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Framework

Foreign languages: the legal and theoretical framework

Area organisation. Framework. Curriculum designs. The school's institutional project

Welcome to this booklet on the teaching of English at EGB 3.

In this chapter we'll be getting to know how the Area of Foreign Languages joined the Educational Transformation Process in 1996, and what and what kind were the agreements reached.

The Foreign Languages Area is a complex topic in the sense that it's been organised in terms of 'cycles', 'levels' and 'options'. What does this mean? (You can consult 'Acuerdo-Marco para la Enseñanza de Lenguas, Serie A-15', or the 'CBCs for EGB' anyway.)

But there will be a new keynote: language learning –first, second or foreign– will walk along paths different from 'general learning paths'.

Meaning? That language learning has been perceived to follow different routes for at least thirty years!! So, whatever conclusions are 'conclusive' for other knowledge areas might not be so for your topic.

Tough, isn't?, but true.

Going back to our short introduction: 'cycle' accounts for 'age' as a crucial factor in human learning, foreign language learning included: as you know very well, young kids don't learn in the same way as pre-adolescents and adolescents, and younger kids learn in ways different from older kids. There are physical, neurological, psychological reasons for this. You have experienced this in the classroom, and research into second and foreign language acquisition will bear you out.

You know each cycle lasts three years. (The only exception is Pre-School, 'Nivel Inicial') This structure reflects significant landmarks in learning in general. Hence the three-year structure.

As regards foreign languages, you will probably agree, in three years' time there is significant progress in a person learning a foreign language. It appears two is not enough: learners seem to need more consolidation, and four implies a new stage in their learning process.

These three years constitute a 'level', an acquisition-learning unit where significant progress and learning-acquisition phenomena can be detected. So, in plain classroom language, this unit relates to how much learning has been achieved, this expressed in terms of conceptual, procedural and attitudinal concepts.

You're starting with the First Level of English at EGB 3. (We hope this is only a temporary measure, and that your Province will be trying to implement the First Level of English at EGB 2, so that soon you'll be teaching the Second Level at EGB 3, and that you will be accessing the second series of chapters we have prepared.)

So, to recap, so far we've touched upon 'age' - relating to 'cycle' - and 'level' - or how much learning has been achieved. Now we plunge into 'options'.

And , now, why the options? This is the third parameter to take into account.

Because, although you teach English, and these chapters intend to help you with your teaching, English should not be the only foreign language being taught in our country. Other languages may be equally useful and interesting.

There are universal declarations that point to this. UNESCO, in a recent statement – points to the need for three languages to be learnt. And the International Association of Modern Language Teachers declared in 1991 that each person has a right to learn three languages: their mother tongue, the language that is in current use in the community where they live, if it is not the same as their mother tongue, and a third language –a foreign language– to communicate with the world.

So? No monolingual country. It is in this light that the 'options' have been conceived of.

These options are stated in Federal Agreement 15 ("Acuerdo-Marco para la Enseñanza de Lenguas" mentioned above), and also in the 'Basic Contents on Foreign Languages', both for EGB and for Polymodal Education.

The options are as follows:

a • One level of English during EGB (that is, three years) plus

b • Another two levels of English (that is, six years) or

c • Two levels of another foreign language (six years again)

So that makes a total of nine years. This implies that the start-up should not be any later than EGB 2!! Besides, this is the recommended time to start. We'd like children whose mother tongue is not Spanish, to consolidate it during Pre-School ("Nivel Inicial") and EGB 1, and learn how to read and write. Then they can proceed to learn a foreign language.

How about options? What has your Province opted for? Are there any other foreign languages in your Province's Curriculum Design? Have you read it? The CBCs are only a national matrix on which the Provincial Curricula are based.

And how many periods a week? No less than two clock hours by Federal Agreement 16, "On the Structure of EGB 3". ("Estructura Curricular Básica para el Tercer Ciclo de la EGB, Serie A-16.")

The intersection of these three variables renders a 'situation'.

Let's summarise what we've been saying up to now. Look at this chart:

SITUATION	CYCLE	LEVEL 1	LEVEL 2	LEVEL 3
Situation 1	1st			
Situation 2	2nd			
Situation 3	3rd			

What is a situation? A situation is the name we give to the convergence of 'level', 'cycle' and 'options'. As you can see, yours is the darkest in the chart. (Dark in shade not in prospects, don't worry.)

What's your situation? Are there any learners whose mother tongue is not Spanish? Do they speak indigenous languages at home? Maybe Asian languages? European?

By the way, if all your learners speak Spanish at home, your school may decide to start as from EGB 1, or Pre-School even. That's absolutely possible. And many experts say that the younger, the better. We'll see if this is true in subsequent chapters.

And then, have you had a look at your school's institutional project? ("PEI", "Proyecto Educativo Institucional" and "PCI", "Proyecto Curricular Institucional") In what sense are they different? Which is more precise, more adapted to the classroom situation?

Next, the area of Foreign Languages aspires to be an integrating factor of the school's institutional project. To what extent do you think this is possible? How much contact do you have with the other teachers that teach your learners? With teachers from other courses?

Finally, we'd like to focus on the kind of English you'll probably be teaching. We all know that English is the preferred option for international communication. It's called "Global English". It's the kind of English that allows people from different cultures to get to know about each other, peoples, cultures, traditions. Not necessarily British or American English.

Did you know that there are around 375 million people for whom English is their native language, another 375 million for whom English is a second language, and around 1,000 million speakers for whom English is a Global language? We belong to this latter group!

Don't miss the next chapter.

We recommend that you go to your headteacher's office and ask him/her for all the documentation relating to Foreign Languages and the School's Institutional Project. That is, the CBCs on Foreign Languages both for EGB and Polymodal Education, your night want to consult: www.me.gov.ar /consejo/documentos, Province's Curriculum Design and the School's Institutional Project. Who can you ask if in doubt? Is there anyone at school? Are there communication channels open with the provincial authorities?

FOREIGN LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND LEARNING

Different perspectives. Language learning in the classroom. Factors at play in effective acquisition and learning

Here we are again. This time we'll be reflecting on acquisition and learning. Ready to work?

Close your eyes now (metaphorically because you're reading).

Remember your first lessons in English? What did you first learn? Let us guess: the verb 'to be'? The Present Continuous? The Simple Present? And, did your teacher draw endless charts on the blackboard? Did you have a textbook that systematised these tenses? Did you recite the conjugation, "I am, you are, he is..." Did you have all these blackboard charts safely copied in your notebook? Did your teacher ask you to turn sentences into the negative and the interrogative? Did you copy these long lists of sentences for home study? Were you told to "study the (verb to be)?" Did you have to repeat sentences, phrases, words? Chorally, in groups? Individually?

You can open your eyes now.

How did you feel about these techniques? Were you happy you were making progress? How much did all that help you use the verb 'to be', the Simple Present, the Present Continuous? Surely it was useful if you were old enough to take advantage of it. Did you really? Take two minutes to write down your reflections on this.

In other words, when did the teaching you had consider the 'communicative' aspects of language use? In what respect/s was your learning process taken into account? Were you allowed to put "two and two together"?, communicative language use and your own acquisition and learning processes?

What we are trying to say is that fluency in a (foreign) language does not necessarily depend on grammar practice but on meaningful input. Grammar and phonology practice are certainly necessary, as we will see, but later on, when learners focus on accuracy work.

What does this mean? Language – first, second, foreign – is developed along similar parameters. If you look at babies, they spend about one year and a half or two before they actually produce language as such. This fact is recurrent and can be transposed to second and foreign language learning. In the classroom as well, no doubt.

But a number of conditions must be met.

For one thing some previous knowledge of the topic being discussed orally or in writing seems to be essential to be able to predict what the content will be about. The more I know about the text before reading or listening to it, the less I will have to rely on linguistic cues.

For an immature learner with little knowledge of the language system there's also the need for them to be able to draw knowledge from contextual clues. In a written piece pictures, photos, headlines, graphs and the like are essential.

A third aspect as important as the other two is how the learner feels about the topic. Interest is essential for the learner to be willing to make the effort.

If we focus on these three conditions in the classroom, our work will enhance exposure –input– which will often result in 'intake', defined as the subconscious incorporation of linguistic material, material that was not actually taught explicitly.

In this light, then, input is a necessary prerequisite for any kind of production. All humans have a receptive repertoire that is much much wider than their productive repertoire. This means that reception antecedes production and is much wider than what we can produce.

Imagine an iceberg floating on the sea. How much can you see of it? Just a part of it. Just the tip. Well, that represents our productive repertoire, which is grounded in the other parts, which are submerged. That's our receptive repertoire.

Just like the tip of the iceberg. We humans go about in the world comprehending a lot and producing comparatively much less. Why should foreign language learning be any different?

Because input goes to the brain, and the brain, together with the person's overall affective apparatus, processes information. It is as if it said, "This I want, this I don't want. Out it goes."

How is this manifested in the classroom?

The first thing is to provide learners with a lot of planned, organised input. This can be done through talking to them in English as much as possible, choosing expression that is clear to them. With gesture, transparent words, and demonstration.

As we say above, this input can be offered through texts that are anchored in content learners can handle and which they would like to explore further. In turn this implies inspecting their worlds, getting to know about them, capturing their pre-adolescent aspirations, changing and contradictory as they might be.

But such is a fact of life.

Does all this mean that we won't be teaching the verb 'to be', the Simple Present, The Present Continuous? That there will be no repetition? No charts on the blackboard? No correction of errors? No, no. Much on the contrary. All that will be present, as part of conscious learning.

Meaning? Meaning that reflection and systematisation, when they're functional and useful, are necessary tools for a better learning. So here comes the grammar, and the pronunciation and correction.

These learners can do it. They're old enough. They've been at school long enough to have developed strategies of different kinds: communication strategies, learning strategies, survival strategies. Take advantage of them.

One interesting activity you might carry out in class is bringing a text in Spanish and asking learners a few questions like the following:

a • Look at the text. Don't read it yet. What do you think it will be about?

   (Write down your learners' predictions on the blackboard)

b • Now apply some reading strategies, like the following:

   circle "important" words, words that tell you about the content of the text;

   read the first and the last sentence;

   find names of people involved in the text.

c • How do you know? What clues did the text give you?

d • Now, read the text and check if your predictions were correct.

e • Are there any words in the text you don't know the meaning of? Which are they?

f • Try to guess the meaning of each. Go back to the text and write down a possible definition for each.

g • Now let's compare notes. (Carry a class-as-a-whole activity to allow learners to confront predicted meanings. If necessary, ask them to look up words in the dictionary.)

h • So, what is the text about?

i • Next get them to summarise, give opinions, criticise the text, among other strategies.

j • Use the text to motivate other discussions. You may ask your learners to write a text derived or derived from the text listened to or read.

You will have to take account of the fact that some learners work better on their own, while others will require pair or group assistance and interaction. Learning styles are crucial at EGB 3. Check them out and bear them in mind when preparing your lessons.

But more about this in our next chapter.

Explain to learners this same procedure can be applied when dealing with a text in English, that they will be working together in this direction, that the dictionary will be the last resort to get at the meaning of a word.

To sum up so far: language development is similar in many respects, whether it is first, second or foreign, but foreign language learning requires attention, especially with pre-adolescents and adolescents.

And so get ready for Chapter 2. Bye for now.

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INTERLANGUAGE

Developmental errors, variability. Are errors inevitable? Interference. Input. Different contexts of acquisition and learning. Reflection on language, correction and systematisation

This is the scene: an English lesson. The learners are working on a problem-solving activity. They're interested and there's good participation. However, the teacher is horrified: there are a lot of very nice ideas but there's a lot of Spanish going on. And a lot of errors! She thinks, "Where has all my teaching gone? They did remember to put in the -s for third person the whole of last week, and now? Nothing!"

The scene must ring a bell for you. Sometimes, no matter the amount of the effort we make to teach something properly, it is as if learners processed information their own way. They come up with incorrect forms that they have never been exposed to. Well, error is part of human nature, isn't it?

Teaching and learning are often indirectly related; sometimes not related at all. There are things we teach which learners find too hard to learn, and other times they seem to pick up classroom language which was never the goal of teaching. Sometimes a very complex structure is adopted and used. This relates to what we said about input in Chapter 1.

The mind processes input according to different parameters. One of them is that there seems to be a "natural route of development" specified by the target language. What does this mean? Research shows that learners whose mother tongues are different go through very similar stages in the development of the same target language, say English.

Incredible, isn't it? This finding has a number of consequences. For one thing, that the source language has been seen to produce less impact than it was at first thought on the target language.

What is the 'source language'? The latest language you've learnt, or the weaker/weakest on the row. On the row? Yes! The sequence of languages a learners is attempting to learn.

If a learner's mother tongue is an indigenous language, or an Asian language, chances are that the learning of English 'will' be affected by either the specified mother tongue, or Spanish, if Spanish is already 'strong' enough to offer 'resistance'. But if the learner is a Spanish speaking monolingual, then surely Spanish will impinge upon the next language being learnt. The 'target language' is the language being learnt at present. English, as you can imagine.

What levels of language will suffer the influence of this other language the most? Probably pronunciation, stress and intonation. But the younger the learners, the less noticeable the effect. At EGB 3, there's likely to be a marked influence in this respect.

In turn this means that the grammar of the target language –morphology and syntax– and the semantic aspects, will "accommodate", as it were, to the target language..

In turn, what does this imply? That at any stage of this process, learners are elaborating hypotheses on the basis of the information -the data- they get from the environment, that is, the (English) they hear and are taught. Sometimes these hypotheses are incorrect or incomplete, and the result is precisely 'errors'. But errors are part of human nature, and they give us clues as to the continuum of development.

So, not only is it impossible to avoid them: they are positive indicators of the learning process. So it is healthy to allow them and register them in a journal in order to deal with them at a later date when the timing is appropriate.

Errors imply a number of cognitive processes at work. The correct hypotheses, the guesses, the incomplete applications of rules, all those features constitute learner language or interlanguage. This is not really a mixture of the source language and the target language, English. It consists of a grammar that is in constant development, but which is systematic.

The term 'interlanguage' was coined by Larry Selinker way back in 1972, in a seminal article called precisely "Interlanguage". Selinker is at present the Head of the Centre for Interlanguage Studies, Department of Applied Linguistics, Birkbeck College, University of London, and is constantly collecting data of interlanguage forms from all over the world. Your contribution might be much appreciated.

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In this light, are errors the result of bad teaching? Can they be avoided? No, on the contrary. They show that the learner's mind is working hard, and that the learning process is on its way.

So, what can a teacher do with errors? All in all, there are basically two types of strategies:

a • direct intervention, in the form of explicit correction, examples, charts on the blackboard, among others, and

b • indirect intervention, by providing learners with further input. This implies echoing, asking for indirect clarification in terms of meaning, among other strategies. Basically, it also means your reiterating the target structure detected as erroneous correctly in natural contexts of use.

What might be the effect of these strategies? As you may know very well, some of these actions may work the miracle, and "the penny clicks" and the learner understands, and then requires practice to consolidate this initial learning. More practice in different contexts.

As possible activities along these lines, try to select two types of strategies, as follows:

a • an activity that is destined to enlarge your learners' acquisition apparatus – along the lines outlined above;

b • an activity whose main goal is to reflect on language use, with systematisation of structures, verb tenses and overall linguistic use.

On the scene that opened this chapter, we met a horrified teacher wondering at the misuse of Simple Present, when apparently learners had had effective practice. One useful question we might ask is, what kind of practice? Probably controlled practice of the type 'complete the dialogue', 'questions and answers', 'fill in the blanks', and others. This type of practice we call 'controlled' practice or manipulation, or pre-communicative. These are some of the names that appear in textbooks.

In the problem-solving activity described, learners were interested and produced creative solutions, but there was a lot of Spanish going on and many errors.

The activity was uncontrolled. Learners were really communicating. There was "communicative stress" due to their motivation. The situation was very different from the types of activities listed above, where there was control of the linguistic variable.

What do we mean by 'communicative stress'? To our knowledge, it's the only type of stress that is positive. It's the kind of willingness, of drive that pushes the learner on to wanting to find out, to perform, to retrieve linguistic and communicative information. A good learner, in short.

For one thing, research points to different aspects of language being acquired and learnt in different depths. It also implies the development of different strategies to resolve communive tasks involving different language levels, sometimes isolated, others times isolated.

This means that the contexts of performance or "discourse domains" were very different. That's why learners' performance was different. The immediate conclusion is that learner performance is variable. We refer to this type of phenomenon 'contextual variability'.

Variability in learner language is parallel to variability in native language use. In fact, we don't talk in the same way to a close friend, to our family or to our headteacher. We don't talk in the same way to our family members if we're happy as when we're worried or angry.

So we see that that language is so versatile and flexible that it adapts to who we're talking to, when, where and why, how we feel and what's going on on our minds. Why should foreign language use be any different?

In conclusion, we recommend to take note of how learner language correlates with the communicative situation and its demands, and how learners adapt to it, affectively and cognitively.

You might propose two different kinds of activity, a factual; one, in which learners have to report on content they have discovered, and another in which they must record their feelings

We'll come back to this soon. See you.

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PERSONAL FACTORS IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

Cognitive, learning and communicative styles and strategies. The development of autonomous learning

Here we are again. This time we'll try to focus on how much the individual learner brings into the language learning task. If you remember, in Chapter 1 we anticipated a number of issues relating to the extent to which teaching and learning are often indirectly related, and that this may be due to personal and experiential factors the learner brings along with him/her.

The learner has a lot of information on his brain, as if it were the hard disk of our computer. This amounts to the learner definitely not being a 'tabula rasa', no blank slate, that is, a being with nothing on their mind at birth.

What do we mean by this?

Some approaches to (language) learning in vogue in the 50s and 60s postulated the idea that there's nothing on the mind/brain before the learner comes into contact with the learning task. This approach, called Behaviourism, put all the load on the environment, on the effect of input and habit formation.

Is this true? What do you think?

Along these lines, the basic idea was that whatever comes from the external world –say in the form of teaching, for example– got "imprinted" on the mind, provided there was enough stimulus, response and reinforcement in the way of feedback. This included practice, notably drills based on repetition and little or no thinking.

This comes as no surprise since Leonard Bloomfield said at the turn of the 20th century, "We have no right to access the workings on an inaccessible mind." What he meant was that there was no way, within the empiricist tradition, to prove with direct evidence that there was cognitive functioning.

One must understand: it was the age of empiricism, and, of course, cognitive processes could not be analysed directly.

Further, this type of approach minimised – denied? – the human capacity to process information in terms of its own structure, and, in particular, to process knowledge of language. This means that the human brain is different from the brains of the other species on the zoological scale, and that, as such, it's got different powers, still being discovered.

In addition, it amounts to asserting that knowledge of language is accessed and acquired in ways different from other types of knowledge. The present general consensus of opinion seems to point to the fact that different types of learning are learnt in different ways. This is not new for language: it was originally postulated by Noam Chomsky, way back in 1957. And of late it seems to have been confirmed for other knowledge areas.

As was anticipated, research points in a different direction from that of the behaviourists. Humans, as we say above, have a great contribution to make to their own learning. This is what we mean when we say that this individual is no 'tabula rasa', or that we're born with knowledge already, and different hypotheses postulate that different kinds of knowledge are accessed, acquired and learnt in ways characteristic of each knowledge area. This is a significant turning point in learning.

In this light, as humans we've got well defined ways of relating with the world that surrounds us, well defined ways of apprehending and interpreting reality, of processing information, thinking, remembering and solving problems.

This is normally referred to as cognitive style.

Some of us require the overall context to be able to understand the parts; others can reconstruct the whole after having examined the parts. Analytically v. globally. Technically the former is called 'field dependence', and the latter 'field independence. What does the term field mean? Context.

A language learner who is analytical or field independent tends to learn best by analysing language, extracting rules and applying them. And context does not seem to be so relevant to them.

At a perceptual level, field independent personalities are able to distinguish figures as discrete from their backgrounds compared to field dependent individuals who experience events in an undifferentiated way. In addition, field dependent individuals have a greater social orientation relative to field independent personalities. Studies have identified a number of connections between this cognitive style and learning, For example, field independent individuals are likely to learn more effectively under conditions of intrinsic motivation (e.g. self-study) and are influenced less by social reinforcement.

Can you identify some of your learners along these lines?

Can you think of activities that might reveal either kind of cognitive style?

All learners have needs. These can be linguistic, communicative, cognitive, affective, sociocultural. If these aspects are considered in the learning programme, then learning will take place more easily.

Have you thought of ways to identify their needs in this respect?

It is not easy to determine our learners' linguistic needs because learning is an internal process: each person processes content in different ways, and may be at different stages of development. However, we can create an environment where learners are exposed to a lot of meaningful language, known and unknown, and where they have curiosity or questions about it. If learners are interested, then they will be fulfilling their communicative needs, expectations and motivations.

All the more so if their basic linguistic needs are taken into account. Surely the learning process will take more smooth paths if these are taken into account. We have no doubts in this respect.

As regards cognitive and affective needs, these are derived from the topics chosen, the tasks and learners' participation in them. As we say in the Introduction, the guidelines we have selected are interesting to a good number of learners in the Third Cycle in our country.

There's a lot of diversity in our country. One cannot expect to find the same reality in Jujuy as in Tierra del Fuego. Even within the City of Buenos Aires there are many different realities. So we have tried to make room for this diversity by allowing learners to bring it into their classroom all along and into the Final Task.

Please, make sure you're attentive and understanding of this fact. It's most important.

It is very difficult to determine our learners' grammar needs because they can be at different stages of the developmental sequence of acquisition. However, we can create an environment where a lot of language, known and unknown, is met and where the learners are helped with new languag and have curiosity or questions about it.

Now have a look at this grid on needs assessment:

How much have you changed in your programme in this respect?

See if the following premises make sense in your context of teaching and learning English:

This type of learning

1 • provides a means of obtaining wider input into the content, design and implementation of a language programme.

2 • can be used in developing goals, objectives and content

3 • can provide data for reviewing and evaluating an existing programme.

It's often the case that researchers identify objective and subjective needs. Which is which?

Objective needs result in content satisfactions derived from an analysis of the target communicative situations in which learners are likely to find themselves. We recommend that you initiate reflection in this respect. Beware: they might not not be in the habit of doing this type of activity, and it might be difficult at the very beginning.

Subjective needs are derived from the learners themselves, which requires sound knowledge of your group of learners. We suggest your circulating a survey along these lines with them. It's always fascinating to find out about their insight into their own language learning.

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THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE AS A TRANSVERSAL CONTENT

Content-based approaches. A cross-curricular approach

How are you liking these pages? Are you finding them useful? Do you discover new messages as you read them?

In this chapter we'll be focusing on topics that intend to integrate the setting of objectives, content selection, sequencing and evaluation. In general, there is a sharp demarcation line between syllabus design -- what to teach -- and methodology -- or how to teach it.

David Nunan says that "such a separation has led in the past to such aberrations as the teaching of courses whose input was specified in alleged (supposed) communicative terms through an audiolingual methodology."

What does Nunan mean? That the contents might have read something like "Unit 1: Introducing oneself. Getting to know others." But then the methodology proposed involved repetition and substitution. That is to say, a mechanistic, 'behaviouristic', methodology.

Where was the communicative part? Were the learners learning how to communicate?

To avoid this type of separation -a dichotomy- we'll explore ways in which both aspects can be integrated. If they're all properly integrated, all of them will interact and influence each other. In what way? Objectives may be modified, expanded or simplified, in terms of learner needs during the development of the learning process.

As teachers, we make decisions on the spot, in real time, as our lessons unfold. It is a well known fact for us that not all we plan for our lessons can be developed as we had in principle thought. Often we must "negotiate" with the institutional requirements, the pre-specified objectives, the textbook, and the task, together with our learners' needs, interests and demands..., and our common sense: we must also negotiate with our own beliefs, approach, and knowledge of what is feasible, possible and probable.

No easy task...

And this task becomes all the more complex if we want to promote acquisition in the classroom.

Several researchers have been experimenting with techniques to promote acquisition in the classroom. One key aspect is providing learners with varied and meaningful input, as we saw earlier on. But how can we determine that input is varied and meaningful?

The key to this question is information, relevant information. And 'relevance' is a notion that depends on age, and cultural and social background, among other variables, and which often has an unstable status with adolescents as we've seen before.

Activities in which two partners must share information to complete a task or solve a problem, are effective in stimulating the development of communication skills. In particular, such activities provide an environment for the development of fluency and the negotiation of meaning, essential for acquisition.

For example, as part of pair work, two partners must interview each other to fill in a grid to find out about each other's favourite band. These grids can be discussed within the group, and finally there could be a rounding off class-as-a-whole with a profile of oneself as a good friend , with statement like, 'What do I have to offer for the development of a good friendship?', in which the most popular/boring band of the whole group is proclaimed, and the best friend can be appointed.

Due to its nature, this type of activity will generate a number of different mini tasks involving different strategies of group dynamics, a bit of research into different musical bands, their musical production; in turn, this will allow learners to come into contact with diferent discourse types, participate in debates, thus learning to argue for and against, and the list could go on indefinitely. Ideally, as the topic is interesting, learners will be trying to express their ideas, and hopefully using English to express them.

If there is 'communicative stress' -the only kind of stress that can be said to be positive- that is, if there's interest and motivation, there will be stimulation of learner linguistic and communicative resources, and their linguistic knowledge will be "squeezed" to the limit.

Another important factor that stimulates interest and hence acquisition is the degree to which tasks reflect the world outside, so to speak. The lesson should include valuable information that will help the learner get to know about other peoples, ways of life, cultures and traditions. Luckily colourless 'Johns' and 'Marys' have been replaced by real life characters.

This does not definitely mean that there should not be fiction. Access to literary discourse, comic cartoons, legends, myths and the like stimulate the learner's imagination. A good "companion" is a cassette, with stories retold against a musical background akin to the text type.

Fact and fiction should thus be clearly demarcated. Learners should be able to access true, updated information. Discourse types should reflect this as well, together with the accompanying imaging. A Maori legend on tape, with aesthetic but functional illustrations to guide the listener, could serve to trigger not only the structure of the legend as a text but the meaning of the legend in the context of the source culture. In turn, this broadens learners' conception of diversity and expands the confines of their minds.

What kind of methodological sequence should follow from these assumptions?

Rather than choosing the linguistic contents to teach and then adapt the thematic contents to that sequence, the priority is the choice of thematic contents in accordance with learner interests and cognitive, affective and social needs. This done, the linguistic and pragmatic contents will manifest the themes chosen. And it is here that selection and gradation -sequencing- play an essential role in the promotion of acquisition and learning.

Next comes the choice of a final task. The final task is the culmination of a number of mini tasks all conducive to the gradual development of skills and subskills necessary to launch the final task. For example, if the final task consists in designing a dossier of a group's favourite musical band, throughout the development of the project there should've been enough instances of exposure to discourse types such as biographical data, advertisements, cassette or CD labels, recital promotions, newspaper articles, reviews of musical albums and the like.

Another possibility might be for learners to design a brochure of a tourist resort in their local area. This will entail the inclusion of local maps, photos, typical costumes and traditional music, a short history of the place, an invitation to visit the area, a description of the main sites, entertainments and interviews with the locals, to mention just a few possibilities.

The path towards the final task does involve language work, and manipulative practice, and process writing and listening comprehension. We're not dischaptering that. On the contrary, the aim is to allow learners to rehearse tasks and develop enabling skills needed for communicating outside the classroom.

What do we mean? That there will be repetition to practise new words, correction of errors, systematisations on the blackboard, crosword puzzles to practise past tense forms, fill-in-the-blank exercises, comprehension questions, the design of personal word banks to recycle vocabulary, and many more manipulative activities that you must be familiar with.

This type of methodology, says David Nunan, brings together proven aspects from classroom acquisition research and principles of learner-centred curriculum design.

As you see, in this chapter we've tried to bring together thematic and linguistic contents, knitting a series of lesson strategies that take account of learner needs. This is what is normally referred to as a task-based content-based approach.

It would be ideal if you brought together some of the concepts discussed in this chapter and bring them down to your classroom situation.

Some of the following questions might help you:

a • What topics are your learners learning in the other curricular subjects?

b • Can you ask your colleagues?

c • What aspects could be learnt in English?

d • Do you know of any materials that might help develop your task? Why?

e • What common decisions have you arrived at with your colleages?

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A TASK-BASED APPROACH

Activities, materials, group dynamics. The steps of the lesson

In our previous chapter we explored the main tenets of English as a transversal content, and, as such, the degree of relevance of FL materials, texts, task types, topics and the like. In this chapter we'll be looking at some of those aspects in detail.

A task is composed of verbal input -as is the case with an oral or written text- or non verbal input, for example a picture sequence -or a combination of both– for instance an encyclopaedia – or an activity, which sets what the learners will do with respect to the input provided.

This requires a new look at the roles of teacher and learner. The teacher will be a researcher, planner, consultant, referee, participant, inspirer, editor... Can you think of any other roles? How does the learner role change in this light?

Tasks can be classified into three types, basically: first-, second- and third-generation tasks.

First-generation tasks

In this type of task the basic goal is the development of communicative skills in a certain area of the foreign language being learnt. Possible examples are 'role-play' and 'simulation'. Some authors make a distinction between these two types of activities. Whereas in a role-play there's the construction of a fictional character, simulations place the learner in a possible situation relevant to their age and interests.

For example, if you ask your learners to close their eyes and imagine they're supermen flying over Amazonia, there's clear indication that this is a role-play. Why? Because it is highly improbable that they will be flying over the world. Let alone Amazonia.

The choice of geographical area, and the role -however fictional it might be- may enable the chance to explore many aspects, ranging from the factual point of view -the geography of Amazonia, its climate, its fauna and flora, the peoples living in the area- to the mythical: the peoples' origins, legends and myths, intertwined with factual aspects of those very people.

Problem-solving activities

In this type of task learners are supposed to solve a communicative problem of some sort, because there's some communicative gap that has to be bridged either by resorting to thematic content, communicative content, knowledge of the world or recent facts, which learners might have to do research into.

For example, learners have a bus timetable and route map. They must go from their city/town/village to another place. They must choose the best route according to ticket price, journey duration, distance, etc. This is the problem to solve.

These activities have the aim of getting learners to practise a specified communicative function and/or group of structures/lexis required for the expression of the communicative function/s identified to the purpose.

A task-based approach

Second generation tasks

These tasks aim at developing procedures related to communication and linguistic handling and retrieval, but also cognitive strategies that have to do with the handling and organisation of information. Learners are expected to collect information, analyse it, decide on the most adequate procedure, select the most relevant data, organise the information obtained, and then analyse the procedures and results.

Language is the vehicle to do authentic communicative work. This implies using a variety of structures, vocabulary and speech acts or communicative functions. The external structure imposed by the task requires constant processing of input and output, reading information, producing reports in English, among other products.

An example: suppose you set a task in which your local area is seen through the eyes of a foreigner, tourists, mainly. Learners have to decide:

a • what they need to know;
b • how to obtain the information: interviews, questionnaires, brochures, and other discourse formats;
c • the language required to carry out the task;
d • when to obtain the information
e • where to obtain it: at the airport, on the beach, at a very important hotel, tourist information office, the local library – other places?
f • what format is to be chosen to express the information obtained: charts, tables, files, reports, and maybe others.

Learners hand in a report in the format decided upon.

Third generation tasks

This type of task shares features with second generation tasks in that key objectives include conceptual and procedural contents, but go further in the incorporation of attitudinal contents as well. This implies the development of aspects of learner personality through educational goals.

Suppose you set the following task: "Designing an alternative world" How would you go about it?

Have a brainstorming session, one in which all learners give their opinions on the topic, that is, what aspects they like about their local environment and what other aspects they'd like to change. These might include changes in the geography of the place, nature, animal life, society, family, leisure time activities, and maybe others learners might suggest.

Write them down on the blackboard. If you can, do so by means of a mind map.

Learners get together in terms of common interests. Each group singles out the type of information and the language required to pursue the task. Learners are encouraged to go to the (school) library to find out about the topics they need to do research into. They then discuss aspects of this "alternative reality" which is their target topic. They inform the rest. Some of the possible strategies to be employed might include games, recordings, stories, legends and the like. Finally, learners have a presentation of their findings and evaluate the activity.

Third generation tasks have a high degree of authenticity, language integration, and contents which involve all aspects of learner personality, previous experience and knowledge of the world. This includes artistic, musical, literary interests, hobbies and worries.

Within this framework, learners and teacher don't belong to two different "counters" -that is that the teacher provides information and the learners receive it passively. They make up two composite entities working together, planning, taking decisions, carrying out the task and sharing the feeling of achievement.

And this brings us to a topic anticipated in this same chapter: the question of group dynamics. As humans we are sociable people. We need to be together. And talk to each other and do things together. Learning is one more human sociable task. Let's promote it.

Many tasks can be better done in groups. And learners can learn from other learners. This is peer teaching. So there is interaction, and learning. At least for the sociable ones.

As we've seen, the act of sharing information in the classroom and helping others to understand creates a feeling of success and reduces inhibition. So group work is a good thing. How can we organise groups?

Your learners might never work in groups. It may be that all they do is raise their hands and answer questions asked by the teacher. Is this the case?

They may think that working in groups is a good occasion for disorganisation. So you must explain. Have a conversation with them before you start the first activity in groups. Ask them if they've ever worked in groups, and how they have felt. Try to focus on how cooperative they are to each other.

Don't always group learners in the same way. Of course we know how disrupting it is to get learners to move and change places. In general, at school learners think they "own" a desk. But you can encourage them to go and talk to someone they never talk to, to share with a learner of the opposite sex, with learners whose names start with the same letter, and we're sure you'll think of more creative ways. Try to surprise them with your grouping instructions. But please avoid the 'good and weak' learner grouping.

Also, change the number of learners per group. That's another variable that will allow you to produce other things than rabbits from your magician's hat.

Always on the move. Surprise them! or the magic will be gone!

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PLANNING A UNIT OF WORK

Identifying needs, topics and interests. Grading linguistic material

Hello! This chapter will focus on planning a unit, and the dilemmas and doubts. OK?

As we've seen before, you're teaching the First Level of English at EGB 3. So we're teaching beginners. What does this mean? It means we must:

- give a lot of weighing to exposure. This action results in longer pre-tasks and shorter task cycles;

- plan a set of short tasks rather than one long one;

- lay less emphasis on public use of language until learners have gained confidence, the planning and report stages are either omitted or very short, with yourself giving the first reports informally.

- initially concentrate on words and phrases, only gradually progressing towards grammar;

- work on language and communication awareness.

And here we are, notebook pen and textbook.

When we sit down to plan a unit of work there are many many aspects we have to consider. Generally, the textbook we use is great help because there are several aspects that were decided upon by the author or authors.

In Chapter 5 we said that the choice of topics was essential for learner motivation. But it is also crucial that the linguistic aspects should be properly sequenced so that the learning task becomes orderly and smooth.

The materials –texts, activities– included in the textbook we've chosen have been graded on the basis of degree of difficulty – alleged order of acquisition or natural route of development, length, number of unknown words, etc. Illustrations are essential to lead in the activity. The task preparation phase has that purpose. Remember: task preps are the key to the success of an activity.

As anyone can imagine, within a content-based task-based approach, grading becomes very complex. Language learning, as you know, is a process of learning to do things with language. Grading tasks, from this perspective, means specifying degrees and types of skill as well as choosing language contents and ordering them some way.

Some of the aspects to take into account are:

- how contextualised the language is, or the degree to which the language is put in a context, which facilitates comprehension.

- how demanding the expected language use is, or the degree to which language use makes cognitive demands on the learner, which implies defining which skills are easier than which others;

- how much sense the (language) task makes to the learner, or the degree to which the learner's prior knowledge is required to make comprehension easier;

- how autonomousus a certain group is, or the degree to which your help is demanded from all or some of the learners;

- consequently, how much stress is experienced by the learners, or where on the continuum positive excitement – paralysing anxiety a certain task or group of tasks finds the learner;

- how "considerate" the language learning task is in general and on particular occasions, or the degree to which learner factors have been taken into account: confidence, motivation, personal learning pace, cultural knowledge/awareness, linguistic knowledge;

- how adequate a certain task or group of tasks is, or the degree to which they can be said to be relevant, possible to implement in terms of available time, demanding in terms of grammatical accuracy/contextual appropriacy;

- how functional the texts chosen to teach the language are, or the degree to which the texts required can be characterised as demanding in terms of size and density, format, contextual clues, content.

All these decisions have to be taylor-made. There are very few general principles, and the few there are are so general that remain unnoticed due to their very generality, so to speak.

And then what? How to start the task?

A good way to start is with a very simple activity. Announce what you're going to do. Think of ways in which you could explain to learners what you expect them to do, preferably in English.

By necessity, your instructions must be very short and to the point. Use simple sentences. Look at your learners. Check if they're attentive. Check their reactions. If they're not, stop and wait for silence. If necessary start again. But don't always start again: they will get used to it and will not listen the first time.

Gestures will always be useful. If necessary, think of Spanish key words in-between. Immediately check comprehension. Ask them what they're going to do. But remember: you must try to build a transition from Spanish into English as soon as possible. Plan for that as well.

Tell your learners you're going to try once to see how it works. Give this the status of a trial, so that there can be error.

Think of this: for a short time -we hope!- or during brainstorming sessions,learners will have to answer in Spanish. Preferably, however, try to find ways to check understanding in English. Strategies like 'Listen-and-Do', which require some non-verbal response, like pointing to pictures, performing an action, might come in handy.

Teach your learners a few routines to go by at the beginning. Include these in the planning of your unit. What are routines? They're semi- productive expressions which they can find appropriate to the situations proposed, combined with vocabulary coming from the topics chosen. Many of these will be transparent – cognates in writing at the beginning. But they will not be transparent when produced orally.

In this way true beginners can begin to make themselves understood A basic requirement is for this initial repertoire to be communicatively useful, and success allows their marvellous brains to put everything into the right place.

So, make a list of those routines. Pin them up in one of the corners of the classroom.

Well now, you've thought about what to do. Now let's think about how to do it.

Encourage learners to start the activity. Think of ways to create some "magic". If the topic is interesting, if it's in keeping with your learners' interests, then the whole thing will be much easier.

Plan the activity and then set a certain time to do it. Try to assign a possible time limit. But if you say 5 minutes, keep your word. Even if you then realise it was too little. If this was the case, don't negotiate: they won't take you seriously next time. But find ways to make the time longer.

Next time you will have learnt the value of 5 minutes with these learners.

Meanwhile walk around, listen to them, help them, suggest but don't give answers directly. Correct errors only if there's no understanding. Encourage them to say things in English, even if these are isolated words. Or "inventations".

If it is a game, play it, if you feel OK playing.

And now a little headache: quick learners, learners with a higher level of English. What tio do? How to plan for them?

Not all learners do all things at the same time. We must respect each learner's personal rhythms and see if we can find different ways to help those that take longer. Besides, learners can do some things faster than other things.

What to do with them? Here are some ideas:
- get all the quick learners at any one time together into a group and plan a few follow-ups of the activities you've thought about for the group at large;
- with all the quick learners together, in a group, ask them what they would like to do in relation to the task the others are doing;
- distribute one or two quick learners in each of the other groups and instruct them to help their classmates;
- if some quick learners know more English than the group's level, apart from being quick, ask them to help you correct some drafts during process writing.

Something important: don't always do the same. Remember they need attention and have a right to enjoy the interaction with the group.

Well, here we come to the end of one more chapter. Hope you've found it useful. See you next Chapter.

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7

TBL FRAMEWORK

Pre-task phase, Task cycle, Language Focus

Hi! How are things with you?

We've been talking about task-based learning. We thought it might be a good idea to show you how it works in practice. To this end, we've included a lesson plan outline. See for yourself.

OUTLINE 1: Picture Puzzle: find seven differences

The aim of this lesson outline is to illustrate a typical revision lesson covering familiar topics. The pre-task phase is, therefore, shorter than usual. This lesson also shows how a recording can be used at the end of the task cycle.

These elementary, Spanish-speaking mixed ability learners have completed the first four units of a content-based coursebook (addresses, family, homes, uses of numbers).

Here we go.

Pre-Task:

1 • Get learners to stand up, find a different partner from usual and sit down in their new pairs. Check they have at least one book every two. Keep them closed for now. They also need one sheet of paper every two, a pen or pencil and their language notebooks.

2 • Introduce the task- "Find the differences" puzzle. Each learner will see both pictures. Together they have to find seven differences and write them down in note form. (Put an example on the blackboard (for example, 'cat on right/on left of sign"). They will only have one minute. They should talk in English, but quietly.

Task cycle

Task:

Get them ready to start: Find the picture on page.... and you have one minute from NOW!

Stop the task as soon as a few pairs have noted down seven differences (or when one minute is up). Ask how many differences others have found already.

Planning:

Tell pairs to choose four differences they think the others many not have seen. Get them to write them down in detail, and practise explaining them, so they can tell the whole class. Show them by expanding the 'cat' example on the board.

Go round and help, noting useful phrases and writing some on left of board, e.g. in picture A... the sign says...

Nominate the shy ones as reporters, and give them another two minutes to practise. Draw attention to phrases on the board.

Reporting and listening

Explain that they must listen carefully to other pairs. If they have the same difference, they tick it off. Once they have heard a difference, they must not report it themselves.

Each pair gives one difference (write these on the board as they tell the class) till there are seven. Some pairs may still have more. Stop them from shouting them out (so they still have some to listen for later).

Announce recording of David and Bridget doing the same task.

Play the recording, Learners tick off the differences they hear. (You may need to pause after each move, and play it again.)

David: Okay? Another difference is the number of the house.
Bridget: Yes.
David: In Picture A it's thirty; in Picture B it's thirteen...
Bridget: -is thirty. Oh!
David: Oh, Okay.
Bridget: Oh. Do you think-?
David: Doesn't matter. Thirty in Picture A and thirteen ...
Bridget: Thirteen in Picture B. And this number's different.
David: What number?
Bridget: The phone number of Paul Smith and Sons.
David: Oh yeah. So, the phone number of Paul Smith and Sons is - what? - in Picture A- is six three one nine oh. Six three one nine oh in Picture A...
Bridget: Mm...
David: And three three nine oh in Picture B
Bridget: Okay.
David: How many have we got? That's three
Bridget: Three. How many do we have to have? Seven. Mm...
David: How about the television- is that on? Yes. Oh no, the television is on, is it? In the first picture.
Bridget: Yes, it is!
David:... and it's not on in the - in Picture B... that's - what have we got?
Bridget: The television is on in Picture A but off in Picture B.
David: Okay. Right. Anything else? Oh yes, the man's carrying an umbrella.
Bridget: Okay.
David: So what shall we put? The man...

Now ask the class if any pairs have more differences. Ask them to give one each. Tell them the record total so far is 13- can they beat it?

Language focus

Analysis and Practice

From the blackboard:

1 • Learners choose a useful phrase from each sentence and practise saying it. Delete the phrase immediately it is said. Delete other words gradually. This is called "progressive deletion"and should be fun!

2 • Learners read out all sentences in full, including the missing parts. Clean the board.

From the tapescript:

3 • Learners hear recording again and follow it in the tapescript. Pause the tape sometimes to let them predict how the next phrase will be said (intonation with stress on key words).

4 • Learners read the whole transcript and find twelve questions to classify in whatever ways they like (e.g. questions with 'shall' or 'get'; short questions-long questions; questions with/without a verb, etc.)

5 • Learners find two examples of the word 'so'. Where does it come in the conversation?

6 • If there's time, learners write down any new phrases they have noticed.

Bring the class together and review the analysis of questions. Practise short questions (point out many are without verbs) and then list questions with 'shall', 'get', 'have' and practise them.

(4-6 can be done for homework and reviewed in class)

Practice:

Make a riddle on a Small Creature, describing its physical appearance and natural capacity. Learners guess.

Encourage pupils to make riddles in groups and try them on the rest of the class.

Are you willing to try this plan in your class? It'd be ideal!

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LINGUISTIC SKILLS
AND COMMUNICATIVE ABILITIES

The development of the four skills.
The asymmetry between reception and production

Hi! How are things with you? Still surviving in spite of everything?

This time we'll be focusing on the distinction between linguistic skills and communicative abilities, how they interact and the value of each.

According to Widdowson –see References below– the concept of 'linguistic skill' can be associated with 'training' in the sense that there has to be some kind of specifiable type of performance that has to be mastered. In the literature, 'skill' translates as 'destreza'. Hence, skill mastery requires specific practice.

What does this mean? Let's give an example from a context other than that of foreign language teaching.

When we learn how to drive a car, there are a number of skills that we have to learn in order to become efficient drivers. For one thing, we must be able to recognise the position of the five gears so that we can choose the right one at the right moment. Part of this skill is also remembering to press the clutch to be able to engage (first) gear. (Or ruin the whole thing!)

When we have mastered this, does it mean that we've learnt how to drive? Does it mean we can go off into the traffic? Into a road? Oh, no! Those of us who have learnt how to drive know this very well much to our cost.

We need an awful number of other skills like the one we've just outlined to be able to control the unexpected: the traffic itself, other drivers' reactions, the geography of the place, and many other variables.

To the extent that we have managed to master all these skills individually, have learnt the place of each in the overall task of driving; if we have been relieved of the awesome task of remembering that it's necessary to first press the clutch to be able to engage any gear, and also press the clutch if we break the car to a halt, then we'll be ready to look at the ongoing traffic. And be good drivers.

The immediate conclusion is that skills are necessary to complete a whole (communicative) task. But, same as in the example on driving, a communicative task requires a number of (linguistic) skills coming together, integrated, articulated with each other, feeding on each other, and rendering a (communicative) ability.

There's nothing wrong about isolating a certain linguistic skill and give learners practice in it. If a group of learners cannot hear the difference between 'bean'and 'bin', it is necessary for the teacher to give them practice in the identification of these two vowels, especially because there's no equivalent contrast in Spanish. But note that this practice on its own won't enable learners to succeed in communication, though, no doubt, handling the distinction will make their lives easier.

Or take the headache of a first, second, third year of English: the -s for third person singular, Simple Present Tense. We may give learners isolated practice for them to choose which of the personal pronouns require the -s. This kind of practice may go fine while it's going on, but what happens when the learner is put into a more demanding situation that requires the solving of some problem? How many third-person -s's do we normally get? None?

In this light, let's have a look at a very frequent type of classroom drill, repetition.

Chorus repetition, group repetition, individual repetition are frequent strategies used in the classroom. Are they conducive to communication? No, not really, but they constitute an initial step towards the implementation of a certain linguistic form in short-term memory.

What is short-term memory? It's the kind of memory that allows us to remember, say, a telephone number that someone has given us orally until we get to the telephone or our personal telephone directory and write it dowbn, and dial it. Normally, once we've written it down or dialled the number, it is gone.

This is the frequent fate of linguistic skills if they're not recycled, revised, integrated, made meaningful in the context of a communicative ability. So? Linguistic skills are necessary but not enough.

What are linguistic skills, then? They're teaching strategies which require the receptive/productive manifestation of isolated linguistic aspects without a real communicative purpose, other than the practice of these same linguistic aspects.

A communicative ability, by contrast, will promote a global analysis of the context, with all its variables, which will also integrate those linguistic aspects that were isolated in view of the overall context. It goes without saying, then, that this type of approach is most desirable since it contributes to able language users, both receptibly and productibly.

This implies that the asymmetry between comprehension and production is best treated from the outlook of communicative abilities, rather than from the linguistic skill approach. As we've said before, communicative abilities are global, all encompassing, and hence suitable for exposure, which –hopefully– leads to input and hence acquisition.

How do we bridge the gap between linguistic skills and communicative abilities, then?

One neat way to do so is to always think of the final communicative task, and plan the lesson in terms of the linguistic skills necessary to pursue the task.

What we're trying to say is that there's a continuum between one extreme and the other, between an activity oriented towards the development of an isolated linguistic skill to full communicative value.

Nothing is forbidden provided there's a rational sequencing of activities from the mechanical –like repetition– going through manipulative activities –like the fill-in-the-blanks exercise– to the fully communicative situation with the expression of personal meanings.

Linguistic-skill practice should not be eradicated, provided it's put into the context of the overall planning leading on to communication, which requires that activities be placed in a certain order requiring more commitment, knowledge and communicative stress from the learner.

What do we mean by 'integration'? As learning does not proceed on a straight line – it frequently goes back, waits (often it comes to a halt), goes on, tries to include the new "learning member" into some system, sometimes confuses the system and a number of systems collapse; then, with more exposure, the learner elaborates a new hypothesis and "resends" the new item in a different direction, until it finally matches the features of the system in question.

Phew! How much work!

In teaching terms, what does this mean? It means that one way to bridge the gap between linguistic skills and communicative abilities is to plan activities that will recycle, integrate and reinforce a certain linguistic item in the context of the overall system, provoking the use of the target item in a situation with a communicative purpose.

This type of strategy will imply not only the use of the language but also the possibility of reflecting on the linguistic forms used in the context of the communicative activity proposed. In turn this means correcting errors, rewriting drafts, drawing attention to linguistic charts and the preparation of new activities that will serve both as input to find out more about learner hypotheses and further practice.

This latter concept brings us to the contrast between fluency and accuracy. Fluency does not necessarily mean speed in production – that depends on cognitive style. We would recommend instrumental fluency, which allows the learner to achieve the communicative purpose proposed in real time, even if, while doing so, his performance reveals that his interlanguage is incomplete and requires hypothesis adjustment.

What kind of activity would you implement for learners to carry out a survey relating to their classmates' daily routines, including domestic facts, leisure time, sports and other aspects you might have detected as crutial for your particular group of learners?

What aspects would you recommend for linguistic skill practice and how would you organise communicative practice as a continuum?

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READING

Scanning and skimming. Top-down and bottom-up approaches

Hello. How are you getting on? We're sure you'll find this new chapter very interesting, and we hope our suggestions will be useful to you.

When we read, there's interaction between ourselves and the text we're interpreting. This means that as we face a text, we start by recognising and decoding words, phrases, chunks. 'Chunk' is a very informal "umbrella term" used to refer to a number of linguistic units with different degrees of syntactic complexity.

What does this mean? A chunk may be 'the beautiful flowers', a noun phrase; it could also be 'the beautiful flowers that my learners gave me', which includes a noun phrase modified by a relative clause; it could also be 'the beautiful flowers that my learners gave me for Teacher's Day', which incorporates an adverbial adjunct of time within the relative clause. And we could go on.

Fluent readers can interpret very long chunks: the more fluent, the longer the chunks. As we've seen, chunks are based on syntactic structure. So fluency in reading can be said to be based on syntactic intuition, among other factors. Such is the case of visual discrimination. Immature foreign language readers might get stuck if they cannot recognise words. So syntactic recognition is possible if and only if the learner has been able to solve difficulties at the level of word recognition.

Fluency in reading is obviously a desirable objective. But there are many other aspects that contribute to a quick interpretation. One is previous knowledge on the topic: the more the reader knows, the smoother the interpretation. Another aspect is the number of clues that visuals accompanying the text itself provide the reader with: pictures, photos, charts. These constitute the paratext. All these elements allow the reader to make guesses and predict what the text will be about. Note that last comes the linguistic knowledge available to the learner.

Interpreting a text assumes previous (personal) knowledge, shared knowledge, a capacity to process information, and inferencing strategies.

In doing all this, the reader resorts to schemata. What are schemata? They are mental representations of typical instances, and they are used in processing information to predict and make sense of the particular instance which the text –oral or written– describes. The idea is that the mind, stimulated either by key linguistic items in the text (often referred to as "triggers"), or by the context, activates a schema, and uses it to make sense of the discourse.

A task-based content-based approach requires a balance between skills and language development. Some of the key skills to be learnt or transferred into the new language are:

- selecting what is relevant for the identified purpose;
- using all the paratextual clues available;
- skimming for content and meaning;
- scanning for specific information;
- identifying the text organisation;
- interpreting relations within sentences and across sentences;
- interpreting cohesive and discourse markers;
- predicting, inferring and guessing;
- identifying main ideas, supporting ideas and examples;
- processing and evaluating the information during the reading;
- transferring or using the information while or after reading;

As this list shows, skimming and scanning are not the only skills required to understand a text fully. Skimming and scanning are useful initially only.

What do skimming and scanning imply? If the reader has a general, global look at a text to find out what it is about, they're scanning it. By contrast, skimming implies exploring a text for specific information.

A top-down approach focuses on the linguistic resources the learner has at their disposal. By contrast, a bottom down approach focuses on meaning and on the learner's previous knowledge, that is, their schema, personal and shared.

The approach we're promoting implies an integration of top-down and bottom-up approaches. Why? Because we start off from the learner, their knowledgge of the world, cultural and social knowledge, and we proceed to integrate linguistic and communicative knowledge available to the learner.

Further, this approach focuses on meaning, not only the meanings of words, phrases, clauses and sentences and vocabulary, but also the meanings in connected discourse, learner and their schema, individual and shared: that makes it bottom-up. This is the scheme we've outlined.

In terms of the scheme proposed above, choose a suitable text. What is a suitable text? One that is in accordance with your learners' level -- remember there's always the possibility of presenting them with a text with a higher degree of complexity than they can produce. Remember the asymmetry between reception and production.

A text is also suitable if it is interesting to your learners. Remember that the purpose of reading is not practising certain linguistic forms, but to find out about something we didn't know about, or to have fun, or many other reasons. Make this clear to your learners.

Next, present them with the text. Get them to look at the title, pictures, photos, visuals in general. Carry out a brain-storming session about their intuitions on the content of the text. Write their ideas on the blackboard.

Identify a purpose for reading: this means setting a task, like completing a chart, solve a problem, and the like.

Now write two or three –no more– comprehension questions on the blackboard. These should be general for you to check whether there's global understanding of the text. Preferably, these questions should be related to their predictions.

Set the reading task. As learners read, walk about and help them if necessary.

When learners are done, ask them to tell you about the difficulties they had while reading the text. Where did they get stuck? (It might be the case that they found some words difficult to decode) If so, teach them to infer, guess, draw on previous knowledge, read and reread, and employ particular strategies when meaning is unclear.

Get them to answer the questions and then exchange versions with the learner next to them. Have a class-as-whole feedback session. If necessary, write your learners' answers on the blackboard. If there are different versions, try to get to one unified version, if possible.

Now write two or three more detailed comprehension questions on the blackboard. Reset the reading task. When learners are through, get them to exchange versions in groups of (four) learners. Instruct them each group should come to one unified version. Again, walk about "visiting" each group. Clarify learners' doubts if necessary.

When you're sure the meaning of the text is clear to the whole class, draw your learners' attention to the text type. Is it a description, a letter, a narrative? Once again, try to retrieve as much knowledge as possible of learners' previous experience with text types. It's necessary to promote the transfer of intuitions and knowledge of text structure learners might have.

Next concentrate on the structure of the text. Are there clearly identifiable parts in the text? Which are they? How are they expresssed? Are there structures, tenses which are typical in the expression of each of the parts of the text? How are the transitions expressed, that is, how are the paragraphs linked to each other? Are there explicit indicators of cohesive links? Get your learners to underline them, elicit the meaning of each, and get learners to reflect on the role of each in the expression of logical relations: addition, contrast, alternation, consequence, temporal relations.

Then, set a task for learners to use the information in the text to solve some problem-solving situation. This could be filling in a file, taking a decision related to the content of the text, and the like.

Now get your learners to decide if they met their purpose for reading outlined initially. Ask them how they felt during its development. As you do this, evaluate your learners' understanding of what was read. You might get them to summarise ideas- on paper and/or in their heads, encourage them to find additional information, if necessary, get them to connect information with other knowledge.

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PROCESS WRITING

Portfolios. Self-correction. Peer correction

Hiya!, as they say in some parts of Britain. We'll be busy writing busily this time. Excuse the reiteration, but sometimes itr serves a purpose when we write.

No one likes writing much. How about you? How often do you write? What do write (about)? Who do you write to? Do you ever write in English? Hmm.

Let's confess: many of us run away from a blank sheet of paper, or screen, We always try to find excuses to postpone it. Is it we're lazy? Is it we'll be punished if a spelling mistake or a typo slips unnoticed? (A 'typo' is a typing error, a slip of the finger, an elegant euphemism to blame the finger that pressed the wrong key. Not the head that gave the wrong command.)

Well, anyway. What's written 'will' be written. Forever? We'll see. What are our fears?

As teachers we've been led to believe that writing is a one -shot affair– one writes once and that's it; that writing is there to stay, that it therefore cannot be changed; that one'd better avoid writing what one is not sure of; that before writing there should be careful planning...

But experience shows that no effective message occurs the first time we write it, and we therefore require it to be reshaped several times, in whichever language. All that matters is the message we want to communicate.

Isn't it a shared experience that writing is rarely taught; that it is rather assigned and then corrected? The –'our'- teachers' emphasis was -is?- on a final product, not on the processes that led the writer to laboriously produce his piece.

Let's relax, ourselves, and get our learners to relax about writing as well. For many learners, the red -or green- pen is one of the most feared classroom objects.

Writing is one more communicative ability. As such it rests upon the pragmatic principles all communicative situations respond to. Moreover, it's a fantastic way to leave records of things we do, things that happen, a very useful way to organise our thoughts. Yes, 'as' we write.

Some people write outlines, or notes, or sketches before writing a piece. Others 'just set out to write', and then they discover what they want to express through their own writing. Those are "unruly" cause they don't follow the "prescribed steps": they find that writing helps them think. And they set out to explore their own heads in search of an idea to write about. (!!)

But are there any prescribed steps? The 'norm' says 'yes'. The non-comformists say, "No, on the contrary." What is true is that there are few hard and fast rules. Writing style responds to cognitive and learning style as any other type of activity a learner/a mature language user might embark on. Writing is certainly a private affair with public consequences.

Meaning? That as writers we have a target, an interlocutor or audience in mind, and that we imagine their frame of mind, how much they know about what we're writing And so we write to 'them', as we have imagined them. And let's not forget ourselves. Don't you ever write to yourself?

But for the writer to direct a written piece to a clearly defined interlocutor there must be clues. Contextual clues. Either the writer draws the clues from the immediate situational context, or he infers them from a linguistic/communicative context.

The two very often merge. A phone call from a friend and the agreed need for one of them to write down some information to be passed to a third party. Or a letter to the editor of a newspaper or magazine telling them about our reactions on a topic brought up in the newspaper. Or the need to write down messages on the answering phone. Linguistic or situational? Hard to tell.

And how to find the clues? How is an audience, an interlocutor defined? There are several parameters. One very important aspect is the relationship between the reader and the writer. Their social roles. Are they (supposed to be) peers? Or does one hold a condition of superiority over the other? And then, what are their psychological roles? How do they feel about each other? Enthused? Bored? Angry? Indifferent? Can you think of other possible feelings that might link up writer and reader? In your own experience as a writer? (Now, don't go on to say, "I'm not a writer." Cause you are!)

So, your learners must not believe that they're writing to you or for you. Unless you're the selected audience. In this case this might be made clear to them. Especially with adolescents. They have big, sensitive noses to smell out all that is not genuine. Remember that.

And then what for. The famous 'communicative purpose'. ('Famous' because it's been bandied about countless times as one of the basic tenets of a communicative approach.)

The interlocutor, their social and psychological roles and the communicative purpose will determine the format, that is, the 'text type'. A note? A diary? A letter? A report? A biography? A story? An advertisement? A myth? An interview? A review? What else?

Each text type will require a certain internal structure. And vocabulary, and tenses and structures. But also connectors – 'cohesive devices', which express temporal sequences, addition, contrast, choice, consequence. And general words which replace others which are more specific. All this we call 'cohesion', or the semantic relationship that puts sentences together so that they do not make up a bare list but an organic fabric with 'texture'.

How can we teach learners to write? The basic thing is that discourse types do not develop naturally. They must be taught There's a great difference between oral and written discourse. Conversational discourse could be developed naturally, but only some of its variants.

To learn how to write the first and most important stage is to allow learners to have exposure to certain types of text we're interested in teaching because they will be functional in conveying useful information about certain topics we have chosen as key notes. There's no need to reiterate the importance of exposure in language learning, L1, L2, FL.

The next stage is to draw learners' awareness to the features of the text: who the interlocutor is; what the communicative purpose is, and how this is manifested; what the format is and how it is organised; how the transitions between one part and the next are resolved; what syntactic and lexical resources are used to express the intended meanings. You can make lists of these features for learners to copy. Without remorse.

The third stage is in the teacher's hands. It implies "selling" the writing task, that is to say, presenting it attractively, as functionally useful, interesting, relevant, challenging, 'within the learners' reach'. Allow all kinds of questions at this stage: tell them they can look up their textbooks, notes, dictionaries and personal lexicons, and also, that they can consult other learners. And you as well. Make them at ease. 'This is not a test'.

The fourth stage comprises the prewriting stage. Conduct an activity to encourage learners to organise their thoughts by brainstorming ideas, researching relevant materials, making webs or charts that outline their thoughts, and interviewing someone for useful information. Have feedback class-as-a-whole, for example.

The fifth stage involves the learner as a writer, as solitary as ever, confronted with a satisfactorily familiar writing task. He 'must' write his own 'first draft', and probably he will start by jotting down his ideas without concern for spelling, grammar, or handwriting. The focus is writing for meaning, concentrating on conveying their thoughts to an audience.

But there must be an interested reader-itinerant teacher helping him every time he puts up his hand to 'yell' for help. (This is more of an affective measure than a linguistic resource)

The sixth stage involves editing. When the allotted time is over –be firm but gentle about this– get learners to exchange their first drafts with their partners. Give them some time to exchange ideas and produce a 'second draft'. Meanwhile, walk about clarifying doubts and also making mental notes for your final reflection on the writing activity.

The seventh stage is is still devoted to editing. This time you might encourage learners to join groups –four to six learners– and discuss their drafts for a second editing – and subsequent production of their 'third draft'. As you circulate, you will soon realise which learners have come to an acceptable third draft, and which require extra help. Encourage the ones who are through to do a final 'personal editing' which could be "published" somewhere in the classroom, for example a 'bulletin board'. Concentrate on the ones that require more help.

Learners revise their work for meaning, proofread and edit it for spelling and grammar mistakes, individually, in pairs, in groups, and/or in conference with the teacher.

Learners must keep all their research notes, personal interviews, annotated (underlined, highlighted) texts because they'll provide data on their development and personal, peer and group process. This comprises the 'portfolio'.

Correction 'is' done by the authors themselves, individual peers often chosen by the author, accompanying member groups, and lastly, really as a very last resort, by the teacher.

This is one of the ways in which a 'process approach to writing' can be enforced. It has rendered to be an excellent way to generate meaningful and grammatically correct written texts.

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EVALUATION AND ASSESSMENT

Process and product assessment

Hello! We're about to close these pages on Level 1.

In the process we have tried to cover the whole of the methodological cycle. What do we mean by this?

We started with the approach; then we went on to the objectives or 'expectativas de logro'; next we got down to methodology and technique, both broader than an approach, and, in so doing, we included choice of materials. Now comes the moment of evaluating results.

A dreaded moment, no doubt. But why?

In a way, talk of evaluation closes a stage and opens up another. This means that evaluation is an integral part of the learning process and it should be planned as part of the process itself.

But, unfortunately, it hasn't been customary for this to be so.

It's been taken to evaluate teacher's actions in the classroom. Well, it shouldn't be surprising in a teacher-centred approach. As we say in Chapter 1 of this series –you may choose to go back to it- it's not that we teach this and this our learners will produce. Not really. "So much in, so much out" certainly does not describe what goes on in life. And certainly not in the classroom either.

Why not?

Because, as we said before, input goes to the brain, and the brain, together with the person's overall affective apparatus, processes information. It is as if it said, "This I want, this I don't want. Out it goes." And there is no possible learning if the person doesn't want to learn.

So, the preliminary conclusion is that evaluation is a very complex process – to say the least.

Let's breathe in deeply and push on. This topic certainly *is* a difficult topic.

Evaluation is ultimately intended to give teachers and learners feedback that will determine adjustments and re-planning of the work to make sure that learning takes place effectively and efficiently.

This said, there should be continuous evaluation all through the school year, and of course, through each project teacher and learners have embarked on. This is process or integrative evaluation. Constant assessment prevents unpleasant surprises.

Progress assessment is moderately easy in a task-based approach, like the one we're proposing. Each step in the development of a project towards a final task entails progress evaluation with the consequent adjustment of objectives for the next step. This in turn redounds in more practice, resystematisation, and perhaps, also, new activities of a different nature.

So this means that not all evaluation is destined to measure 'final results'. By its very nature, learning a language is mainly procedural, so it's process-based. And if we teach it as a process, shouldn't we evaluate it in the same way? Unfortunately, this is not the current view in the classroom. "What's done is done". So it's considered to be a "one-shot" affair. You miss your target, you miss your turn. And that's it.

All for process, then.

Evaluation and assessment

Process assessment involves learners' interest, their progress in the development of communicative skills and in the growth of the linguistic system, their knowledge of content, their attitude towards the language, the group and themselves as members of the group.

Conceptual, procedural and attitudinal concepts. All three. The four skills. All four. The whole integrated into learner performance.

Quite a task, isn't it? So how can we proceed?

In order to develop self-awareness of progress -their own and others'- it's advisable to involve learners in the evaluation task.

Learners can assess their own achievement of objectives, development of abilities, knowledge of concepts, use of English in class, participation, work with classmates, their role at school, what they think about the topics and the text they're using in general.

How must we proceed to enable this?

One essential aspect is for learners to know what they're evaluating. This requires teachers to share their objectives with their groups of learners. Yes, do let them have a copy and refer to this list every time your lesson finishes. Questions like, what have we learnt today? What have we revised today? How are you getting on? Do you think you need more practice? Why? In what areas? What do you think you could do to improve your performance?

The what-can-you-do question might be disturbing at the beginning. But it's necessary to teach learners to build up their self-esteem and autonomy. Go gently but firmly, and try not to give up in despair.

So, to recap so far, we have focused on assessment of learner progress. This is called 'formative evaluation' by some authors. This you do informally as you go along, but regularly. It allows you to adjust your planning constantly. And think and rethink your teaching on safe ground.

All for process..., but not all the time...

What happens when the term finishes and we have to comply with the institutional requirement of term marks? Another dreaded headache. Progress reports will come in handy, yes, but some kind of partial rounding off will be necessary.

It's time for assessment of product.

Assessment of product is generally called 'summative evaluation'. It concentrates on the assessment of learners' use of English, class interaction, activities, interest, materials and topics at the end of a specified period of time.

And this is where it is necessary to review the types of activities learners were engaged in, the types of texts they were exposed to and had to handle; the skills and subskills that were practised.

Exactly as we taught them.

That's why the Final Task is a good opportunity for product evaluation. And a natural one, where there can be learner participation.

And last but not least there's ourselves: the hateful moment of evaluating ourselves and our task.

Here's a checklist that might help you sit down and reflect:

- How clear was I when I gave instructions? Were learners clear what they had to do? (Sometimes one is not but still some learners manage to guess. But what about the great majority? Am I ready to make provision for that? Mm...)

- What kind of procedures did I use? Were they in keeping with the procedures used during the term/year? Were they adequate?

- What else could I have used that could've been clearer? More transparent texts? Fewer unknown words? Another topic? A shorter listening comprehension text? Better illustrations? A better tape? More men on tape? (Women seem to be more difficult to understand than men..., only in terms of voice quality and speed of delivery..., of course!!)

- Where did I go wrong? (We teachers often go wrong, but the good thing is that we've always got the next class to remedy errors) And in this case there's the next term. The important thing is not to wait until the end of the year 'cause chances are that there won't be much for us to do. But we often make the right decisions as well! So... cheer up! (But more about success below.)

- Was I successful? Where was I successful?

  What were my successes? (Be ample and generous with yourself!) What else could I do to be more successful? (It's OK to sit back and view one's successes, but it's good to plan for new ones! 'Always on the move'!)

- What do my learners think of the test and of the work we've done together? (Do ask them to justify what they say. This is another bit of learning for them as well.)

And now it's time to rethink objectives. And the whole thing starts all over again. New textbook? New topics? Different text types? A different linguistic sequence?

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1

MORE OF THE SAME:
WHY LEARN MORE ENGLISH?

Learning useful things for today and tomorrow

Here we're starting a new section. This time we'll be focusing on the Second Level of English at EGB 3. (You might want to read the chapter entitled "Overall Framework", if you haven't read it yet. You might find a number of points that will no doubt help you make sense of the topics discussed)

Here we're facing a group of learners who have hopefully managed to complete the contents in Level 1.

This is the picture: some of your learners might have completed their Level 1 at EGB 2 successfully. If this is the case, you might feel a certain degree of enjoyment on their part at the prospect of starting EGB 3 with a new Level. They will probably feel important and expectant.

To others, it might be, as they say in English, "a blessing in disguise", i.e. something one must gulp down as it were, for one's future benefit. (The only problem is that the good of it is not apparent to them in any sense conceivable.)

There's still another well defined group – those who have decided that "they'll never make it in English", either because they've been convinced that this is so through sustained failure or because they've been de-motivated, or lazy, or because they speak a different Ll and this has not been part of the teachers' priority in their syllabus.

Still, adolescence lurks in the background of all different groups. Even for the most enthusiastic, group allegiance and recognition might rank before any kind teacher initiated effort. Peers come first.

And so pronunciation and intonation might "go down the drain"; creativity and explicit interest might be disguised behind indifference and lack of participation. You might find that some of them often find it shocking having to engage in something when they can't at first see why they're doing it.

And the inevitable question, "Why learn more English? What for?

And here comes yet one more challenge. How to convince them that English is much much more than learning grammar and vocabulary? How to show them that it is possible to do some of their things in English? That it is a live language?

The challenge is then manifold: maitaining the interest of those who are interested; convincing the ones that see no point in learning English that it's useful and interesting to learn it; and showing those learners who think they're no good at learning it, that they can, but not theoretically, say: getting them to fulfill graded tasks with controlled communicative challenges.

The key, then, is motivation, 'extrinsic' motivation. Creating a favourable class atmosphere, where topic choice and targeted skills encourage interaction within their own teenage culture are taken into account. The interesting thing about young people is that there are elements of their 'culture' that do not respect national boundaries. American films and fashions are popular throughout the world. British and American pop groups are also very big in many places because English is the language of pop. In fact, groups that sing in English have a much larger potential audience. For example, the Swedish group Abba, which is going through a revival, was huge in the 70's but there are lots of more recent examples.

Then, teenage mags like 'Shout', 'Sugar' or 'Just 17' are invaluable. Finding stuff that is of interest is a start. Making sure that it does not date, that it is suitable for classroom use, and that it is easy to use, is the challenge. These authentic materals can stimulate you and your learners to experiment and develop further materials of your own. All these will no doubt be refreshing and innovative.

And the other tearing question: how to promote "real communication"?, and motivate learners to listen and speak in English. Involving learners in the dynamics of the class is another key question. Peer-to-peer interaction in small groups is thought to offer a number of advantages (Richards and Lockhart, 1994, Brown, 1994): it reduces the dominance of the teacher over the class, it promotes collaboration among learners, it offers a more comfortable, relaxed atmosphere, it enables the teacher to work more as facilitator or consultant, it can promote learner responsability and autonomy.../... but its crucial advantage is that it can increase the quantity of student talking time (STT) in the classroom.

Carry a survey among your learners. Ask them what they think about English and what uses they think they can put it to today and tomorrow. Suggest a few ideas but listen to theirs. All the best.

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A TASK-BASED CONTENT BASED APPROACH WITH SECOND LEVEL EGB 3 LEARNERS

Choice of topics, activities and text types. A learner-centred curriculum

We're now getting down to brass tacks. In the first part of this chapter we'll be discussing on the pros and cons of a content-based approach to enforce the Second Level of English at EGB 3. In the second, we'll be trying to give you a few ideas on how to put it into practice.

As we discussed repeatedly in the first part of this booklet -Chapters 4, 6, 7 and 9, which you might want to review– a content -based approach has the potential for developing growing English-proficiency by learning 'through' English, and orienting this growing labyrinth of paths in the direction of knowledge area language skills learners need to participate successfully in an integrated classroom.

Rather than focusing on language forms and functions alone, and attempting 'fake' communicative activities of little personal interest, content-based (foreign) language instruction also develops conceptual knowledge appropriate to the learner's course level.

According to the 'Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century' (USA), it is recommended that there should be a broad integration of communication skills, culture, interdisciplinary academic content, and world citizenship. These tandards were developed around three organising principles, which include:

- "the Five C's of Foreign Language Education" (Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities – we'll be developing all of them all along this series of chapters),

- the "weave" of curricular elements (the language system, cultural knowledge, communication strategies, critical thinking, learning strategies, other subject areas, and technology), and

- the framework of communicative modes (interpersonal, interpretive, and presentational). "

In this light, activities to foster language acquisition and learning are integrated, whenever possible, with those designed to teach information or content. Thus, learners reinforce and further their knowledge of other disciplines through the foreign language. They acquire information and recognise the distinctive viewpoints that are only available through the foreign language, its cultures, and Global Culture.

By the same token, this aproach allows learners to engage in conversations, provide and obtain information, express feelings and emotions, and exchange opinions within topical frameworks relevant to their ages, interests and cultural contexts. In the process, this allows them to interpret oral and written language on a variety of topics and in diverse language formats.

As a natural consequence, learners present information, concepts, and ideas to an audience of listeners or readers -peers or others- on topics of their own choice relevant to the group's cognitive, affective, social, learning and heuristic ("exploratory") needs.

The implementation of these objectives calls for activities geared to visual and experiential learning- especially through videos selected and edited by the instructor; learner produced materials such as posters and projects; realia, group skits and dramatic presentations.

In turn, these strategies aim to enable the development of all four skills through exposure to different text types, both in the oral and written modes. Gradually, effective input with motivating content will surely yield production of texts by motivated learners, not so much in the language itself –that requires a well developed capacity for (meta)linguistic appreciation– but in the discoveries made and in the handling of information itself.

As a possible activity, you might carry out a survey among your learners. Ask them about topics they would like to find out about, and get them to explain why they're interested in it/them. Next, tell them to find out who else in the group in interested in the same topic, and encourage them to form groups of four to six learners each. They should try to agree on a common topic, and think of possible sources to initiate a short research project. When they're through, get them to report to the big group both in the form of a written plan and an oral exposition.

Good luck!

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MATERIALS

Sources and resources, textbooks, ancillary materials. Motivating learners through challenging materials

In the previous chapter we referred to communication as one of the most cherished goals to be achieved in the FL classroom. Good deal! Of course we want our learners to communicate. And content-based approaches provide us with relevant subject.matter to communicate about.

The question now is, 'how can we drive our learners to communicate?' There are many ways, but one is surely the result of the materials we use. Let's start by the textbook.

But they cannot perform the miracle on their own. They need help. What kind of help would be required, then?

The kind of help required is rather obvious, and it has to do with what a teacher can get from a textbook, basically, and from other resources, like songs, audio-cassettes, videos and their teacher guides (if any), books on activities and the like.

Have you identified any already? Are any of these being used in your classroom? Are they in use? If so, what?/which?

If one focuses on the textbook, there are a number of requirements the textbook must comply with. Let's see if we can give a few examples.

In this respect, the obvious answers are: a sensible grammatical grading, suitable contexts, interesting, motivating, cognitively engaging ssubject-matter, functional activities, good ideas for recycling, effective suggestions for reinforcement and correction, suitable samples for testing, good illustrations, attractive subject-matter and layout, a low price, so that learners do not opt for making photocopies...

Some authors discuss the relationship between the textbook, the learner and yourself as a kind of inseparable trio that fares the whole year. Other authors go to the extreme of postulating a "marriage relationship" between the teacher and the textbook, which is not supposed to last a lifetime a a whole school year..., at least!

How do you feel about the textbook you use? Faithful? Unfaithful? Disrespectful?

And when you choose your textbook, do you take into account some of the following crieria?

Does the textbook you're going to use/you're using,

- offer clear guidelines as to how it can be used?
- focus on relevant topics for your learners?
- make its objectives explicit to you? To your learners?
- make provision for the diversity of learner backgrounds, learning styles and personal rhythms?

- take account of learner beliefs, prior knowledge and social and cultural conceptions?
- allow learners their own learning pace?
- include successful pieces for presentation of new material (language, communication, topics)?
- foster recall, recycling and integration of previous learning?
- provide suitable (relevant, functional) contexts of learning?
- offer a suitable linguistic and communicative sequencing?
- include a variety of relevant samples of language, texts, situations, topics and the like?
- provoke reflection on what is being learnt and on how it is being learnt?
- take account of your learners as active 'catalysts' of language and knowledge area content?
- give feedback to your learners?
- help learners to make their own connections, conclusions and contributions?
- make connections with other materials that can be used?

And then,

- Is it attractive as a textbook?
- Does it provide you with material that appropriately fits into the existing learning context?
- Are you happy with it? Are your learners happy with it?

As a possible activity on the choice of textbook you might carry out a survey among your learners. You might present them with a series of questions drawn from the ones above, and you might add others, for example relating to characters' age and ways of reacting in social situations. That might be a clue as to what your learners feel about the textbook they use every day.

And then you might include other ancillary materials, like songs, oral narrations, videos, extra activity books.

Can you measure the effect on your teaching and your students' learning?

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AN OPTIMAL (FUNCTIONAL) SEQUENCING

This chapter will allow us to look at some issues that were discussed in the first series of chapters, 1, 2 and 3, which are concerned with acquisition and learning.

On this occasion, we will be focusing on the relationship between these processes and how different textbooks organise linguistic and communicative material to make the learning process easier to the learner. This is called 'grading'. The question is, is it possible to do this? Is it true that what is linguistically simple is, in fact, easier to learn?

There is the generalised belief that learning should start with easy items and turn to progressively more difficult ones, but it is often the case that teachers and syllabus designers often trust their own experience. In fact, it is not easy to determine what is easy and what is difficult.

Can you think of something "simpler" than the –s for third person singular?

A common assumption that guides the so called "Structural Approach", is that learners in fact progress in a linear fashion. What do we mean? We mean that aspects of language should be presented and practised to the point of "full" mastery and automated use before complex and more "difficult" ones.

At first sight it seems sensible to assert that learners should progress in a linear fashion, from the presentation and practice of simple structures to that of more complex ones, and that there should be a strict control over the number and kind of structures presented in order not to overburden the learners.

However, the very same linguists and grammarians that stare there are simple and complex structures also declare that 'language is a system of systems'.

What is a system? An organised whole, made up of components with a value within that same whole. For example, the Present Perfect Tense has a value only when contrasted with the Simple Past Tense. And the singular contrasts with the plural, and so on.

The adoption of an approach like the one described above poses two questions:

a • considering that language is a system of systems, as we say above, is it necessary to teach all the components of a given system for the learner to access the system as a whole?

b • taking into account that words in general, and modals in particular, for example, have several meanings, is it necessary to teach all the possible meanings including metaphorical meaning?

c • if words and phrases have different uses and communicative meanings, which mark degrees of adequacy with respect to different social situations and interaction with speakers who perform different roles, is it necessary to teach all the possible uses? Or should their less frequent uses be introduced at a later stage when they are taken up again for a second (or third) time?

The three questions posed above read like rhetorical questions. The commonsense answer is NO, NO, NO.

Besides, there does not seem to be any room for learner contribution. And we know for a fact –our learners themselves teach us lessons on creativity every single day– that the learner's mind is a 'processor', constantly adjusting, sorting out, hypothesising, arranging and re-arranging. An active mind.

In the first part of this booklet, we state that research into second and foreign language acquisition has proved there is a natural route of development specified by the language being learnt, in this case English.

This natural route specifies a natural order of acquisition, which, apparently, has little to do with linguists' and grammarians' decisions as to the degree of complexity of linguistic forms.

To give you an example: a long time ago a group of 13 year-old beginners, using a rather inadequate textbook for their age since it was geared to young adults, came to lesson 4 or 5. The main target was "Expressing and asking about likes and dislikes" through the exponents 'like-likes'/'don't'-'doesn't' 'like' In that lesson there were two young adults, a boy and a girl, "getting to know each other". At one point of the conversation, the girl asked, "Do you like classical music?" "Oh, no," replied the boy. "Classical music sends me to sleep."

The teacher was horrified. "How can I possibly teach this pattern at this stage?" So she decided not to teach it. She played the cassette, and when they got to the much feared pattern, she asked: "Does X (I forget the character's name) like classical music?" "No," the learners replied, almost all of them. The teacher asked a brave question: "How do you know?" She saw several hands up and got ready for the worst. She appointed one of the learners. "Yes"" "Porque dice 'Classical music sends me to sleep." And then, when she hadn't yet recovered, she heard, "Homework sends me to sleep." And then she could hear generalised laughter. And then, "Matemática sends me to sleep.".

Breathe in. This is fantastic but it doesn't explain the whole of language learning.

As we say elsewhere, learning does not proceed in a linear fashion. It's got its own directions, rhythms and modes of proceeding.

One of such ways is through reiteration, that is, 'by recycling new material and presenting the learner with it in different contexts' but not massively.

What does this mean? That when organising material for presentation and practice, there should be as many opportunities as possible for the learner to be exposed to the target linguistic aspects at regular intervals, each occasion providing more clues as to the way the item/s function/s within their own system and across with respect to other systems.

The view of learning that underlies this approach to material organisation implies that learning itself is 'provisional', that it counts on a learner getting near(er) the target in gradual approximations, going back, processing and re-processing, hypothesising, getting stuck, and going further on.

So, the syllabus organisation is spiral, which allows cyclical reiteration. In turn, these reiterations in new contexts offer chances of recycling the material, reinforcing it, and widening its confines, discovering new meanings and uses.

This kind of approach might give the impression of too much disorganisation. This requires the teacher to keep a daily record of lexical and structural items which were introduced, those that are still standby, and those that must be taken up again, so that systems are recycled in terms of learner needs and completed and rounded off in accordance with linguistic requirements.

Because of everyday overwork, what we generally do is rely on the organisation in the textbook we have chosen. And that refers us back to Chapter Nº 3, on the choice of textbook. But there are several things a textbook cannot do for us –however good it might be– and that is catering for our learner needs.

This capacity to detect learner needs will develop in us the possibility of viewing the textbook with a critical eye – even if it is the best we could possibly have chosen, and of drawing from it what our learners require. This is an important step in developing our autonomy as teachers.

On the other hand, the assumption that as teachers we must follow whatever has been stated in the textbook blindly is false, as false as the rather generalised belief that the ideal textbook should contain a restricted corpus of grammar and vocabulary. Vocabulary is what really allows communication, comprehension and the expression of personal meanings.

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STUMBLING BLOCKS IN THE LEARNING PROCESS

The plateau predicament. Fossilisation and variability. Reflecting on errors. Correction. Teacher intervention

This chapter will allow us to look at some issues that were discussed in the first part of this booklet, in particular Chapter 2, which is concerned with interlanguage.

The study of "language learner language" or learner interlanguage is one of the most studied aspects in second and foreign language acquisition research for the last 30 years or so. It is supposed to be a dynamic system, sometimes pausing for reorganising features and components, and then proceeding.

But this is no more than a bucolic picture, the ideal thing, What happens in fact?

Learners tend to get stuck at different points, sometimes these points are in a way predictable. This is what we mean by "stumbling blocks". These are inevitable, and are generally determined by features of the target language, but also by personal learner factors.

Among these factors we can mention personality, age, intelligence, aptitude, cognitive style, and motivation in foreign language acquisition. The better we get to know the group, the better prepared we will be to predict these stumbling blocks and develop strategies to remedy them.

Now a word about each of these factors.

Relative success and rate of acquisition seem to be closely related to age. Younger learners seem to score better at oral skills, typically pronnciation and intonation; older learners appear to learn faster, especially with respect to the morphology and the syntax of the target language.

Researchers assert that intelligence generally is closely related with success in the foreign language classroom. Aptitude also helps the learner higher levels of communicative competence.

As you may know already, motivation and attitude influence success. Instrumental and integrative motivation combined sustaining initial motivation through different types of tasks. (You can look up task-based and content-based learning in the first series of chapters)

When it comes to personality traits, research seems to point to he fact that extrovert personalities tend to achieve better at communicative compeence, while learners of the introvert type might be better at developing linguistic competence. Cognitive style does not seem to be decisive in successful language learning.

As you might have experienced already, individual learner variables are not easy to attend to due to the lack of a common and standardised definition for each of the different variables (for example, the distinction between motivation and attitudes is not always clear.) Also, the interrelatedness of the various factors (for example, age and cognitive style, cognitive style and personality, etc.)

However, if these factors are attended to while planning correction and remedial strategies, there is the possibility that learners might not fall into the much feared "plateau predicament". What does this mean?

As we said above, the learning process pauses at intervals to process information. The danger is that this period should extend for too long a time, and might not be able to take in new material, recycle and integrate and incorporate material for production.

What could be done in these cases?

Classroom experience has shown that the more we insist the worse it becomes, and the learner seems to regress. One possible measure is not to insist on production, but focus on comprehension, on input; in other words, what can be done is change the discourse domain.

As we state in Chapter 2, much like natural languages, interlanguages are found to be variable. All along the acquisition/learning process, the learner's interlanguage goes through different stages of development.

Each stage of development overlaps with the one that precedes and follows it, so that at any given stage of development the learner's interlanguage contains a number of competing language rules with "one rule guiding performance on one occasion and another rule on a different occasion" (Ellis, 1985:75).

Students' linguistic performance often varies even from one task to anothe, and there are a number of factors that are believed to produce variables forms.

Variability can be systematic and non-systematic. Systematic variability is relatively easy to handle since in general it can be seen most learners at the same time, and they show the direction of learner language development.

More problematic is individual variability. Here we must try to guess what kind of hypotheses he learner has constructed to understand the system the learner has constructed.

There's still another type of variabiity, contextual variability, which can be explained with reference to either the linguistic or the situational context of use. This involves the type of task, for instance, since we're focusing on language learning in the classroom.

Performance variability has to do with psycholinguistic factors such as the learner's emotional or physical condition, which can lead to slips, hesitations and repetitions.

And here comes the headache: free variability. It is sometimes the case tha learners use two or more alternate forms that exist within the learner's interlanguage for no apparent reason.

All these factors point to the complexity of the learning task, and to the usefulness of teacher intervention.

We might suggest the following activity:
a • single out one learner from one of your groups;
b • keep a record of his/her performance for two weeks;
c • try to classify your data in terms of different variables:
 • oral v. written discourse
 • planned v. unplanned discourse
 • controlled v. free production
d • try to spot any instances of variability
e • classify those instances in terms of the types we've discussed in this chapter
f • try to elaborate a remedial strategy to help that learner;
g • apply it;
h • measure results;
i • interview your learner: what were his/her impressions?

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MORE ON TEXT TYPES

Web-based and nultimedia texts. Hypertext. Linearity v. hierarchy and threads.
Learnability

I this chapter we will be focusing on new text types, typically those related with the web.

What is a text? We often refer to a book as a text because it represents a wholeness, a complete story or a scientific report, for example. Texts also often include the neginning and completion of a story, an argument and whatever is the purpose of the text.

What, then, counts as text? We would likely not call this passage quoted from Shakespeare as the text of Hamlet:

"There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all."(V, ii, 208-211)

We would refer to the quoted passage as part of the text of Hamlet. But once it's included in another work, it becomes part of the new work. In essence, then, the same passage is part of two different texts. From a discourse perspective, linguistic structures, as they are used in communicative situations, are embedded in the whole social and historical context of culture.

They are but one system of signs among many that people use to give meaning to their environment. Other signs include not only gestures, facial expressions, body movements, verbal and non-verbal sounds, and proxemics, but also cultural artifacts such as traffic noise and folk music, pictures and billboards, and landscapes and city maps. Linguistic signs acquire their meaning because they point to other signs in the environment.

When learners go abroad and interact with the members of the host culture, all these signs are there, live, to be recognised and decoded. In a video or multimedia programme, however, they are inevitably filtered through the film-maker, the camera, and its lens, in other words, through the semiotic system of the video itself. Interpreting that semiotic system means understanding as much as possible why certain events might have been selected, others ignored, why certain people were focussed on, others left in the background, and so forth.

What students need to understand, then, when learning the linguistic system through "authentic" video, is the way language interacts with other sign systems, including those of the medium that represents them.

Hypertexts

What is a hypertext? It's a new type of text with short sections linked up to each other. The reader in a way chooses the order and constructs a text of their own. It is to be found on the wide world web. The reader can easily jump back and forth between the documents, looking at various parts of this text.

"Hypertext is a characteristic product of the late age of print. While still dependent on alphabetic literacy, linearity, hierarchy, and other trappings of Gutenberg culture, hypertext implicitly challenges the origins from which it came to life. It is a a dynamic network of ideas, indefinite in its boundaries and mutable over time.

The precise nature and boundaries of a hypertext are hard to define. The experience of reading for any two people may be radically different: where multiple writers are involved, authour voice and intention come in for serious questioning. In the World Wide Web and in multimedia texts, for instance, a single document may contain links and references to other texts stored by people around the Internet. A single reading may involve writings (and writers) from Argentina to Bombay; and since many documents on the Web are regularly revised, you get continuous updates.

On the Web, the type of "texts" differ significantly from traditional print media. On one hand, text, graphics, and sound can all combine to form documents on the Web and multimedia. Multimedia raises interesting issues about how we treat these elements in a work. Can there be "texts" that are primarily graphics and sound, with only a little ritten material? On the other hand, what about links? How do we treat documents made of links to other works not of the "author's" creation?

What Is the beginning of hypertexts?

Linear structures based on a beginning, middle, and end taken on a different guise in hypertexts. They are also difficult to discern on the Web. It's like joining a highway. Certainly there are many places where you can get on, drive for a while, and get off, but would that constitute the beginning, middle and end of the Interstate system? It does constitute a beginning, middle, and end of a trip, but that's not the same as the system on which the trip took place. So, like a trip, it is possible to have a beginning, middle, and end in a Web session; the Web itself, however, does not have such structures.

The value of the section called 'introduction' loses its original meaning. Instead of introductions, hypertexts include a 'general index', which contains background information. Each item on this list is an active link that takes the reader to any one section.

What is important in this type of text is the concept of 'thread'. What is a thread? It is an 'itinerary' that a given reader decides upon in terms of their knowledge of the worlf and particular interests. From a psycholinguistic point of view, the skills required to follow a certain thread imply being able to handle text structure, and how this is manifested in terms of topic development.

In this light it will be necessaru to look at the difference between Print and Text.

Words in print and words in electronic formats mean the same thing. The only difference between hypertext and print text is perception. Looking at the digital nature of hypertexts, though valuable in terms of recognising the fundamental technology of computer generated works of art (be they writing, visual, etc.), is like looking at texts and painting as essentially the same thing: ink or paint on some kind of surface. Just because a poem and a painting are both comprised of a substance placed on a surface, doesn't mean they are "essentially identical."

The important difference between print and hypertext is not the fundamental technology of how the letters and words are displayed (ones and zeros or particles of ink), but what readers can do with the text. If text is "that which is woven," the difference between printed and hypertexts is in who does the weaving: in print the author is solely responsible for weaving the text, in hypertext the reader takes on the responsibility (with the help of authors who provide suggestions to the reader on possible directions--and this can be multiple authors in multiple works).

Limits of Print Texts

One of the problems with printed text is the fact that the text is limted to the particular thread being developed at hand. A paper version of any work would have a scope; and from the writer's point of view there would points when they would like to go further on a particular subject.

Would that still make the text coherent?

The other aspect to take into account is space. Space imposes limits. To have such a piece published in most journals, newsletters, magazines, the writer have to get through my argument as efficiently as possible. Any long digression would likely take the reader away from the initial thread, and a reader might easily lose interest in the text when the topic has gone away from the main topic.

Hypertext is more versatile in this respect.

In this new mode of reading, readers also lose interest when there are too many links that take them away from the thread chosen. Links might take the reader to whole documents which might only be indirectly related to the main theme.

Using multimedia and web hypertext transforms our task from teaching language as a formal system to teaching language as "communicative practice," that is, a social activity that reflects and reproduces a speech community's stock of values and beliefs. However, as language teachers we are used to teaching the linguistic system the way linguists have described it (i.e., independently of its communicative practice).

To round off this chapter, a good idea would be to visit some site and see how it works. For example, a site on hypertext would be interesting. You will find one at http://www.dnai.net/~mackey/thesis/gindex.html

There you will be able to choose what to read. You will find that some ideas presented in that hypertext have been incorporated in this chapter.

All the best.

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MULTIPLE INTELLIGENCES AT SCHOOLS

Implications for language learning

You might have heard about Gardner and the theory of "multiple intelligences".

Of course it's related to the concept of intelligence, which has remained central to the field of psychology, and consequently to education.

As is often the case, there has been a divorce between research into psychology and the "applied area" of intelligence. Fortunately, by the late 70s, there were signs of a reawakening of interest in theoretical and research aspects of intelligencem with a focus on the information-processing aspects of items in psychological tests.

A decade ago, Gardner found that his own research interests were leading him to a heightened concern with issues of human intelligence. This concern grew out of two disparate factors, one primarily theoretical, the other largely practical.

As a result of his own studies, Gardner became convinced that the Piagetian view of intellect was mistaken. Gradually empirical evidence was beginning to show that the human mind may be quite modular in design. That is, separate psychological processes appear to be involved in dealing with linguistic, numerical, pictorial, gestural, and other kinds of cognitive systems.

On a more practical level, Gardner was disturbed by the nearly exclusive stress in school on two aspects: linguistic and logical-mathematical teaching. Although these two forms are obviously important in a school setting, other forms are also important in human cognitive activity within and specially outside school. Moreover, the emphasis on linguistic and logical capacities were practically the only aspects in the construction of items on intelligence, aptitude, and achievement tests. If different kinds of items were used, or different kinds of assessment instruments devised, a quite different view of the human intellect might emerge

These and other factors led Gardner to taje into account a wide variety of human cognitive capacities, to incorporate as well the skills valued in a variety of cultural settings.

He realised that he was stretching the word 'intelligence' beyond its usual application in educational psychology, Gardner proposed the existence of a number of relatively autonomous human intelligences. He defined' intelligence' as "the capacity to solve problems or to fashion products that are valued in one or more cultural settings, and detailed a set of criteria for what counts as a human intelligence."

To arrive at his list of intelligences, Gardner and his colleagues examined the literature in several areas: the development of cognitive capacities in normal individuals; the breakdown of cognitive capacities under various kinds of organic pathology; the existence of abilities in "special populations," such as prodigies, autistic individuals, idiots savants, and learning-disabled children; forms of intellect that exist in different species; forms of intellect valued in different cultures; the evolution of cognition across the millennia; and two forms of psychological evidencethe results of factor-analytic studies of human cognitive capacities and the outcome of studies of transfer and generalization. Candidate capacities that turned up repeatedly in these disparate literatures made up a provisional list of human intelligences, whereas abilities that appeared only once or twice or were reconfigured differently in diverse sources were abandoned from consideration.

Multiple intelligences at schools

Gardner includes seven intelligences, each with its own component processes and subtypes. As a species, human beings have developed to carry out at least seven forms of thinking. In a biological metaphor, these may be thought of as different mental "organs". O separate information devices.

Although all humans exhibit the range of intelligences, individuals differ -presumably for both hereditary and environmental reasons- in their current profile of intelligences. Moreover, there is no necessary correlation between any two intelligences, and they may indeed entail quite distinct forms of perception, memory, and other psychological processes.

The multiple intelligences

Logical- Scientist Sensitivity to, and capacity to discern, logical or mathematical Mathematician numerical patterns; ability to handle long chains of reasoning.

Linguistic Poet Sensitivity to the sounds, rhythms, and meanings Journalist of words; sensitivity to different functions of language.

Musical Composer Abilities to produce and appreciate rhythm, Violinist pitch, and timbre; appreciation of the forms of musical expressiveness.

Spatial Navigator Capacities to perceive the visual-spatial world Sculptor accurately and to perform transformations on one's initial perceptions.

Bodily- Dancer Abilities to control one's body movements and kinesthetic Athlete to handle objects skillfully.

Interpersonal Therapist Capacities to discern and respond appropriately Salesman to the moods, temperaments, motivations, and desires of other people.

Intrapersonal Person with Access to one's own feelings and the ability to detailed, discriminate among them and draw upon them accurate self- to guide behavior; knowledge of one's own knowledge strengths, weaknesses, desires, and intelligences.

Can you recognise some of these in yourself? In your learners?

How do we go from here? What are the potential contributions to education, and in particular (foreign) language learning.

The objective is to try and isolate each of the seven intelligences and see how rget interact with each other, and what contribution each can make to overall language learning, especially from the outlook of a content-based approach. Gardner says that we must try to find the strengths and weaknesses of each.

Putting Theory into Practice

Gardner has developed a series of modules, or "domain projects," that serve the goals of both curriculum and assessment. These projects feature sets of exercises and curriculum activities organised around a concept central to a specific domain.

These drafts, sketches, and final products generated by these and other curriculum activities are collected in portfolios (sometimes termed "process-folios"), which serve as a basis for assessment of growth by both the teacher and the student.

Gardner describes some projects aplying the theory of multile intelligences. Through a variety of special classes (e.g., computing, bodily/kinesthetic activities) and enrichment activities (a "flow" center and apprentice), all children are given the opportunity to discover their areas of strength and to develop the full range of intelligences. In addition, over the course of a year, each child executes a number of projects based on schoolwide themes, such as "Man and His Environment" or "Changes in Time and Space."

Do you think you could do some of these?

Provision of suitable materials allows children to gain experiences that engage their several intelligences, and allows children's strengths, interests, and proclivities to develop. These include games. Can you think of what type?

To what extent do you think chapter is useful?

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BUILDING LEARNER AUTONOMY

Strategic competence. Communication strategies. Learning to learn

In this chapter we will try to examine how 'strategic competence' -the ability to solve communication problems despite an inadequate command of the linguistic and sociocultural code- can contribute to the development of an overall communicative competence.

The concept of 'strategic competence' can be related to that of 'interlangua', which we have discussed. This includes two basic types of communication strategies (reduction and achievement strategies), and we will concentrate particularly on the use of 'achievement strategies' at the discourse level.

You will remember that any person who is not a mother -tongue speaker or a true bilingual must necessarily rely on some incomplete and imperfect competence- this corresponds to the present stage in his or her interlanguage system.

Each of us, and each of our students, could be placed somewhere along an imaginary line between the two extremes of an ideal zero competence and an ideal native speaker competence. If we are still in the process of learning a language, we are moving along this line, we are gradually approaching a native speaker competence by successive approximations.

Why ideal competence? Because in practice there is no absolute zero competence -you can at least rely on some form of non-verbal communication and, more importantly, there is no absolute native speaker competence- just think of how often, in L1 communication, we cannot find the words to say something and have to adjust our message, or to ask our interlocutor to help us, or to use synonyms or general words to make ourselves understood.

One of the most extraordinary paradoxes in language teaching is the fact that we rarely teach, or even allow, our students to use the kind of strategic devices (or communication strategies) that even native speakers are often forced to use. We are still very much concerned with exact communication -something which perhaps does not even exist.

In ideal terms, we could say that in oral interaction we have some kind of communicative goal and we set out to make a plan and execute it. If we meet a problem, that is, if our command of the linguistic and sociocultural code is not adequate, we have two basic choices.

On the one hand, we can avoid the problem by adopting a reduction strategy: in other words, we keep our message within our communicative resources, we avoid the risk, we adjust our ends to our means — in this way we change our goal. On the other hand, we can decide to keep our goal but develop an alternative plan, we adopt an achievement strategy, we take the risk and expand our communicative resources, we adjust our means to our ends.

Here are some examples of reduction strategies:

Reduction strategies can affect

- content: topic avoidance; message abandonment; meaning replacement; modality (e.g. politeness makers); speech acts.

Reduction strategies can affect the content of our communicative goal: we are all familiar with the essential strategy of avoiding a topic we do not feel confident to talk about.

Also we have all had the experience of abandoning our message, or rounding it off quickly, because we felt it was going to involve us in all sorts of problems with grammar or vocabulary. And the reason why a non-native speaker can sometimes sound vague is possibly the fact that he or she is replacing the original meaning, the original goal, with a simpler message. (Does this sound familiar?)

Reduction strategies can also affect modality (for example I may miss out markers of politeness and fail to observe the rules of social distance) or whole speech acts: for instance, if I cannot use pre-topics in opening a telephone conversation, I may do without such starters as *Are you busy?* or *Am I ringing at a bad time?* which are sometimes useful and necessary. Of course such failures are not always serious, but they may lead to false perceptions on the listener's part.

Reduction or avoidance strategies are difficult to spot, and are an obvious and essential part of a learner's instinctive repertoire. However, we want our students to widen their resources, to take risks, to actively expand their competence, so we shall probably be more interested in achievement or expansion strategies.

One useful first distinction is between strategies at the *word* or *sentence* level, and strategies at the *discourse* level. It is important to make this distinction because when considering achievement strategies, one almost automatically thinks of, for example, ways of expressing the meaning of a word when the exact term is not available. In fact, as we shall see, some of the most interesting things happen in the actual interaction that goes on between people.

One of the simplest things one can do when faced with a problem in a foreign language is, of course, to borrow words from the L1: we know that monolingual classes, such as the ones that we teach in, often use this easy way out. Also, some of our students are very good at "foreignizing" Italian words, pronouncing a word as if it belonged to English, or even adjusting its form to take account of typical morphological features of English. And we could all quote examples of literal translation, when "case popolari" become "popular houses" and false friends lead to all sorts of unusual and often funny utterances.

However, achievement strategies become much more interesting when they are based on the learner's actual interlanguage, that is, when learners try to use their present knowledge and skills and stretch them, so to say, to their limits. It is this active use of one's limited resources that I think we should be particularly concerned with. The first area of strategies has to do with generalization and approximation: if you don't know a word, you can fall back on general words, like *thing* or *stuff*; you can use superordinates, like *flower* instead of *daffodil*; you can use synonyms and antonyms, like not *deep* to mean *shallow*. Of course, generalizing implies a disregard for restrictions on word meaning and word usage, and can therefore be dangerous: this is a problem we shall soon get back to.

Another area of strategies involves the use of paraphrase. Paraphrase can consist of definitions and descriptions, examples and circumlocutions: as an example, consider the following transcript from a research I recently carried out. A non-native speaker Can you give examples of this strategy?

The problems that learners can meet at the discourse level are possibly endless, since they cover the general ability to manage the interaction. Moreover, as we know, managing interactions is a very complex affair which calls into play not just strategic and pragmatic skills, but sociolinguistic and sociocultural conventions as well. Fig. 5 lists some examples of very general areas which I think are among the most problematic for our students.

Can you think of other strategies learners use to pass on their messages? Can you give examples? Can you you you keep a diary on them?

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KNOWLEDGE PREVIOUS TO THE LEARNING TASK

Verbal and non-verbal images as factors in language learning success

Earl Stevick presents an interesting working scheme to relate how we perceive the world and the skills and processes to acquire and learn a foreign language. This working scheme is based on the notion of 'image'.

One's image of something is not just a "visual picture in the mind." It is one's basis for action with respect to that something. One's image of one's kitchen enables one to find things in the kitchen.

Non-verbal imagery includes the kinds of data that come in through the five senses – colour, distance, size, sound, texture, and flavour, among others. It also includes emotions and purposes, and duration, frequency and remoteness in time. Non-verbal imagery provides the meanings that we put into words and infer from the words of others.

Our verbal imagery is the basis we have for pronouncing sounds and words , and for putting words together into larger combinations. If our verbal imagery coincides with that of others we will be understood, and, as FL users we will have made a "good approximation" to the FL. Often as learners we get the wrong imagery, or imageries lacking in parts, and so we make errors.

Learning and using a language implies the two kinds of imagery that we mentioned above: verbal imagery refers to 'form', sort of the "boxes" which we fill in with meanings, which come from our non-verbal imageries.

How can we connect verbal and non-verbal imageries?

In a nutshell, language learning consists in learning the appropriate connections between the verbal and the non-verbal imageries.

Verbal and non-verbal images result in a 'network' of relevant associations, which involve data of many kinds. We can say that the two things that connect when we use language are verbal 'symbols' and non-verbal 'images', which are the mental resources that enable us to come up with the spoken and written linguistic symbols and patterns of symbols that we need when we need them. 'Non-verbal images' are what generate the meanings: the feelings, the pictures, the sounds and all.

By contrast, verbal images are based on data drawn from different communication channels as identified by the five human senses, but they draw on other modalities as well. Performing actions while we talk to someone provides additional kinesthetic and auditory information. Let's not forget that there are individual differences regarding channel choice and modalities in general.

People differ greatly in the degree of strength and frequency of the various kinds of associations from which they create their images. they seldom perceive the difference between visual, auditory and emotional sources. Also, the images we construct do not remain fixed on our minds. For every occasion that the images are required to take action, the mind recycles a number of relevant associations and ' recreates' a new enriched image.

In Stevick's opinion learning a language implies three simultaneous processes.

a • matching up non-verbal images with other non-verbal images;

b • combining verbal material, which what we often do when we relate a word or pattern with its meaning, more or less consciously, and

c • matching non-verbal with verbal images, which refers to those moments when we reflect on how we use language.

In general terms, this fantastic capacity for language acquisition that we humans possess enables us to distinguish non-verbal from verbal material, and to sort out all this material.

How can all this be implemented in the classroom?

Stevick suggests that as teachers we should try to make an effort for verbal and non-verbal material to be active in learners' minds. It is not enough, he points out, for that material to be present in the teacher's mind only. So this requires activation on the part of the teacher and the learner, and retrieval by the learner.

Translated into classroom terms, this implies that there should be constant recycling of the material taught. Recycling will be most effective if it is contextualised in situations different from the initial ones, and if it requires different kinds of associations involving verbal and non-verbal images.

Another aspect to take into account is the fact that learners differ in their handling of different aspects of input. This means that different kinds of information produce different kinds of impact on them: some respond to visual material more readily; others to auditory input; or grammatical, phonological o lexical material.

Consequently the richer the input, the better. What does 'rich' mean? 'Rich' in what sense? Richness not in the linguistic sense only: input is rich if it appeals to learners in different ways, considering that groups are richly diverse, with learners whose cognitive and learning styles are different, who employ different strategies to go about in the foreign language.

Another aspect related to input is that it will be more appealing to the learner and interesting –and hence more 'memorable'– if it relates to some coherent reality: what we mean is that the content should be true "in some possible world", even if it is fictional.

This implies that to some learners factual information is not so important. However, even though it's healthy for content not to always reveal 'facts', it is necessary to establish a common code with learners so that they realise what type of input they will be exposed to. Why should this be so? Factual as opposed to fictional content calls for the activation of different kinds of non-verbal images, though, often, the verbal images might be the same!

In previous chapters and in this one, there have been constant references to diversity in the way of cognitive and learning styles. However, though it's perfectly advisable to allow learners to develop their own "stockpile" of information, as teachers –Stevick says– we should try to keep track of what kind of information is in fact in their stockpile.

At first sight this reads like an impossible task to accomplish, given the number of learners in each group, and the apparent enormous diversity one is likely to encounter in any one group. Still, diversity is not infinite but rather predictable in terms of cognitive and learning style types. The important thing is to be on the alert to at least single out some modes of operating as agents of their own learning/acquisition task.

Stevick warns us against the danger of building a set of teaching strategies around the success of an identified learner or group of learners. He says,

"These are not idle questions, either, for exactly this kind of thing has happened time and again in the history of language teaching. The social prestige of literary scholars lay behind the Grammar-Translation method, and the practical achievements of the anthropological linguists during World War II produced a methodology built around their strengths. One after another, successive innovators have cast and recast 'the learner' in their own image. Even as an individual teacher, may be tempted to act as if all students really 'should' be like me at my best, or perhaps like my most illustrious alumni. So I will remember Diller's warning (see 8.1.1.) about the temptation to take one experience or one small set of principles and push that experience or that set of principles 'too long and far.' Whenever someone offers me a new tecnique, or asks me to embrace yet another approach, I will ask myself, 'How would this fit ------?", and into the blank I will substitute first Ann, then Bert, then Carla and Derek and Ed and Frieda and Gwen." [These are the learners whose strategies he discusses in his book.]

(Stevick: pp. 150-1)

What do you think of the quote above? Do you agree with what Stevick says about teaching approaches? Do you think you could be in a position to detect some of your learners' images? This is the activity we suggest for this chapter. How would you try to implement it?

Here are some suggestions:

a • taking down notes on an identified sub-group of learners;

b • carrying out a survey

c • trying different kinds of 'innovative' activities and checking and recording learners' reactions

Can you think of any others?

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REFLECTIVE TEACHING

Collecting data. Keeping diaries and writing portfolios. Collaborative teaching

In this chapter we will be looking at ways in which it is possible to reflect, become aware and hence improve on our own teaching ourselves.

All teachers can benefit from becoming reflective teachers. What is most important for each of us, whether new to the profession, or those of us who have been actively engaged in teaching for many years, is to think about this activity in which we are engaged. We must think about what we wish to accomplish in the classroom, why we have chosen these goals, and how we wish to achieve them. Once we have engaged in the active process of teaching, we must regularly reflect on what is happening and has happened in our classrooms. In this way we also engage in a process called "reflection-on-action". This occurs as we think about what we are going to do, and later what we have done suggest that not only should one engage in reflection, but one should reflect with colleagues who can help us improve our teaching strategies.

Reflective teaching is a practice and an approach to teaching that allows us to become more professional and better teachers. Essentially, it involves collecting data from our own teaching. Some teachers keep a journal after class everyday. Reading those notes at a later point can make a good contribution to self-awareness and choosing different strategies. Some other teachers opt for tape recording their classes and listen to it at home, for example. Reviewing the data at later points, and using the information that they get from that process to make critical judgements about our teaching and try to improve, in a nutshell what it's all about.

Why can't we improve as we go along? Why do we need to look back afterwards?

It is possible to some extent. Trouble is just that teaching is so complex and there is so much going on, particularly in my case, in the language classroom. There is a great deal of interaction with students. And a lot of decision-making as we go along, in spite of having planned he day' lesson. It is not just the same as lecturing to students on subject matter. But it is quite helpful to record some to keep records of different kinds, whether it is tape recording, a video recording, personal journal notes, notes from observers who have sat in on our lessons, all of these strategies allow teachers to concentrate on improving the teaching when we are not concentrating on the teaching itself.

Although approaches to reflective teaching vary, reflective teachers generally accept that their teaching practices, and the motives for those practices, should be critically questioned and continually improved. Critical reflection is not limited to teaching techniques, but includes attitudes, beliefs, behaviours, and perceptions. A few of the many strategies for reflection include the following:

Self-analysis through:

a • Use of teaching portfolios in which ongoing efforts to update course content as well as course delivery can be documented.

b • Viewing a video recording of ones own teaching can be an eye-opening experience.

c • Use of self-assessment forms.

d • Self-assessment through filling out the same student questionnaire used to evaluate teaching at the end of each semester by students.

Shared analysis through:

e • Forming a reflective partnership or a cooperative effort between two faculty members who observe each other teach and discuss their interpretations of each other's actions and intentions,

f • Participating in a process of collegial coaching which centres on the two primary activities of observation of classroom teaching and instructional consultation.

g • Using the FLs Department at your school -if there is one- as a resource. The role of the department chair in the implementation of the annual review process is critical. Department chairs will have increased responsibilities for assisting in the creation and implementation of improvement plans for those faculty who rate unsatisfactory in any category. Efforts are being made to increase resources for department chairs in learning how to assist faculty successfully in this process.

We have outlined a few possibilities. At first sight, our proposal might read like a time consuming process, but anyway you will find it is rewarding.

Which of the possibilities suggested would you like to try? Have you ever tried this? What were the results of the experience? Did your learners participate in them? How?

Bibliography

Richards, J. & Nunan, D. *Second Language Teacher Education.* OUP, Oxford, 1995.