

Chapter 7

Developing Students' English Language Skills and Cultural Awareness by Means of Food Topics

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ABSTRACT

The chapter tackles the topic of food in teaching English as a second language from different instructional perspectives, which include an integrated approach to skill-development, vocabulary acquisition as well as to American and British culture and civilization. The major purpose is to suggest various classroom activities based on topics related to food that can be used by ESL teachers in their classes. Consequently, the focus is on the strategies conducing to the development of receptive and productive language skills, practice of lexical items and enhancement of cultural awareness. Various theoretical elements regarding the teaching process lie at the basis of practical activities proposed by the chapter.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most common topics in teaching English as a second language is food and eating habits. Starting from this assumption, the chapter will deal with this generous topic from different perspectives, which include aspects linked to the instructional activities as well as issues of American and British culture and civilization. As to the learning and teaching process, it will show that classes based on topics related to food are extremely effective if conceived in a memorable way contributing to learners' improvement of language skills and vocabulary in general. The study will also argue that the learner training is highly successful if the instructional process makes use of the integrated-skills approach that simultaneously develops both receptive (reading and listening) and productive (speaking and writing) skills.

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Such a user-friendly topic allows the development of student-centered classes in which learners may involve enthusiastically in the discussion of the subject if it corresponds to their needs and interests. It is agreed that the communicative power of such classes may be exploited by resorting to a wide variety of pairwork and group work activities (role plays, simulations, games etc.) that engage students thoroughly in the instructional process. Special mention should be made of the fact that students can use what they learn in and out of the classroom and that this will become a long term acquisition of their own store of English.

It is a fact that when learning a foreign language, students tend to get familiar with vocabulary in a random way but, as it will be shown, they may benefit from structured and well-designed activities within *food* classes. Thus, the chapter will highlight the importance of food-related vocabulary activities in the learning of active and productive vocabulary and lexis (single words, idioms, multiword items), as well as of other food activities meant to develop students' awareness of the grammatical and functional structures of the language. Moreover, this chapter will demonstrate that students have the opportunity to practice language in specific contexts, imitating everyday life situations by means of controlled, less-controlled and free dialogues, drama-like activities, songs and music etc.

The chapter will also reveal that a good way to motivate students to learn English is to offer them the opportunity to choose what kind of issues connected with food they would like to study and develop them into group projects. Among the most appreciated subjects by students are: food and nutrition, eating habits, fast vs. slow food, weight loss, eating disorders etc.

As far as the culture and civilization aspects are concerned, the paper will present various activities that focus on American and British specific dishes and eating habits that characterize the two cultures, meant to enrich students' communicative skills, to provide students with insights into the target cultures, to guide and refine their emotional approach to cultural issues and to develop their aesthetic taste. Last but not least, a basic concern will be to show that *food* English classes help students develop healthy eating habits.

All in all, the chapter will provide a general framework for practicing a topic with a view to developing English language skills in an effective way which should be integrated in a broader instructional process including "curriculum projection, implementation and evaluation as basis for strong competences – which are necessary for better performances" (Eftimie, 2012, p. 39.)

IMPROVING LANGUAGE SKILLS AND VOCABULARY

Due to the fact that food topics are highly motivating in English classes, teachers can develop both students' language competence and performance in communicative contexts that involve various activities that aim at combining receptive and productive skills, as well as at increasing students' ability to interact. As stated by CEFR (2011, p. 14), "as processes, reception and production (oral and/or written) are obviously primary, since both are required for interaction" and are taught according to an integrated approach. In other words, it is essential to conceive classroom activities in which language skills are practiced in conjunction with each other. Furthermore, designing an integrated syllabus that inter-relates skills, functions, grammar and vocabulary will enable students to become proficient language users as it "seeks to provide for mutual reinforcement" (Richards & Schmidt, 2010, p. 288) of its different components.

By means of such a syllabus teachers can organize their instructional activity starting from general and specific clear objectives that express what is expected from the learners in terms of knowledge and

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