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TOWARDS AN INTEGRATED APPROACH TO FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

Learners construct a series of internal representations of the second language system. This occurs as a result of natural processing strategies and exposure to the foreign language in communication situations. Provided the right kind of exposure, the learners' internal representation develop gradually, in predictable stages, in the direction of the native speaker competence.

Littlewood, 1998

ABSTRACT: *This article is a proposal on How to develop advanced students' linguistic. Strategic and sociolinguistic competences when learning English as a foreign language. To begin with, it states the general guidelines to be taken into account for any advanced language level. Then it points out the importance of communicative competence in any foreign language learning process; this is reflected on the communicative approach to the teaching of language, in which linguistic skills and communicative abilities are brought into a closer association with each other. Subsequently, this paper establishes specific parameters to follow in order to develop students competences in a foreign language classroom, based on the theme-based teaching model that places equal value to content and language objectives. Finally, some conclusions and pedagogical implications are stated in relation to the impact of this proposal.*

RESUMEN: *El propósito de este artículo es plantear una propuesta pedagógica que desarrolle las competencias lingüística, estratégica y sociolingüística de los estudiantes que están en un proceso avanzado de aprendizaje del inglés como lengua extranjera. En su primera parte, la propuesta establece los parámetros generales y rasgos característicos inherentes a un nivel avanzado de una lengua extranjera; además, se resalta la importancia de la competencia comunicativa en el proceso de aprendizaje de esta lengua y su influencia en los enfoques recientes relacionados con la docencia de la misma. Posteriormente, se establecen estrategias y parámetros por tener en cuenta para el desarrollo de cada una de las competencias que hacen parte del proceso de aprendizaje de inglés en el aula, también se recomienda para lograr esto, la utilización del modelo de enseñanza*

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centrado en los contenidos del curso. Finalmente, se presentan algunas implicaciones pedagógicas y conclusiones en relación con el impacto de la propuesta.

KEY WORDS: *Communicative, linguistic, strategic and sociolinguistic competences, theme-base modal.*

Learning a foreign language is no doubt a complex process in which students build their knowledge gradually; and as they move on up in this process, they develop a certain degree of fluency and accuracy in this language. They are able to handle virtually any situation in which the target language use is demanded and become “advanced” students. As a result, before presenting any proposal, it is a must to establish the guidelines to be taken into account for any advanced language level.

Brown (1994) states some general parameters:

1. Students’ Cognitive Learning Processes

As competence in language continues to build, students can realise the full spectrum of processing, assigning larger and larger chunks to automatic modes and gaining confidence to put the formal structures of language on periphery so that focal attention may be given to the interpretation and negotiation of meaning and to the conveyance of thoughts and feelings in interactive communication. (Brown, *ibid.*:115)

2. The Role of The Teacher

First teachers become effective mediators, term taken from the concept of mediation¹ which refers to help students acquire the knowledge, skills and strategies they will need in order to progress, to learn more and to tackle problems. It also has to do helping students become autonomous, and take control of their own learning with the fundamental aim of enabling them to become independent thinkers and problems solvers. Second, as Wright (1991) quotes, teachers contribute – as directors – to the language system that is being constructed by the learner.

3. Teacher Talk

Natural language at a natural speed is a must at this level. Students must be challenged by teacher’s choice of vocabulary structure, idioms and other language

¹ For Vigotsky (1986), and his followers, mediation refers to the use of tools; tools in here are defined as anything that is used in order to help solve a problem or achieve a goal.

features. Students must be provided with ample opportunities to produce language so that the teacher's role of provider of feedback takes prominence. Finally, very little, if any, reliance on the students' native language is justified.

4. Authenticity of Language

Everything from academic prose to literature to idiomatic conversation becomes a legitimate resource for the classroom, since it brings students into contact with language as it is used in the culture to meet actual communication needs. Furthermore, fully exploited, authentic texts give students direct access to the culture and help them use the new language authentically themselves, to communicate meaning in meaningful situations.

5. Fluency and Accuracy

At this level, almost all students are "fluent" in that they have passed beyond that breakthrough stage where they are no longer thinking about every word or structure they are producing or comprehending. (Brown, *ibid.*:116)

6. Student Creativity

Teachers know students are now able to apply classroom material to real contexts. So the ideal is to exploit it in an enjoyable way and move the students' performance beyond the teaching-learning settings.

7. Listening and Speaking Goals

At this level, students can focus more carefully on all the sociolinguistic nuances of language. Pragmatic Constraints need to be worked as students finely tune their production and comprehension in terms of register, style, the status of the interlocutor, the specific context of the conversation, turn taking, topic nomination and termination, topic changing and culturally conditioned language constraints. (brown, *ibid.*: 116)

8. Reading and Writing Goals

Reading and writing skills similarly progress closer to native speakers competence as a student learns more about such things as critical reading, the role of

schemata in interpreting written texts, and writing a document related to one's profession (laboratory reports, records of experimental research findings, etc.).

9. Grammar

The concern is related to functional forms, sociolinguistic and pragmatic phenomena and strategic competence. Classes need not become saturated with metalanguage, but well-targeted deductive grammar has its place.

10. Techniques

They can now tap into a full range of sociolinguistic and pragmatic competences. Typical of this level are activities like group debates and argumentation, complex role plays, scanning and skimming reading material, deterring and questioning author's intent, writing essays and critiques. (brown, *ibid.*: 116)

To begin with, it is generally acknowledged that the ultimate aim in language learning is to acquire communicative competence, to interpret, whether this is made overt in talking or corresponding or whether it remains covert as a psychological activity underlying the ability to say, listen, write and read. In consequence, the issue is not whether this is the aim of language learning but how this aim is to be achieved. Widowson (1996) affirms the most recent trend to reach this goal is the communicative approach to the teaching of language. Notwithstanding, since such approach seems to be loose ends in principles and practice: inconsistencies, unexamined assumptions, and unresolved difficulties, our proposal consists on using the communicative approach but recognising its shortcomings. That is to say, to implement a set of strategies and techniques that allow to overcome the shortcomings of this approach, and to improve students' communicative competence when learning a foreign language.

As widowson (*ibid*) points out, the teaching of language as communication calls for an approach which brings linguistic skills and communicative abilities into close association with each other; one way to obtain this association is by using an integrated approach which gives the students greater motivation that converts to better retention of all the principles related to language learning (speaking, listening, reading, writing, grammar, and culture). In other words, a whole language approach whereby all the skills are treated in a more interrelated way. Brown (1994) sets up an example to illustrate what this principle implies: A course that deals with reading skills, then, will also deal with related listening, speaking, and writing skills. A lesson in a so-called reading class, under this new paradigm, might, for example, include:

1. A pre-reading discussion of the topic to activate schemata.
2. Listening to a lecture or a series of informative statements about the topic of a passage to be read.
3. A focus on a certain reading strategy.
4. Writing a paraphrase of a section of a reading passage.

This class, then models for the students the real-life integration of language skills, gets them to perceive the relationship among several skills, and provides the teacher with a great deal of flexibility in creating interesting, motivating lessons. (Brown, *ibid.*:218)

This integration of the four skills is the only plausible approach to cope with the inner communicative feature of language and language learning. By the same token, such approach fits within a communicative interactive framework which relies on the following principles:

1. Production and reception are quite simply two sides of the same coin; one cannot split the coin in two. (communicative competence)
2. By attending primarily to what learners can do with language, and only secondarily to the forms of language, (pragmatic competence) we invite any or all of the four skills that are relevant into the classroom arena.
3. Often one skill will reinforce another; we learn to write by examining what we can read.
4. Interaction means sending and receiving messages (strategic competence).
5. Written and spoken language often bear a relationship to each other; ignore that relationship is to ignore the richness of language (discourse competence).
6. For literate learners, the interrelationship of written and spoken language is an intrinsically motivating reflection of language, culture, and society. (cultural and sociolinguistic competence).

Adapted from Brown, *ibid.*:219

When it comes to deal with these principles a very important concept arises: Communicative Competence. The term communicative competence was coined by Hymes (1967,1972) a sociolinguist who was convinced that Chomsky's (1965) notion of competence was too limited. Centrally, he proposed that there are competences which go beyond the linguistic domain discussed by Chomsky, and that we also have to take into account appropriateness of language use. Skehan, (1995). Drawing on these insights, Canale and Swain (1980) proposed a three – component framework for communicative competence. Canale (1983) later extended this to four component competences: linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic. (Skehan, (ibid.: 92) affirms “ The first three of these are proposed as underlying knowledge systems, akin to that proposed in the linguistic domain by Chomsky (1965), with the first of the components substantially based on Chomsky's fomulation. Sociolinguistic knowledge will include the individual's understanding of social relations and the potential impact such understanding has for communication, and for choosing what to say that is appropriate. It also, under some formulations, includes knowledge which helps the language user relate language to context, and to interpret and encode meanings. Similarly, discourse competence concerns the language user's knowledge of rules of discourse, of how spoken and written texts are organised and what might influence whether they are considered to be well formed.

This proposal has undergone some relevant modifications. These new points of view are perhaps best expressed by Lyle Bachman's (1990) schematisation of what he simply calls language competence as shown in figure 1.

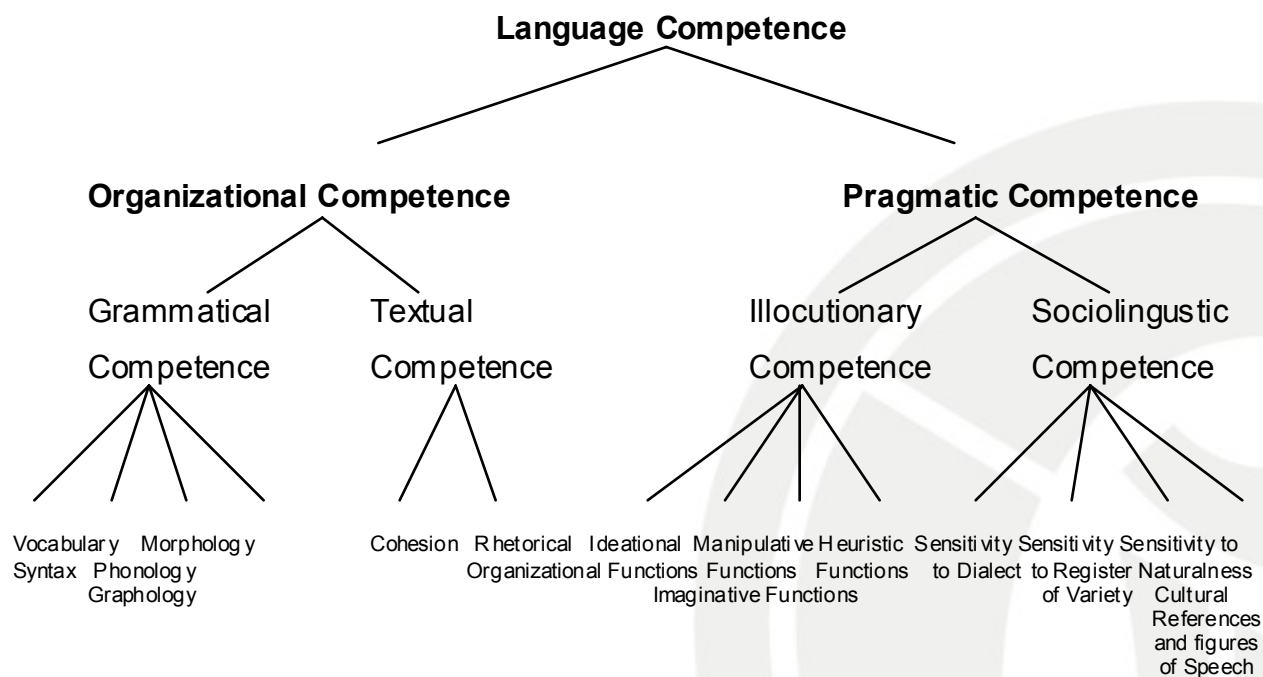


Figure 1. Components of language competence² (Bachman 1990:87)

For the purpose of this article, we will focus our attention on linguistic, strategic and sociolinguistic competences and how they can be developed in a foreign language classroom.

As it is well-known, the linguistic competence refers to what learners do and do not know in the area of grammar; in other words, if learners can demonstrate that they know the rules, then, they must surely possess grammatical competence. Tarone and Yule (1991:69).

To develop this linguistic competence we have to follow certain parameters:

- ❖ Follow an interactive approach.
- ❖ Present embedded meaningful, communicative context.
- ❖ Contribute positively to communicative goals.
- ❖ Promote accuracy within fluent, communicative language.
- ❖ Do not overwhelm students with linguistic terminology.

Adapted from Brown, *ibid.*: 349

Furthermore, we have some grammar techniques to work on grammar in an integrated way:

1. Using charts.
 - Useful to clarify relationship and explain tenses
2. Using objects - realia
 - Objects brought into the classroom
3. Using maps and simple drawing
4. Using dialogues
5. Using text
 - Oral – interviews
 - Written articles

Finally, with the recent revolutionary changes in technology and software development, more specifically, software focused on language learning, the computer-as an interactive device-has become one appropriate aid for language learning to be integrated into specific curricula. It is how, Higgins and Johns (1984) states that well-designed CALL courseware - consisted of individualised, self-paced drill and practice - could be used as a supplementary material to fulfil the student's specific needs in terms of grammar, eliminating in-class grammar drill and writing practice, freeing class time for more meaningful communicative activities. Thus, the computer not only replaces passive work with interactive exercises, but also increases the amount of interaction in class. That will allow

² A whole explanation on how each one of these competences work is found in Bachman (1990) *Fundamental Considerations in Language Testing*.

students to learn at their own pace in their own way in a self-access practice which is a relevant step in developing learning autonomy³.

Next we move to the strategic competence. Spolsky (1990) defines it as verbal and non-verbal communication strategies that may be called into action to compensate for breakdown in communication due to performance variables or to insufficient linguistic knowledge. According to Bachman (ibid), this competence is central to all communication. It achieves this role by discharging a mediating role between meaning intentions (the message which is to be conveyed), underlying competences, background knowledge, and context of situation. It carries out this role by determining communicative goals, assessing communicative resources, planning communication, and executing the plan. Bachman considers these capacities to constitute metacognitive skills. They are cognitive because of the nature of the operations that they involve, and meta since there can be a self-awareness built in to their operation.

Given what we know about the nature of strategic competence, the sort of classroom activities we present to our students may be designed either to promote the overall skills of the learner in successfully performing communicative acts, or to promote the learner's ability to use communication strategies (e.g. circumlocution, approximation, literal translation, mine, message abandonment, and topic avoidance) when problems are encountered. Most of the exercises in a communicative syllabus, such as exercises involving problem solving⁴, are designed to give the learner practice in performing communicative acts in the foreign language and then to promote the overall strategic competence of the learner Tarone and Yule, (ibid.: 114).

The last competence to talk about is the sociolinguistic one. Tarone (1993) affirms that: Mastery of sociolinguistic skills in a language entails mastery of speech act conventions, norms of stylistic appropriateness, and the uses of language to establish and maintain social relations. A knowledge of appropriate conditions for language use must involve an understanding of the way which such factors as the roles of the speaker, hearer, and overhearer, interact with the communicative setting, the topic of discourse, and the purposes of the participants. Whatever approach we use to teach sociolinguistic competence must then be integrative in nature, with the goal of our approach to sensitise learners to the social diversity of language, rather than to teach them long lists of discrete phrases.

³ Based on the definition given by Holec (1981), in which autonomy is the ability to take charge or one's own learning. However, this ability is not inborn, but must be acquired either by natural means or (as most often happens) by formal training.

⁴ With high-intermediate and advanced students, intellectually challenging problem-solving activities can be used on a regular basis to promote interaction and diverging thinking. Role play is commonly part of the procedure. Rivers (1997:36).

According to this proposal, it is much more appropriate to use a problem-solving approach in which learners are asked to analyse the social features from the foreign language in actual communicative situations through the use of a descriptive framework given by the teacher. Nevertheless, due to the shortcomings the students from our country face, studying English in a foreign language setting, the data must be authentic materials collected through (video tapes, films, radio broadcast or printed texts) and other available sources.

This gathered information must be analysed based on the conception of culture as a process. What this principle implies is that students learning it engage in different types of performance behaviours; and through a set of cognitive and affective learning activities, they should be able to:

1. Recognise/explain similarities and differences between L1 and L2 cultures.
2. Recognise/explain the changing nature of culture, the inaccuracy of stereotypes, and the sources of culturally conditioned behaviour.
3. Examine cultural information and sources, and describe, report, and analyse findings.
4. Value cultural contributions and accept cultural uniqueness through cross-cultural analysis.
5. Engage in hypothesis refinement by following a step-by-step process starting with perceiving a cultural aspect, make a statement, gathering information, and contrasting with native culture, leading to a modification/refinement of the initial cultural perception.
6. Participate successfully in novel cultural situations.

Taken from Ramírez, (1995:66)

One type of activity recommended is simulation or role-play (Olshtain & Cohen, 1991). Here students are asked to assume certain roles that would produce pragmatic features. Generally, such role plays/simulations are guided in the sense that background information on the situation is provided; for example, to practise clarifying information, arguing, and apologising Hinkel (1999:159). Similarly, naturally occurring speech acts arise in the course of discussions, debates, and other problem solving activities that are widely used in every communicative language classroom.

In sum, to maintain all this integrated – skill focus previously stated, it turns out necessary to determine a model to work on in classroom practice to pull towards the meaningful purpose for which language is used: that is, The Theme/Topic Based Teaching that places an equal value on content and language objectives. This model claims that language skills are indeed enhanced but through focal attention to the topic and peripheral attention to the language.

According to Brown, (ibid.: 222), theme based instruction provides an alternative to what would otherwise be traditional language classes by structuring a course around themes or topics. Theme-based curricula can serve the multiple interests of students in a classroom and can offer a focus on content while still adhering to institutional needs for offering a language course, per se. So, for example, an intensive English course for intermediate pre-university students might deal with topics of current interest such as public health, environmental awareness, world economics, etc. In the classroom students read articles or chapters, view video programmes, discuss issues, propose solutions, and carry out writing assignment on a given theme.

What is important is to put principles of effective learning into action. The major principles underlying this model are:

- ❖ The automaticity principles.
- ❖ The meaningful learning principles.
- ❖ The intrinsic motivation principles.
- ❖ The communicative competence principles.

All these principles are well served by theme-based instruction and/or by courses that are successfully able to get students excited and interested in some topic, issue, idea, or problem rather than bored or weary of overanalysing linguistic rules. Finally, the impact of this proposal- an integrated approach to language learning and teaching – relies on the facts that:

- ❖ It will contribute to the integral learning process of the students – knowing and knowing how-. That is to say, they will not only improve in terms of their linguistic competence but also complement their learning process in other such also relevant areas of language learning: awareness of language as a means of communication in the foreign culture and its further implications in their learning process. In other words, students become aware of complex matters as social norms, worldviews, beliefs, assumptions and value systems that affect many, if not all, aspects of foreign language use, and social cognition, as well as second language learning.
- ❖ The students will be fulfilled with appropriate strategies for addressing cultural behaviours while learning foreign language skills. Consequently, they will stop being foreign language consumers and become active architects of inter personal and intercultural understanding and communication.
- ❖ This proposal develops autonomy. Through the developing of competences, pupils will be more conscious about their own learning, identifying strengths and weaknesses to be improved. Becoming aware will lead them to take a course of action and make their own decisions about their own learning process, which is, finally, the goal of any foreign language learning process.

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