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Teaching the four language skills from a communicative perspective: some pedagogical implications

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I. Introduction

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During the process of learning a second/foreign language (SL/FL), learners are expected to acquire a particular proficiency level, in both the written and oral mode, which enables them to employ the language for communicative purposes (Usó-Juan & Martínez-Flor, 2006a). Achieving that aim, however, sometimes appears to be rather complex, especially in FL contexts where the opportunities for practising the language purposefully and for receiving authentic-like instances of input are scarce. Traditionally, English Language Teaching (ELT) textbooks have been considered as the core of the instructed setting (Sheldon, 1988). Nevertheless, they have been criticised for not providing an adequate representation of language (Ediger, 2006), and for not accounting for purposeful communicative activities (Hyland, 2003). In order to overcome those problems, different resources such as audiovisual and/or internet sources might be employed (Martínez-Flor & Usó-Juan, 2006a; Beltran-Palanques, in press). Hence, learners can be provided with authentic instances of language, and by designing appropriate activities they might be engaged in purposeful activities. In line with this, it has been valued the use of both audiovisual and internet resources since they permit learners to be exposed to authentic instances of authentic language as well as to explore on-line materials (Martínez-Flor & Usó-Juan, 2006a; Beltran-Palanques, in press). Given the importance of providing learners with both authentic-like instances of language and communicative activities in which language can be employed purposefully, the goal of the present paper is twofold: (i) to provide a revision of the role of the four language skills from a communicative perspective; and (ii) to present a set of activities to teach the four language skills from a communicative perspective.

II. The role of four language skills from a communicative perspective

The discussion about the teaching of SL and FL from a communicative perspective has been the concern of several researchers (e.g. Canale, 1980; Canale & Swain, 1983; Celce-Murcia et al., 1995; Usó-Juan & Martínez-Flor, 2006a). With this respect, it is Hymes (1972) who advances some of the major competences that should be integrated within this particular construct.

Hymes (1972), as a response to Chomsky's (1965) understanding of SLA processes, suggests that language should be tackled from the perspective of language use within a social construction. With this respect, the author identifies two main components, namely those of linguistic competence and sociolinguistic competence as part of the communicative perspective. Following Hymes's (1972) ideas, Canale and Swain (1980) and further developed by Canale (1983) provide the basis of



the communicative competence by including a variety of competences, more precisely those of *grammatical competence*; *sociolinguistic competence*; *strategic competence*; and *discourse competence*. The *grammatical competence* refers to the linguistic features of language which involves lexicon, pronunciation, spelling, word formation and sentence structure. The *sociolinguistic competence* is related to the socio-cultural conditions that can affect participants' language use. The *strategic competence* involves a set of strategies which may be used to solve any problem caused during the communicative event. Finally, the *discourse competence* is understood as the ability to produce and interpret coherent and cohesive spoken or written texts beyond the level of the sentence.

In addition to this, Bachman (1990) proposes a communicative model which consists of three main competences: *language competence*, *strategic competence*, and *psychological mechanisms*. The first one is divided into two main subcomponents, more specifically those of *organisational competence* and *pragmatic competence*. The former involves both *grammatical* and *textual competence*, while the latter encapsulates both *illocutionary competence* (i.e. speech acts and language functions) and *sociolinguistic competence* (i.e. ability to use language appropriately in a given context). The *strategic competence* refers to the ability to employ language competence accordingly to the pragmatic and sociolinguistic parameters in order to communicate appropriately. Finally, the *psychological mechanisms* are related to both psychological and neurological conditions that may be at work when communicating such as receptive and productive language in its different modes (i.e. oral, visual, aural).

A further developed communicative competence perspective is bestowed by Celce-Murcia et al. (1995) in which it is included the following competences: *linguistic competence*; *socio-cultural competence*; *strategic competence*; *discourse competence*; and *actional competence*. The main component within this particular model is that of *discourse competence* which refers to the selection, sequencing and organisation of words which are required in order to communicate appropriately. The *linguistic competence* involves certain elements such as those of *phonological*, *lexical*, *morphological*, and *syntactic* which are required in order to communicate. The *socio-cultural competence* is related to the speaker's ability to use the language acceptably in a given context which is affected by social contextual factors, style, as well as cultural conditions. The *actional competence* refers to the speaker's ability and knowledge to outperform and understand speech act sets. Finally, the *strategic competence* has to do with the strategies that are needed in order to learn and use of language appropriately.

More recently, Usó-Juan and Martínez-Flor (2006a) provide a communicative competence model which consists of five main components, namely those of *discourse*, *linguistic*, *pragmatic*,



intercultural, and *strategic*. The *discourse competence* is related to the choice and the sequencing of the sentences in order to provide a cohesive and coherent message. As a matter of fact, this specific competence is seen as the core of the model since it supports the rest of the components. The *linguistic competence* encapsulates the grammatical competence as well as the linguistic system. Hence, this competence embraces phonological, grammatical and lexical items of language. The *pragmatic competence* entails two subcomponents, namely those of illocutionary and sociolinguistic aspects of language. The former refers to the specific language functions and speech acts that speakers require to use language appropriately, whereas the latter has to do with the specific circumstances under which interaction may take place. The *intercultural competence* includes socio-cultural aspects, social norms as well as the non-verbal communication. The last component, the *strategic competence*, refers to the appropriateness in the use of communicative strategies that are employed to convey meaning in an acceptable manner. In addition, this particular model shows the relationship amongst the different components and emphasises the integration of the four language skills to create discourse.

In short, since Hymes (1972) identified some of the major components of the communicative competence perspective, several models have been developed in order to contribute to this particular field of research (e.g. Canale & Swain, 1980; Canale, 1983, Bachman, 1990; Celce-Murcia et al., 1995; Usó-Juan & Martínez-Flor, 2006a). Amongst the different communicative competence perspectives described above, certain differences can be identified. The models proposed by Canale and Swain (1980) and Canale (1983) and Bachman (1990) do not note how the different components are interrelated within the communicative construct. On the contrary, Celce-Murcia et al. (1995) and Usó-Juan and Martínez-Flor (2006a) identify the relationship of the different components. In addition, further differences are also found as regards the treatment of certain competences (i.e. pragmatic and intercultural competence) within the communicative competence perspective suggested by the different models. More precisely, models such as those suggested by Canale and Swain (1980) and Canale (1983) understand the pragmatic competence as part of the sociolinguistic competence, while the models proposed by Bachman (1990), Celce-Murcia et al. (1995) and Usó-Juan and Martínez-Flor (2006a) place it as an independent component. As regards the intercultural competence, however, with the exception of Usó-Juan and Martínez-Flor (2006a), little attention is paid to this particular competence. Finally, the function of the four language skills is only taken into account by the models developed by Bachman (1990) and Usó-Juan and Martínez-Flor (2006a). With this regard, Bachman (1990) advances some of the basic functions of the four language skills (i.e. psychological mechanisms) while Usó-Juan and Martínez-Flor's

(2006a) model emphasises the development of the communicative competence through the four language skills.



III. Teaching the four language skills communicatively

The teaching the four language skills from a communicative perspective implies that teachers should be resourceful and creative. That is to say, teachers should search appropriate materials that can provide an authentic representation of language use as well as elaborate on specific activities in order to engage learners in communicative activities. The following section presents a set of activities which integrate the teaching of the four language skills from a communicative perspective. Moreover, drawing on previous research (Martínez-Flor & Usó-Juan, 2006a,b; Martínez-Flor et al. 2006; Usó-Juan et al., 2006; Usó-Juan & Martínez-Flor, 2008; Warschauer, 2010; Bahrani, 2011; Beltran-Palanques, in press), we attempt to present certain activities which emphasise the importance of exposing learners to authentic-like instances of language as well as having learners engaged in communicative and purposeful activities.

a) Teaching listening activities

As regards listening, audiovisual materials might provide learners with a wider representation of how language is employed in authentic and contextualised situations (Martínez-Flor & Usó-Juan, 2006; Usó-Juan & Martínez-Flor, 2008; Beltran-Palanques, in press). By using audiovisual materials, learners can be exposed to pragmatic and discourse features of language (Martínez-Flor, 2007; Usó-Juan & Martínez-Flor, 2008; Beltran-Palanques, 2011) that are rarely shown in traditional materials as ELT textbooks (Usó-Juan, 2008). Moreover, on-line resources offer a rich variety of aural input in the form of videos that can be employed for teaching purposes. Taking into account those aspects, we propose an activity in which learners can be exposed to input samples that represent the actual use of language.

Videos from video-sharing websites: the use of videos can be very beneficial for learners as they can be exposed to not only to contextualised aural input but also visual information. Teacher should help learners to activate their background knowledge about the forthcoming spoken text in order to facilitate their comprehension. Moreover, learners can also be asked about specific information which appears in the spoken texts to check whether learners understand the input. In addition to this, the teacher can also ask learners to identify the situation (participants' relationships) as well as their non-verbal communication. Finally, the teacher might open a whole-class discussion about the topic.

b) Teaching speaking activities

In the case of speaking, researcher shows that a rich variety of activities might be done to promote this particular language skill in the language classroom. In short, it has been valued the potential of elaborated texts (Burns, 2006; Martínez-Flor et al., 2006), audiovisual material (Hughes, 2006; Martínez-Flor et al., 2006; Beltran-Palanques, in press). By using elaborated texts and audiovisual materials learners might be aware of the importance of using certain pragmatic and discourse features. In relation to this, role-play activities might be strongly beneficial since learners can practise the linguistic features examined. In line with this, we suggest an activity which consists of presenting learners with authentic instances of language in order to explore discourse features.

Examining audiovisual scripts: the use of videos and the corresponding scripts might help learners to become aware of the importance of pragmatic and discourse features. In order to do so, the teacher should carefully select the audiovisual materials that better fit with the features under study. After that, the teacher should first introduce the pragmatic and discourse features that should be examined as well as explain them the social conditions that might determine somehow the use of the different linguistic features. Then, learners can be exposed to the video scenes in which they can be asked to identify the both the context of situation and the different features. Finally, learners can examine the scripts and elaborate contextualised role-play on the basis of the pragmatic and discourse features studied.

c) Teaching reading activities

In the case of reading, by using both off-line and on-line resources learners can be exposed to authentic texts that can be employed in the language classroom (Usó-Juan & Martínez-Flor, 2006b, 2008; Beltran-Palanques, in press). In bringing this particular type of resources learners can be exposed to different passages that might be of their interest. Consequently, they could feel more comfortable with the reading passages and they might participate more actively during the reading sessions. Considering the previous assumptions, we propose an activity in which learners are invited to select their own materials.

Learners take over: the purpose of this activity is to give learners the opportunity to take part actively in the elaboration of the reading materials. Learners can be divided into different groups in order to search and select different texts to elaborate on reading activities to the other learners. Therefore, learners are expected to select certain reading passages that might be of their interest and present them to the language classroom in order to work on them. The teacher should supervise that the activities proposed by the learners are appropriate and provide



feedback when required. This activity may be rather motivating for learners since they can search for texts that they might be particular interested in as well as choose the topics they consider more suitable for them.

d) Teaching writing activities

As regards writing, learners should be presented with activities in which learners can use the language communicatively (Usó-Juan et al., 2006). In order to reach to that end, learners should be given the opportunity to take part in activities that might reflect the real use of writing (Usó-Juan, et al. 2006; Usó-Juan & Martínez-Flor, 2008; Tomlinson, 2011; Beltran-Palanques, in press). In encouraging learners to take part in this type of activities, they may feel rather motivated and they can reflect on the potential and necessity of writing in order to express their ideas and convey meaning. Taking into account the importance of providing learners with communicative and purposefully activities, we present an activity which involves the elaboration of either an off- or on-line written magazine.

Create a magazine – give roles to learners: the aim of this activity is to create a magazine. The teacher should assign learners different roles (e.g. editor in chief, associate editor, advertising manager, design editor) as well as discuss with learners the different sections that may be included in the magazine. The magazine can be done either in printed form or as an on-line blog. This type of activity can be very motivating for learners and they can write about topics that they might be interested in.

IV. Final remarks

The purpose of this particular paper was twofold. On the one hand, we presented a review of some of the major contributions to the communicative perspective in order to see how the four language skills might be integrated within this particular framework. On the other hand, we proposed a set of activities which can be implemented in the language classroom in order to help learners to achieve communicative competence through the four language skills. In designing the different activities, it was taken into account the importance of providing learners with authentic instances of input as well as to help them to be engaged in communicative and purposefully activities.

For further research, it would very interesting to implement the different activities suggested in this paper in order to see whether the use of alternative materials may be beneficial for the development of learners' communicative competence, especially in FL classrooms.

V. References

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