

APPLYING REBT TO TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

Jelena Zivlak¹, Jelisaveta Šafranjić², Marina Katić³

^{1,2,3}University of Novi Sad, Faculty of Technical Sciences, Novi Sad, Serbia

¹zivlakjelena@uns.ac.rs, ²savetas@uns.ac.rs, ³mare@uns.ac.rs

Abstract: REBT is a type of therapy created by Albert Ellis in 1955 (DiGiuseppe, Doyle, Dryden & Backx, 2014). It is particularly suitable for educational context since it is active and didactic in its nature, requiring from its practitioners to teach people how to identify and change their thoughts. Such therapeutic style and psycho-educational approach is quite similar to good lecturing, which involves asking students for feedback and results in change of behaviour and applying the lessons learned to future problem solving. Consequently, REBT has been applied in education for a long time and its educational derivative is called rational-emotive behaviour education (REBE). So far, different studies have examined the role of REBT in the educational context, usually by exploring the relationship between irrational beliefs and language learning. The evidence suggests that dealing with irrational thoughts of students will promote language learning and help overcome common hurdles, such as procrastination, fear of making mistakes and unwillingness to communicate. This paper examines basic REBT concepts and ways of implementing it to English language teaching. Vernon & Bernard (2019) propose four ways of using REBE in classrooms: by delivering socially structured emotional education lessons, by integrating it into the curriculum, by making use of the teachable moment and by using the total educational environment integration (p. 294). The activities considered in this paper propose curriculum integration and teachable moment, since they prove more suitable and accomplishable considering curriculum requirements, time constraints and interventions that are not implemented on the organizational level. Homework assignment topics are one of the most straightforward ways for integrating REBE into EFL teaching by covering topics that require students to practice disputation and develop unconditional self-acceptance. Additionally, online teaching is also considered and recommendations are given for overcoming frustration intolerance and modeling unconditional self-acceptance and unconditional other-acceptance.

Key Words: REBT, REBE, English language, teaching, college students, online teaching

1. RATIONAL EMOTIVE BEHAVIOUR THERAPY (REBT) AND ITS PRINCIPLES RELEVANT FOR EDUCATION

REBT is a type of therapy created by Albert Ellis in 1955 (DiGiuseppe, Doyle, Dryden & Backx, 2014). The philosophy of REBT is greatly influenced by stoicism. Its main tenet is expressed in the following saying of Epictetus: *Men are not disturbed by things, but by the view which they take of them* (DiGiuseppe, Doyle, Dryden & Backx, 2014: 4). In other words, the foundation of REBT is that people's interpretations of events are the main source of disturbance, and not the events per se, which is supported by the fact that people react differently to a same event. For instance, in the same situation of delivering a poor presentation in a foreign language class, one student could feel regret, thinking that he/she could have prepared better, and another one may feel shame, thinking that he/she is utterly incompetent. Different emotions also have a different outcome on students' future learning – the former student is more likely to put in more effort and deliver a better presentation on next occasion, while the latter one is more likely to shy away from giving presentations in a foreign language in the future. One of the most important concepts is the idea that people feel disturbed because they absolute demands about themselves, other people or the world (DiGiuseppe, Doyle, Dryden & Backx, 2014). Instead of differentiating between their wishes and reality, people start regarding their preferences as musts, wrongly thinking that they absolutely must write essays without any mistakes, or that the teacher must always give highly useful feedback.

One of the reasons why REBT is particularly suitable in the educational context are some of its features that also characterise teaching. One of those characteristics is its psychoeducational and active approach (DiGiuseppe, Doyle, Dryden & Backx, 2014), reflected in the fact that the therapists actually teach the client the main principles and concepts of the model, with the idea of equipping him or her with the knowledge that will help them deal with problems on their own in the future. Therefore, teaching clients basic premises of REBT is an integral part of therapists' work. One of the styles of cognitive disputing is called didactic style and it refers to using lectures or analogies to convey a point to a client (DiGiuseppe, Doyle, Dryden & Backx, 2014: 170). After a client is presented with such ideas, Socratic questions follow to check whether he or she has understood them and if that is not the case, the therapist may provide further explanations (DiGiuseppe, Doyle, Dryden & Backx, 2014: 170). This process is similar to lecturing a student, in which a teacher explains main concepts of the lessons and asks questions to check their comprehension and then adds further information and clarifications if necessary. Didactic lectures are used

particularly often in initial sessions, which is again similar to the language learning setting in which basic concepts are explained in the beginning and then applied by the students (DiGiuseppe, Doyle, Dryden & Backx, 2014: 263). Another relevant characteristic of REBT is that many people have been helped and have learned its principles by reading books or attending a lecture, without ever coming to therapy (DiGiuseppe, Doyle, Dryden & Backx, 2014: 263). Such self-directed learning has its limitations that also apply to learning a foreign language independently – one can improve receptive skills, such as listening and reading, but it is more difficult to improve productive skills, such as speaking and writing. Another reason why REBT is suitable for being applied in education is that it advocates change based on a cognitive-learning model, meaning that it is necessary for clients to practice thinking differently to achieve lasting effects (DiGiuseppe, Doyle, Dryden & Backx, 2014: 285). More specifically, one of its tenets is that clients need to rehearse changing an dysfunctional belief or adopting a new effective one and it relies on the fact that homework improves therapeutic outcomes (DiGiuseppe, Doyle, Dryden & Backx, 2014: 285). Guidelines for assigning clients homework could also be applied to the teaching context: homework should be negotiated, it should be consistent i.e. related to what was previously done, it should be specific and a systemic follow-through is recommended (DiGiuseppe, Doyle, Dryden & Backx, 2014: 286). Therefore, REBT lends itself to learning settings since it is a kind of therapy that acknowledges that learning is essential for a change to occur.

Basic REBT principles that are very relevant for teaching are that »cognition is the most important proximal determinant of human emotion« or that »we feel what we think« (DiGiuseppe, Doyle, Dryden & Backx, 2014: 21) and that »irrational thinking is a major determinant of emotional distress« (DiGiuseppe, Doyle, Dryden & Backx, 2014: 22). This is relevant for teaching due to the fact that teaching is laden with emotions and that it can be described as an emotional practice that involves emotional understanding, acquiring and disseminating knowledge (Hargreaves, 2011). Ellis (1994), as cited in DiGiuseppe, Doyle, Dryden & Backx, 2014, makes a distinction between disturbed or healthy and nondisturbed or unhealthy emotions, explaining that the former are linked to irrational beliefs and the latter to rational beliefs. An irrational belief is »absolute, not logical, not consistent with reality, does not help to achieve one's goal and leads to unhealthy/dysfunctional emotions« (DiGiuseppe, Doyle, Dryden & Backx, 2014: 33). The goal of REBT is not only to help people deal with unhelpful views or irrational beliefs, but to replace them with more helpful, rational beliefs and a new philosophy. This also bears relevance to the educational context since a student who feels anxious (unhealthy emotion) about speaking in English in a foreign language class is less likely to excel than if he or she merely feels concerned about it. Finding a way to replace anxiety with concern would contribute to improving learning outcomes in this context.

There are four types of irrational beliefs that can all be applied to foreign language learning and teaching: demandingness, awfulizing, frustration intolerance and global evaluations. Demandingness can be defined as »an unrealistic and absolute expectation of events or individuals being the way a person desires them to be« (DiGiuseppe, Doyle, Dryden & Backx, 2014: 34). Demands are not in accordance with reality and can be recognized by using modal verbs, such as »must, ought, should, have to, need« (DiGiuseppe, Doyle, Dryden & Backx, 2014: 43). Some examples of them in the context of English language learning could be: *I absolutely need to have perfect pronunciation of all English words*, *My teacher must be patient*, *The curriculum must be interesting*. Another type of an irrational belief is awfulizing, which can be described as »an exaggeration of the negative consequences of a situation to an extreme degree, so that an unfortunate occurrence becomes *terrible*« (DiGiuseppe, Doyle, Dryden & Backx, 2014: 43). For example, a student may overly negatively evaluate outcomes of a situation, which is illustrated by the following beliefs: *It's awful to see that my peers have much better prior knowledge than I do or If a teacher keeps correcting my grammar mistakes it's really awful*. Another form of an irrational belief is frustration intolerance, which is reflected in »demands for ease and comfort« (DiGiuseppe, Doyle, Dryden & Backx, 2014: 43). In other words, people demand that circumstances should be more beneficial for them or easier for them to bear and if that is not the case, they describe it as too hard or unbearable. For instance, a student may say that *it's unbearable to give a presentation with a presentation who doesn't speak English as well as he or she does* or that *having to learn six tenses during one semester is just too difficult*. Finally, global evaluations of human worth refer to rating people's worth and thinking that »some people are worthless or less valuable than others« (DiGiuseppe, Doyle, Dryden & Backx, 2014: 43). Global evaluations of one's worth as a foreign language learner or a learner in general can have particularly detrimental effects on mastering a foreign language. Students with history of lower achievements during their previous education often complain by saying that they have *an innate foreign language anti-talent*, which can become an excuse for insufficient effort. In REBT people are taught to »evaluate their deeds and not themselves« and »self-evaluations are replaced with what Ellis called Unconditional-Self Acceptance« (DiGiuseppe, Doyle, Dryden & Backx, 2014: 51). More specifically, a student could be encouraged to focus on the amount of work and effort that produced low results, instead of his worth as a learner or as a language learner. Such approach would then motivate them to learn more or to use different methods next time, instead of continuing to consistently achieve poor results by evaluating oneself as a foreign language dummy.

REBT maintains that the most effective way to deal with distress is to change irrational thinking, which is conceptualised in the A-B-C model, in which A refers to activating event, B stands for beliefs which can be rational and irrational and C stands for consequences of those beliefs (DiGiuseppe, Doyle, Dryden & Backx, 2014). In case of English language learning, an example of an A could be mispronouncing a word in class. The situation itself does not cause unhealthy emotions by itself – a student could decide to pronounce the word several more times and then

be happy that he or she has mastered it. However, a student could also feel the unhealthy emotion of shame at C because he or she believes that such mistake is terrible or that the peers and the teacher have now realized that he or she is incapable of speaking English well. Interestingly, a student may also feel anger at C if he or she thinks that it is not right for the teacher to correct him/her in front of everyone. In these cases REBT advises disputing irrational beliefs and adopting effective rational beliefs. Logical disputation refers to questioning logical consistency of beliefs by checking whether it logically follows from reasoning, for instance: *Does it really logically follow that mispronouncing one word proves that I am incapable of speaking English well?* Empirical disputation questions focus on questioning whether someone's beliefs are consistent with reality (DiGiuseppe, Doyle, Dryden & Backx, 2014), for example: *Where is the evidence that my teacher mustn't correct me as much as he/she finds fit?* Pragmatic disputation questions focus on evaluating »hedonic, pragmatic, or heuristic value of their beliefs« (DiGiuseppe, Doyle, Dryden & Backx, 2014: 167), for instance a student could reflect on how useful his/her irrational belief is and what good has holding on to the belief that he/she mustn't make mistakes in class brought him/her.

2. REBT IN EDUCATION AND TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

REBT has been applied in education for a long time and its educational derivative is called rational-emotive behaviour education (REBE). REBE's main tenet is that »a systematic, structured curriculum based on REBT principles can empower young people to take charge of their life to the degree this is possible, learning how to think, feel and behave in self-enhancing rather than in self-defeating ways« (Vernon & Bernard, 2019). The goals of REBT help to develop »critical thinking skills, problem-solving and decision-making skills, practice and persistence, self-reliance and self-responsibility and goal setting, all, which promote achievement« (Vernon & Bernard, 2019: 292). The basic concepts of REBE are self-acceptance, emotional and behavioral consequences, beliefs and disputing beliefs and they stem from REBT (Vernon & Bernard, 2019). Vernon & Bernard (2019) propose four ways of using REBE in classrooms: by delivering socially structured emotional education lessons, by integrating it into the curriculum, by making use of the teachable moment and by using the total educational environment integration (p. 294). Structured REBE lessons are proposed as the preferred method, as basic REBE concepts are specifically taught and teachers have to be familiar with REBE philosophy (Vernon & Bernard, 2019). The second approach is less direct and entails integrating rational concepts into the curriculum by deliberately choosing topics for essay assignments that reinforce rational ideas (Vernon & Bernard, 2019). The teachable moment is similar to this way of integration. In such moments teachers use the chance provided by a specific class situation to clarify rational concepts, such as for instance by explaining to learners that students who are very anxious before taking a test have different, catastrophic thoughts compared to other students who do not (Vernon & Bernard, 2019). The fourth and the highest level of integration is the integration on the level of whole institution, reflected in an institution rewarding students not only for achievement but also for progress and persistence (Vernon & Bernard, 2019). Although Vernon & Bernard (2019) suggest structured lessons as a preferred implementation method, the activities proposed in this paper refer to curriculum integration and teachable moment, since they prove more suitable and accomplishable considering curriculum requirements, time constraints and interventions that are not implemented on the organizational level. Homework assignment topics are one of the most straightforward ways for integrating REBE into English language teaching by covering topics that require students to practice disputation and develop unconditional self-acceptance, especially in the context of making mistakes. Students can be required to write essays in English on what is it like to make mistakes while speaking in English and how they can improve it and they can be asked to describe how they learned something that was difficult at first, for instance, irregular verbs. They can also be given assignments in which they practice disputation of different beliefs. Students can also be taught words for different emotions and their definitions.

So far, different studies have examined the role of REBT in the educational context, usually by exploring the relationship between irrational beliefs and language learning. Abu-Melhim, Abood, Al-Zghoul & Zughoul (2015) reported a correlation between irrational beliefs and foreign language anxiety in Jordanian college students. Watson & Dodd (1984) reported that REBT was an effective way of reducing communication apprehension, or unwillingness to communicate in college students. Willingness to communicate and readiness to make mistakes are an integral part of successful language learning and improving language achievement, while foreign language anxiety interferes with language learners' performance of college students (Saito & Samimy, 1996). In addition, rational beliefs directly affect procrastination and time to study for exams and indirectly influence academic achievement (Balkis, Duru & Bulus, 2013). In summary, the evidence suggests that dealing with irrational thoughts of students will promote language learning and help overcome common hurdles, such as procrastination, fear of making mistakes and unwillingness to communicate. When it comes to the online teaching mode, there are many opportunities for overcoming frustration intolerance of teachers and students and learning about unconditional self-acceptance and unconditional other-acceptance. Teaching online requires both students and teachers to exhibit flexibility and adjust to new circumstances. Both students and teachers have a task of acquiring skills and knowledge necessary for using different online platforms for education. Online teaching is teacher-centered and students often have a chance to see a teacher's home or hear background noise, whereas college students often choose to turn off their cameras. In such cases, teacher's reactions to different situations are more visible than in

face-to-face teaching. Students can see whether their teacher has irrational demands, such as: *Technology must work for my class to be successful, I must know how to use all options available in this program* or: *My neighbors mustn't play music or hammer nails into walls during my class* and *My dog must be quiet during the class*. If the students see that a teacher prefers to teach in favorable conditions, but does not require it, his/her example teaches them how to deal with similar problems when they experience it. If a teacher calmly reacts to his/her neighbor making noise during the class, he/she is more likely to feel annoyed instead of being angry with neighbors and has a better chance of staying focused and teaching a good class in spite of the noise. However, it is also reasonable expect a teacher to make mistakes as well by sometimes not being as patient as one would like to or not knowing how to use technology perfectly and such situations are a chance to teach students about unconditional self-acceptance. Unconditional other-acceptance can be taught by teaching the whole class to give feedback exclusively on performance. Sometimes students with lower level of English language make mistakes that others find funny and in those situations it is important to stress that making mistakes is a part of learning. One of the ways of illustrating this is by giving examples from the teacher's personal experience and explaining that even the teacher found some aspects of language learning (e.g., writing in English) difficult, but that he/she managed to overcome those issues by practicing more or by writing every new word on paper several times. Another way is by paying attention to the way teachers give feedback. It is advisable to correct specific mistakes and give constructive feedback to students on how to improve, instead of agreeing with students when they state that they started learning English too late to learn it well or that they have never been successful at learning English. Apart from this, encouraging students to speak in class and give presentations is a useful method of helping them deal with foreign language anxiety. Even though such exposure may be a very challenging experience for some students and therefore it could be useful to give presentations in pairs, such experience is later an excellent proof to students that giving a presentation in a foreign language is not awful and that it is manageable if they prepare in advance and that they can bear it since they have done it.

3. CONCLUSION

REBT is a form of therapy that bears relevance to teaching due to its psycho-educational approach, use of didactic style, emphasis on homework and on cognitions. Due to this, it has been applied in education for a long time and its educational derivative is called rational-emotive behaviour education (REBE). The findings of previous studies have indicated that irrational beliefs, one of main concepts in REBT, are linked to foreign language anxiety, unwillingness to communicate, fear of making mistakes and unwillingness to communicate in students. Therefore, the activities proposed in this paper refer to interventions whose aim is to deal with the aforementioned issues. Homework assignment topics are one of the most straightforward ways for integrating REBE into English language teaching by covering topics that require students to practice disputation and develop unconditional self-acceptance, especially in the context of making mistakes. Additionally, online teaching mode is also considered and recommendations are given for overcoming frustration intolerance of teachers and students and modeling unconditional self-acceptance and unconditional other-acceptance.

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