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The impersonal sentences: a proposal for a teaching unit

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Abstract

This study proposes a framework to develop a teaching unit for a group of Italian speaking students of E/LE (*Español Lengua extranjera*), in order to deepen one of the most complex linguistic topic: the impersonal expressions.

Moreover, these structures represent a central issue, of any language system, as they may become even indispensable to communicate in certain contexts and real situations. Basing on the *enfoque por tareas* approach, and through a comparative-contrastive perspective with Italian language, our proposal aims at choosing the best way to transmit to our student certain basic skills in using such forms.

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1. Methodological premises

A crucial operation for the success of any educational plan is the preliminary detection of students' needs. The literature concerning this issue, in fact, is wide, and there are also very different ways to define the concept of need. Anyway, without presenting the different taxonomies and interpretive hypothesis, we share the consideration of Robinson, who defines the needs analysis something strongly contaminated by the vision and ideological

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convictions of the person conducting it (in Aguirre Beltrán, 2005: 648).

The target of our research is a class of students attending the first year course of Spanish Language and Translation at the Department DISTU of the University of Tuscia (Viterbo). This course consist in 75 hours of frontal teaching, which are complemented with more than one hundred hours of a Language Spanish course, taught by the linguistic associates.

Considering the amount of time dedicated to learning the foreign language, we believe that students may be faced, at least during the second semester of the academic year, with the topic of the impersonal sentences.

Moreover, considering the traditional vocation of our department and our course of study -modern languages and cultures-, to train experts, instead of simple users of foreign languages, aspiring to jobs such as languages teaching, translation and interpreting, the needs analysis, here, has to consider this specific professional purpose.

The educational need in our case is twofold: on the one hand, a training to deep awareness of the Spanish language structures, and on the other one, developing comparative-contrastive mechanisms between these structures, and, in particular, between Spanish and Italian impersonal expressions.

Before proceeding with the target situation analysis, it should be advisable considering the current conditions of the class, evaluating its starting level: linguistic knowledge, learning skills and experiences will be analyzed. Several tools such as questionnaires and tests, interviews and observation, will be used to calibrate properly the activities to be implemented.

Another clarification regards the method that we intend to use for our teaching unit, specifying that we are talking about a concept that, despite the general belief, has no unequivocal meaning.

Sánchez Pérez, for example, suggests to assess the role of all elements that contribute to define the teaching method. According to the Author, there are three key-elements: the theoretical component (principles and beliefs); content; and activities, through which the selected content is practiced (Sánchez Pérez, 2005: 669).

We share this consideration, believing, however, that it is not possible to identify in a preliminary way the different factors composing a certain method, still less for an activity in continuous definition like as didactics, where many unexpected factors may come into play, conditioning it.

A second element that we would like to emphasize is the opportunity to adopt a contrastive perspective, considering Italian students of Spanish language, we cannot underestimate the element, extremely influencing, of affinity between these two very close languages.

A very wide and authoritative literature states that this closeness, at least in the initial phase of learning, is misleading, finding that after an initial phase of very rapid learning, students tend to produce very little and slowly.

Carrera Díaz focuses on a similar issue, considering in particular the opposite case, concluding that also a Spanish student of Italian language perceives how much the two languages are, actually, away from one another (Carrera Díaz, 2007: 2).

The author comes to exalt the role of contrastivity in the teaching/learning process of related languages, especially when considering an adult audience that will inevitably be conditioned by the mother tongue. Rejecting the idea that the learning process of a L1 is the same as the L2/foreign language one, it should be highlighted that in the second case there will be also other factors, such as previous other linguistic experiences, that will influence the acquisition process.

This idea, now widely accepted, led to the production of many language teaching methods, depending on the mother tongue of the recipients, and certainly a pioneer in this regard has been Saussol, which has devoted a great effort to the problems of Spanish language acquisition by Italian students.

In addition, as stressed by Carrera Díaz, the error, resulting from the negative influence by L1 on the learning mechanism, is not something negative, as proposed by the Contrastive analysis, but rather it has an educational value, as a tool to develop critical thinking and autonomy.

Also Calvi defends the centrality of contrastivity in the teaching foreign language process, even more when the languages are related:

teniendo en cuenta los actuales conocimientos sobre el proceso de aprendizaje y la oportunidad de incentivar el protagonismo del alumno en la práctica didáctica, resulta aconsejable utilizar la reflexión consciente en el aula, siempre y cuando resulte didácticamente productiva. Pero no se deberá interpretar la noción de enfoque contrastivo de manera estática, como confrontación de estructuras, sino dinámica, como toma de conciencia activa por parte del aprendiz de la distancia interlingüística, que refleja, al mismo tiempo, la distancia entre el horizonte cultural de la L1 y el de la L2.

Este planteamiento dinámico supone, ante todo, desarrollar en los alumnos la capacidad de observación, secundando la tendencia natural de poner en contraste los conocimientos y utilizar la L1 como fuente de hipótesis sobre la L2; pero proporcionándoles, al mismo tiempo, un marco teórico adecuado (Calvi, 2003: 25).

The third and final premise regards the use into our research of the *enfoque por tareas* method, which presents some specific factors, that seem adequate to our empirical case, such as recognizing a crucial role to the group work; implying the adherence of the final activities/targets with real situations, in which students have been or may be; assigning to the teacher the role of a guide-collaborator of a dynamic and interactive process.

The main training objective of this methodology is to educate learners not only in the formal contents of the language, but also in the instrumental use of these contents, to realize one or more likely activities/targets. It is an educational process that moves within the communicative language teaching (Koike & Klee, 2013: 13-17), aiming at an active communication process in the classroom, through the organization of appropriate learning activities:

[En esta evolución de la enseñanza comunicativa] de alguna manera, pasamos de la teoría a la acción, de los contenidos a los procesos: no se quiere saber, solo, cómo se pide una información y hacer ejercicios en clase de entrenamiento, para ponerlo en práctica cuando se necesite; se trata ahora de hacerlo de verdad, y esto desde la misma clase. Ese es el cambio que propugna el trabajo con tareas o proyectos, dentro del mismo enfoque comunicativo: el pasar a la acción, cumpliendo, en clase, tareas interesantes que incitan, en el proceso, a aprender todo lo necesario para poder llevarlas a cabo (Fernández López, 2001: 14).

2. The unit construction

Before passing to build our unit, it should be noted that its planning is a part of the more general education program. The development of our unit deals with the *currículo* design, that, according to García Santa-Cecilia, is built on three levels: *nivel de fundamentación del currículo* (theory of language, language learning theory, analysis of sociocultural factors, teaching situation), *nivel de decisión-planificación del currículo* (objectives, contents, methodology, evaluating activity), *nivel de actuación-aplicación del currículo* (teaching and learning concrete activities; teacher training, evaluation) (García Santa-Cecilia, 1995: 85). However, for sake of brevity we will not enter in these aspects.

Each unit, which is placed at the second level of this program scheme, has its own goals, pedagogical structure and evaluation system. The objectives, with a specific communicative characteristic, materialize in contents that revolve around the theme or situational area chosen, which includes, also, the vocabulary related to it.

The crucial moment of evaluation, finally, can refer to both activities involved: the teaching process or the learning process, and can be further carried out in each unit or series of units.

The final level of this planning is represented by lessons development, through which to address specific aspects of learning program: in this phase the teacher will have to reconsider the outline provided for the units, adapting each to the time span available for each classroom session (Pastor Cesteros, 2006: 271-276).

As regards the *enfoque por tareas*, we consider and apply to our case the theoretical framework proposed by Estaire and Zanón (2010) which is organized into six basic steps.

The first one is the definition of the subject. Although convinced of the need for negotiation with the students, we propose within our methodological approach a project idea involving or students' future job or their everyday life. For this case-study, in order to ensure the greatest possible involvement, considering also the young age of our learners, we propose a project hypothesis based on the tourism sector.

The second step is to set the communication objectives, making the students able to cope with the four basic linguistic skills (oral and written expression, oral and written comprehension) in real situations, related to the theme.

Exactly in this regard it can be helpful one of the most specific elements of the *enfoque por tareas*, in particular we refer to likelihood of its communication goals. In our experiment the students will faced with communication necessities related to the final objective, such as: "How to understand, or ask about the existence of something somewhere (hotel, restaurant, tourist information office)?", "How to ask, or give information about the weather from somewhere?", while they pondering around the equivalent expressions used in their native language.

The third step is to schedule in time the final task/objective; this is a crucial part of the project, as it demonstrates the effectiveness of learning activities throughout the unit, in order to achieve the final objective. Our students are asked to write a travel reportage to a Spanish-speaking country. It has to be a Spanish-Italian text, where bilingualism however is not reduced to a simplistic translation exercise, but becomes a comparative-contrastive linguistic reflection tool.

Predictably, the theme and the task chosen will push students to use many impersonality expressions: the idea of a travel diary, indeed, will also lead them to express judgments about routes, food, visited places, people met, customs and habits of foreign populations, and/or evaluate all these experiences.

The fourth step provides establishing the thematic and linguistic components, necessary to accomplish the final task. As evident, it is a very different approach from the traditional ones, as the contents are not fixed in advance, but they are selected during the course, because proved to be necessary to accomplish the task.

With regard to thematic components, they imply to locate and analyze the key aspects of the topic (tourism system, international routes, tourism market); while as regards linguistic components, they involve components ranging from the textual genres (guides, maps, web pages) to the characteristic aspects of the touristic expressive code, like as the lexical ones. This goal, once again, will be achieved by comparing the Italian and Spanish contexts of use.

In this step we take advantage of the materials used in a study recently presented (*Las oraciones impersonales: un análisis comparativo italiano-español*) during the XXV ASELE Congress (Madrid, September 2014), where we considered in detail some impersonality expressions (atmospheric expressions, expressions with tacit subject, verbs *haber, ser, hacer* + noun, adjective, adverb; the impersonal *se*; the construction *tratarse de; dar pena, miedo, vergüenza*; the verb *bastar*; the verbs *pasar, suceder, ocurrir*; the verbs *doler, escocer* and *picar*; the verbs *oler, apestar*; the verbs *decir, poner, rezar, constar*), all treated contrastively with the Italian language.

The fifth step is the planning process of lessons. In particular, in this step the sequence of tasks/objectives should be organized and coupled with the sequencing of lessons comprising the entire course. Regarding this issue, Estaire and Zanón state that the process of selection and incorporation of objectives/tasks can be both preliminary and rigidly fixed, as well as the project progresses, by the student's contributions and suggestions (Etaire & Zanón, 2010: 414).

We think it would be an advantageous tool the insertion, during the classes, of preparatory works instrumental to the final objective, such as making an hotel reservation by phone and/or by mail, organizing an excursion, encouraging learners to suggest parallel tasks, based on their previous experiences in that context.

The sixth step is the evaluation process: a training project, in which the participants are invited to contribute to the definition and development of all the activities, automatically generates continuous evaluation moments, pushing everyone to a reflection practice. This reflection process allows the student to reconsider not only teacher's and other students' actions, but also his/her own productions, and especially the mechanisms leading to them. This attitude, active and passive at the same time, transforms the self-evaluation in a form of continuous research on errors reason, and on the ability to solve them.

In this perspective, the detection of some weaknesses will bring to adopt a suitable corrective approach during the same classes, developing an active and dynamic reflective attitude, that involves all the aspects of the acquisition process: from those institutional and formal to the organizational and relational ones.

We share the proposal of Chancerel and Richterich, which believe possible repeating the needs analysis throughout the course, reinforcing implicitly and indirectly the logic we have recalled before: a constant monitoring of the progression coincides and amplifies the adequacy of a continuous (self)formative assessment (in Aguirre Beltrán, 2005: 651).

Conclusions

In order to be more effective, we have represented our methodological approach through a graph, in which from bottom to top, each step is part of a chain, where the former feeds the next one. Moreover, even if other tasks/objectives are generated during the formative process, or other materials and experiences are added, all these aspects contribute to achieve the final task/objective.

We are moving into a form of education, based on a democratic and a shared management of the classroom,

where students suggest to add some contents as well as ask to eliminate other, where it is possible to bring all materials to target the classroom as needed, doing less of material proved unsuitable.

Our approach proposes a self-managed class where the renounce to a formal way to transfer concepts is also balanced by the contrast with the mother tongue, raising the awareness of students about their learning process. The self-managed class shows to be a part of a larger collective project.

However, for sake of brevity we have presented just a prototype scheme of a didactic unit, the development and concrete implementation of which should require much more space than that allowed for this article. We trust, therefore, the opportunity of broadening and deepening this model in a future publication, where it is possible to describe in detail each moment composing the teaching unit.

In this future work, we will deepen also aspects such as: the management and organization of the times, the topics covered and their sequencing, the materials used, and the reference to the use of tests and operational tools to monitor the progress of the class.

We will also try to highlight the kind of reaction shown by the students in front of the issues presented, and yet, their inclination to a comparative approach with their native language, and their sensibility to reflect consciously on these issues and themselves.

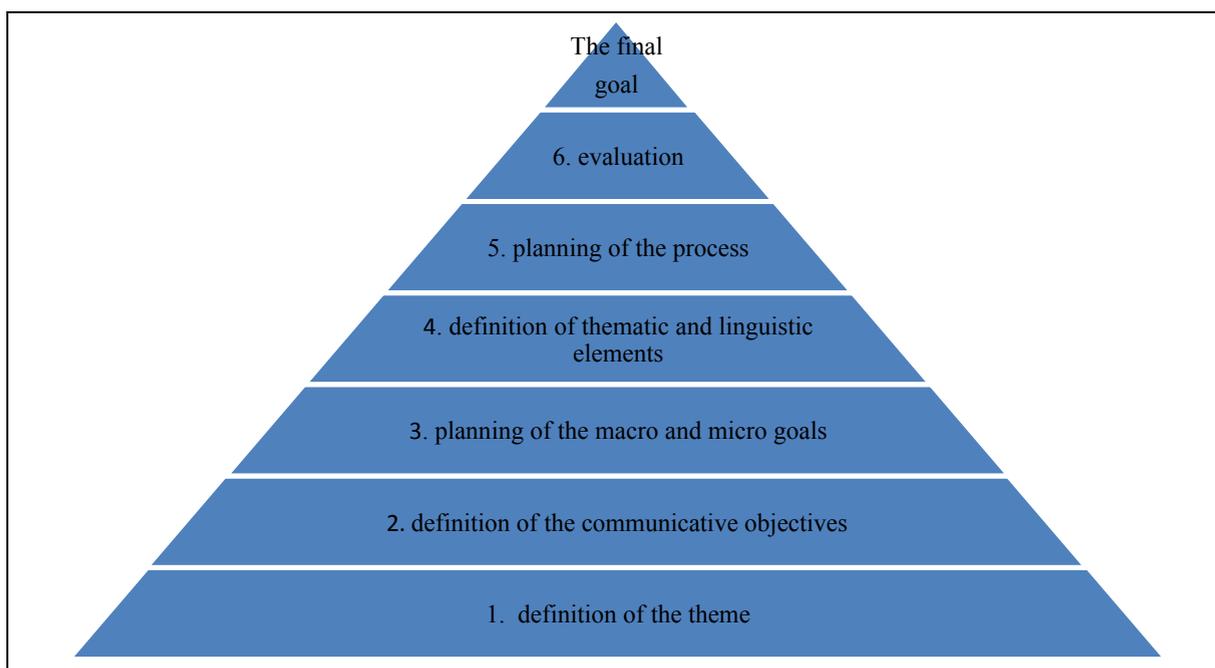


Fig. 1.

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