

Glass ceiling as a limit for learning and self-development

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Abstract

This theoretical paper explores the 'glass ceiling' concept in education, defined as the plateau learners reach in their development, with language learning used as an example. It argues that traditional language teaching methods, with their reliance on textbooks, teacher-led instruction, and a focus on grammar and vocabulary, can contribute to this plateau by overlooking individual student progress and personal development. The study examines how the school and classroom environment, including pedagogical approaches like creating a safe learning space, providing feedback, and incorporating peer assessment, can influence this phenomenon. Using language learning as a primary example, the paper analyses the factors contributing to the glass ceiling effect and concludes with practical recommendations for teachers to address this challenge and foster student growth.

Keywords: Glass ceiling, learning, limits, self-development, language learning, teaching approach.

Skleněný strop jako limit pro učení a seberozvoj

Abstrakt

Tento článek je teoretickou studií, která se zabývá konceptem tzv. glass ceiling – skleněný strop ve vzdělávání, který je definován jako limitující hranice, na kterou se žáci

dostanou ve svém vzdělávání a rozvoji, kdy učení jazyků bylo použito jako příklad. Autoři tvrdí, že tradiční metody výuky cizích jazyků, které se spoléhají na učebnice, výuku zaměřenou na osobnost učitele a zaměřující se na gramatiku a slovní zásobu, mohou přispívat k těmto limitům tím, že přehlíží individuální pokrok a osobní rozvoj studenta. Studie zkoumá, jak může tento jev ovlivnit prostředí školy a třídy, včetně pedagogických přístupů, jako je vytváření bezpečného prostoru pro učení, poskytování zpětné vazby a zapojení vzájemného hodnocení. Na příkladu jazykového vzdělávání studie analyzuje faktory, které přispívají k efektu konceptu limitu – glass ceiling, a v závěru předkládá praktická doporučení pro učitele, jak tento problém řešit a podpořit růst studentů.

Klíčová slova: skleněný strop, učení, limity, seberozvoj, výuka jazyků, přístup k výuce.

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Introduction: Reaching the Glass Ceiling in Learning

A constant challenge for pupils at all levels of school has always been to achieve the required level of achievement and the optimum level of key competences. The glass ceiling concept refers to the point at which a learner reaches a plateau in their learning journey, mostly regardless of the formal education processes. As an example, let us look at language teaching which is arguably the kind of learning influenced by the glass ceiling concept the most. Language learners face the challenge of achieving certain language proficiency according to the stage of their learning/grade in school. Such a challenge creates a need for a critical reassessment of school environment, school climate, classroom environment and traditional teaching methods, in case of language learning traditional language teaching methods. Traditional approaches to language learning may cause that the plateau point in students' learning journey is 'overlooked' due to traditional, strict reliance on textbooks and teacher-led instruction, where the emphasis is often a task-orientated delivery of the preset generic curriculum. Such traditional language teaching/learning approach can be rooted in outdated pedagogical paradigms, with a focus on grammar and vocabulary, which causes the teacher to lose sight of individual language development skills of his students, as well as their progress in understanding themselves, and their personal development that has been the cornerstone of education.

Apart from the traditional teaching methods and their mostly negative effects towards the concept of the glass ceiling in language learning, it is also necessary to concentrate on other relevant concepts. This paper is a theoretical study that aims to describe the concept of glass ceiling as a plateau in learning, using language learning

as an example. Pedagogical concepts that occur in the classroom/lesson and may have a positive effect on the student reaching the plateau, such as creating safe environment or providing feedback and utilizing peer assessment in the teaching, are discussed in their respective chapters. This theoretical study provides a conclusion with recommendations for teachers that can be utilized in their teaching.

1 Traditional Language Teaching Methods and Learning Plateau

While once widely adopted, traditional language teaching methods are increasingly being questioned for their effectiveness in fostering true language proficiency. One significant issue is the perpetuation of ‘failed’ methodologies, such as the Grammar-Translation Method, this method, heavily reliant on grammar rules and translation, often leads to students who can memorize vocabulary and grammar rules but lack the ability to communicate effectively in the target language. This phenomenon is known as ‘false beginners’ (Stern, 1983). False beginners should not be mistaken for true beginners, who are and have always been in schools, in the classrooms. It has been proven that everyone learns second languages more or less the same way. Also, learners who struggle often begin on the wrong foot by focusing on the sounds of the language rather than meaning. This phonetic approach makes it difficult to progress naturally through the stages of language learning, which is very common in school as it is focused on performance. Even when learners share similar backgrounds, like age and learning environment, this flawed decoding and encoding process creates a growing divide between those who struggle and those who succeed as their language studies continue (Nakamura, 1997, p. 7). In traditional language teaching, by prioritizing grammar rules and translation exercises, this approach neglects the development of communicative competence. Learners may become proficient in analysing language structures but struggle to apply them in real-world contexts. As Krashen (1982) argues, language acquisition is a subconscious process that occurs through meaningful communication, not explicit instruction.

Similarly, Task-Based Learning, while emphasizing authentic language use, can sometimes lead to a lack of language control. By focusing on completing tasks, learners may prioritize task completion over accurate language production, e.g. completing the task in the book, often without accurate understanding or additional learning, which can result in a reliance on formulaic expressions and a limited range of linguistic resources. As Skehan (1998) points out, while task-based learning can be beneficial, it is essential to balance task-based activities with explicit language instruction.

Furthermore, the overreliance on Present-Practice-Produce sequences, a common method in many language classrooms, while popular, can be ineffective in promoting

long-term retention and meaningful language acquisition. This is because it often fails to provide sufficient opportunities for learners to integrate new knowledge with existing knowledge (Krashen, 1982). It can also be problematic, stifling creativity and critical thinking. By rigidly structuring the learning process, this method may not adequately prepare students for real-world language use. As Skehan (1998) points out, a more flexible and dynamic approach, which incorporates a variety of activities and tasks, can enhance language learning outcomes. This often involves presenting new language items, practicing them through controlled exercises, and then producing them in freer activities. However, such a linear progression may not be the most effective way to learn a language. As Dörnyei (2009) suggests, a more cyclical approach, incorporating review and recycling of language items, can lead to better retention and fluency.

Lexical approaches emphasize vocabulary acquisition but often prioritize learning words in isolation or as fixed phrases, rather than teaching how to use them flexibly in different contexts. This can limit learners' ability to create original and meaningful language (Lewis, 1993). By presenting vocabulary as fixed expressions, these approaches may hinder learners from developing the flexibility and adaptability needed for authentic communication. Nation (2001) emphasizes the importance of teaching both lexical chunks and individual words to allow learners to combine them in novel ways.

Finally, the exclusive focus on explicit instruction can neglect the importance of implicit learning. While explicit knowledge of grammar rules can be beneficial, it is equally important to develop implicit knowledge through exposure to authentic language input. As Nation (2001) emphasizes, a balanced approach that combines both explicit and implicit learning can lead to more effective language acquisition.

2 Learner-centred Approach to Teaching

Another concern is the lack of emphasis on learner autonomy and reflection. Traditional methods tend to position the teacher as the sole authority, limiting opportunities for students to take ownership of their learning. A more learner-centred approach encouraging self-directed learning and metacognitive strategies can lead to greater language proficiency (Dörnyei, 2009). A teacher who is not concerned with themselves but rather with the students and their learning needs to change their attitude toward their work and their students. Learners need to learn to be responsible in their learning journey and their teacher creates such an environment in which they are the centre of attention yet not too constraining or stressing. Students have to taste their failures and wins that emerge out of their preparation for the lessons, studying for the exam or the lack therein. A learner-centred teacher tries to fully utilize self-evaluation and peer evaluation in their teaching so their learners learn the values of their own opinion coming

from the ability to think critically, which is a necessary 21st century skill (Weymer, 2013, p. 11; Wagner, 2008 in Jůvová, 2023, p. 10).

2.1 Creating a Safe Working Environment for Language Students

The creation of a safe working environment is essential for language students to thrive and develop their skills. The physical classroom or learning space should be welcoming and conducive to learning. This includes an arrangement that facilitates interaction and collaboration. Students should feel comfortable expressing their opinions, asking questions, and making mistakes without fear of judgment or ridicule. This can be achieved through creating a culture of respect, empathy, and positive reinforcement. This environment should also foster research, reflection, exploration, and the development of soft skills such as trust, self-confidence, subject knowledge, and objectivity. Additionally, involving students in decision-making processes and the delivery of their own learning can further enhance their experience (Edmondson, 2018; Dweck, 2006). A similar view is presented by researchers such as Bahous et al. (2011) and Dörnyei (2007), who 'claim that a positive and motivating classroom climate is considered a factor contributing to the attainment of a successful language learning outcome' (Yen, Hien, & Qyuen, 2019, p. 56). Emphasis on the learning environment is also seen in Krashen's theory of acquisition, as 'he posited that SLA occurs when the learner comprehends the language input in a low-anxiety, high-motivation situation, and proposed that the teacher's role is to create such a learning environment' (Moeller & Catalano, 2015, p. 329).

2.2 Student Involvement in Lesson Planning: A Key to Engaged Learning

Incorporating students into the development and implementation of lesson plans has emerged as a powerful strategy not only to enhance engagement and learning outcomes but also to impact the personal and social development of the student. By actively involving students in the planning process, educators can foster a sense of ownership and autonomy, ultimately leading to more meaningful and effective learning experiences (Topping, 1998; Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2018).

Research has shown that when students participate in lesson planning, they demonstrate increased motivation, improved academic performance, and a deeper understanding of the subject matter (Hattie, 2009). Similarly, Jagersma (2010) show mutual connection between student participation in curriculum and their increased engagement which can further positively influence students' desirable learning outcomes. Moreover, by providing students with a voice in shaping their learning experiences,

educators create a more inclusive and student-centred classroom environment (Brookfield & Preskill, 1999; Jaques, 2000).

Several strategies can be employed to involve students in lesson planning. One approach is to conduct student surveys or interviews to gather insights into their interests, learning styles, and preferred activities. This information can be used to tailor lessons to meet the diverse needs and preferences of the students (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 2014). Additionally, incorporating student-led discussions and group work can encourage collaborative planning and decision-making (Brookfield & Preskill, 1999; Jaques, 2000).

Another effective strategy is to allow students to co-create learning materials, such as presentations, videos, or interactive activities. This empowers students to take ownership of their learning and develop valuable skills in creativity, critical thinking, and communication (Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2018; Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2019).

3 The Power of Feedback and Peer Assessment in Learning

Feedback and peer assessment are essential and powerful components of the learning process, playing a crucial role in enhancing student confidence, self-awareness, and enthusiasm. Feedback provides learners with valuable insights into their work, allowing them to identify strengths, weaknesses, and areas for improvement, boosting their motivation and confidence in their abilities. 'The notion of 'feed forward' is also associated with the effectiveness of feedback, as a means of improving performance in the future. It is therefore important to ensure that feedback meets its intended purpose, of delivering improvement to student learning and performance' (Williams, 2024). Peer assessment, on the other hand, encourages students to take on the role of both assessor and learner, promoting critical thinking, self-reflection, and collaboration. Several studies have demonstrated the positive impact of feedback and peer assessment on student learning outcomes. For example, Hattie (2009) found that feedback is one of the most powerful influences on student achievement. Similarly, Topping (1998) highlighted the benefits of peer assessment, including improved student motivation, engagement, and understanding of learning goals. Feedback is most effective when it is timely, specific, and actionable. It should focus on the student's work, not their personal qualities, and provide clear guidance on how to improve. Peer assessment can be implemented in various ways, such as peer review, peer marking, and peer tutoring. It is crucial to provide students with clear criteria and training on how to give and receive feedback effectively (Black et al., 2003; Topping, 2017).

3.1 Cultural and Linguistic Diversity in Feedback and Peer Assessment

In today's increasingly globalized classrooms, it is essential to acknowledge and address the diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds of students. This diversity presents both opportunities and challenges for effective feedback and peer assessment. Cultural differences can significantly influence how students perceive and interpret feedback. For example, some cultures may prioritize direct and explicit feedback, while others may prefer more indirect and implicit approaches (Carless & Winstone, 2020). Failing to consider these cultural nuances can lead to misunderstandings and hinder student learning. Furthermore, language barriers can impact students' ability to provide and receive feedback effectively. Students with limited language proficiency may struggle to express their thoughts clearly or understand the feedback they receive. This can be particularly challenging in peer assessment activities, where students need to critically evaluate and provide constructive feedback on their peers' work (Yu & Lee, 2016).

3.2 Error Correction: A Supportive Approach

Error correction is a crucial aspect of language learning. However, it is essential to approach it with a supportive and constructive mindset. By focusing on the positive aspects of a student's work and providing specific feedback on areas for improvement, teachers can create a positive learning environment that fosters language development. It is important to note and explain students that they should not take errors and their correction as a negative aspect of their learning process but helpful and desirable tool for achieving their goals (Wahyana, 2020).

The British Council's Teaching English offers a wealth of practical resources and advice for language teachers, including articles on error correction strategies and techniques (British Council, n.d.). Similarly, TESOL International Association provides resources, research, and networking opportunities for English language teachers, with articles and webinars on various aspects of language teaching, including error correction (TESOL International Association, n.d.).

3.3 The Role of Responsibility

Taking responsibility for one's learning is essential for achieving language proficiency. When students are actively involved in the learning process, they are more likely to be motivated and engaged. As Krashen (1982) argues, motivation is a crucial factor in language acquisition. By setting realistic goals, seeking out opportunities for language practice, and seeking support from teachers and peers, learners can take control of their language development (Avazmatova, 2022). Creativity and experimentation are

essential components of language learning. By encouraging students to think critically, problem-solve, and take risks, we can help them develop the confidence to use the language in authentic contexts. It is relevant to point out that learning language in authentic context can take place far away behind the class door and thus is not limited to the class environment (Duda, Valešová, 2021, pp. 17-18). 'As the results of qualitative analysis, it was seen that practicing what is learnt in the classroom and having a connection with the foreign language out of the classroom (listening to English songs, watching English movies) are very important to gain a high proficiency in language' (Güneş, 2011, p. 5).

4 Learning Process in Digital Age

The advent of the digital age has irrevocably transformed the landscape of language learning, challenging traditional pedagogical methods and empowering learners in unprecedented ways (Politico, 2008, Práger, L., & Řeřicha, V. 2019). As technology continues to evolve, the role of the traditional classroom will likely diminish further, giving way to innovative and personalized learning experiences that our teachers and educators must embrace. Not only has the world rapidly changed, but so do current students who are incomparably different from those in the past. Prensky (2001) introduced the term 'digital natives' referring to the generation who has grown up with technologies. On the other hand, he uses the term 'digital immigrants' for those 'who were not born into the digital world but have, at some later point in our lives, become fascinated by and adopted many or most aspects of the new technology' (Prensky, 2001, p. 1). In fact, most of the teachers are still digital immigrants who need to adapt to the world of digital natives and use this powerful tool of technology for effective learning process and possibly pass some of the responsibility to the students as autonomous learners.

The internet has and will continue to revolutionize language learning by offering a multitude of opportunities for learners to engage with authentic language, practice their skills, and connect with a global community. Online resources and digital tools have made language learning accessible to anyone, anywhere, at any time. Learners can now access authentic materials, engage in virtual language exchanges, and connect with native speakers from around the world, empowering learners to become active participants in their own learning journey. They can create their own content, collaborate with others, and share their knowledge and experiences with a global audience. Even the digital space itself is changing as new forms of communication and interaction are evolving. 'The space which was previously devoted to electronic communication through emails and chats has moved to a new dimension of social media sites, such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and sites that store and stream films and TV series' (Duda, Chmelařová, 2018, p. 66). The digital age offers unprecedented opportunities

for language learning, and by leveraging technology and innovative teaching methods, we can prepare our students for success in the 21st century (Parrish, 2020).

Conclusion: Breaking Through the Glass Ceiling in Learning

This article has explored how students can achieve a qualitative leap in their learning journey with language learning being used as an example by embracing innovative approaches that go beyond conventional classroom settings. Highlighting the limitations of traditional (language) teaching, it relies on rote memorization, grammar drills, and limited opportunities for real-world language use, over-reliance on completing the tasks in the textbook, methods that are tedious and ineffective, leaving learners feeling frustrated and disengaged. While they may provide a foundation in language structure, they fail to address the dynamic and communicative aspects of language learning. Students today are no longer passive recipients of knowledge but active creators and collaborators in a global digital community. Teachers need to embrace a learner-centred approach that prioritizes:

- Safe Learning Environments: fostering trust, self-confidence, and a culture of positive reinforcement,
- Student Involvement: empowering students to participate in lesson planning and decision-making,
- Effective Feedback and Peer Assessment: providing constructive criticism and encouraging self-reflection,
- Supportive Error Correction: focusing on progress and positive aspects of student work,
- The Role of Responsibility: encouraging students to be responsible and autonomous in their learning,

However, the traditional classroom is no longer the sole domain of (language) learning. The digital age offers a multitude of resources and opportunities, including:

- online materials: authentic learning materials accessible anytime, anywhere,
- virtual language exchanges: connecting with native speakers from around the world,
- personalized learning experiences: tailored to individual needs and learning styles.

By moving beyond traditional methods and embracing the digital age, both students and teachers can achieve a qualitative leap in language learning. This shift empowers learners to become active participants in their own learning journey, breaking through the glass ceiling and achieving true language proficiency in a globalized world. The future of language learning is bright. By leveraging technology and innovative teaching methods, we can equip students with the skills they need to succeed in the 21st

century. While traditional (language) teaching methods have their place, they are not sufficient to equip learners with the skills needed to break through the glass ceiling of language proficiency. To truly empower learners, it is imperative to adopt innovative teaching methodologies that prioritize learner autonomy, critical thinking, and authentic language use. By embracing a more communicative and learner-centred approach that prioritizes meaningful language use, critical thinking, and cultural understanding and incorporating authentic materials, language teachers can create safe, dynamic and engaging learning environments empowering students to reach their full potential and become proficient language users for success in the globalized world.

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