

Argumentation in language teaching

Abstract: This paper discusses the importance of argumentation and critical thinking in education and disserts about the components of the foreign language curriculum that would contribute to form competent speakers able to interact critically in society.

The author proposes a methodology in language teaching to develop the communicative competence by means of discourse analysis of different sources (mass media, mainly) in which aspects such as coherence, cohesion and the use of elaborated codes are fostered. A classroom project carried out at Universidad Pedagógica with language students is presented.

Key words: Argumentation, language teaching, communicative competence, coherence, cohesion, restricted codes, elaborated codes, intertextuality, argumentative plan.

Resumen: El documento discute la importancia de la argumentación y el pensamiento crítico en la educación y reflexiona acerca de los componentes del currículo de lenguas extranjeras que podrían contribuir a formar hablantes competentes capaces de interactuar críticamente en la sociedad.

La autora propone una metodología para la enseñanza de las lenguas que desarrolle la competencia comunicativa mediante el análisis del discurso de diferentes fuentes (medios de comunicación, principalmente) en la cual aspectos tales como la coherencia, la cohesión y el uso de códigos elaborados tienen gran importancia. Se presenta un proyecto de aula desarrollado en la Universidad Pedagógica Nacional con estudiantes del Departamento de Lenguas.

Palabras clave: argumentación, enseñanza de las lenguas, competencia comunicativa, coherencia, cohesión, códigos restringidos, códigos elaborados, intertextualidad, plan argumentativo.

This paper aims to draw attention to a field of inquiry such as argumentation, given the fact that it is a controversial problem with a great relevance for education. One of the main objectives of our educational system in the different levels of formation is to enable students to solve problems and have critical competence to value the different situations they have to face in particular contextualized communicative events and in the roles they play in the society.

This critical competence, which is mainly expressed through language as a means of communication and the strengthening of the argumentative component in our programs would shape a more critical and competent professional, able to interact with discourses and react to them interpreting the real sense of the meanings and creating a way of thinking with responsibility.

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As it is stated in this document, the development of the argumentative competence implies the development of the communicative competence and brings about the production of more elaborated, coherent and cohesive written and oral texts.

The current situation

Students of undergraduate programs have difficulty with supporting their ideas and when trying to do it, they do not have an argumentative plan, so that, they present their ideas in a disorganized and unclear way. It is difficult for them to give arguments, since the criteria they have to support their ideas are limited to common sense or to reproduction of ideas given by others. Some of them consider things that go beyond local time, place and context unthinkable or impossible (Bernstein, 1990) and they do not try to use deeper or more complex propositions in the way they give arguments.

There is no critical competence; most of our students just give fixed arguments that are difficult for them to recontextualize or reformulate taking into account the process of interaction and the new things or variables that come up during the discussions. Therefore, they need to evaluate arguments, to discern the correct from the incorrect, the good from the bad and to have a personal position or point of view and language teaching should contribute to fulfilling this duty.

The secondary importance given to critical thinking, meaning and contextual activities in the classroom is the reason why many of our students are not competent language speakers even when they have finished all designed language studies in the curricula of our universities.

Communicative Competence

In order to teach students to be competent users of the language, our classes need to focus on meaning, context, use, communicative competence,

interaction, and culture. As Widdowson (1990) states, “learning a language implies getting to know something and being able to do something with that knowledge”¹. Any view of language that does not consider contextual elements represents an individualist conception that understands language as an abstract entity isolated from society and culture. Learning a language must be a combination of knowing and doing, and it is necessary to find a methodological operation to achieve both.

The concept of communicative competence refers to the linguistic competence as well as to the pragmatic competence which consists of a sociolinguistic component that allows us to understand the appropriate norms according to the situation in which the language is being used; a discourse component which allows us to produce coherent statements; and a strategic component through which we are able to prevent possible flaws of communication in order to facilitate interaction (Hymes, 1984, quoted in Lomas, 1993).

When we talk about communicative competence, we conceive the speakers as members of a community, who express social functions and use the language as part of their identity to carry out their daily life activities. Communicative competence is socio-culturally conditioned, because it is the set of cultural norms that we learn in the process of socialization.

Anthropologists and linguists have stated that the cultural norms vary from one culture to another and even in the same culture they vary from one group to another depending on factors such as age, gender, etc. As we have contact with different cultures, in different contexts and speak about varied topics, we learn how to use the language properly, taking into account pragmatic factors that determine what, how, when and to whom to tell things in order to be socially successful (Lomas, 1993).

¹ H. G. Widdowson, *Aspects of Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990.

Sociolinguistics and Discourse Analysis

Traditionally, the study of language was done at sentence level, because it was seen easier to understand how language works in short stretches of speech than in longer ones. However, language is using and that using is always contextualized. Sociolinguistics studies the diversity of linguistic uses to the discourse level depending on the socioeconomic position of the speakers which determines an unequal access to the valid or accepted registers of the language imposing hierarchies and relegating the expressions that are considered illegitimate to the lowest positions (Bourdieu, 1985).

Bourdieu (1967) argues that discourse does not consist only of signs to be understood or deciphered, but also, they are signs to be valued, signs of authority destined to be believed and obeyed. This author explains that it is strange to find in daily life that language works as a pure instrument of communication. Information is only exceptionally the end of linguistic production and its use is commonly in contradiction with the search of symbolic benefits. For this reason, contextual analysis, social factors in terms of differences found for mode, formality, register, and power are of great importance to language teaching.

According to Bernstein (1990), the arguments can be presented in a restricted or elaborated way depending on the code we use. The social class we belong to regulates this code and the extent of power or control that we have in the place we live in. The concept of code regulates dispositions, identities and practices and Bernstein puts these units of analysis in pedagogic contexts.

It is interesting to consider Bernstein's views in this paper, due to the fact that the relationships of elaborated and restricted codes with dominant and dominated in the context of the pedagogic discourse, can be expressed in the discourse of our students and one of our tasks, if we are thinking of developing the argumentative competence, is to discover and describe regularities in the students' language,

encouraging us, teachers, to promote coherence and cohesion in the way our students use the language.

The restricted codes are those based on the local specific context in which the person lives. For instance, this author mentions an experiment in which children from different social classes were asked to classify in groups items of food, and then they expressed their criteria based on restricted codes, such as "this is what my Mom makes" or "that's what I eat for breakfast". They did not consider elaborated codes (for example they could have referred to the way the food they ate was grown, or if that was considered healthy or unhealthy food), but the ones related to their local context.

In order to generate a change from restricted to elaborated codes, teachers have to expose students to problem solving by using language in real contexts and consulting different sources such as movies, encyclopedias, literature, music, internet, guests, field trips; that will provide them with varied information based on which they can classify critically and go deeper, extending their perspective. With appealing and participative classes in which teachers take into account students' likes, preferences, interests and habits and allow the presence of multiple expressions of culture: comics, rock, sports, theater, games, etc., learners can overcome the boundaries of restricted codes.

The Argumentative Plan

The use of restricted codes as pointed out by Bernstein has a lot to do with the lack of an argumentative plan. It means the lack of concatenation among the different elements in a discourse. If there is no argumentative plan, the assertions are incoherent, inconsistent and ineffective because the elaboration (written or oral) does not take into account different sources.

The process of acknowledging and distinguishing multiple sources is called intertextuality. It deals with the use of multiple sources consulted in a

meaningful way that accounts for communicative needs that should be related in the deep structure to the central issues under discussion. The critical views about the sources, the consistency, coherence and cohesion in which knowledge is used are also definitive in the argumentative plan.

For example, in a project carried out during one semester at Universidad Pedagógica Nacional with first semester languages students, the intertextuality and the argumentative plan were the main aims. Students had to contrast different sources that were related in the deep structure with the violence in American culture. Students read and debated an article of the *Washington Post* about the violence in schools. After that, they watched and discussed the documentary *Bowling for Columbine*, read commentaries downloaded from the Internet, watched and analyzed some segments taken from *CNN*. Based on that, they did some written and oral assignments that showed a qualitative change from restricted to elaborated codes.

Some argumentative plans proposed by Mauricio Pérez (1999) were considered when providing input to fulfill the written tasks assigned to the students:

- Delimitation of the subject matter, holding a position, arguments, examples, conclusion.
- Conclusion, delimitation of the subject matter, holding a position—arguments, comparisons.
- Holding a position, conclusion, delimitation of the subject matter, arguments, examples, support in theory.
- Arguments, support in theory, arguments, examples, delimitation of the subject matter, holding a position and conclusion².

Cohesion and Coherence

María Cristina Martínez (1994) states that cohesion and coherence are key aspects in understanding the ways in which writers organize their

ideas. She defines cohesion as the necessary conditions that must be fulfilled in order to get discourses connected meaningfully. Cohesion needs semantic linking and the connections must be adequate to the conceptual frame in which they are used.

On the other hand, when she analyzes the concept of coherence, she points out that coherence deals with the illocutionary development of the discourses, in other words, the way in which the communicative acts are organized hierarchically in order to constitute bigger communicative units. According to Martínez, when we analyze coherence in discourses, and in this case, in students' written and oral samples, we have to focus our attention on the type of communicative act that is performed and the linear and global connections that conform the whole text.

Speakers or writers select, from a wide variety of possibilities, the ones that allow them to fit their communicative intentions; they decide the best way to organize their discourse to the sentence level and then the most appropriate way to organize sentences and paragraphs and finally, the emphasis that they want to give to some portion of information or the one that they want to omit.

All the previous considerations, followed properly, can make a coherent discourse in which the ideas are connected and the intentions of the writer or speaker are expressed when performing acts of persuading, informing, narrating, arguing, inviting, etc. (Martínez, 1994).

In order to illustrate my perception about the problem, I think that it is relevant to mention my experience in an advanced English class in which I decided to foster argumentation processes keeping the existing relationship between language and social context. Students were exposed to input related to types of paragraphs, text organization, coherence, cohesion, and style.

I planned three oral debates related to ethical insights (The Air Raid Shelter, the Twin Problem

² Mauricio Pérez, *Working Document*. Colegio San Bartolomé de la Merced, 1999.

and the Death Penalty). They were video recorded in order to discover and describe regularities. Also, students were assigned seven written tasks about topics of interest for the students (The Death Penalty, the Persuasive Voice, the Twin Problem, Healthy Eating, Educational System, Logical Arguments: Contrasting Two Opposing Views and Life Stories). For all these assignments students consulted different sources, coping with intertextuality, and adopted an argumentative plan that fitted their communicative needs. For example, with *Life Stories*, they interviewed parents and grandparents, gathered photo albums, recalled remembrances and selected various literary styles and layouts.

They had to apply the knowledge studied in class and to express their own beliefs in the context of taking part in real debates performed during the class or in written essays in which they had to defend their points of view consistently. Students were invited to convince, attract the audience by means of clarity, trying to be comprehensible, to convey meaning each time they sent messages. I realized that in this class students developed their communicative competence in a positive and democratic atmosphere. The performance of debates to confront different points of view created an environment in which arguments prevailed over prejudices or stigmatism about the students' English level. Language use bore more importance than language form in the practice of meaningful activities.

I want to highlight that in the experience commented previously, there was language input and this input in many occasions was related to the formal system of the language. For instance, one of them was the discussion about the adequate use of linking words, the adequate punctuation, or the most common expressions used when writing a paragraph of comparison and contrast or of cause-effect; all of them referred to the standard language system that is accepted when communicating in academic environments.

Linguistic accuracy can be achieved by means of metacognitive processes in which students re-

flect upon language structure after having participated in communicative activities during the class. This implies the reconstruction of the task in the sense that students had to evaluate which expressions did or did not work in terms of clarity, appropriacy and accuracy. In order to do this, different subskills were considered.

For example, at the end of a debate or any other communicative task, teacher and students with a higher level within the class corrected aspects of pronunciation such as inappropriate pronunciation of regular verbs in simple past tense, or aspects of vocabulary that were observed inaccurate in the interactions. In this exercise of reflection and analysis teacher and students identified language forms and rhetorical structures as they were used in real communication situations. As a result of this analysis, meaningful feedback arose bringing about the consolidation of rules through this metalinguistic process.

From this perspective, grammar and accuracy are not central elements because our concern is communication itself and all the variables that connect to it. The students' command of English is not seen as the basic requirement, but their capacity to interact with others and defend their thoughts gaining the adhesion of their audience. Accordingly, the use of argumentative techniques is very relevant and this is the topic of the following section.

Argumentation and Argumentative Techniques

Perelman (1997) proposes the *new rhetoric*, understood as a theory of argumentation, useful to convince and persuade an audience through the study of different discursive means or argumentative techniques such as the use *cuasilogical arguments*: contradiction and incompatibility, the rule of justice and reciprocity, arguments of transitivity, inclusion and division, and weight, measurement and probabilities which have a lack of rigor and precision; and *arguments supported on real structures* that consist of

succession nexus and coexistence nexus. In the former, the argumentation is based on phenomena of the same level; in the latter, on terms of different level, such as the essence and its manifestations³.

With these techniques the most important aim of speakers is to provoke or increase the adhesion to the thesis presented. An efficient argument enhances the intensity of the adhesion, so that it generates the premeditated action from the hearers or at least it creates in the audience a predisposition to do something, or to behave in a certain way that will be manifested at the right moment.

For instance, with my first semester language students, efficient arguments arose from the analysis of the attitude of the United States in the war in Iraq. Students had to bring in or report on from news programs in class and many of them were related to the role of the United States in Iraq. One of the oral activities about the topic was a debate in which some students played the role of the United States and others of the Iraqis. Given that this was a problem widely discussed in the university and that we had already analyzed the documentary *Bowling for Columbine*, students reflected critically about the

violent means that the United States used to solve the conflicts all around the world.

In order to enable the students to react critically in front of the messages sent by mass media (television, movies, radio, newspapers, etc.), I included in my program diverse sources, so that students developed tolerance towards different cultures and understood the power of highly elaborated representations that appear in mass media and the need for them to be critical and selective about the cultural model full of values, prejudices and ideas that belong to the dominant culture, (Cassany, 1994).

In the methodology proposed, there is a combination of some aspects of the structural view, which has to do with the knowledge that is needed to be proficient language users. Formal rules have to be learnt not just as a formal system but as a resource for use. Essentially, we as teachers have to design meaningful and practical tasks in the school context in order to get the students use vocabulary and structures meaningfully developing, in this way, their communicative competence, critical thinking, and doing our job of teaching a language more successful and rewarding.

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³ Chaim Perelman, *El imperio retórico. Retórica y argumentación*. Bogotá: Grupo Editorial Norma, 1997.