FROM BUILDING BLOCKS TO ARCHITECTS EMPOWERING LEARNERS FOR SUCCESS

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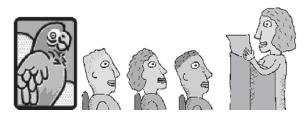juana.reyes@cyclelogic.com

Although our ultimate goal is to enable our learners to become autonomous and efficient in their use of the foreign language, whether or not they have the opportunity to ever live and interact in a foreign language setting, our work as teachers must involve a conscious analysis of the different factors involved in this process, as well as the conscious effort to put all the intervening factors into action. Furthermore, it is our responsibility to develop the learners' thinking skills as they increase their competence in the target language and at the same time make them aware of their responsibility for their own processes and success by enhancing their autonomy and making them aware of the value of learning strategies. It is our task as teachers to be present on this journey and guide our learners towards becoming architects and masters of their own foreign language construct. In order for this journey to be a successful one, we must make sure we provide the learner with a correct supply of building blocks.

In this paper we present an analysis of the main components comprised in teaching English as a foreign language, including a historical overview of methods, approaches, strategies, the concept of learner's autonomy, social and psychological factors, aiming at contributing to every teacher's reflection on his/her task in the school context.

1. Foreign language acquisition in the classroom, a historical overview

Throughout the years, teachers of a foreign language have been trained according to certain beliefs, theories and methods which at the time have been considered the most effective and successful ones. However, not one of those different approaches or methods has lasted longer than a few years. Why does the way of teaching change so much? It may be due to the fact that mankind is evolving constantly and the ways of our ancestors have become obsolete nowadays, when learners are surrounded by a completely different world. Let us take a look at some of those predecessors to the ways of teaching we favour today in order to later on analyze why we have moved forward since then.

1.1 Behaviourists: Learners as parrots

What is the nature of learning, and how can we determine if learning has successfully taken place? For behaviourists (Skinner: 1957) language learning was the result of imitation, feedback, reinforcement and habit formation. These ideas originated in the audio-lingual method, which considered the mother tongue as a problem when learning a new language.

Corder (1967) proposed the notion of *contrastive analysis*, which defended the idea that learners would produce some mistakes which were predictable, and they were tackled using drills, mimicking, memorization, and repetition. The role of the learner was similar to the one of a parrot, and there was little or no real communication taking place. His/her only responsibilities consisted of memorizing expressions and vocabulary. Perhaps the only benefit of this method was practicing pronunciation and intonation patterns, but it is difficult to imagine that the learners were ever able to successfully transfer any of the classroom "knowledge" to the real world. The role of the teacher consisted of supplying material, assessing the students, and being a model for the target language, with little reflection on the task or its use for the learner.

1.2 Innatism, the genetic capacity for learning languages

A different perspective on learning came from innatism, on which Noam Chomsky based his theories on language acquisition (Chomsky: 1959). According to this view, human beings have a *Language Acquisition Device* (LAD), and the environment which they grow up in provides them with samples which will trigger this device. Chomsky also refers to a *Universal Grammar* (UG) which exists in the human brain since birth, and which has some common underlying principles to all existing human languages. Through exposure, children will activate their UG with the specific characteristics of their native

language. According to this view, there was a critical period for learning, after which it seemed, the opportunity to learn a language would be gone. For Foreign Language Learning, the implications of this model would be that the learner would benefit from exposure in order to activate his UG for a new language. However, it has not been clarified whether there exists a critical period for second or foreign language acquisition. Based on Chomsky's concepts of *competence* and *performance*, learning of a foreign language was a process for creating the means for the formation of Competence in L2 through exposure to *real* language (performance). In this view, the role of the student was similar to the role of a plant: being exposed to the sun rays and carrying out internal processes, with little idea of his own role. The teacher's responsibility in this case consisted of providing a graded series of materials and oral instances of the target language, but other essential aspects such as psychological and social factors were ignored.

1.3 Learning vs. acquisition

Within the framework of innatism, Stephen Krashen (1982) thought that the development of knowledge by learners of a second/foreign language occurs in two possible ways: *learning* vs. *acquisition*. Learning takes place when the student has gone through a conscious process of study, and acquisition occurs when the learner is exposed to language he understands. In his view, only through the process of acquisition will the learner be successful in fluent, natural communication. Acquisition takes place only through exposure to what Krashen called *comprehensible input,* which is input slightly above the student's level of competence. Learning would not lead to success in the

target language, as students would be too focused on form rather than meaning, and they would be blocked by what Krashen defined as the *monitor* (a self-correcting mechanism used by the learner), and also by an *affective filter* which would block the natural evolution in the language.

Communicative language teaching based itself greatly on Krashen's ideas. In this view the learner is involved in more meaningful interaction, and he receives comprehensible input. He/she is also involved in activities which lower his/her affective filter, and focus on rules is no longer required. From this perspective, the learner's needs are given more consideration, and we can say that the teacher becomes more involved in the learning process by providing opportunities for real communication, and coming up with more enjoyable lessons. Although some of these contributions have enlightened the field of EFL/ESL teaching, and are still valuable, it is also true that the value of explicit instruction cannot be ignored. The concept of comprehensible input alone may not be enough to cover all the dimensions of language teaching and learning, and the fact that the process of acquisition is considered to be an unconscious one does not cover the development of students' autonomy and self awareness of their learning processes. Another problem within this conception lies in the fact that social interaction is not given importance. Further developments in this area would help eliminate these weaknesses.

1.4 Interaction and affective factors

The interactionist position, supported by Ellis (1984a, 1986), Hatch (1978), Teresa Pica (1987) and Michael Long (1983), among others, stated that although *input* was an important component in the acquisition and development of a second/foreign language, it is not enough in itself. *Conversational interaction* plays an essential role in this task. For Ellis, a key factor in the language acquisition process is "the opportunity afforded the learner to *negotiate* meaning with an interlocutor, preferably one who has more linguistic resources than the learner and who is adept at 'foreigner/teacher talk'" (1984a, p.184). Learners need an opportunity to interact with other speakers allowing modification of speech to take place, leading learners to negotiate meaning through interaction. These ideas were also similar to Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory of human mental processing (Vygotsky: 1978): through interaction with "better peers", the learner makes progress and moves on to what he called the *Zone of Proximal Development* (ZPD). In order for this collective construction of negotiated meaning to take place, the learner should be involved in cooperative activities and project work which are interesting to them. The implication of these ideas is that learners are indeed able to transform the knowledge of the target language and fulfil communication tasks for the purpose of negotiating and processing information in a cooperative situation. The role of the teacher in this perspective would be providing students with opportunities for meaningful interaction, and establishing content which motivates the students, so there is a real need and willingness to negotiate meaning. Effectiveness of communication would be favoured over accuracy in order to allow for the development of *automaticity*. This perspective would also shed light on the concept of autonomy. By enabling learners to take responsibility for their tasks we are allowing them to explore their own problem-solving skills and socio-pragmatic competence, which is essential if they are to negotiate meaning in the foreign language setting.

2. Comprehensible output

In addition to the relevance of input and interaction, Swain (1985) defines the importance of *output* in the process of acquisition. Comprehensible output allows the learner to confirm or correct hypotheses about the target language, and reinforce the idea of meaningful interaction. Through exchanges with peers, or native speakers of the target language, the learners are not only receiving meaningful input, but they are also testing the efficiency of their output and the ability to "get the message across". Besides, they are testing their ideas about the language and creating meaning through negotiation: "Comprehensible output…. is a necessary mechanism of acquisition independent of the role of comprehensible input. Its role is, at least, to provide opportunities for contextualized, meaningful use, to test out hypotheses about the target language, and to move the learner from a purely semantic analysis of language to a syntactic analysis of it (Swain: 1985, 252).

Here we can think about the syntactic aspect of language, and the importance of interacting with "good models" in order to improve accuracy. In an EFL situation, the opportunities for interacting with native speakers are limited, and therefore, there is a risk of developing *pidginized* forms of the language which even the teacher could suffer. In order to minimize this risk, instruction on form should be given its own place in the classroom. This area could also be the object of the students' autonomy and self-assessment, so they become aware of the importance of accurate form after succeeding in "getting the message across". It is also the responsibility of the teacher to keep up to date with the mastery of the target language, and not content him/herself with being a successful facilitator of the learning situation.

3. Metalinguistic awareness. How important is it?

Allowing for opportunities to engage the learners in successful communication, negotiated interaction in a foreign language learning situation, together with explicit grammar instruction helps develop *metalinguistic awareness*, which is the ability to see language as the object of inquiry. This awareness is associated with an increased ability to learn a language. Within the classroom situation, metalinguistic awareness is developed by involving the learners in negotiation. As Gass and Selinker explain: "….learners are made aware of errors in their speech (…) through the questioning and clarification that often goes on in negotiation. In other words, negotiation is what makes effective learners aware that there is incongruity between the forms they are using and the forms used by the native speaking community. In order to respond to an inquiry of non-understanding, the non-native speaker must modify his or her output. For this to take place the learner must become aware of a problem and seek to resolve it. (…) One can presume that negotiation, because it leads to heightened awareness, ultimately leads to increased knowledge of the second (foreign) language". (Gass and Selinker: 1994, 220)

So far, we have explored the different conceptions involved in the acquisition of knowledge in the target language and the implications of setting up a successful learning situation. Now we are going to analyze the components, or "building blocks" which will give our learners the ability to become efficient transformers and creators of knowledge in their use of the foreign language.

4. Assembling the building blocks for a successful construct

Communicative competence (comprising grammatical, discourse, sociolinguistic, pragmatic and strategic competence) is a key element in human interaction, and all its aspects are present in L1 or L2 interaction. While grammatical competence involves the capacity to make correct use of the devices a language has in order to create native-like pieces of language, discourse competence refers to the capacity to create language that fits naturally within larger pieces of language known as discourse. Sociolinguistic competence, on the other hand, refers to the ability to produce language which responds to the needs of a specific social group or situation, involving the cultural aspects necessary to achieve communication. Pragmatic competence is the capacity to make use of the language in order to achieve a practical purpose, such as fulfilling a basic need or getting something done, whereas strategic competence refers to other resources a speaker might turn to in order to achieve his goal, including gestures, body language, and so on.

Grammatical competence, which comprises the study of morphology and syntax, seems to be the least popular among both teachers and students. First of all, this component of foreign/second language learning is unpopular among learners, who think of rules and vocabulary as being boring, monotonous components of a process that eventually leads them to a kind of plateau. For teachers and experts in the EFL/ESL field, the role of grammar has been controversial, dreaded by some, and favoured by others. It is our view that in an efficient second/foreign language learning situation, grammar (or rather, the study of grammatical competence) should be given the status of an essential component.

The first reason why an optimal EFL/ESL situation should involve the explicit study of grammar lies in the fact that learners in the classroom are building up their competence in the target language. As explained earlier, meaningful interaction will allow the learners to develop their communication skills. It is essential to provide explicit guidance on form, so students do not fall into pidginized uses of the language, and fossilize in a form of language that is communicatively effective, but which is not accurate. By enabling learners to develop their target language in an accurate way, we are allowing them to internalise the target language code in a manner that is not alienating to them, and which will eventually allow them to interact successfully with the users of that language at a dignified level.

Secondly, as suggested earlier, the study of morphology and syntax develops *metalinguistic awareness* in the learner. This awareness is not a hindrance, as Krashen suggested with his *monitor model*. On the contrary, by enabling the learner to be aware of certain standards required for the code to be efficient, we give him the tools for self-correction and self-adjustment, thus developing his autonomy as a language user, and expanding his possibilities for success in his continued transformation and creation of knowledge in the target language. This idea stresses the importance of setting the study of grammar within a context and content, so the process of constructing the language takes

place in a way that makes sense to the student and their mental processes, and fits in with their idea of the target language as a whole.

The integration of grammatical competence in an interactive way with the other areas of communicative competence is essential. Although this paper does not focus on the other components of communicative competence (discourse, sociolinguistic, pragmatic and strategic competence), we want to stress their fundamental role in establishing a solid model for our students and in making the learning process communicatively meaningful.

5. Constructing success through learning strategies

According to Chamot and O'Malley (1994), students can learn to use learning strategies through instruction, and the use of learning strategies can improve performance on language learning tasks. This component of the second/foreign language instruction has recently been the object of a great deal of analysis. Successful learners, consciously or sub-consciously make use of a series of strategies that facilitate their learning. The choice of strategy seems to be made according to the learner's intelligence type, the type of task, and the level of complexity. In addition, the use of learning strategies for language learning transfers to new tasks, promoting the development of autonomy in learning, and improving the organization of the thinking processes. For Douglas Brown (1994), "successful mastery of the second (or foreign) language will be due to a large extent to a learner's own personal "investment" of time, effort and attention to the second language in the form of an individualized battery of strategies for comprehending and producing the language". (Brown: 1994, 20)

This is what Brown refers to as "strategic investment", which is an essential component in the development of learners' autonomy. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) have identified three major categories for learning strategies: *metacognitive strategies*, *cognitive strategies*, and *social and affective strategies.* As we can see, the scope of learning strategies goes beyond the organization of content or skills, in order to involve awareness of mental processes themselves, as well as the social and affective domains, thus expanding the conception of the learner as a whole human being whose multiple dimensions interact towards his success or failure. In order to promote learner awareness and involvement in their own development processes, we should favour the explicit study of learning strategies in developing autonomy.

6. Skills integration

Integration of the "four skills" is another basic component of second/foreign language instruction. The integration of the four language skills is essential in meaningful learning and communication. Language in the "outside world" occurs naturally as a *whole,* and one mode feeds on another. Skills interrelate and derive from each other, and production and reception are two sides of the same communication and negotiation process. Listening provides opportunities for speaking and writing, reading leads itself to writing and speaking responses (comments, discussions, feedback), so this integration flows naturally. Skills integration allows for a motivated and dynamic classroom atmosphere, maintaining a connecting thread through meaningful content, cooperative learning, and the development of the social and affective components. With respect to the written mode, the negotiation and creation of meaning

take place as an interactive process between the writer and the reader. The reader constructs new meaning after relating to the written text, and at the same time is able to produce comprehensible output, after making sense of what has been read, thus developing his own construct. When the reading material comes from other members of the class, students can become more engaged in the cooperative construction of meaning, and their response to their classmates' writing is more "loaded" with their personal experience. The living nature of the written word becomes evident in this way, and from there, endless opportunities for getting involved and developing other skills flow naturally. We thus favour the ideas of the *whole language approach,* which believes that *"language should not be separated into component skills, but rather experienced as a whole system of communication."* (O'Malley and Chamot: 1994, 20).

Adding to the idea of integrating the four language skills, we can mention the integration within the classroom of other "modes" which, in spite of their non-linguistic nature, are nevertheless means of expression which lead themselves to creating responses from the learners. Music, painting, and dancing, for example, can be incorporated into the classroom as ways of promoting involvement from the students, and evoking their responses at a different level compared to the stiff, traditional educational models. In this way we give opportunities for other intelligence types to relate in the target language and make it their own. A poem, for example, would elicit a drawing response which later on could become the topic for written or oral communication. Allowing the learning situation to incorporate other manifestations of human expression provides the students

with new ways of appropriating the language and makes it a part of their own personal expressive power and their individual nature.

7. Can we contribute to cognitive development?

Traditionally, second/foreign language teachers have considered it their responsibility to be limited to the teaching of a code, and assess the learner's grasp of such code, and then hope the learners will transform that code for their own use in an effective way. However, we have become aware of the importance of incorporating other dimensions in order to compound the possibility for learner success. SL/FL Teachers are also responsible for the *Cognitive Development* of their students, and the way in which a second/foreign language is learned can serve as a means to develop the learner's thinking skills, both in L1 and L2. Within the framework of Cognitive Academic Language Learning (better known as the CALLA approach) (O'Malley and Chamot: 1994), the language needed by a student in a content area requires a certain number of functions, such as explaining, informing, justifying, and comparing. The successful accomplishment of these functions requires the use of what O'Malley and Chamot call *lower-order* and *higher-order thinking skills.* In an EFL setting, contents have traditionally been somewhat "light", and therefore, many of the language functions and development of higher-order thinking skills have been neglected. EFL textbooks have in general failed to provide the learners with opportunities to develop their cognitive academic language skills. Learners who later on incorporate themselves into an academic setting using the target language often lack the necessary skills to interact in the language at a demanding cognitive level. Even if learners never find

themselves in an academic setting of the target culture, they are often dealing with cognitively demanding English in their areas of study. It is in this area where Content-Based Language Instruction would be most useful. (For further discussion on how to develop thinking skills through academic content see O'Malley and Chamot, *The CALLA Handbook, Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1994*).

8. How is autonomy basic in our construct

Another important component in the architecture of foreign/second language learning and also the object of reflection and consideration is the concept of learner autonomy. In the words of David Little, autonomy is "*a capacity –for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action. It presupposes, but also entails, that the learner will develop a particular kind of psychological relation to the process and content of his learning. The capacity for autonomy will be displayed both in the way the learner learns and in the way he or she transfers what has been learned to wider contexts*" (Little: 1991, 4). It is our goal as foreign/second language teachers, to ensure our learners become successful in the creation of their own construct of the target language. Learners must develop independence, self-confidence, and competence to interact within the foreign language setting.

The development of autonomy involves awareness raising in students and accepting responsibility for their own learning, needs, preferences, weaknesses, cognitive style and intelligence type. Allowing learners to take part in the decisions with respect to content, materials, assessment and follow up are ways to promote this independence and self-

responsibility. Related to this idea we find the promotion of cooperative learning to enhance student autonomy. By allowing for a variety of different associations (as opposed to teacher-centred instruction) to take place in the classroom, learners become aware not only of their own strengths and weaknesses, but also develop a kind of "cooperative autonomy". Being aware of their peer's different styles and strategies, learners devise new ways for negotiation within a group, and thus reflect upon their own strengths and weaknesses, and assess their own hypotheses about *what works* for them as individuals and what does not.

Autonomy also refers to the learner's capacity to develop mastery of the range of discourse roles that a native speaker of the target language is involved in "real life". In order for this kind of autonomy to develop, all the range of possible discourse roles should be made available in the classroom. This does not mean that we should involve our students in role-play situations all the time (although role play does have its place and value in the methodological scope). Student interaction takes place in cooperative work, project work devised by the students, peer teaching and assessment, research and meaningful content through students' selection of topics, activities, materials, and even assessment tools. This type of involvement develops autonomy because it engages the students' personal *construct systems* (Little: 1991, 32). This notion relates to the idea of comprehensible output and within this concept, the activities and cooperative work are well-structured to achieve an end goal. In order to promote autonomy the learner's goals, assumptions and attitudes must be made explicit. Students' prior knowledge is activated, so that they realize what their point

of departure and their goals are. According to Little, "successful language learning requires language to be medium and content" (Little: 1991, 33). These ideas fit in well within the framework of natural language, the interactional view, and content-based instruction.

An additional enrichment to an approach which aims for learner autonomy is syllabus negotiation. By involving the students in the decisions made prior and during their learning, their individual wants and needs are considered, and their awareness as to the components of their learning process is raised. Motivation enhancement would bring about greater engagement from the part of the students, and they will also become responsible for their own process. Fulfilling the students' suggestions and requests during the course by means of reflection and feedback sessions is important in making them feel respected and valued. Students can also be made responsible for presenting some of the content to peers, and carrying out the assessment in a way they think appropriate. Projects could involve research work outside the classroom as well as exchanges with experts within the university or through the World Wide Web. Finally, learners might need to be made aware of the endless possibilities they have when asked to participate in the decisions for their own course, and also be guided so that the possibilities remain at a realistic level. Questionnaires and reflection sessions at the beginning, middle and end of the course can help narrow down the number of goals and specific objectives the students want to accomplish, and define the kinds of activities and cooperative work they prefer. Self-assessment worksheets, journal writing and follow-up charts will provide concrete information in order to define what needs to

be reinforced, what needs to be taught again, and what skills have to be improved. By becoming creators and transformers of their learning situation in a warm, cooperative atmosphere, learners will be capable of further evolving as independent and autonomous human beings.

9. Empowering learners for cultural awareness

Our analysis of the components of the EFL/ESL situation takes us to the dimension where the target language is derived from, and in which we aim for our learners to evolve successfully: the cultural dimension. As mentioned earlier in this paper, we strive to make our learners efficient transformers and creators of knowledge in the foreign language, and, if need be, in the foreign language setting. We are aware of our responsibility in the transmission of the target culture through its language and vice-versa. But how can we empower the learner to successfully integrate with a foreign language culture in addition to teaching him the "code"? Is there a way, for example, to prepare a student of English for interacting successfully within an English-speaking community, when English-speaking communities themselves are so diverse, and made up of so many different colours, backgrounds and interpretations in different parts of the world? Our aim then is to develop in our learners some kind of sensitivity called *cultural awareness.*

The first way in which the cultural dimension of the target language appears to the student

is through content. Language and content are the windows through which the learners will expand their view of the foreign language setting, and we cannot isolate, even from the first stages of the learning process, the target language from a meaningful, culturally-embedded context. In the case of English, the sources of cultural information flood our senses with images and role models coming from the United States of America, so we can say, the American culture as a target is not unknown or exotic to our learners. How much of that image is the real image of the North American people, and how distorted is the view presented by the movie industry, consumerism and the idea of perfection? Furthermore, what about the millions of English-speaking people who live in Canada, Australia, Great Britain, South Africa, and so many other diverse places around the globe?

Raising cultural awareness in our learners will expand their views on the planet as a whole, developing ideas of tolerance, and breaking away from pre-conceived ideas and propaganda. It will also prepare them for conflict and adjustment, and for dealing with acculturation. Through discussion and reflection, learners can become aware of the fact that not all cultures interpret the world in the same way, and that in cultural terms, there is no *right* or *wrong*. Becoming aware of different patterns of communication also involves becoming aware of non-linguistic devices which different cultures interpret and use in different ways: body language, publicity, religion, social and political tradition, they are all relative and variable concepts. Understanding these concepts and being aware of their scope will provide our learners with enough baggage to allow them to integrate successfully, and to get over clichés and over-generalizations with respect to other cultures.

As language teachers we have the possibility to integrate the cultural dimension into our classrooms through content: readings, movies, publicity, native speaker presentations, news, etc, can all be subjects of reflection and discussion, and we can enhance a critical and tolerant view of other cultures and our own, inside our *think-tank*, the classroom.

Finally, it is also our task to open roads for the students into diverse aspects of the target culture, such as literature, history and arts, keeping at the same time a sense of proportion and respect for our own Colombian and Latin-American values, and establishing comparisons for the purpose of understanding that there is no *better* or *worse*, just *different*, and that failing to develop this sense of cultural respect and self-respect has been the cause of much suffering throughout the history of mankind.

Conclusions

We have considered the different components of the second/foreign language learning situation, from a historical perspective, and also through the analysis of those aspects which determine success in the process of acquisition. Theoretical developments have enlightened teachers on the nature of second/foreign language acquisition, and the processes involved therein. Advances in the study of the different components of the teaching/learning situation have expanded our views and defined broader paths for learners to become fully engaged in their own processes. The integration of skills

and the importance given to meaningful interaction have shifted the focus of lessons towards a more humanistic and holistic approach. In addition, the realization of the prime importance of learning strategies and the development of thinking skills have broadened the learner's role and empowered him/her to take active part in his/her own transformation and construction of knowledge in the target language. The road towards learner autonomy is open, and it is the task of the teacher to keep an open mind and a self-critical frame, so that he/she can incorporate new developments into his/her teaching. A reflective position will also allow teachers and students to consider the cultural dimension of the language teaching and learning situation, and nurture cooperative learning in the construction of success. The task might seem complex, but the rewards of this common endeavour are worth the effort.

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