

Interacting in social contexts as the starting point of a teaching unit

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Our philosophical background for this paper will be the conception of language as an integral part of social life (Hymes, 1971). As a result of this thought, language teaching (whether the teaching of the mother tongue, a second language or a foreign language) should be intimately related with affective factors and should be carried out in terms of language functions for social interaction.

Our objective here is basically to illustrate how this conception of teaching can be put into practice both in courses of EFL and in ESP courses.

1. GOALS

If we consider that language is social and that it exists for social purposes, our teaching objectives — and therefore the contents of our teaching units — cannot be centered around formal or structural aspects of the language to be taught. A teaching unit should rather be constructed to develop a communicative competence that will permit the learner to interact in the foreign language within real communicative situations, using the language according to the social role he performs and to the social actions realized in a given setting, motivated by his communicative needs and intentions. This does not mean that language structure is to be neglected. It is rather that it has become a means to a communicative aim and has ceased to be a teaching aim in itself.

A course of English as a Foreign Language should therefore be designed having in mind that the learner will perform either the role of a foreigner within an English-speaking community or the

one of a Spanish speaker (in our case) who interacts with an English-speaking foreigner. This leads us to determine teaching-learning goals that correspond to communicative needs of a foreigner who uses the language within a non-English-speaking community and hypothetically or potentially would interact in an English-speaking environment. We may list the following as some of the learning goals for such students:

A. Approaching the target language and culture:

- 1) By learning about how English-speaking people live and interact in ordinary life.
- 2) By interacting as a potential traveler in a country where English is either the national language or a means of communicating with foreigners.
- 3) By learning about other peoples' literature, history, socio-political organization and other aspects of their civilization.

B. Helping English-speaking foreigners approach his own life, language and culture:

- 1) By interacting as a potential tourist guide or friend of English-speaking foreigners in his own country or in relation to his country.
- 2) By corresponding with English speakers who live in other countries.

C. Looking for ways of meeting his occupational needs or interests:

- 1) By getting information from different kinds of written or oral messages related to topics of his occupational needs or interests.
- 2) By interacting through different means of "institutional" communication, such as formats, tests, catalogues, ads, interviews and formal letters.

However, teaching goals should not be restricted to the potentiality of real situations that the student might encounter outside the classroom; they should also meet the immediate communicative needs inherent to dynamic interaction within the classroom situation that correspond to teacher-student and student-student relationships. These goals imply facing realities in the classroom related to anxieties and satisfactions resulting from the learning process and of the psychological atmosphere of the group of students. The success in handling this is essential for achieving confidence in the use of English as a real means of communication, through which students can express not only their own ideas, but also their own

feelings and expectations. Besides, teaching students to interact in English in relation to their learning tasks saves precious time (during class) that is usually dedicated to deal with discipline problems, to the explanation of assigned learning tasks, or to the organization of the group to perform them. This sort of objectives should not be limited to considering what is being **done** in class, but also what is being **thought** and **felt** by both students and teacher with respect to the different members of the group as well as to the contents to be learned and the activities performed in class. This will allow a participation of the learner not only with his intellect but also through an integral involvement of his personality.

2. TEACHING UNITS

Once the ultimate goals have been determined, one can proceed to construct teaching units that aim at the achievement of developing specific aspects of communicative competence, taking into account both the correctness and the appropriacy of linguistic items.

The most recent advancements in pragmatics and text linguistics show that the basic unit of language analysis cannot be the sentence, not even the speech act in isolation, but rather the text as a linguistic unit of a speech event, within a specific context of situation, in which members of a speech community interact according to their social role as well as to their communicative needs and motivation. Thus, for example, a speaker does not produce imperative sentences for the sake of producing imperative sentences; nor does he use imperative sentence to give orders for the sake of giving orders. He may use an imperative sentence (language form) in order to interact in the classroom (situation) as a student (speaker's social role) with his peers (interlocutors' social role) to give an order (function), motivated by the uneasiness caused by indiscipline (need), and with the purpose of collaborating with his teacher to get things done (purpose).

In the same way, a teaching unit should be designed in such a way that the learner can use the foreign language within a linguistic and a social context. Thus, as has been stated before, a linguistic aspect cannot be the starting point for a teaching unit. Even a given speech act such as greeting, ordering or asking for directions is not sufficient if it is taken in isolation. It is rather the context of situation, the determination of who speaks to whom, with what purpose, under which circumstances and in what manner, which should be the framework for a teaching unit. It is thus the context of situation which determines the kinds of interaction to be practiced as well as the linguistic elements that are most characteristic in the given sort of interaction and should therefore be taught. Also the selection of the language skill to be emphasized should be made according to the kind of channel — whether oral

or written, direct or indirect — that is demanded by the context of situation and the kind of interaction — whether receptive or productive — that is inherent to the social role of the student as a hypothetical or real participant in a speech event.

For instance, if the teaching unit is concerned with the situation of introducing a friend to a relative, it is obvious that speaking and listening are to be emphasized, while in a unit around the situation of corresponding with a pen pal reading and writing are the most important skills.

3. LEARNING TASKS

The different activities carried out during the learning process should be related to the kind of social interaction represented by the context of situation selected for the teaching unit. They need to be designed in order to achieve the communicative goals determined for the unit. They may involve interaction within the context of situation given, within analogous hypothetical situations or within immediate real life situations that can result from student-student or teacher-student interaction. In other words, learning tasks should be related to at least one of the determinations of who speaks to whom, about what, under which circumstances and with what purpose, made for the context of situation that has been selected as the starting point of the teaching unit. In this way, the learner can find a guidance to develop a communicative and linguistic competence which he may apply on future occasions in which he needs to interact in similar speech events.

If we take the case of the situation mentioned above of introducing a friend to a relative, the unit may start with a dramatization of a given speech event that takes place in an English-speaking environment, so that the student can "put himself in the shoes" of someone who lives that situation. He may then create an analogous situation by making up a similar conversation with his classmates, using different linguistic forms for the realization of speech acts of introducing people and greeting when being introduced.

However, these speech acts are not the only ones that occur in natural communication when two people meet for the first time. In an informal relationship such as the one established by someone's friends and relatives when meeting at home after school, finding out about certain aspects of the life of the person that is introduced seems to be a feasible communicative purpose. Enquiring about his place of origin is an appropriate topic if there are semiotic hints (physiognomy, accent) that convey that the interlocutor comes from a different country or region. (This situation will be frequently encountered by a foreign English speaker when traveling abroad). Thus, talking about people's places of origin is a logical topic to be included in this teaching unit. This can be originally done in relation with hypothetical situations of meeting people in

informal settings and then transferred to immediate communicative contexts resulting from the student-student or teacher-student relationship: finding out about each others' places of origin or the ones of relatives or people known by all participants, with the purpose of getting to know each other better or of sharing common interests.

The mastery of a given linguistic aspect may demand some special concentration on form rather than on function at a given stage of the learning process. However, even under these circumstances explanation and practice should take place in a meaningful and contextualized way. In our case, the pronunciation of /j/ in "you" when uttering the question "Where are you from?" is a necessary linguistic aspect to be dealt with. This may be achieved with the practice of conversations between people who meet for the first time, concentrating specifically on the pronunciation of /j/.

In relation to ESP, the principle of contextualizing learning tasks is equally valid. Let's take for example the goal of meeting the students' need to consult materials in English for the presentation of a paper or of an oral report. For this purpose, one may construct a unit around the hypothetical situation of a student who approaches a text on Simon Bolivar with the specific purpose of finding out about British influence on Bolivar's ideas, since this will be one of his main arguments in his paper. The teaching unit will be constructed around this specific communicative purpose, with the objective of training the student to select a text and read it with a specific purpose in mind and of giving him the tools to convey from key elements in an English text the communicative purpose of the writer. Thus analyzing titles, subtitles and topic sentences is an adequate strategy for this communicative purpose, since it corresponds to a procedure that would be performed by a good reader. Also, getting some training in the analysis of cohesive elements to grasp the author's intention will train students to approach other texts appropriately.

The initial communicative situation selected for this objective can be further on transferred to hopefully real needs in relation to analogous purposes for their subject matters, using texts supplied by teachers or by the students themselves.

To conclude, the proposal presented here is to design foreign language courses based on the consideration of real-life communicative needs resulting from the foreigner's social role in relation to his own speech community and to speech communities of the target language. This approach will guarantee a much more meaningful and coherent learning process, since it will determine that each learning task will contribute to the achievement of a communicative objective. Through such learning the student will participate with his personality as a whole, involving not only his intellect but also his feelings and attitudes. The considerations presented here imply a different conception of learning difficulties and of grading objectives and contents. There is no space to develop this topic here, but we may state that the principle of communicative competence

implies that learning difficulties are not simply determined by difficulties with language form, but that they also depend on how "near" we feel the foreign language to us. This means that the first steps should be taken in relation with the most primitive and immediate communicative needs and that further steps will have to do with most elaborate uses of language.

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