



Listening as an Easy Skill: Analysis of a Particular Context

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I want to focus on the difficulty perceived by seventh grade students in connection to listening activities in the English class, at some public schools in San Juan, Argentina. This analysis will lead to the examination of contextual factors that might act as unforeseen constraints on the language learning situation.

KEYWORDS: Listening Skills, EFL, Contextual Factors, Language Learning Situation

I. INTRODUCTION

Norton y Toohey (2004: 2) claim that “critical pedagogy cannot be a unitary set of texts, beliefs, convictions and assumptions” but it has to respond to the “particularities of the local”. Assuming a critical stance to language pedagogy, the process of Foreign Language Teaching (FLT)² can not be one and only and follow the same model all over the world; on the contrary, based on sound theories, it has to be enacted within a given place and time. Any teaching practice born out of the compromise between what the theory declares and what each context makes feasible, should be subject to constant revision so that it can be improved, if education is to lead to social change.

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² In this paper, the term *Second language* will be used to refer to any language learned sometime later than the mother tongue, as suggested by Mitchell and Myles (2002). This term would thus embrace the conception of a foreign language. Both terms (*second language* and *foreign language*) will be used indistinctly.

II. THE SCENARIO

Argentina Education system is organized in four levels³: initial, primary, secondary and university, any of them can be supported either by the state or by private funds. The curriculum design for the first three levels is supervised by the Ministry of Education. In general, it can be said that private schools, even some parochial in the rural areas, are better cared for and tend to have a smaller student population than public ones. This last group consists of bigger schools, normally organized in two shifts (morning and afternoon) and sometimes even a third at night. On account of the size of the student population and of meager (or not so well administered) funds, these buildings tend to be poorly kept.

As regards the organization of the curricula, students at secondary level (or EGB3) have an average of six forty – minute periods of instruction per day. There is as an average of 10 to 12 subjects per year, a foreign language included among them, with 3 periods a week, often distributed in two weekly sessions: one lasting 80 minutes and the other 40 minutes.

As stated in the documents based on the prior *Federal Law of Education* (1993) the main objective of teaching a foreign language at secondary level has been the development of communicative competence, the level of attainment depending on each educational institution. It is expected that this spirit will be kept once the National Law of Education, is fully implemented.

In Argentina the standardized curricula has always included teaching a foreign language at secondary level. According to the *National Law of Education* (2006), at least one foreign language should be taught at primary and secondary school, this overt inclusion of a foreign language as part of the official curricula already at primary level, is innovative. Due to the fact that English has become a *global language* (Crystal, 2005) it is assumed that in most cases, except for Portuguese in the vicinity of Brazil, the most widespread choice will be English.

Even though learning a foreign language at such an early start is advantageous, it cannot be denied that it will trigger out a new situation, already recognized in the earliest drafts of the new law (and its subsequent revisions): there are not enough graduate teachers all over the country who can teach this subject.

In San Juan, this issue has been made even more evident by the mining activities carried out by foreign companies. These have recruited among their many working forces, quite a few graduate teachers or advanced university students to give services to the main companies or their subsidiaries. At the same time, the settlement of these companies has

³ The *Federal Law of Education* organized primary and secondary level in: EGB I(1st, 2nd,3rd year) EGB II (4th, 5th,6th year) and EGB III (7th, 8th, 9th) and Polimodal level in 1st, 2nd and 3rd year). The *National Law of Education*, which was passed on in 2006 and will be fully implemented in 2008, goes back to the traditional organization of primary (including 6 years) and secondary level (embracing 6 years).

increased the population's interest in learning English. These concurrent events have made it rare to find graduate teachers working at urban public schools. As it will be seen later in this paper, in many institutions, the role of teachers of English is performed by adults who have sometimes undertaken English studies but whose real job is not connected with teaching, for instance, engineers, architects, etc. In most cases these teachers do not have a sound linguistic competence or do not feel confident enough so as to use English fluently in the classes. This might raise a controversy if communicative competence is the objective students should achieve but the teacher does not possess it.

III. COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE AS A GOAL FOR FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

The concept of *communicative competence* was coined by Hymes in 1971, to refer to the *observance of sociolinguistic norms of appropriacy* in any situation in which language was involved (Celce Murcia, 2001: 16). Seeking communicative competence implied a change in language classrooms: rote learning, decontextualized linguistic production were then felt to be inadequate; it was necessary to prepare students for real situations in which they could keep appropriate linguistic interactions in new unrehearsed situations. Soon communicative competence became the major objective of Second Language Teaching (SLT) and consequently, development of the four linguistic skills became a relevant issue in this field. In order to interact successfully in a target language both the productive as well as the receptive skills were considered crucial. This caused a break in the tradition because up to that moment the development of the receptive skills had been rather disregarded.

In the field of Second language Acquisition, the fundamental role played by input has long been ascertained (Krashen and Terrell, 1983; Ellis, 1999; Larsen-Freeman and Long, 1991). When input is comprehensible it provides the student with a level of difficulty adapted to his capacity, which lets him connect form and meaning, thus turning input into intake. The provider of comprehensible input, has to modify the language using familiar structures and vocabulary, applying extralinguistic characteristics and modifying the interactional structure of the conversation.

Input in the language class ranges from textbooks and audio material to teacher talk. Shrum and Glisan (2005: 158) point out the important role played by authentic oral and written texts in the development of acquisition but at the same time, they claim that is necessary to help students make sense out of that input. These authors refer to this capacity as the *interpretive* mode⁴: that is to say interpretation of meaning when there is no possibility to negotiate with the actual author of the text. It relates not only to oral or written

⁴ Shrum and GLissan (2005) consider that communication takes place by means of three communicative modes (Interpersonal, Interpretive and Presentational).

texts but it also includes the viewing medium: videos, movies, television programs, because the joint action of oral and visual resources lead to effective comprehension.

The development of listening provides the learners with the possibility to get input on which to build the interlanguage and at the same time, this exposure to oral language prepares students for future interactions in the target language. In many cases, as in the in the contexts described before, there are more possibilities to find more written than oral texts as sources of input.

Certain features of the oral language make listening difficult; Lam (2003) points out that this skill is felt to be one of the most difficult. Rost (1999:225) groups the difficulties around 3 domains: linguistic aspect (lack of a given aspect of linguistic knowledge or of decoding problems), inferential aspect (inadequate strategy selection; inappropriate schemata) and procedural aspect (unskilled response). This author emphasizes the need to focus on process rather than on product when listening, that is to say it is essential to help students develop strategies to process oral language efficiently. He suggests, that instead of grading oral texts, the teacher should adjust the difficulty of the task that accompanies the listening text.

IV. THE TEACHER IN A TWOFOLD ROLE

In the context describe before, public schools in San Juan, the teacher plays a very important role in the process of learning a foreign language. She might be the only supplier of oral input, the language on which the learners will construct their interlanguage. Undoubtedly, these students might be confronted with other sources of input such as internet or those provided by viewing videos or TV but the level of difficulty might turn this input into unintelligible language. The level of difficulty of the language might not only hinder the process of acquisition but at the same time can be a hurdle in learners' motivation because they might feel that understanding native speakers is an unattainable objective.

The teacher becomes as a crucial factor in the process of learning a foreign language, not only because she becomes the basic provider of input but also because several aspects of her professional performance play a direct role in the classroom arena. To enhance this idea, it is interesting to approach this issue from the perspective of the teacher professional knowledge. Richards (1998:1) considers that this is made up of six domains: *theories of teaching, teaching skills, communication skills, subject matter knowledge, pedagogical reasoning and decision making, and contextual knowledge.*

The first domain, *theories of teaching*, refers to how each teacher conceives the process of language learning and the role she plays in this process. This domain constitutes, in terms of Richards and Lockhart (1995) the *teacher belief system* and it is based on values and conceptions related to the job of teaching. In many cases, teachers are not fully aware of the theories that permeate their teaching practices, these are implicit theories (Richards,

1998; Porlán Ariza et al: 1997). These teaching theories are the result of a personal development and they do not necessarily reflect current trends in SLT. In terms of Tudor (2006), any language teacher has a vision of language and a vision of learning, thought again it is necessary to point out that this person might not be fully aware of them.

As regards *Teaching skills*, Richard's second domain, it embraces the repertoire of techniques and procedures that are applied in a language class. Each teaching theory prioritizes certain techniques: drills being an illustration of the typical technique fostered by audiolingual practices, role playing of communicative language teaching. Sometimes there is a gap between the theory we overtly preach to apply, and the techniques and procedures we really apply in the class: one might believe to adhere to Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) but an analysis of the activities implemented in class demonstrate that they favour repetition and memorization. It is as if they were two parallel paths that never meet: what we consciously want to do in the class and what we indeed do. This incongruity can be accounted for resorting to the implicit theories or belief system.

The third domain, *communicative skills*, deals with a general dimension of communication skills such as voice audibility, clarity of speech, ability to establish rapport, etc, common to any teacher. In the case of language teachers there is an additional aspect: language proficiency which is closely connected to the fourth domain: subject matter knowledge. This refers to what teachers know about the foreign language and is definitely associated with language proficiency. Teachers provide instruction about what they know about English: they need to focus on the language as an abstract object so as to be able to reflect on it. Language proficiency, in the context that will be analyzed, becomes crucial because all teachers are non native speakers of English. When the teacher's expertise consists of a slight grasp of the foreign language, and she is well aware of this situation, her confidence in her performance in the class and the quality of her input are highly affected.

The fifth domain is related to *pedagogical reasoning skills and decision making*, according to which a teacher will select certain types of contents and adapt them to each particular teaching context. This is what Chevallard (1991) calls *didactic transposition*, that is the selection and transformation of scientific knowledge into a range of contents feasible to be developed in each course. Chevallard points out the need to keep a constant surveillance between scientific and pedagogical knowledge so as to avoid the possibility that this adaptation of scientific knowledge becomes estranged from the original source.

The didactic transposition the teacher makes are highly determined by the sixth domain: *contextual knowledge*. This refers to the appreciation of contextual issues when making choices and decisions related to teaching. It is linked to the capacity the teacher has to adapt her teaching practices so as to suit the context in which those are embedded. Richards (1998:12) quoting Ashworth and Holliday points out that teaching methodologies *that are not responsive to contextual issues are likely to be irrelevant and ineffective*.

I have described the theoretical background of the some of factors that intervene in the context I will be examining. When pursuing communicative competence in educational settings several factors are interwoven: the context, on the one hand will define the goals to be achieved, and on the other hand, it will provide overt or implicit support seen in economic funding and in willingness to overcome difficulties that might hinder the learning of English as a foreign language. Within this context, the teacher does not play a minor role in the attainment of students' communicative competence for she is not only the main input provider but also the facilitator of learning situations in which students will develop their knowledge of the English language.

V. THE RESEARCH

As a teacher trainer in San Juan, I have the possibility of visiting many different schools: primary, secondary, public or private. It has always been my impression that while students have the opportunity to learn many different subjects at school, English is not included among them. Moreover, English is ranked as a difficult subject unless students attend a private language school, where they develop necessary competence in English.

In 2006, together with a team of teachers, we started a research project so as to find out some possible explanation for the difficulties students were confronted with when learning English at school. The project⁵, which is to be finished by the beginning of 2008, has as main objective the exploration of the causes of those difficulties and the suggestion of possible pedagogical interventions to overcome them. The categories investigated are the student, the teacher, the contents and the context.

The research paradigm to approach this problem is exploratory – quantitative - interpretative (Nunan: 2004, 4). The data for the research was gathered in 7th year EGB III, in ten public schools in the urban area of San Juan (capital of the province). The institutions selected were representative of different categories within the public section. The results, in the aspect studied in this report, will be analyzed mainly from a qualitatively perspective.

The data was collected in 7th year because, though it is established in the *Provincial Constitution* (Chapter V, Article 83) that a foreign language should be taught in 4th year EGB2, the fact is that this takes place only at the start of EGB III, i.e. 7th grade. It is then, when most students at public schools first learn English. The subjects are adolescents ranging from 11 to 13 years old. The size of the classes varies from 25 to 30 students. This is a naturalistic study because each class is examined in its actual context of realization, without any manipulation.

⁵ *Dificultades para aprender inglés desde una perspectiva áulica en EGB III*, Facultad de Filosofía, Humanidades y Artes, Universidad Nacional de San Juan, San Juan, República Argentina.

The class, the primary source of information, was approached by means of several instruments. On the one hand, a survey for students and another for the teacher, and on the other hand, the observation and transcription of a class.

The advantage of the survey, in the format of a questionnaire, is that it can yield information on a large scale basis (Brown, 2001: 6). The transcription and the observation (rendered as field notes) aim at triangulating data sources (Brown, 2001, Freeman, 1998) so as to make the results of this research credible, limiting any possible bias (Brown, 2001).

The main focus of this paper will be the degree of difficulty the linguistic skill of listening poses to students. The results reported here refer to five schools.

VI. THE RESULTS

Once the data from the five schools had been collected, the first aspect to be analyzed was the degree of difficulty the linguistic skills and some of the components of language (grammar and vocabulary) presented to students. The following figure shows students' opinions.

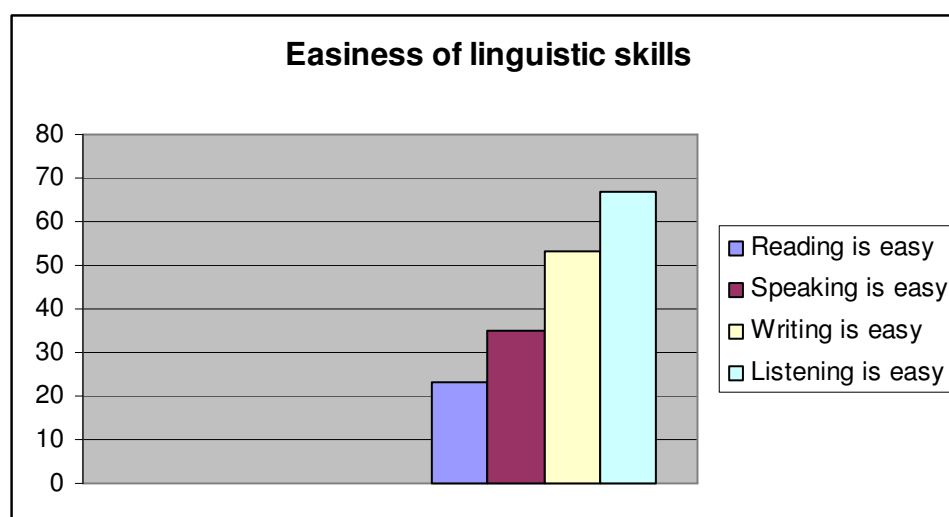


Figure 1: Easiness of linguistic skills

It was surprising to see that listening was considered the easiest of the linguistic skills. This fact was clear even in the pilot study but at that moment, the research team felt this could have been due to a flaw in the design of the earliest version of the survey. Thus, this instrument was reviewed and reorganized. Surprisingly, the results were consistent with the earliest sample: listening still ranked as the easiest skills. Out of the experience in the classroom, the research team had a completely different vision as regards the complexity of this linguistic ability. This fact led the research to deeper and unforeseen levels of analysis: several factors entangled in the teaching situation were examined namely the resources implemented in the class and the quality of the interactions held in the lessons.

When students' and teachers' information was triangulated the comparison threw quite opposite results. For the teachers, students had most difficulties when listening and speaking, as well as when writing. In connection with the ability of listening, teachers reported that students found listening and understanding cassettes easy but videos and songs difficult. Students themselves said that they liked to listen to cassettes, songs and videos even when they found this rather complex. It could be inferred that students were not exposed to authentic oral material, that is why they did not find listening problematic. One of the teachers was sincere enough to point out that it was the skill they practised less.

Once this situation was evident, the analysis focused on the possibilities offered by each institution to help the teacher in the implementation of listening activities. Concerning the availability of tape recorders, the video room or other resources, in one of the schools there was a well equipped audio room which for some elusive bureaucratic reason was not easy for the teacher and the students to use, a situation that was not uncommon in most schools. As regards other type of resources, all schools had these appliances were in good conditions. Another situation was found: there were enough tape recorders and they were in good shape, but the sources of electricity in each classroom did not always work. These aspects overtly conspired against the implementation of listening activities with authentic material.

Hence, very often students' only possibility to be confronted with some oral English was the teacher's modified input. The following extract illustrates one teacher's modified input: she reduced the speed of delivery, emphasized the words she needed students to pay attention to, making comprehension easy for students using demonstration.

T: Ah ok...just time to start....ok...listen...ehh let's start with...do you remember your timetable? ...your timetable? Yes? Ok...have it at hand...open your books...open your books...your timetables...ok? good, the real one, the real one...good, let's see...let's see...ahh tell me...Maxi...open your book...please...where's your timetable?...your timetable, Maxi?...do you have it? Ok...your timetable Juli!...Darío...this timetable...ok...yes? Do you have it? The timetable? ...the school timetable not the book timetable...ok, perfect, now, let's began...what lesson one on Tuesday? ...lesson one on Tuesday....

Transcript Extract I

Students were well aware of the fact that listening to English helped them strengthen their knowledge of that language. When asked about the teacher's modified input, they felt it was useful.

Teachers openly said that they used English part of the time, not always and that when they did so, they spoke slowly and making themselves understood through gestures and demonstration. In some classes, the use of English was reduced to instructions and appraisal from the part of the teacher.

The following stage was an analysis of the actual use of English in the class and for that the transcriptions proved to be extremely valuable. In the classes examined, certain common features led to the categorization of input in three types along a continuum, according to the amount and quality of input the teacher provides students with.

As regards amount of input, the focus was on the quantity of Spanish (L1) and English (L2 used), paying attention to see which one got a bigger proportion. To analyze the quality of input, it was considered whether the main input was concerned with grammar or meaning. Another interesting aspect referred to the type of production the teacher expected from students: repetition of words or sentences, creation of new utterances or texts. Thus, teachers' input fell into three types:

- a) Type I: English was used most of the time (except for instructions), the main focus was on grammar and the expected answer was repetition.
- b) Type II: same amount of L1 and L2, focus on meaning, students were guided to produce sentences or phrases, instructions in the L1.
- c) Type III: no English at all, talking about the grammatical system of the English language in Spanish, students were only asked to produce words, focus on grammar. This is could be considered a class of English but in Spanish.

It was noticed that all teachers resorted to the L 1 when they wanted to give instructions and for the explanation of grammatical rules. In some classes, the use of English was reduced to instructions and appraisal from the part of the teacher.

In Extract II, (type I input) students' production consists of repeating after the teacher, there is no creation of phrases in English on their own. They do not need to think and understand as it is shown when they repeat phrases they are not supposed to (*very good*).

T: This is Irina
 LLL: This is Irina
 T: Where is Irina from? Where is Irina from?
 LLL: emmm...she is from...
 T: She is from...Russia
 LLL: Russia
 T: Russia
 LLL: Russia
 T: Very good
 LLL: Very good [laughter]
 T: No repitan very good... ()

Transcript Extract II

In Extract III (type III input), the teacher introduces the *verb to be* starting a comparison with the verb “*ser*”, conjugating it in Spanish and providing the translation in English without any context.

T: ...the verb to be, vamos a ir leyendo...Bueno, ahora acá (pointing at a text) ...tiene dos significados el verbo...para castellano, tiene dos significados ¿si?...cuáles son, según lo que observan ahí.

SS: Ser o estar

T: Ser o estar, a ver algún ejemplo del verbo ser en castellano, alguna oración que tenga ese verbo...conjugado,----- presente...del modo indicativo

SS: Yo soy

T: Ah, yo soy...-----

SSS: Nosotros somos

T: en el significado estar...alguna oración con esa aplicación

S: Nosotros estamos en () ----

T: ahora fíjense debajo en inglés cómo los voy a encontrar escritos

{ SSS: Am...is...are

T: Am...is...are... ¿si?...tiene, dos significados en castellano, pero en inglés lo voy a encontrar escrito al mismo verbo to be, de tres maneras distintas....

Transcript Extract III

In the above extract, it could be said that the whole class was delivered in Spanish, there was no input at all on which students could build up their interlanguage. In fact, the teacher through induction and translation led students to the conjugation of the verb first in the L1 and then in the L2, without even a sentence as a context.

The following extract depicts a listening activity of a class that includes type II input. The teacher used a balance of L1 and L2 to set the situation explaining any new word that might appear in the oral text:

T: An old photo...porq-porqué parece que es old

S: Porque es en blanco y negro...black and white

T: Because is wh-black and white...now we are going to listen to thee...to the conversation...()eh, ah remember...(), Isabel...and Tom

SSS: And Tom

T: They are, eh they are... in Tom's

S: Room

T: Or bedroom...y esa es la conversación que vamos a escuchar

[Profesora prepara la actividad con cassette- Murmullos]Vayan leyendo ustedes mientras ()

[Murmillos]

T: Listen [Actividad] Listen...listen to the conversation...primero escuchamos, después respondemos [Actividad finalizada] Did you understand?...¿se entiende?...did you understand?

Transcript Extract IV

It is now fully understandable that students did not think that listening is difficult not only because they were very rarely exposed to authentic English but also because when they listen to oral texts in the L2, they had already been taught the words they did not understand or asked to follow the written version of the aural text at the same time.

Once it was clear why students considered that listening to English was not a difficult task, it was necessary to find an explanation to the different procedures implemented by the teachers. For that, the teacher's professional knowledge was examined. The teachers who provided type I and type II input were university teachers while the others were non graduates. This shows a flaw in their *communicative skills* for they might not have a sound handling of English or they did not feel confident in the use of the English language, what might have contributed to delivering a class of English in Spanish, thus depriving students of the possibility to be confronted with the English language.

Extract II portrayed a class in which the teacher implemented techniques based on the audiolingual approach, tradition that permeates many ELT situations, even today. These procedures, based on repetition, were not conducive to communicative competence. The same could be said in reference to Extract IV (type II input) in which the teacher did not give learners enough practice in the interpretative mode, preparing students to process oral language in unrehearsed situations.

More evident is the failure in pedagogical and reasoning skills, because the teacher from extract III, delivered a class in which the pedagogical knowledge did not reflect the scientific one, in this case, the English language.

As regards the contextual knowledge, it would be interesting to see if the procedures implemented (repetition, for example) were suitable for students who live in this postmodern society and are used to more participative methodologies to build up their knowledge.

There is a common thread to the different situations analyzed and it is teacher's beliefs: teachers had not incorporated modern concepts as regards the appropriation of knowledge from the part of the students, in this case building up interlanguage, or the development of communicative competence and are apparently not aware of this situation.

The results so far seem to hint that these teachers might need some modification of their professional knowledge.

VII. CONCLUSION

The starting point for this research was to find an explanation to students' perception of listening as the easiest of the linguistic abilities. In the search for the answer it was found out that several facts converged to make students opinion be realistic. The context had an important part due to inefficient resources at different schools and the other concomitant aspect was related to the teacher, and these referred essentially to their implicit theories for

language teaching. Their professional knowledge was based on outdated theories thus the didactic transposition was not the adequate: neither the amount and quality of input, and the procedures implemented in class were conducive to the development of students' communicative competence. It is evident that there is a need to improve the language learning – language teaching situation in each the institutions involved in the research.

Thus, the analysis of the data took to a mapping of aspects of the classroom onto a broader social context. The aim was not to prescribe theories or procedures but to get a better understanding of what was happening in the classroom. It was not the intention of the present paper to assume a normative stance but rather to resort to the notion of *preferred futures* (Pennycook, 2001): each institution should find the right compromise between the own context and what is *preferable*. Hereby lies the challenge.

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