



PARTICIPATORY PEDAGOGY AND VOLUNTEERS

WHAT IS PARTICIPATORY LANGUAGE TEACHING?

'Participatory' language teaching aims to address inequality and injustice by making the learning process more democratic and empowering. One way it does this, in practice, is by giving students more ownership over their class and how it's run. To do so, this approach doesn't use predetermined curricula or work books. Instead, the class teacher talks to students about their lives and listens out for the 'live' issues which are most relevant to the group. This informs lesson planning. Students' real life concerns and issues are the driving force behind the curriculum. There is ongoing feedback from students about whether what they're learning is relevant.

The idea is that students should be respected as 'experts' when it comes to their own interests and language needs. Respecting students in this way is a corrective to the injustice they face in the world outside the classroom. Volunteers can also contribute to this by showing students respect and being interested in their point of view, their needs and what they have to say.

The participatory approach draws its inspiration from radical Brazilian educator Paulo Friere. In Britain, a project called 'Reflect ESOL' (2007-2011) showcased how his ideas could be applied to language learning.

The teacher then is a facilitator. They do provide some language input but their main job is to help everyone in the class to contribute to creating a strong, supportive learning community. Participatory education often centres around in-depth discussions about issues central to students' lives. Language learning comes out of this meaningful and genuine dialogue.

VOLUNTEERS IN THE PARTICIPATORY CLASSROOM

In a 'participatory' classroom, the emphasis for volunteers should be on listening to students. This is because participatory approach focuses more on students' output than traditional methods. Evidence suggests that students learn language through their own output (producing language) and not only by processing input (hearing or reading language). The participatory focus on discussion, dialogue and self-expression means students get lots of opportunities to produce their target language. Volunteers who are able to hold back and provide a supportive listening presence can greatly support this process!

But volunteers aren't just there to listen - they can get involved in class discussion like everyone else if the topic is relevant to their lives. In this way, the volunteers can enrich the community in a participatory classroom. Involving volunteers in authentic discussion where they share their opinions and experiences helps to break down hierarchies between volunteers and students, because everyone becomes active participants in the class. For example, volunteer-run project Xenia runs women-only workshops aimed at 'meaningful two-way social integration'. Xenia doesn't distinguish between language learners and expert speakers - they are all equal 'participants' in the workshops.

In a participatory classroom, the distinct roles of 'teacher' and 'learner' are critiqued. Whilst in practical terms the paid teacher will still be ultimately responsible for planning and facilitating the lesson, the idea is that everyone in the group has things to teach and things to learn. This message is emphasised when there is open exchange between students and volunteers and when there is the opportunity for students who have progressed to a high language level to become volunteers themselves.