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“PLUTO’S BUBBLE BATH”,
or
WHAT CAN AN LSP TEACHER LEARN FROM MICKEY MOUSE?

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Abstract

As a teacher of English, and more recently, of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and business communication, I have been reflecting on what could make my classes genuinely relevant for my students. Do the curriculum and the various faculties’ syllabi answer their needs as learners of a *foreign language*, but also as *learners* of a foreign language, as *learners* in general? The answer to the first question seems to be an unequivocal yes, which is not the case though, if one tries to objectively and critically answer the second. While students are provided with specialized vocabulary and plenty of contexts in which to use it, in which to develop all their language-related skills – from reading and listening, to writing and speaking – and professional skills, such as oral presentations and public speaking, business meetings and negotiations, company-to-company correspondence, are they also taught to critically think about the studied topics? Are they taught how to learn, with a view to motivating, to enabling them to become active, independent learners?

Key words: CT (critical thinking), creative thinking, language-related skills, needs analysis, student development, teacher/trainer development

INTRODUCTION, OR, THE FASCINATION OF MICKEY

Between 2009 and 2011, I spent a lot of time watching all sorts of cartoons with my baby daughter, Maria, most of which calibrated for very young kids, 1 to 3 year olds. Some of them were really demanding to watch for an adult, due to their sheer repetitiveness and lack of articulated speech, which, added to the countless hours spent home with a baby and then toddler, managed to take a toll on my abilities to articulate speech. Quite on the contrary, others were captivating even for me, let alone for one and a half – two-year-old Maria. Among the last, the most notable seemed to be modern Mickey, not the classical Walt Disney character, but the newer, still Disney, version in the shape of a new cartoons series, Mickey’s Clubhouse.

The legitimate question springing from this new interest I seemed to be developing in Disney’s cartoons was why did we both - mother and daughter - like them, preferring them to a host of other, newer, supposedly more entertaining stuff? How did they manage to generate that interest, or rather, addiction? What made them work? Could it be the warm, non-aggressive figure of the main character, Mickey? The colorful, naively painted background? The music? All of these prove, indeed, to be pluses, when one compares Mickey’s Clubhouse to other, way more belligerent, cartoons. But they are simply not enough.

I kept asking myself this question for a while, until, one day I was persistently asked to watch a particular episode, “Pluto’s Bubble Bath”, which I did several times. This proved to be an opportunity rather than punishment, as I had enough time to spot in it what made it so special for children and adults alike. Some adults, in any case, as I must acknowledge the fact that not all mothers are teachers, and not all of them are interested in language acquisition, that is, in how their children learn to speak, or, simply, in *how* their children *learn*.

As some of you, who are parents, might know, in this particular episode, Mickey and friends try to give Pluto a bath that the latter seems to appreciate slightly, though not significantly, more than in the classical Walt Disney similar episode, where he is utterly reluctant and uncooperative. Out of this struggle, bubbles start flying around, encapsulating the main characters, that is, Pluto and Mickey, and carrying them in a pretty dangerous journey, close to the moon and back to Mickey’s clubhouse. Meanwhile, the hero encourages everybody to think out of the box and to find new uses for old tools / Mickey-tools, that is, for a hair drier, towel and bath toys – which stimulate children’s creativity.

1. EDU-RES MASTER PROGRAM

A few years before, between 2007 and 2009, I attended a second master program, “English Language Education and Research Communication for Business and Economics”, briefly EDU-RES, at the Faculty of International Business and Economics, Bucharest University of Economic Studies. What tempted me to embark on this two-year new project despite not having finished my doctoral studies was what PhD professor and my department colleague Laura Mureșan relentlessly advertised as its genuine focus on interdisciplinarity, on new, communicative methods of ESP teaching (which was immediately relevant for me as a young teacher in constant need of training), the opportunities to improve my research and academic writing skills (which actually proved vital later on, when I started writing my PhD dissertation), and, last but not least, two

courses that promised to introduce us to creative and critical thinking (which sounded beautiful despite my having almost no idea about what they meant).

“Critical Thinking” and “Creative Thinking”, tutor – PhD Australian professor Christina Neesham, were two of the most popular courses of the whole program, two of the most captivating courses I had ever been taught at that time, two of the most exciting courses I *have* ever been taught still, to this very day. It was the first time when I was shown that thinking is not a natural instinct, like deglutition, something that we are born with. Unfortunately, actually fortunately if we take the right perspective, it is something to be *learned*, to be *trained* in us from the day of our birth. If we are unlucky to live in the wrong environment (strong personality parents who always know better, education systems that focus on memorizing and reproducing information, etc.), we never learn how to think. I have come across dozens of people in my private as well as professional life who believe something to be true just because they saw that on TV. Not a good enough reason, if I have a word here... These two courses were something of a revelation for me, I realized it was the first time when someone pointed out the fact that we had to learn how to think, and then to think out of the box, and so on and so forth, to become complete and completely trained beings, professors, researchers, whatever.

2. WHAT I LEARNED FROM EDU-RES AND MICKEY

You may wonder by now what the connection is between Mickey’s Clubhouse and the EDURES master program. Sadly did I acknowledge that connection myself, when I realized that in other countries children are taught to think critically and creatively as soon as they start speaking, while I was introduced to critical and creative thinking in my thirties.

Mickey’s Clubhouse cartoons are calibrated, as I mentioned before, for very young children. A proof is that part of the learning that the series intends to generate is related to very simple Mathematics or natural science notions: children learn how to count to ten, they learn to add/subtract small numbers (five rose petals plus five rose petals is ten rose petals, etc.), they learn the days of the week, seasons, colors, animal and plant species, what a rainbow is and how it is formed, but also musical instruments, means of transport, etc. They also learn to behave, they learn the value of friendship, of offering help to someone in need – moral and ethical values. All cartoons, as well as stories when I was a child, were, are still supposed to do that. We all know that learning at very young ages takes place while playing, and actually the border line between playing and learning is very thin.

It is so much more than that, children are taught to think critically and creatively. You will never persuade the sort of adult one such child will eventually grow up into that something is true because they saw it on TV. They will inquire about the credibility, about the reliability of the source, of the TV channel or TV program for instance, they will ask for evidence, hard data, facts, figures, statistics, expert opinion, *some* evidence. They will probably ask for more than one opinion, in order to make sure the argument is not biased [1]. Then, they will decide if and what percentage of what they hear/see on TV to believe. This type of adult will never panic when facing the first problem or emergency, they will be more likely to come up with an original idea/solution to it. Because this sort of people are not afraid that someone may laugh at them (as some of my students justify their reluctance to talk during our classes), they simply know that new ideas may work, or not. If they don’t work, they try again. No need to panic.

Don't we all want our children to be this type of adults, to be this type of children? I do. How do we train them into that? If school's focus is, sadly, on memorizing and reproducing stuff, then we can do so much more to train their thinking. I realized how changed I was after graduating from EDU-RES. I also realized how changes Maria was after a year of watching Mickey's Clubhouse, after seeing that towels are not only used to dry your skin after taking a bath, but also to protect a bubble from a fatal encounter with a cactus. I cannot even imagine a Romanian teacher asking our 5-year-olds to think of new ways of using a towel!

3. "HOW SCHOOLS KILL CREATIVITY"

Here I have to bring forth one more argument in favor of my thesis. One more fortunate encounter, one that I had last academic year, with Sir Ken Robinson and the TED Talks. I may have easily bypassed it, if I hadn't given credit to one of my students' recommendation. As a teacher of ESP, I have always believed in the importance of needs analysis, of adjusting my teaching, even the syllabus, to my students' needs. I have always welcome their suggestions, of course, as long as they were not ridiculous. So I did this time. While trying to find the best means, the best resources to teach public speaking/oral presentation skills, Corina suggested TED Talks. I could recite ten, maybe fifteen textbooks about, or with units about oral presentations, but I hadn't heard about TED Talks at that point, I shamefully admit, as it is a wonderful resource. She told me Ken Robinson's discourse on school and creativity, "How Schools Kill Creativity" [3], was one of her favorites. Sceptically, I didn't promise anything, except going home and thinking about it. So I went home and watched it once, and then again. I designed a whole seminar on it and it was one of the best seminars in years (despite working better with one group of students and worse with a second group, for logistical reasons). I could have known better. I'm glad I didn't!

Why am I mentioning this particular TED talk at this point in my argument? Because Ken Robinson argues in favor of, praises the value of creativity, but more importantly, because he acknowledges the fact that in England too (just like in Romania), just like in many other educational systems, creativity, the most valuable asset of mankind, in his opinion, is not appreciated, on the contrary, it seems to be killed in our children by schools. To summarize his argument, creativity is essential, especially nowadays, with information and technology changing at such a fast pace, as no one can solve new problems with old means. To be creative is to dare try new ways of solving problems without *fearing* you might fail. While children are born this way, Sir Robinson argues, schools stigmatize mistakes, later on companies stigmatize mistakes, mistakes are the worst thing that can happen to you. The outcome is, sadly, that by adulthood, most individuals have lost that capacity. Because school kills creativity.

I absolutely agree. That is why, presented with a simple problem: "A company's marketing team has ordered 500,000 brochures advertising a new service. Two days before the day scheduled for the distribution of the brochures, you realize that the contact phone number has one wrong digit and the customers will get a dead line. What do you do: fire the marketing manager or reprint the brochures, at a huge cost?" – most of us panic first, rather than take a close look at the situation and answer: "neither of the two; I'd rather call

the phone company and ask for that number. Since the customers will get a dead line, it means the wrongly printed number is nobody's number and a simple phone call to the phone service provider will solve the problem." [2]

4. TO CONCLUDE

It seems that the only viable solution for our future sustainable development is to invest in education, as we all know, but that could translate as an investment in teaching creativity and critical thinking, in teaching our children how to think with their own mind, without fearing mistakes. However, not only in Romania, but I would argue more so in Romania, schools' focus is still on memorizing and reproducing information, and sometimes, if we are fortunate to attend more modern educational systems, on training competencies and practical skills. Creativity and critical thinking courses are in my opinion the most important thing schools and universities should invest in, and yet the one that is still missing, with few, but notable, exceptions.

What more important skill is there than keeping our eyes wide open, even we, teachers, academics, researchers, so that we can still learn new things? That teaching is learning is a commonplace as old as mankind, but I still insist, we can all learn, we must all learn if we are to become, and then to remain, competitive, appreciated educators, and that learning can sometimes occur in contexts where we don't expect it, not in teacher training sessions, or maybe conferences. It could occur simply while observing other educational systems, in the daily interaction with our students, we can learn from our children, and yes, we can even learn from Mickey Mouse.

5. REFERENCES

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