature Review

Since the 1970s, there has been a growing interest of researchers (Rubin 1975, Stern 1975, Hosenfeld 1976), looking for the strategies for helping students become GLL. In the next two decades, more research was conducted (Chamot, 1987; Oxford, 1990; Wenden, 1991). This interest penetrated into the new millennium with fervor, as presented in the literature (Cohen, 2011; Griffiths, 2008, 2013; Oxford, 2011). By studying GLL, a conclusion was made that the strategies to learn a second/foreign language are as bewildering as learning L1 and that our amazing brain is capable of acquiring more than one foreign language to a high level of proficiency. Yet, trying to point at the best and most effective strategies for becoming GLL, became a big controversy. Rebecca L. Oxford, a Professor Emerita and Distinguished Scholar, in her book *Teaching and Researching Language Learning Strategies; Self-Regulation in Context* (Oxford 2017), mentions 100 different strategies for learning a second or foreign language. She further claims that strategies can be taught and brought to a degree that the learners may use them dynamically for task completion, improving performance and enhancing proficiency. According to Oxford (2017), the learners should reach a degree of half-conscious use of strategies.

Vygotsky, one of the most meaningful contributors to the understanding of the sociocultural nature of our learning (Vygotsky, 1971) claims that self-regulation is an outcome of mediation.

"The learner develops self-regulation through assistance (mediation) in a sociocultural context." (ibid)

Oxford (2017) agrees with Vygotsky and adds that in language a more capable other provides mediation through spoken dialogues with the learner. She claims that it is sometimes important for the

teachers or any more capable others, to break down learning tasks into different parts, to help learners become aware of the parts and learn how they work together and practice combining them together. This Vygotsky (1971) called "de-fossilizing" and claims that it is a good cognitive practice.

Oxford (2017) emphasizes that when teaching GLL we expect them to deduce and learn by following our lines of thought and imitating them or by acquiring their own strategies simply by watching us, yet, for UAS, mediation is essential. Nothing should be expected or taken for granted that they acquire or do unless specifically told to.

In his book *Totally Positive Teaching*, Joseph Ciaccio (2004), a former teacher in a middle school in Long Island, New York, suggests breaking down the lesson itself, into smaller time intervals. He shows that the best time for acquiring new information is at the beginning of a lesson and then again at the end of it. Therefore he recommends breaking the lesson into smaller portions respectively, e.g.: instead of the traditional 45-minute lessons, teach for 20 minutes ("Primetime I"), take a five-minute break (the "downtime"), and then teach again for 20 minutes ("prime time II"). Or, plan for two sessions of 20 minutes each: the first 9 minutes when the students are receptive, then 2 minutes which should be used for reading names or any similar activity and the next 9 minutes, to rehearse what was taught in the first 9 minutes. During the 5 minutes break between the 2 sessions, the students should be made to get up from their chairs and move around.

Griffiths & Oxford (2014) emphasize that:

"...there is a significant positive correlation between strategy use and successful language learning" (Griffiths & Oxford, 2014)

However, merely having a toolbox of strategies will not necessarily create a proficient acquirer. Anderson (2008), posits that since strategies are interdependent, they should be orchestrated and integrated so they work well together. Griffiths and Gokhan (2016), add that it is necessary to see the learning strategies as part of a bigger picture that should include the learner's individual characteristics, the learning goal and the learning context.

Some more research over the years has demonstrated a difference between GLL and UAS in the way they use learning strategies (Porte, 1998; Van Abraham, 1990), the frequency of using learning strategies (Green and Oxford, 1995; Kyungsim and Leavell, 2006), and the number of strategies used by the learners (Griffiths 2003, 2008, 2013).

An additional factor essential for language acquisition was discussed in a meta-analysis conducted by Gardner, R.C., and Masgoret, A.M. (2003):

"... the active variable in the socio-educational model of second language acquisition is motivation." (Gardner & Masgoret, 2003)

Moreover, they claim that motivation is the dominant correlate to achievement (ibid). Cheng and Dornyei (2007) agree that motivation is a key factor which determines success in second language acquisition, yet they stress the lack of empirical investigation of motivational strategies.

All these studies agree upon the importance of strategies for acquiring a foreign language. Following are the most common and well-known ones (compiled from Mora, 2017 and Richards & Rogers 1986):

- 2.1. The Grammar: translation approach and the Structural Approach: Emphasize reading comprehension and writing performance. Accomplishment is reflected in the ability to translate from the L2 to the L1.
- 2.2. The Direct Method and the Natural Approach: Encourage the oral skills of the target language and encourages teacher never to use the mother tongue in class. Exposure and the culture of the target language is a significant component in acquiring the language.
- 2.3. The Reading Approach: For the academic population who study mainly and mostly to master reading comprehension in the target language. Translation is the accomplishment.
- 2.4. The Audiolingual Method: Emphasizes on spoken language, visual and audio aids are largely used and there is an emphasis on pronunciation.
- 2.5. Blended learning:
- 2.6. 1. a combination of face to face teaching with distant learning through electronic devices.
2. learning that occurs while focusing or doing other activities.
- 2.7. The Communicative Approach: Emphasizes on both spoken and written language for communication purposes.
- 2.8. Linguistic Corpus: brings modern technology and teaching methods into today's classrooms. Language is used for understanding written texts, like frequency word lists.
- 2.9. The Sandwich Technique: for a group with one L1- the teacher introduces new phrases or sentences of language by inserting a translation to L1 between two repetitions of the phrase in the language being taught.

3. Problem Statement

Literature relates widely to the value of motivation and self-regulated strategies for learners who thrive on success, in agreement with their unique personality, learning goals and context characterizing each individual learner. Not much research was found relating to the special needs of both teachers and UAS, other than working in small units and the salient role of mediation.

4. Research Questions

1. What are the challenges of teaching UAS?
2. What special challenges do Hebrew speaking UAS face?
3. What are the methods to prepare for and teach in a class of UAS?

5. Purpose of the Study

To establish a clear cut tool-box for EFL teachers of UAS that will enhance the teachers and help UAS successfully pass the final requirements at the same levels as their GLL peers.

6. Research Methods

6.1. The Case Study

In-depth interviews were conducted with six experienced EFL teachers (referred to as T1-T6) of both UAS and GLL.

7. Findings

7.1. The challenges of teaching UAS -

According to the findings, 67% of the teachers noted that UAS lack motivation. 33% report that students' attendance is very poor. The students need extra time to perform on different tasks and they need special care and attention. One of the teachers (T4) described the UAS as often having a sad expression. She claims that due to personal and emotional difficulties that might arise from poor economic backgrounds, these students are not free for studying.

In addition, while the homeroom teachers of UAS do have a counselling program (as reported by T3), there is no specific counselling for EFL teachers. Teachers feel the urgency for guidance. Other challenges reported by the teachers: difficulty in L1; difficulty in seeing the whole from the details; short concentration spans; over-crowded classes - the number of AUS students in the class should be around 15 according to T2 and T4.

7.2. English to Hebrew speaking UAS-

The most challenging distinction between languages is the sentences structure, with 83% of the teachers agreeing upon the difficulty for Hebrew speakers to inculcate the different structure. 67% claim that the different origins of the languages are significant and 50% of the teachers report that UAS are less exposed to the English. 33% of the EFL teachers posit that UAS students are quite detached from the language, i.e. they neither see the importance nor the need for learning a second language, not even English. Furthermore, 33% argue that UAS have a problem with pronunciation since it is so different than Hebrew, and finally the most common challenge with UAS: lack of practice.

Other challenges mentioned:

1. The vowel system: in Hebrew the sounds are signalled by a system of lines and dots mostly under each letter, sometimes above or beside the letters.
2. The direction of writing: Hebrew-from right to left; English-from left to right.
3. The passive voice is common in English yet rare in Hebrew.
4. The tenses work differently in each language.

7.3. Preparing and Teaching a class of UAS

- A. **Comprehension from written or spoken texts:** When teaching comprehension, 100% of the teachers break down the assignment into smaller units, e.g.: a paragraph, and instruct to deal with each paragraph separately. 83% pre-teach vocabulary in context. 67% of the teachers prepare low-order thinking skills (LOTS) questions for each small part, e.g.: Where...; When... ; How many... etc. In addition, 67% translate some parts of the text and

the questions into Hebrew. 50% teach strategies such as skimming and scanning, highlighting eye-catchers, eliciting the main idea from details, etc.

Other: teach the different types of questions and possible answers; pre-teach tenses in context; repeat spelling rules - using visuals; administer success quizzes; look for former knowledge; use guided reading.

- B. **Writing:** When preparing UAS to write a composition, 67% of the teachers reported that they pre-teach connectors, prepositions, and vocabulary in context.

67% teach strategies such as the patterns of an essay and its parts- opening and closing paragraphs, the structure of the paragraphs in the body; the 4 "wh"s: what, when, where, who, i.e.: the students are taught to answer these questions as an opening to their writing assignment; the "oreo": opinion, reason, examples, opinion. These way students remember the structure of the composition.

33% have quizzes on either single words (connectors, preposition, vocabulary in context) or on whole sentences.

One teacher also reported quizzing the students on whole compositions which they have to prepare and then memorize for the quiz.

33% prepare sentence fill-ins, to enhance the correct structure of a sentence, which as stated before, is a major challenge for Hebrew speakers. The students are then asked to incorporate the sentences they had formed into their composition. Other: practice dictionary skills from Hebrew to English; emphasize the different direction in English (from left to right and not like in Hebrew-from right to left).

- C. **Semantics & Lexis (vocabulary):** When asked to specify how they teach vocabulary to UAS, 50% of teachers build sentences with new vocabulary, 50% administer frequent dictations/vocabulary quizzes or translation quizzes and 50% recommend using short lists - between 10-15 words.

33% use games such as memory games; filling the missing vowels; word search puzzles; flashcards. 33% introduce word families to enhance understanding, 33% teach prefixes and affixes to enhance and enrich vocabulary and 33% teach spelling rules and the vowels system (even though these were surely introduced earlier) knowing that UAS many times lack that crucial knowledge for vocabulary acquisition.

Other: choral speaking (all the class repeats together the word); persistent review of vocabulary.

- D. **Syntax & Phonology (grammar):** Teaching grammar per-se is less popular in classes of UAS. T3, for instance, does not teach grammar in any form. 67% teach grammar in context only while 33% consider teaching spelling rules as grammar.

Others: compare the different tenses to Hebrew; do not teach negative and interrogative sentences.

- E. **Oral skills:** When teachers were asked to describe how they taught oral competencies to high-school UAS, the answers diverged greatly. It seems that each teacher has his/her own agenda for enhancing oral skills. There seems to be no consistency, no repeated

pattern among the teachers. Only 33% suggested scaffolding with patterns to be filled in, practice reading out loud in front of the whole class, and start by talking and presenting from their seats to build their confidence. This disparity points at the great need for clear-cut instructions and further research.

7.4. Discussion:

The findings of the interviews show lack of motivation, which probably causes poor attendance. This agrees with the studies of Gardner and Massgoret (2003), Chang and Dornyei (2007) stating that motivation is a major component of achievements for all students, UAS inclusive. This need should be addressed by precisecounselling for the devoted teachers, to help them push and motivate struggling UAS students.

The difference between the languages is a big challenge, more so since the UAS are not free for practicing and are not exposed to the language. Big efforts should be made to inculcate the different sentence structure and the fact that there are different rules for this game. As expressed by T3 and T4:

"They have a hard time accepting that it is a different language that works differently"

Comprehension tasks should be broken down into small parts like, a paragraph, one hundred words only, or with starters even work on the sentence level. This agrees with Oxford (2017), Vygotsky (1971), and Ciacco (2004), who recommends breaking the lesson into short intervals to make it more effective.

After deciding on the size or amount to be presented to the students, a short list of the vocabulary elicited from context (between 10-15 words) should be introduced. This can be written on the board with L1 entries and practiced using different methods. The most recommended ones: forming sentences and frequent quizzes. Then teachers recommend using games and flashcards. The games mentioned by the teachers are memory games, puzzles, word search sheets. While introducing vocabulary, visuals should be used, along with one spelling rule at a time. The next step would be preparing LOTs questions. Then, the teacher should decide to translate certain parts of the specific part of the text or the relevant questions, and teach strategies, such as highlighting eye-catchers; finding the main idea /the details; finding connectors.

Other activities the teacher might want to use: pre-teach the tense in context.

8. Conclusion

The growing numbers of UAS in the educational systems call for re-thinking teaching strategies and even revising the teachers' role. Therefore, the first and major conclusion from the findings of this case study is that EFL teachers of UAS must have constant and precisecounselling, to help them enhance the motivation of UAS in the first place. The second outcome which is practiced by most interviewees is to work in small portions. These two main findings agree with the little literature found on EFL for UAS. The scarcity of studies and the wide variety of methods practiced by teachers show the tremendous need for guidance and the urge for a well-established toolbox specifically designed for UAS, one that will encompass units broken-down into small parts, specific and consistent strategies and clear instructions for

teachers of UAS within the existing curriculum. The above findings may establish the starting point for such toolbox, yet further research is essential for establishing clear strategies and specific methods to inculcate these strategies and at the same time, build a supporting system for the teachers, to enhance the top key component in learning: motivation.

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