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AN ANALYSIS
OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING APPROACHES: THE CASE OF AZERBAIJAN

UN ANÁLISIS DE LOS ENFOQUES DE ENSEÑANZA DEL IDIOMA INGLÉS: EL CASO DE AZERBAIYÁN

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ABSTRACT

The demand for the English language in modern times is quite wide. However, even though the English language is compulsory in secondary schools in Azerbaijan, English skills are not sufficient enough for the effective use of the language when students reach the college or university level. Therefore, the focus of the paper is to study the current state of English language teaching in public schools and to identify the methods and classroom activities used by English teachers in Baku. For this purpose, twenty government secondary schools were selected. Observations and interviews were conducted for data collection. The results of the study revealed that although teachers claimed that they use alternative methods in their classes, they mostly used traditional methods in English language teaching. However, since modern teaching concepts require more space for active and interactive teaching methods in English teaching measures should be taken to address this problem.

Keywords: Azerbaijan, language education, teaching methodology, second language learning, interactive teaching

RESUMEN

La demanda del idioma inglés en los tiempos modernos es bastante amplia. Sin embargo, aunque el idioma inglés es obligatorio en las escuelas secundarias de Azerbaiyán, las habilidades en inglés no son suficientes para el uso efectivo del idioma cuando los estudiantes alcanzan el nivel de colegio o universidad. Por lo tanto, el objetivo del artículo es estudiar el estado actual de la enseñanza del idioma inglés en las escuelas públicas e identificar los métodos y las actividades de clase que utilizan los profesores de inglés en Bakú. Para ello, se seleccionaron veinte escuelas secundarias públicas. Se realizaron observaciones y entrevistas para la recolección de datos. Los resultados del estudio revelaron que, aunque los docentes afirmaron que utilizan métodos alternativos en sus clases, en su mayoría utilizan métodos tradicionales en la enseñanza del idioma inglés. Sin embargo, dado que los conceptos de enseñanza modernos requieren más espacio para los métodos de enseñanza activos e interactivos en la enseñanza del inglés, se deben tomar medidas para abordar este problema.

Palabras clave: Azerbaiyán, enseñanza de idiomas, metodología de enseñanza, aprendizaje de una segunda lengua, enseñanza interactiva

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INTRODUCTION

In an ever-expanding and multicultural world of business, professionals from diverse backgrounds in a variety of jobs are required to master intercultural communication skills. To meet this need, language studies have become an essential part of the Azerbaijani education system in public schools. As our society becomes more globalized, the importance of English language skills has become more and more important. It is the fact that poor or deficient English language skills significantly close the doors to both education and career (Brown, 1980). In Azerbaijan development and diversification of language teaching have become a national development target. However, despite the fact that the English language is mandatory in secondary schools of Azerbaijan, and English language teaching started to take place in the national curriculum of Azerbaijani education system a long time ago, it cannot be said that Azerbaijan is successful in English language teaching. Students' poor results in the national exams and ranking of the EF English Proficiency Index prove that Azerbaijan has a very low proficiency level in the English language. The index is divided into 5 categories of countries proficiency level, Azerbaijan' s English proficiency level is at 5, so it's at the lowest level. (Figure 1)

01	Netherlands	70.27	14	Croatia	63.07	31	France	57.25
02	Sweden	68.74	15	Hungary	61.86	32	Latvia	56.85
03	Norway	67.93	16	Romania	61.36	35	Spain	55.46
04	Denmark	67.87	17	Serbia	61.30	36	Italy	55.31
07	Finland	65.34	19	Switzerland	60.23	47	Belarus	52.39
08	Austria	64.11	21	Lithuania	60.11	48	Russia	52.14
09	Luxembourg	64.03	22	Greece	59.87	49	Ukraine	52.13
10	Germany	63.77	23	Czech Republic	59.30	50	Albania	51.99
11	Poland	63.76	24	Bulgaria	58.97	56	Georgia	50.62
12	Portugal	63.14	25	Slovakia	58.82	79	Turkey	46.81
13	Belgium	63.09	28	Estonia	58.29	85	Azerbaijan	46.13

Proficiency Bands ● Very High ● High ● Moderate ● Low ● Very Low

Figure 1. Europa's EF English Proficiency Index 2019. Source. https://www.ef.com.mx/epi/downloads/

Compulsory learning of a foreign language begins in an Azerbaijani school at the primary stage of education, in the first grade. According to the F-528 numbered order of the Minister of Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan dated July 20th 2018, (http://edu.gov.az/upload/file/emre-elave/2016/427/427-emre-elave11.pdf) among foreign language (languages) to be taught at General Education Schools of the Republic of Azerbaijan are English, German, French, Russian, Arabic, and Persian. Teaching a foreign language in all General Education Schools, regardless of the language of instruction, starts with the I (first) grade. The foreign language that is taught from the I (first) grade is the main foreign language a student learns

in school. The availability of appropriate pedagogical staff and materials and educational resources at the school is a prerequisite for teaching foreign languages. The second foreign language is taught in the General Education Schools from the fifth grade. It is inadmissible to refuse the teaching and learning of a second foreign language while having the appropriate pedagogical staff and potential training base. Besides, according to the rules set out in paragraph 21 of this Note, foreign language classes are divided into 2 groups to allow the teachers to work individually and more closely with every student.

Contemporary pedagogy and didactics emphasize the subjectivity of the student, recognizing him/her as the most important link in the education process. Since the knowledge becomes outdated very quickly, it is much more important to equip students with such skills as acquiring and processing information, creative problem solving, cooperation in a group, or the ability to learn effectively. To provide students with these skills, it is very important to choose the right teaching approach.

Today, we observe a diverse approach to teaching English language. It is the result of applying the best practices taken from traditional methods, enriched with the latest results of neurological and psychological research as well as the achievements of information and communication techniques. The objectives of teaching foreign languages also determine changing socio-political conditions: globalization, open borders, and increasing mobility - including communication.

In addition to the concept of learning and learning objectives, the starting point of the selection and development of teaching environments and methods are the prerequisites, interests, views, and individual needs of the students. Since learning is diverse and linked to prior knowledge, teachers use a wide range of guidance and learning methods. The choice of methods takes into account the conceptual and methodological skills required in English language teaching. Learning methods based on exploration, experimentation, and problem-solving promote learning to learn and develop critical and creative thinking. The modern approach to teaching requires promoting the active work of students and the development of collaborative skills. Students should be guided to plan their studies, evaluate their operational, and working skills, and take responsibility for their learning. They should also be guided to make extensive use of information and communication technologies. Also, attention is given to identifying and changing attitudes and practices in the selection of study methods and work guidance.

Relevant learning experiences engage and inspire learning. Students are provided with opportunities for work that links the knowledge and skills they study to their experiences as well as to phenomena in the environment and society. Students are encouraged to solve challenging assignments, identify problems, and ask questions and seek answers. To promote this goal-to engage and inspire students to learn, to develop their creative and critical thinking, and to improve student performance and to increase student achievement, teachers must determine effective methods.

It is clear that the use of interactive teaching methods will improve the quality of the English language course. It is not possible for foreign language teaching to reach its purpose only with a single method. Therefore, the objective of this article is to analyze the current state of English language teaching in Azerbaijani schools, and to identify the methods and classroom activities used by English teachers in Baku. For this purpose, 20 schools have been chosen, all from Baku. Randomly selected English language classes of 9th grade were observed to identify the methods used by instructors. The teachers were not informed beforehand; thus, they did not have a chance for advance preparation. For the analysis, the interview and observation study were administered. Data collection was completed approximately in one month during the 1st semester of the 2019 academic year. EFL teachers of 9_{th} grade classes were observed and inquired to reply interview questions to define the teaching methods used by them.

In the first stage, an interview consisting of 6 questions was carried out among 20 randomly selected English teachers at chosen schools. The questions included general information about teachers, methodology, and follow-up of the developments related to the methods. The interview questions were the following:

1.Can you give brief information about yourself?

2.What are the best ways of teaching English for you?

3.What methods do you use to teach English?

4.What are the challenges that you face during the implementation of methods?

5.How do you handle these challenges?

6.What strategies do you use while planning your lessons?

In the second stage, the observations were held, and the sessions corresponded to one lesson (45 minutes). They were carried out in two modes: (a) teacher observation and (b) teaching observation. The teacher's observation focused on the method that is chosen by the teacher. During the didactic observation, the observer documented the didactic process and recorded the following information: (i) the duration of individual stages of the lesson on the timeline and (ii) noted the related details, e.g. the type of materials used by the teacher in working with students, the form of work students and the topic of the assignment.

DEVELOPMENT

In recent years, foreign language teachers have gained considerable independence in the choice of teaching aids, creative understanding of the content, and the ways of implementing different methods for the program requirements (Galskova, 2006, p. 336). Considering the existence of various methods in the modern process of teaching a foreign language, it should be noted that the leading position is held by methods and technologies based on a personality-oriented approach to teaching (Brown, 1980).

A method or approach to foreign language teaching involves more than a set of definitions that includes instructional practices based on teaching and learning perspective. In order to have information about the value or effectiveness of the methods, it is necessary to interpret their aims, objectives, and characteristics by associating them with a language course or program (Richards & Rodgers, 2014, p. 155). In foreign language teaching, almost everyone has the same goal at the first level of the learning and teaching process: student achievement. The more methods in language teaching, the greater the diversity of human experience" (Rodgers, 2001).

According to Desiatova (2009), foreign language teaching in schools is mainly based on the activities that children take part in. These activities can be to listen to stories, role plays, debates, play games, sing songs, etc. The main feature of interactive tasks is that they are aimed not only consolidating the material that has already been studied but also learning new things (Baraldi, 2009; Barreto, 2014; Culham, 2004; Gaudart, 1990; Gomez, 2010; Ntelioglou, 2006; Uddin, 2009). This type of learning is more natural and stimulates interest in students. In organized activities, students themselves seek knowledge. The result of student activity is the qualitative assimilation of knowledge (Tanner, 2001)

According to (Bird (1993, p. 26), teachers may prioritize some topics for students to adopt the language. In this respect, firstly, the teaching method should be based on the level of the students. After this determination, it can be tried to develop a positive tendency towards the language and language learning of the student, as well as the topics learned. Subsequently, the foundation can be prepared to use the foreign language in different patterns (Halliwell, 2016, p. 9).

In recent years, an important development in the methodology of foreign language teaching is that the students are more prominent than teachers and more emphasis should be on students' perception (Doff, 1988, p. 9). The essence of good teaching is to observe and interpret students' interests, attention, and participation, and to know when to act and when to stop. All of these depend on observing the students' facial expressions and behaviors.

In general, the methods used in foreign language teaching have emerged to cover the deficiencies or insufficiencies of a method being used, and these efforts have contributed to the better teaching of foreign language and brought alternative methods to this field. The widely used foreign language teaching methods adopted by the Council of Europe Department of Modern Languages are as follows:

- Grammar-Translation Method
- Direct Method
- Natural Method
- Audio-Lingual Method
- Communicative Method

The most relevant characteristics of these will be discussed below.

Grammar-Translation Method- There is no specific learning theory on this method, it focuses more on rational analysis, rule learning, and comparative studies. Induction is used in grammar teaching and students are given priority to grammatical patterns in the texts that are initially read. As teaching progresses, more complex grammatical structures are given along with extensive grammatical explanations. The main purpose of this method is to teach the rules of the language and to make the correct translation through these rules (Damiani, 2003). However, mother tongue and foreign language are used together during teaching. The two languages are compared with each other and all levels of information are translated from the source language to the target language and from the target language to the source language (Brown, 1980). Students are asked to learn all the new words in the reading passages to gain a vocabulary consisting of important words (Stern et al., 1983). Exercises are mostly focused on translating sentences from the target language to the mother tongue. This method does not pay much attention to pronunciation. The main purpose is the accuracy of translation between languages.

The grammar-translation method makes progress in terms of writing and reading skills. However, the student has problems in terms of speaking and listening skills (Chastain, 1971). Since there is not enough focus on pronunciation, the language learned through this method leads to inadequacies in verbal communication. The student has problems in understanding and speaking. The authoritarian attitude of the teacher is also incompatible with the accepted student-centered teaching approach (Stern et al., 1983). Since the vocabulary is limited to the texts used, the vocabulary of the student cannot develop sufficiently.

Direct Method- In order to attract the attention of the students at the beginning of the lesson, an interesting dialogue, a short story or an anecdote are often told. Since the direct method asserts that learning a foreign language is the same as learning a mother tongue, oral instruction is done first (Brown, 1980). The method aims to improve the 4 skills of students: listening, speaking, writing, and reading. The target language is used as the language of instruction and translation into the mother tongue is not allowed during vocabulary teaching. In teaching words, visual tools, drama, and definitions made in the target language are used (Richards & Rodgers, 2014).

This method focuses on all four basic language skills and tries to improve all aspects of language skills. The direct method argues that learning a foreign language takes place in the same way as learning a mother tongue. However, it is not possible to revive the conditions of mother tongue learning in the classroom with adult students under the conditions in which a child learns the mother tongue (Nunan, 2000). The main disadvantage of this method is that it is teacher-centered. The success of the method depends on the teacher's abilities and language skills.

Natural Method- The language of instruction is the target language learned. The student is asked to directly replicate and imitate what he listens, even if he does not know the meaning of the word (Cameron, 2001). Students should be active while learning and speaking as much as he can, regardless of mistakes. The teacher immediately corrects the student's mistakes with feedback. Pronunciation features of the foreign language are tried to be provided by reading aloud exercises. In vocabulary teaching, priority is given to co-origin words.

Students who learn a foreign language by natural method, have been successful in speaking an informal language and pronouncing the words correctly, however they are inadequate in terms of reading and writing skills (Brown, 1980). This often leads to difficulties in applying the method and finding a native speaker of that language.

Audio-Lingual Method- Structures and new words in the target language are taught through dialogues. These dialogues are sometimes performed by the help of teachers and sometimes by the help of devices, first students repeat the dialogue in the chorus, then in groups, and finally

are asked to repeat on their own (Brooks, 1964). If necessary, explanations can be made in the mother tongue of the student. Grammar rules are taught through simple exercises and artificial sentences. The explanation of the rules is not included. The only guidance is given on how to do the exercises. Listening and speaking are the main focus of this method (Rodgers, 2001). Vocabulary teaching is limited to words used in everyday language and each word is taught in a context. Lingua-phone rooms are preferred instead of classrooms.

Students who learn a foreign language through the audio-lingual method learn the language mechanically because they listen and repeat it constantly. This makes it possible to speak the language only in patterns. Since new words and patterns are taught in a context, students have difficulty understanding and using them in different contexts (Muijs & Reynolds, 2001).

Communicative Method- Each of the language skills is taught in natural contexts for communicating. It is tried to increase the communication skills of the students through the hand-model, incidental teaching, and time delay activities (Littlewood et al., 1981). Since the teaching is student-centered, the course materials, teaching environment, and activities are produced specifically for the student. The teacher's role in the classroom is to guide students in communicating with each other by their language teaching objectives (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). The teacher who applies this method should be able to know both the target language and the mother tongue of the students competently. Students and teachers can use the mother tongue in a controlled way (Stern et al., 1983). The target language is used not only in communication activities but also in explaining activities and assigning tasks. These communication activities may include brainstorming, forced debate, presentation, interview or role-play, group and pair work and games. Keywords are given to facilitate understanding of the reading passages and the main concepts in the text are identified.

The fact that the rules of grammar are kept in the background by compressing the teaching into the structures stands out as a deficiency of this method. These rules should be taken into consideration more because it is necessary to use the language more smoothly. The concept of memorization, which is ignored by the communicative method, is truly a useful skill (Littlewood et al., 1981). During the pair and group work, the teacher cannot completely guide the communication between the students and find the opportunity to correct mistakes. This not only makes the learning inefficient but also harms the authority of the teachers.

Today, in the methodology of teaching foreign languages there has been a tendency towards a transition from a traditional approach to its variety - an interactive approach (Reynolds et al., 2003). The purpose of the interactive approach is to create conditions for comfortable learning

that promotes the active interaction of students. The backbone of interactive approaches is interactive activities and assignments that students perform. Interactive learning involves learning that is immersed in communication but not replaced by it (Muijs & Reynolds, 2001).

Methods used to teach English courses in Azerbaijani schools

The main purpose of this paper was to identify the methods used in English language teaching in public schools of Azerbaijan. As it is mentioned in the previous part, the research concentrates on 9th grades English language classes. The findings are based on observation and interview results. On average, the instructors were teachers with 15 years of experience. The Table 1 below show the general information of participants and observed schools.

Table 1. General information of participants in the study

Schools	Teachers	Gender	Age	Experience (years)	Class size
S 1	T 1	F	53	23	13
S 2	T 2	F	35	11	10
S 3	T 3	F	45	15	11
S 4	T 4	F	37	10	18
S 5	T 5	F	33	7	21
S 6	T 6	F	53	20	10
S 7	T 7	F	48	18	9
S 8	T 8	F	32	5	22
S 9	T 9	F	45	17	12
S 10	T 10	F	34	11	20
S 11	T 11	F	38	7	13
S 12	T 12	F	50	22	16
S 13	T 13	F	55	25	11
S 14	T 14	F	36	12	14
S 15	T 15	F	49	19	10
S 16	T 16	F	42	10	13
S 17	T 17	F	55	22	11
S 18	T 18	F	43	12	12
S 19	T 19	F	55	26	9
S 20	T 20	F	29	3	12
Average			43.35	14.95	13.35

The duration of lessons in all schools was 45 minutes. The lesson started with homework checking or warming up, teachers took the first 4-5 minutes to ask questions and discuss brief topics, such as weather, weekend activities, daily routines. Next, follow-up questions were posed to

the students. In the remaining time of the lesson, the teacher showed her performance till the end and the students did not have the opportunity to express themselves.

Lesson objectives were checked according to the "Model Your Expectations" strategy. Observation results show that only 4 teachers set the proper lesson objectives, while half of the teachers did not match the requirements of the checklist. It is also revealed that the rest of the English teachers meet only some components of the "Model Your Expectations" strategy. It is clear from the Table 2 that mostly, there was no proper lesson plan, and the students were not clearly informed about the content of the lesson at the beginning.

Table 2. Check results on the "Model your expectation" strategy

Teachers	Introduced the purpose of the lesson to the students	Ensure that the target is visible to the students throughout the entire class	Make sure that students understand the purpose	Refer to the goal during the lesson	Ask for a goal / resemble a goal in the lesson summary
T1					
T2	✓		✓		
T3					
T4	✓	✓			
T5					
T6	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
T7					
T8					
T9	✓				✓
T10	✓		✓		✓
T11	✓				
T12					
T13	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
T14					
T15					
T16					
T17	✓				
T18					
T19					
T20	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Most schoolteachers stated that school facilities and equipment are very important in foreign language teaching. As the words quoted by T3:

There should be technological infrastructure in the classroom to perform listening and monitoring activities in a foreign language.The absence of technological infrastructure creates problems with a focus on the target language.

However, observation results show that many classrooms were lacking in the physical facilities necessary for listening. The Pie Chart of Figure 2 provides data about the technological infrastructure of the observed schools.
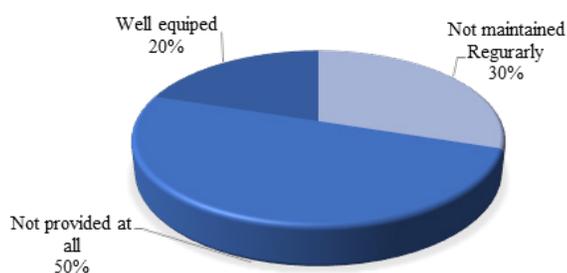
Figure 2. Technological infrastructure of schools

The chart shows that only 20 % of the schools were well equipped with sufficient technological infrastructure for English classes. The teachers working in those schools stated that their efficiency was high in their courses. In 30% of schools, technological resources were only used for a certain period of time, because the technological infrastructure was established but not maintained regularly. Half of the schools, especially those with low socio-economic backgrounds, were not provided with maintenance services at all. According to the responses of teachers, it is not possible to use the audio-lingual method effectively, since the teachers are the only model for the target language. Listening activities were carried out without using books or any supplementary materials. Mostly, students listened to the teacher and repeated accordingly. Only 25 % of the teachers used the Audio-Lingual Method. Moreover, teachers who were teaching in large-sized classes stated that they face some challenges. As the words quoted by T5:

… *Class size is another important requirement, and it is recommended that the number of students should not exceed 15 per English classes. Under the current circumstances, it is quite difficult to have below 20 students per class in Azerbaijan. Although, the order of the Minister of Education states that foreign languages should be taught in the form of subgroups, due to several reasons it is not possible to divide classes every time.*

It was noticed that 5 schools out of 20 did not follow this rule, as the classes were not divided. Since the number of children was high, teachers were not able to do pair and group works to improve required skills in language teaching. The number of students being able to apply the target language during a lesson was low. Therefore, as classrooms became crowded, the participation opportunity per student decreased in the classroom environment. Teachers complained about classes with 18-22 students, as it was very difficult to teach foreign languages without dividing students into groups. Thus, it was difficult for teachers with 18-22 students in classes to check their

homework in 45 minutes, give the new tasks, explain the lesson, do the activities, and ask questions.

Observation results show that there are various methods used by teachers. It is revealed that mainly, teachers apply Traditional methods in their teaching. The most preferred method used by teachers are indicated in Figure 3.
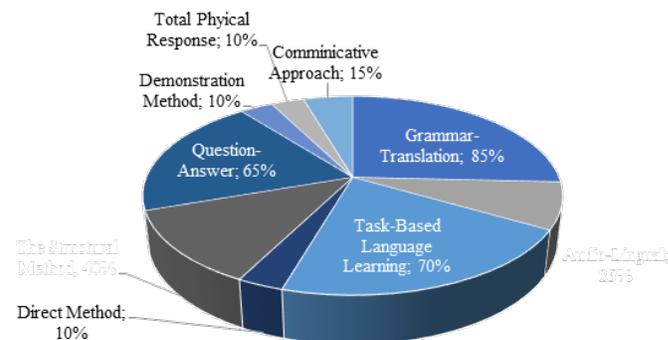

Figure 3. Teaching method used by instructors

During the observations, it was noticed that in 17 schools out of 20, priority was given to grammar teaching. For that purpose, the Grammar-Translation method was used by teachers. According to the annual lesson plan, grammar topics were taught progressively in a given sequence. In the teaching process, the basic rules, concepts, word, and sentence structures of language were emphasized. Language rules were memorized by students. It was going down to the details of complex and difficult grammar rules.

The language was treated as a set of rules, the texts read were associated with the content in the mother tongue. The rules of grammar were taught in the Azerbaijani language. Firstly, the rule was presented, explained, and then shown in the sentence. They were not connected with the text. The sentences given to the students were generally "templates" set up to teach grammar rules.

In almost all observed schools, in language teaching, priority was given to reading, and translation, there was little or almost no systematic emphasis on speaking, writing and listening. The accent was on the literary form of the texts and the meaning of the texts was not emphasized. The texts were processed by induction. First, a sample reading was done by the teacher. Then the same text was read by the students individually. The teacher paid attention to pronunciation, intonation, and stress.

Word selection was based solely on the reading texts used, there was no concentration on basic vocabulary. Mainly, words were taught in two languages, mother tongue, and English language, through word lists, dictionary tasks, and memorization. In the textbooks, a list of words

and their meanings in the Azerbaijani language were provided. Students were asked to find synonyms and antonyms, fill the gaps in the given sentences, translate the sentences, and form new sentences with the words used. The results show that only a few teachers use the Communicative Approach, Total-Physical Response, and Demonstration Method in their teaching.

According to the teachers, one of the reasons that they avoid interactive methods, was the examination system in our country. In this respect, it was stated that teachers did not always look forward to the communicative teaching method, even if they were well equipped to apply interactive methods. They continued to practice English language classes with the traditional method based on grammar teaching. Teachers noted that multiple-choice questions led them to explain the grammar rules and memorize vocabulary for the exam, that is, to teach the test technique in previous years. Even if the questions asked in exams were related to communication skills, perception of exams forced students to learn a foreign language by solving tests. They were obliged to assess students according to their theoretical knowledge rather than practical. Therefore, there was no need to use interactive methods in the teaching process.

CONCLUSIONS

Foreign language learning in Azerbaijan is becoming more and more important, due to the global development in the world, where English learning has a predominant place among foreign languages taught. However, the results of the study revealed that although teachers at the schools of Baku claimed that they use alternative methods in their classes, it was not supported by the observation results. The findings showed that teachers mostly used traditional and grammar-translation methods in English language teaching. Since a variety of methods are the basic elements of this framework, failure in its usage is the main problem in foreign language teaching in Azerbaijan.

As the English language teachers do not apply appropriate methods and techniques, students are lacking communicative skills, critical analysis, creative thinking, proper writing skills and it is challenging for them to do listening activities. The use of accurate planning and correct methods in the lesson, help to approach the target easily. However, the results for 20 Baku schools showed that teachers do not have proper planning strategies for their lessons, and they do not set clear lesson objectives for students.

In Azerbaijan, individuals should be encouraged to learn foreign languages with the help of interactive and technology-based language teaching methods since technological educational tools have facilitated the learning of foreign languages. The most important means of communication of technology has become an inseparable part of daily life. The interactive learning environment provides the teacher with a richer and flexible classroom and course environment and provides a rich variety of materials in the learning-teaching process. However, to carry out an effective foreign language learning, the major role of the teacher is to keep children motivated. A good teacher can enable the students to participate in the class effectively in order to bring their creative ideas and stimulate their interests, therefore, teachers must ensure a positive environment where students can easily express themselves.

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