Abstract
Foreign language teaching and learning has changed dramatically in the last two decades and instructional pedagogy must be adapted accordingly. In this writing, we analyze meaningful learning and its application in the ESL/EFL classroom.

Introduction
According to the British council, it is estimated that over 1 billion people world-wide are currently speakers of the English language. English is the native language for about 375 million people and is spoken as a second language by another 375 million. Approximately 750 million people speak English as a foreign language and English is the dominant international language used in business, communications, science and diplomacy.

Vast change has taken place in teaching English as a Second or Foreign language (ESL/EFL) since the 80’s. Teaching methods, techniques and materials have been developed to meet the demands of ESL/EFL students.

The purpose of this writing is to present:

- The fundamental principles of meaningful learning followed by a contrast against rote learning
- The three student approaches to learning and studying
- Recommendations for activities that will aid our university level teachers and students at the UVM in creating classroom conditions which promote meaningful learning by constructing understanding.

Fundamental Principles of Meaningful Learning
The following summary is presented to reflect upon our understanding of meaningful learning and the concurrence of the teaching community that effective learning takes place when it is:

- **Active:** We interact with the environment, manipulate the objects within it and observe the effects of our manipulations.

- **Constructive and reflective:** Activity is essential but insufficient for meaningful learning. We must reflect on the activity and our observations, and interpret them in order to have a meaningful learning experience.

- **Intentional:** Human behavior is naturally goal-directed. When students actively try to achieve a learning goal that they have articulated, they think and learn more. In order for students to experience meaningful learning, they must also be able to monitor their own progress.

- **Authentic:** Thoughts and ideas rely on the contexts in which they occur in order to have meaning. Presenting facts that are stripped from their contextual clues divorces knowledge from reality. Learning is meaningful, better understood and more likely to transfer to new situations when it occurs by engaging with real-life, complex problems.

- **Cooperative:** We live, work and learn in communities, naturally seeking ideas and assistance from each other, and negotiating about problems and how to solve them. It is in this context that we learn there are numerous ways to view the world and a variety of solutions to most problems. Meaningful learning; therefore, requires conversations and group experiences.

According to Jonassen et. al. (1999)

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**Rote versus Meaningful Learning**

Meaningful learning requires that students and teachers take a step further from passive interaction and the evaluation process requires more from the student than that of retrieving factual information. It may be useful to proceed by contrasting meaningful learning against rote learning.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meaningful Learning</th>
<th>Rote Learning</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-arbitrary, non-verbatim</td>
<td>Arbitrary, verbatim</td>
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<tr>
<td>Deliberate effort to link new knowledge with higher order concepts in cognitive structure</td>
<td>No effort to integrate new knowledge with existing concepts in cognitive structure</td>
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Deep, Surface and Strategic Approaches to Learning

An important issue that has resulted from educational research is the position presented by John Biggs which sustains that students can take different approaches to learning. Biggs states that these approaches are not stable traits in individuals, although some students will tend towards taking a deep approach while others will tend towards taking a surface approach. It is suggested; however, that effective teaching strategies can motivate students to strive for a deep approach; on the other hand, inefficient instruction can pressure students to take a surface approach. Biggs defines good teaching as the encouragement of a deep approach to learning.

(Biggs, 1999)

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Approach</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
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| **Deep** | Actively seek to understand the material / the subject  
Interact vigorously with the content  
Make use of evidence, inquiry and evaluation  
Take a broad view and relate ideas to one another  
Are motivated by interest  
Relate new ideas to previous knowledge  
Relate concepts to everyday experience  
Tend to read and; study beyond the course requirements |
| **Surface** | Try to learn in order to repeat what they have learned  
Memorize information needed for assessments  
Make use of rote learning  
Take a narrow view and concentrate on detail  
Fail to distinguish principles from examples  
Tend to stick closely to the course requirements  
Are motivated by fear of failure |
Strategic
Organize their time and distribute their effort to greatest effect
Ensure that the conditions and materials for studying are appropriate
Use previous exam papers to predict questions
Are alert to cues about marking schemes

Meaningful Learning and a Deep Approach

The Course Syllabus

The syllabus used in the English Department of the UVM has been designed to facilitate student development and improvement in the four main communicative skills:

Speaking skill: Incorporates contemporary vocabulary in context, personalized speaking tasks to develop fluency, anecdotes based on memories and stories.

Reading skill: Has global topics and graded realistic reading taken from authentic modern sources such as magazines, novels, newspapers and web sites.

Listening skill: Includes dialogues, monologues and songs by original artists with a variety of accents, while it also provides work on authentic pronunciation, stress and intonation.

Writing skill: Offers students opportunities to practice several formats in a personalized manner; such as, narratives, descriptions, letters, and reports.

The Course textbook

The main objective of American Inside Out (Gomm, et.al. 2004) is to promote the use of strategies that encourage learning by personal engagement, both emotional and intellectual. Each unit is built around three topics both interesting and relevant to young adult students. The tasks are designed to set up opportunities for genuine communicative exchanges and meaningful learning.

To encourage this, the authors have included a "Close Up" section which follows a three stage approach: language analysis, practice and personalization.

1. Language analysis promotes "noticing" of language grammar characteristics and usage (This is done by means of listening and reading activities so that students articulate and organize what they know and incorporate new information.) The authors recommend pair and group work to exchange and encourage team work and a friendlier learning scenario, they also provide questions and discussion points to test understanding of grammar.
2. **Practice** allows students to manipulate or select structures, testing their theories. In the text, authors have chosen realistic and meaningful stories related to students' own life prompting students to make connections to prior knowledge and experience.

3. **Personalization** prepares students to talk applying actual examples of certain grammar structure given to their own lives, opinions, and feelings.

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**Additional Meaningful Learning Strategies**

The following suggestions for further meaningful learning activities are not presented in a particular order and each are provided with a brief summary:

- **Project Presentations**

  Through project work, students perform research of real-world problems and submit their findings through oral and written presentations and share what they have learned.

- **Multidisciplinary Interactions**

  In cooperative efforts, students coordinate and arrange information to identify the varied relationships across disciplines.

- **Web Quests**

  Web quests grant worthy opportunities for students to learn. Through web quests students can research and accomplish tasks to learn through authentic information from around the world.

- **Mind Mapping**

  Mind mapping helps students organize their previous knowledge and create a link to new knowledge.

- **Role Playing and Games**

  Games and role-playing are creative and resourceful activities which require student involvement and participation in the language classroom.

- **Case Studies**

  Students examine problems and ideas to acquire experience in decision making and problem solving.

- **Field Work**
Practice activities in the field provide students with meaningful authentic experiences which bring them to an augmentation of their understanding of ideas and concepts which can be brought into the language classroom for analysis and debate.

Conclusion

The basic principles of meaningful learning, the three student approaches to learning and studying and finally the proposal of additional meaningful learning strategies have been presented. As you experiment within your language classroom, you will constantly be on the look-out for new ideas. Another particularly good source for ideas is the web. You will be surprised at the number of activities that can be adapted for use and implementation. The only limitation is your imagination.

References

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Ha impartido inglés como segunda lengua extranjera durante los últimos 18 años. Obtuvo la Licenciatura en Docencia del Inglés como Lengua Extranjera por la Universidad de Guadalajara y un Certificate for Overseas Teachers of English (COTE) por la Universidad de Cambridge (certificación metodológica avanzada en enseñanza para profesores de inglés). Ha enseñado cursos de inglés y de negocios en una variedad de contextos, incluyendo la universidad, y en programas especializados de la lengua dentro del campo corporativo. También ha ocupado cargos administrativos en Montgomery Ward y Potter & Falk. Desde el año 2004 coordina el Departamento de Lenguas Extranjeras en la UVM-Querétaro.