

## STUDENT PRODUCTIVITY IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING PROCESS

*Nowadays in the world of endless technological advancements, the rate of student productivity in language learning process has not kept pace. The investigation of factors, which have made student productivity remain stagnant is of great importance. The paper explores the opportunities of increasing student productivity through implementing Communicative Language teaching method, along with preferential Student-Centered approach. The paper also elaborates on the advantages of group work, which is used to develop students' communicative skills, as well as raise their motivation in L2 learning process.*

**Key words:** *productivity, Communicative Language Teaching, Student-Centered approach, communicative purpose, 'hands-on' approach*

The economic downturn of Armenia has had its adverse effect on the index of happiness of people /Helliwell, Layard, Sachs, 2007/ living in the territory of Armenia and probably their compatriots in other countries too. A recent study at the University of Warwick revealed that in developed countries happiness led to a 12% spike in productivity, as for the countries with less economic stability, productivity level went down in compliance with the downward change of their index of happiness. Jamie Doward confirms the results of the study in his article published in the Guardian noting: 'Positive emotions appear to invigorate human beings, while negative emotions have the opposite effect' /Doward, 2010/.

The set of traditional values and perceptions previously cultivated in countries with economic and geopolitical issues like Armenia have been substituted with the ones that determine the lifestyle of people nowadays. Unfortunately, the platforms where the representatives of the younger generation are allowed to speak up, exchange ideas, brainstorm, in other words communicate effectively, and have been but few. This has led to diminishing their trust; i.e. trust in institutions, trust in being the shaper of their own tomorrow. Partial or even worse, complete loss of trust inevitably leads to demotivation and loss of productivity; productivity in work environment, but first and foremost productivity in learning process. Demotivation has been one of the greatest problems of education in Armenia since the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It came to the focus of researchers during the chaotic years of 1990s, because education that had traditionally been a top priority for Armenians lost much of its former significance. However, the researchers found that in the field of second language learning learners were less demotivated.

Since the approval of the pilot project for the reform of the general education system by Decision No 377 of June 1999 Armenia's educational system has seen series of shakeups. As a replacement to centralized system, decentralization presupposed autonomy of management of educational institutions. A new enchantment with the idea of experimenting with novice teaching methods occurred, that led to their implementation as a “quick fix” under a strong top-down pressure. However, the techniques, approaches designed by some leading education schools did not give the anticipated results locally, because their implementation was carried out either directly, without any consideration of local cultural idiosyncrasies, or, which is worse, with some lame adaptations, that had not gone through any testing period.

The situation was nearly the same almost everywhere, and Richards actually claimed that ever since “studies of the effectiveness of specific methods have had a hard time demonstrating that the method itself, rather than other factors, such as the teacher’s enthusiasm, or the novelty of the new method, was the crucial variable” /Richards, 1990: 36/. Moreover, recognition of the huge range of variables affected the growing dissatisfaction with the notion of a “quick fix”, or in other words the “technical-rational approach”, i.e. the notion that social change and improvement can be effected through the strict application of scientific method. This had very much been the mind-set that impelled the spread of audiolingualism, which was highly criticized for its “scientism” in the last decade of the twentieth century. Further developments of the mentioned trend gave way to the rejection of the idea of Universalist, objective knowledge. Accordingly, Pennycook argued that methods are never “disinterested”, but serve the dominant power structures in society, leading to “a de-skilling of the role of teachers, and greater institutional control over classroom practice” /Pennycook, 1989: 610/.

Nevertheless, the determination of teachers, specifically language teachers to embrace new methods despite any constructive criticism is largely conditioned with the belief that brush new methods like fancy Earworms mbt method, Biki approach, or Dynamic Immersion will help them achieve new heights in language teaching. Moreover, the method concept has gained new popularity among English language teachers in Armenia and Block's claim seems more than actual. According to Block at an etic level, i.e. in the thinking and nomenclature of scholars, the method concept retains great deal of vitality despite so many attempts to discredit it /Block, 2001: 72/.

Today availability of workshops conducted by popular TESOL or DELTA language experts within the framework of a continuous professional development program or just as a promotion of a successful language textbook is turning some language teachers to passionate adherents of this or that approach. These new developments are probably better than the ones when language teachers acknowledged only authoritarian approach to language teaching, which unfortunately is not just a bitter reminder of the past.

Take Communicative Language Teaching, despite its obvious advantages it is still competing with the ineffective, translation-based language teaching approach. The situation is mostly conditioned by teachers' poor training. Communicative Language Teaching dates back to 1960s and challenged the dominating Situational Language Teaching, which was basically characterized with Audio-Lingualism. The idea, that the main goal of the Communicative Approach is to develop communicative competence /Richards & Rodgers, 2001: 159/, is yet alone alluring for language teachers. The followers of the given approach accept the role of a facilitator of the communication process, along with the role of an independent participant who should be ready to analyze, counsel and manage communication processes. Student-Centered Approach, which is being acknowledged by large circles of activists of the English language teaching, inevitably leads to productivity growth. Unfortunately, the approach is rarely used in academic environment in Armenia, thus all the “acknowledgement thing”, mentioned at different workshops, has proved to be nothing but a “lip service”.

Moreover, the so-much-spoken-about notion of 'establishing students' needs' has hardly become feasible either; lecturers often assume that students are only capable of establishing their “wants” rather than their “needs”, but it seems that they are just clueless about the ways of implementing the above-mentioned concepts in the academic environment. Teachers sometimes feel lost when they are faced with the daunting challenge of adapting teaching strategies to students' needs. According to NTC California multiple research studies from the past decade teachers who manage to communicate with student before and during the actual course on subjects pertaining to language learners' academic, social and personal issues, adapt those strategies more successfully to the learners' needs. Teachers address the individual and diverse needs of language learners in both academic skills and second language acquisition. Their methods target the development of English language learners' content knowledge, as well as use of academic language associated with the subjects of their interest or research. Teachers focus on vocabulary and language development through which teachers introduce new concepts by discussing vocabulary words key to the concept. The given strategy aims at developing not only students' language competence, but also their knowledge background in the field of their interest. Then they make a guided interaction for students to work together to understand the proposed materials that have direct reference either to their life or to the area of their interest. Rather than simply memorizing information, teachers model and explicitly teach thinking skills (metacognition) crucial to learning new concepts.

Another important strategy is the use of meaning-based context and universal themes, associated with something meaningful from students' everyday lives and using it as springboard to interest them in academic concepts. Research shows that when students are interested in something and can connect it to their lives or cultural backgrounds they are more motivated and learn at better rate.

Though the concept of interaction of students, be it guided, semi-guided or unguided, is viewed by many methodologists from different spectra, they are all unanimous about the importance of teamwork /McCann, 2012/. Frequent use of teamwork in teaching process provides a beneficial platform for incremental implementation of the above-mentioned approaches in the academic environment. For example, previously futile attempts to conduct Student-Centered lessons gain feasibility with the enrollment of students in teamwork. Moreover, the teacher is able to delegate effortlessly some procedures to students of higher competence who then act as coordinators when, for example, preparing a group presentation or a case study role-play, etc... Teamwork allows teachers to provide the learners limited guidance in reference to the performance of the task or to the details of the chosen project. The only thing teachers have to do in that case is to instruct students on the deadlines for the task.

In the course of their group work, students communicate effortlessly because they get a communicative purpose /Jim Scrivener, 2010/, they brainstorm, feel empowered when making decisions on the choice of the material, layout or performance of the selected project/task. They also get a better understanding of their capabilities, hence are more likely to establish their “needs” rather than their “wants”. The sense of accomplishment in students leads to the development of trust in its broader sense; trust towards their own abilities, the abilities of (at least) some of the group members and the validation and appreciation of the accumulative knowledge of the whole group. Thus, trust directly leads to productivity growth in class, which is one of the most important targets of language teaching.

According to Merriam-Webster's dictionary, “Productivity” means:

- a) the quality or state of being productive, i.e. having the quality or power of producing (offering to view, causing to have existence);
- b) the rate of something being produced.

On the other hand, Business Dictionary defines it as a measure of the efficiency of a person, system, etc., in converting inputs into useful outputs. Thus, it can be assumed that productivity in academic environment is possible only when the teacher provides sufficient amount of inputs (any type of guidance, materials, visual aids, etc.) to students for them to convert the “inputs” into USEFUL “outputs”; i.e. presentations, any type of role-playing, letters, term papers and reports.

The concept of productivity was defined by Lyons in the end of 1970s as "... that property of the language-system which enables native speakers to construct and understand an indefinitely large number of utterances, including utterances that they never previously encountered" /Lyons, 1977: 78/. To motivate non-natives to produce, and what is more, to produce "an indefinitely large number of utterances" teachers should acknowledge that in the process of language teaching it is fundamental to grasp the width and the depth of the concept of productivity. In the process of teamwork there are infinite opportunities to produce at the lesson and

afterwards too if the task proposed to the students has the potential to create momentum for students.

The level of productivity is directly bound to the approach the teacher chooses to use. In case of Student-Centered approach, average student has the opportunity of producing average every 2-5 minutes, which is far more than in case of Teacher-Centered approach due to pair and group work. Pair and group work contribute to lifting interaction barriers that are commonly major obstacles for almost 80% of students. Because of certain cultural and historical reasons (for example, most carry a subconscious burden of being a representative of a nation of smart, talented people who have but been ravaged for centuries), learners feel inhibited to communicate. The majority has also certain awe for “authority”, and probably to some extent, it is because of their 12-year learning experience of Teacher-Centered approach that has subdued any initiative, any sparkle, which may stir up in a student. The other reason for communication problems is the ubiquitous Internet with its social networks that has transformed the young into major extroverts, as they have become used to living in a virtual world, and this results in diminishing all their “offline” abilities of interaction.

Teamwork mitigates the pressure of being “smart”, as students perform in a less formal environment during the group work. Learners easily show initiative, make suggestion. They take peer correction with less frustration or in some cases with gratitude; hence it proves to be more effective than corrections made by the teachers. Thus the act of teacher correction is sometimes plain useless. The assumption is confirmed with a broadband research on this matter /Jacobs&Zhang, 1989/, though in high power culture countries the situation is to a certain extent different /Jalafarhani, 2012: 88/. The results based on the analysis of the effectiveness of teacher versus peer feedback on language accuracy of high versus low proficiency EFL learners revealed that peer feedback did not affect grammatical accuracy improvement for both high and low proficient students, but teacher feedback was found to be effective for grammatical accuracy especially for low proficient learners. In terms of overall performance, both feedback types were significantly effective, irrespective of the proficiency level. The study also showed that learners favoured teacher feedback and saw the teacher as figure of authority that guaranteed quality.

As for the learners of elder generation, who are used to a more conventional method of teaching, they perceive correction as a must. It often helps the teacher to gain their trust, on the one hand because of the learners' hidden preference for authoritarian teaching approach, and on the other hand, it is taken in as a demonstration of the teacher's “competence”, as well as the teacher's alertness or the inner radar for mistakes, is thought to be “professionalism”. The “demonstration” in such case is usually useful by the end of the learners' performance specifically in the beginning of the course. To increase learners' productivity the teacher should create a comfort zone for the learners, for them to be able the make much of the teacher's initial input.

The level of productivity is directly affected with the set of communicative activities that the teacher considers most effective for this or that group of students. Before experimenting with the activity in the class the teacher has to do some prior work; i.e.

- create a realistic context and set a scene for the activity;
- clearly understand the purpose of the task;
- get prepared for “information gap” or “opinion gap”;
- think of scheduling some time for students to prepare for the activity;
- think of the relevance of the activity to the learners' life;
- think of ways of generating interest in the activity;
- decide on the type of groupings appropriate for the learners;
- think of ways of involving students in self-correction of errors;
- think of the type of exchanges anticipated for students to produce
- think of providing students with a sense of conclusion.

The type of activity, that is traditionally considered as a productivity booster, is role-playing. As it is believed to be a very effective tool for developing the learners' L2 speaking skills, it has therefore become a constant activity in most language teaching course books. However, the role-playing activity can have an adverse effect on productivity if the task is propositioned as directly as it is in most textbooks, with no consideration of the learners' age, culture, field of interest. In that case role-playing can even become a real put-off for learners.

Moreover, language learners of a more mature age may think of a proposed activity as ridiculous, as they are hardly ever able to abstract themselves from their daily chores and responsibilities. They normally come to language classes motivated not by the urge of self-development or possible job promotion, but by something negative; either it is the urge to gain some credits at their workplace or they do it because they have a language test to face. In this respect, it is more sensible to adapt the role-playing task to the reality of the learners' lives.

Today highly respected language teaching experts (Jeremy Harmer and Scott Thornbury) agree that teaching is more about “management rather than methods”. With the influx of Business and Management terms and concepts modern English Language Teaching is view in relation to Management too. Moreover, University of Sterling has designed a Management and English Language Teaching course (MELT). MELT experts see the future of language teaching in a new light. They constructively reject the ominous end of language teaching and claim that the English Language Teaching will have a guaranteed future, once it is perceived from the spectrum of business or management. Before designing a language teaching course teachers should think of such concepts as “demand”, “target audience”, “promotional tools”, assess the level of feasibility of the “goal” or view “communication” in relation to “trust and productivity”. They claim that productivity is directly dependent on “demand”, which in case of language teaching is when learners feel that there is some interest in their experience on

behalf of their interlocutors, and they get a compelling feeling to share when they are engaged in a communicative. Teachers should repeat in the back of their mind the cliché that “language is a means of communication”, and respectively that L2 should serve as a tool for the learners to communicate, built trust to share their experiences.

Methodologist often speak about providing learners with “communicative purpose”, which in reality means that the learners should feel that there is a genuine interest in their experiences, their opinion. All these should provide a solid ground for learners to develop trust in their own capabilities, in the skills of their peers, in their teacher's competence and eventually in the course as a whole. The “demand” inspires them to push their own boundaries, to take in more to eventually “produce” more. Thus, only on this term the so-called “provision of communicative purpose” may actually work and raise the productivity level in class.

The next important contributor to productivity in class is “empowerment”. In case of a total “hands-on” style, the teacher misses the opportunity of inspiring the learners to the point that they would produce at the top of their skills. For example, in case of the brainstorming activity the productivity level goes down, when it is conducted by the teacher in the “hands-on” manner, because only the more or less extrovert students contribute to the performance of the task. Sometimes the unpleasant outcome is when the brainstorming, which was supposed to be, fun for students, who endlessly generate ideas without any language inhibitions, turns into a “monologue”, basically performed by ... the teacher. All the learners gradually lose their interest in the course of the discussion, as the use of the given style demotivates them. The learners do not feel empowered to show initiative and generate ideas at this kind of tightly orchestrated brainstorming activity.

In case of “delegating” style the teacher gives a task to the class dividing it into pairs or/and groups. They are “empowered” to make their own decisions on the way they would choose to complete the task. The productivity level rises, once the students are empowered to make their own creation, be it just a short role-playing or a presentation or even an idea that was developed in consensus process,. It gains momentum and is anticipated to see even higher rise in the nearest future because the learners eventually built up trust, trust towards their own abilities, as well as the efficacy of the approach implemented in their learning process.

Nevertheless, all the efforts to raise the productivity level usually prove to be futile if the targets, that the learners are supposed to achieve, remain obscure. Even in case of slightest ambiguity in the task students fail to complete it. Students should clearly understand why they are doing it and what they are going to achieve personally, as well as what impact would it have on their plans of self-development, and probably how useful the given experience may turn to be in future.

To sum it all up briefly, teachers argue that the 21st century students are more focused on their “wants”. They also claim that the instability of the current economic and political life has made it pointless for them to have long-term plans,

or some even suggest that young adults have developed a fragmental thinking and do not go beyond their tactical goals. The best way to approach this is not to look for some reverse arguments and provide the learners clear targets. Teachers should trust their students to find the benefit of the task for themselves without killing the fun of the process. Teachers should take the rewarding but humble role of allowing learners to feel that they are the ones who take the lead at the lesson, which will make them feel proud and help them produce more.

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**Լ. ՍԱՐԳՍՅԱՆ – Ուսանողների «արտադրողականության» բարելավումը անգլերեն լեզվի ուսուցման գործընթացում.** – Մեր օրերում տեխնոլոգիական առաջընթացի պայմաններում ուսանողների «արտադրողականությունը» լեզվի ուսուցման գործընթացում ոչ մի աճ չի տեսել: Սույն հոդվածում ուսումնասիրվում են այն գործոնները, որոնց պատճառով ուսանողների «արտադրողականությունը» չի բարելավվում: Հոդվածում փորձ է արվում ուղիներ գտնել ուսանողների «արտադրողականությունը» բարձրացնելու ուղղությամբ, որի համար առաջարկվում է կիրառել լեզվի ուսուցման հաղորդակցային մեթոդը (CLT)՝ շեշտը դնելով ուսանողակենտրոն ուսուցման վրա (Student-Centered approach): Հոդվածում ուսումնասիրվում է նաև այն, թե ինչպես են խմբակային աշխատանքները խթանում ուսանողի ներգրավվածությունը:

**Բանալի բառեր.** արտադրողականություն, լեզվի դասավանդման հաղորդակցային մոտեցում, ուսանողակենտրոն ուսուցում, հաղորդակցային նպատակ, ուսուցման «ուղղակի» ներգործման մոտեցում

**Լ. САРԳՏՅԱՆ – Повышение «производительности» у студентов при изучении английского языка.** – При всей доступности технологических достижений в процессе изучения английского языка, роста «производительности» у студентов не наблюдается. Выявление первопричин стагнации «производительности» у студентов является важнейшим фактором при обучении иностранного языка. Данная статья посвящена проблеме оптимизации процесса обучения иностранному языку путем интенсивного применения коммуникативного подхода в обучении иностранным языкам (CLT), а также подхода, ориентированного на потребности студентов (Student-Centered Approach). В статье в частности, рассматривается преимущество групповых работ, направленных на развитие коммуникативных навыков и умений студентов, а также пути повышения мотивации у изучающих иностранные языки.

**Ключевые слова:** производительность, коммуникативный подход преподавания языка, подход, ориентированный на потребности студентов, коммуникативная цель, «активный» подход