

THE UTOPIA OF INNOVATION AND CHANGE IN COLOMBIA: A DIPSTICK SPEECH FOR AN EFL TEACHER GROWTH CONFERENCE *

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INTRODUCTION

In this presentation, I relate principles and theories in EFL to trends in foreign language teaching in Colombia. This is no attempt at an exhaustive coverage of ways in which one might innovate in foreign language teaching. Rather, I have been very selective in what I present, and focus on trends that reflect how I would like to see foreign language teaching in Colombia develop. I have ignored present limitations as regards teacher education and resources available. My description therefore has a certain utopian quality.

I first consider a number of influential general pedagogical principles: learner-centeredness, learner consciousness, negotiation of content and methods, collaboration across subjects, and project work, and discuss how each of these relates to foreign language teaching. I then discuss various types of innovation, developed specifically within foreign language teaching. The final topic covered in the presentation is teacher education and how this can live up to the challenge of the principles I elaborate.

1. DIFFERENTIATION

DIFFERENTIATION involves organizing teaching so that the different needs and abilities of learners are catered for. In comprehensive education, there is a clear need for differentiation. This is the case in private institutions and, increasingly, also in some high schools in Colombia, whose educational system has a broad intake of learners with a wide range of interests, abilities and learning styles.

Differentiation exists in several forms in the classroom. An extreme form is totally individualized teaching, each learner working with their own topic and materials at their own speed. Reading and listening comprehension are appropriate for individual work, in that texts and accompanying activities can be chosen to suit the individual learner's level.

It must be noted, parenthetically, that in the age of the micro-processor it is necessary to be aware of both the potential and the dangers of computer-assisted foreign language learning. Given the materials available commercially so far, such work is confined to mechanical exercises which only practice few of the components of communicative competence.

As learning a foreign language includes learning to engage in communicative interaction with other individuals in a range of social contexts, one highly appropriate form of differentiation is learning in small groups. Interacting with teaching materials cannot substitute for real-life communication. Moreover, group work contributes to furthering one of the primary goals of general education, namely socializing pupils to cooperate, to accept other opinions and draw on varying abilities, in short, to work together towards solving common problems.

A precondition for differentiated teaching is awareness on the part of both teacher and learner of learning needs and goals, of the utility of materials available and of how they can be exploited, of the function of different learning activities. But consciousness is not enough. Differentiated foreign language teaching should be undertaken in rooms which lend themselves to a wide range of activities, preferably with small group rooms available. Ideally, there should be access to videotapes, cassette-recorders, books, newspapers and magazines, cardboard and crayons, etc. Finally, it is less than likely that the teacher is in a position to provide individual guidance if the class of learners exceeds 20. Indeed the maximum size of a foreign language class should be considerably smaller.

2. CONSCIOUSNESS

One of the goals of education is to develop independence of thought in the individual, to foster critical consciousness. If one considers the specific contribution of foreign language school subjects in relation to this general goal, it is possible to identify three types of knowledge which could contribute to achieving it. These are metacommunicative knowledge, knowledge about language learning, and sociocultural knowledge.

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2.1 Metacommunicative knowledge

I have elsewhere stressed the importance of metacommunicative awareness in relation to communicative competence. I have indicated that knowledge of the rules governing linguistic form could be directly relevant for the development of learners' proficiency, as such metalinguistic knowledge can provide short-cuts to learning or can monitor language production and increase correctness. Conscious knowledge therefore has a direct utility value in relation to the development of language proficiency.

I have also made the point that metacommunicative awareness is a valuable goal in itself in a school subject, a central aspect of which is communication. Metacommunicative knowledge in relation to a foreign language can increase the individual's awareness of communication in the mother tongue as well as provide an informed basis for insight into the conventional nature of language and the different forms that it assumes in different cultures.

It is the last-mentioned function of metacommunicative knowledge that I find particularly important. I would therefore like to see greater cooperation between teachers of Spanish and teachers of foreign languages, studying in depth specific features of communication, for instance, speech act realization in the relevant languages, discourse structure, forms of address, strategy use, etc.

2.2 Knowledge about learning

For learners to be able to participate actively in establishing teaching goals and selecting activity types and materials for study, they need a certain amount of knowledge about foreign language learning. In particular they should be aware of the relationship between the development of a specific aspect of communicative competence and such factors as classroom organization, textual input, feedback and language rules as formulated in reference works or by teachers. What mediates between these factors and the development of communicative competence is learning processes. In addition to being equipped to identify their own learning needs, learners should therefore be able to pinpoint areas of their communicative competence which are most in need of improvement. Furthermore, they should be able to relate these learning needs to processes of language learning and to select appropriate learning "strategies". This last step would involve negotiation with the other learners in the class as well as with the teacher, in order to reach a procedure which not only suits the individual learner's personal needs and learning

style but also coordinates this with the needs of other learners in the class.

When teachers are offered this idealized scheme for negotiating a syllabus with learners, a common reaction is that it is unrealistic. My response to this is that if the teacher genuinely wants participation on the part of the learner to plan teaching content and methods, then learners have to be in possession of the necessary metaknowledge, including knowledge about learning. Pupil participation without such metaknowledge can easily lead to pseudo-democratic decisions, with the teacher manipulating the pupils. Or to pupils opting for a course of action which can lead to only some of their learning goals being met. This is the case, for instance, if the only factors which are considered seriously in the negotiation phase are themes and texts, to the neglect of metacommunicative or language learning goals.

2.3 Socio-cultural knowledge

All examples of English which learners meet, whether literary products, newspaper articles or videotaped conversations between native speakers, are anchored in a socio-cultural context. Learners of English develop their communicative competence in relation to this socio-cultural reality, especially their competence.

Traditionally, there has been a tendency to identify the concept of "content" in foreign language teaching with socio-cultural knowledge, often with an emphasis on the historical dimension. On the other side was language, which was considered to be primarily proficiency-related. I would argue that a central area of the content of foreign language teaching is linguistic, in the sense that it deals with communication (in a broad sense) in the foreign language. Therefore, when I argue for the importance of metacommunicative knowledge and knowledge about language learning, I am not arguing for an increase in the proficiency side of foreign language education, at the cost of socio-cultural knowledge. What I would like to strengthen is knowledge about what I consider to be the core of all foreign language subjects: communication in the foreign language, including learning to communicate in the language.

3. NEGOTIATION OF SYLLABUS

The concept of negotiating a syllabus implies that teachers and learners together establish the teaching sub-goals, the route to be followed in order to reach these goals, as well as the types of activities needed, including the selection of texts.

For learners to be able to participate in such negotiation, they need to have metacommunicative knowledge. As learners cannot be expected to acquire such knowledge in other school subjects, it is essential that foreign language teachers convey this knowledge to the learners at a fairly early stage. In one school in which this is done systematically, the goals for pupil awareness are that the pupil is to understand:

- why English is being learned;
- what is being learned;
- how learning takes place;
- their own role and that of their fellow students in the teaching/learning situation;
- how they can help fellow students to learn.

In addition to strong pedagogical arguments in favor of learners taking responsibility for what they are learning, we can advance three further reasons. The first is that no description of potential learner needs, however comprehensive, can anticipate all the needs of a specific set of individuals. The second is that there is a risk of teaching materials and elaborate syllabuses giving the impression that foreign language learning is exclusively a question of assimilating a given, normatively-defined content and a set of rules, a complete package. Negotiating a syllabus stresses the learner's active role in construing and creating meaning in the foreign language, as preparation for dialogue and contact with the new language. A third reason is that learners must be prepared to continue their foreign language learning on their own after completing general education. They must therefore learn to plan language learning.

4. INTER-SUBJECT COLLABORATION

I use the term "inter-subject" rather than inter-disciplinary because I am referring to collaboration between two or more school subjects. Disciplines such as linguistic theory, phonetics and text analysis are of relevance to many subjects, and most problems need not be analyzed with the help of more than one discipline.

There are many points at which school subjects overlap and support each other, and the increasing trend towards collaboration across subject boundaries is a recognition of this. Collaboration can consist of an agreement between a couple of teachers to cover parallel ground in different subjects, with each subject pursuing the topic independently. Or collaboration can consist of much more integrated work.

An example of such integrated work is a first-year university collaborative venture involving English,

Mathematics and Physics, running over a period of two semesters. The topic can be energy, and fundamental principles of Mathematics and Physics can be studied in relation to specific aspects of the topic. The contribution of English is not merely to read texts which are only available in English, but to take up problems which are exemplary for an understanding of the world in general and how it relates to the Third World in particular. The particular theme of technology can be chosen together with industrialization and the forms of energy which are relevant to the economy of a particular Latin American country. These English texts can be read with more understanding because of the insights into the topic from the natural sciences, and the natural science coverage of energy can benefit from the reading of texts which put the issues into a wider perspective.

I would not wish to minimize the very considerable demands that such collaboration makes on the teachers involved. This example comes from an experimental course, but a great deal of inter-subject collaboration may take place at many other institutions, both at the high school and, to a lesser extent, in the beginning levels at the University.

One worry which has led to a resistance to inter-subject collaboration is a feeling that the identity and goals of English may not be respected, for instance that the foreign language becomes downgraded to being a tool for other subjects. As a communication subject, English has "content" of the three kinds that I have outlined above, quite apart from proficiency development, and it is essential that inter-subject collaboration takes this into consideration. If this is done, there is every reason to encourage learners and teachers of English to collaborate with other subjects.

5. PROJECT WORK

By Project Work, I understand a specific way of organizing learning so that the participants, typically working in small groups, are actively involved in:

- Selecting topics
- Formulating the problem(s)
- Selecting working procedures, including choice of methods and materials
- Processing texts, data, etc.
- Producing a report or an equivalent product
- Evaluating the product and the working process

Occasionally, the term "project work" is used to refer loosely to any thematic approach to teaching, e.g. working with a given topic for a period of several

weeks. For this to be Project Work proper, the process has to reflect the six steps enumerated above: Project work is as much a way of organizing learning as it is a question of studying a specific theme.

One reason why Project Work has been evolved at school and higher education levels is that it provides a means of reconciling some of the problems discussed in the preceding sections. Project Work allows for differentiation without leading to complete individualization. It enables learners to develop consciousness and to negotiate a syllabus. It lends itself to collaboration across subject boundaries.

When Project Work is used in foreign language learning, there is the problem of how to ensure that the participants not only develop consciousness but also proficiency in the foreign language. This is a difficult problem which, to my knowledge, has not been tackled in a satisfactory manner yet. If Project Work is decided on for a restricted period of time, one might accept that the learners use their mother tongue when working in the group as long as they produce a report in the foreign language and that they primarily use materials written/recorded in the foreign language. In this way there is an element of proficiency training within some of the four skills at least. But for obvious reasons it would be desirable if learners would accept using the foreign language in the groups. In order to achieve this, it is necessary for the teachers to spend a good deal of time discussing the issue with the learners before they embark on their project, pointing out to them what benefits will accrue from using the foreign language and giving them advice on how to handle the problems which will often arise.

Project Work is hardly feasible if the traditional pattern of foreign language teaching in schools is preserved, namely dividing up the available time into periods of 45 minutes or 90 minutes. For Project Work to operate in a satisfactory way it is necessary to introduce phases in which the learners work intensively with one subject (or a few if the project is carried out in collaboration with other subjects). Working intensively with a foreign language for a certain period of time, rather than spreading out the time thinly over a long period has been recommended. Intensive work can provide a qualitative leap, particularly as regards language proficiency, which may not otherwise occur. In particular, less successful learners can develop a sense of achievement in foreign language learning. One could therefore consider reorganizing the time-table in Colombian schools so as to allow for more intensive work at different phases of the school year, and correspondingly less intensive ones at others.

6. COMMUNICATIVE FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING

The major goal of Communicative Foreign Language Teaching is to build up competence which can be used for a variety of communicative purposes in non-educational contexts, and to do so by upgrading communicative activities in the classroom.

The extreme case of communicative foreign language teaching is to abandon the subjects as such and to use the language as a medium of instruction in other school subjects. This is what happens in Immersion Programs in North America, in which children receive a substantial part of their early school instruction in a language which is not their mother tongue (e.g. French in the province of Ontario in Canada). Although such programs have led to very positive results, immersion children reaching a higher proficiency level in the foreign language than traditionally taught children and still doing as well or even better in other school subjects including the mother tongue, it is unrealistic to expect foreign language teaching in Colombia to become reorganized along such lines.

A mild variant of immersion education would be teaching a single non-language subject like geography through the medium of English. Provided that teachers could cope, this would undoubtedly be effective for the development of proficiency in English. But as there would still be a need for other aspects of communicative competence and all the types of knowledge associated with English to be developed, English would remain as a distinct subject on the time-table.

I turn now to the present situation in Colombia, with foreign language learning taking place in classes specifically established for this purpose. How can such lessons be made to approximate the varieties of communication outside school?

Many types of communicative activities are used in order to achieve this. Typical examples are:

- Games and problem-solving activities of various sorts, in which fairly restricted goals are set for the communicative interaction.
- Role plays and Simulations, dialogues or small group interaction in which the pupils act out or simulate roles that they have been assigned or can imagine themselves in.

Most of these activity types not only practice aspects of linguistic competence, they also develop

learners' pragmatic and strategic competence. There are examples of simulations and role plays in every textbook which demonstrate how both production and reception development can be built up by activities which gradually stretch the learner's proficiency, providing enough support initially, and setting up freer, more creative situations later on.

Activities like role playing are often employed with a view to developing learners' productive skills. A focus on production skills has characterized most communicatively oriented language teaching, this in part reflecting the behavioristically based assumption that something is only learned when the learner is able to produce utterances in the foreign language. With cognitivist views on comprehension, which see this as an active process, there is now a clear tendency to upgrade listening and reading activities.

Especially at the beginning levels of foreign language learning, it has been suggested that a Comprehension Approach has significant advantages. According to this, learners are not required (or in some cases even allowed) to speak the language for a period of perhaps several months, the idea being that learners' receptive competence should be well developed before they start using the language for productive purposes. This has obvious affective advantages, as much of the pressure and anxiety associated with beginning to speak a foreign language is removed.

A strong case can be made for strengthening listening skills, not just as a part of a comprehension approach but generally, at all levels of education. At the University level, for example, authentic listening materials can serve similar purposes to written texts in providing stimulating source material which can be analyzed for metacommunicative and socio-cultural knowledge. Both receptive competence and the kinds of conscious knowledge that can be built up in connection with such listening activities will be relevant for the subsequent development of the learners' productive competence, and can be linked up with participation in the kinds of communicative activities mentioned above.

7. LANGUAGE TEACHER EDUCATION

Some teachers are already putting into practice many of the principles presented in this speech and in the Conference as a whole, although they may never have encountered them in their studies. The evaluation and discussion of such experience would benefit from systematic analysis of it, within an explicit foreign language pedagogical framework. This can provide the concepts and a metalanguage for knowledge about the teaching and learning of foreign languages.

While the ideal state of affairs is for teachers to be trained in all these areas in the course of their studies, this is not the case for those teaching today. There is therefore a real need for extensive programs of in-service training which can relate the experience of teachers to theoretically explicit principles of foreign language pedagogy.

In concluding this part of the speech, I will describe the qualifications that foreign language teachers should ideally have within the approach I am advocating for. I begin by considering in what ways the demands made on teachers of foreign languages differ from those made on teachers of other subjects.

In the first place, foreign language learners are already communicatively competent, to a greater or lesser extent, in their mother tongue. The proficiency side of foreign language teaching therefore involves learners in doing things that they can already do, but in a different code. Although other subjects can also draw upon experience from outside the classroom, it is only foreign language teachers who have to "re-teach" or reformulate what the learner already knows.

Secondly, foreign language learners are learning something that others, namely the native speakers of the language, have not had to "learn" at all but have assimilated naturally in interaction with their environment. The foreign language teacher has to lead learners to a similar kind of proficiency, possibly by quite a different route.

Thirdly, language use is intimately related to personality, social identity, to the ability to perform cognitively demanding operations. Learning a foreign language can be psychologically very demanding, and the teachers must know how to alleviate anxiety and linguistic insecurity.

Fourthly, whereas in many school subjects the insight and knowledge that learners develop is the main concern, in foreign language learning, in a very real sense, the medium is the message. Many of the activities are important in themselves as they represent the communication which is the essence of the subject.

These factors mean that it is no exaggeration to state that foreign language teaching is qualitatively different from other types of teaching and that teachers require special qualifications and training. I would claim that these are as important for teachers of beginners as for teachers of more advanced learners. When learners are meeting the pronunciation and rhythm of the language for the first time, they are exploring the

relationship between L1 and L2 and building up their learning styles, there is a need for teachers with expert knowledge of the language and the processes of learning it, just as there is at more advanced levels. Unfortunately, it is not uncommon to meet the erroneous belief in the school system that the teaching of beginners does not require special qualifications.

What then are the essential requirements of these professional qualifications? In the first place, proficiency in the language, in all the areas of communicative competence discussed in any text referring to the concept. Lack of proficiency can result in, for instance, over-dependence on teaching materials and a tendency to be rigid in assessing learner language.

The second requirement is a solid grounding in all the 3 areas of knowledge discussed earlier in this speech. I will briefly consider each of these. As regards metacommunicative knowledge, students today generally acquire a training in grammar and phonetics, some awareness about vocabulary, and very little if any familiarity with pragmatics, discourse, strategies or fluency. While there is a natural resistance and reluctance to adding "new" areas to an already crammed study program, with perhaps a feeling that even less grammar and phonetics would be the result, the phenomenon of a knowledge explosion is a real one. It is true, for instance, in medicine, where no-one would argue that doctors should only be trained in a selection of the areas necessary for their profession. If foreign language teachers are to be qualified to critically assess and utilize teaching materials and the methodological suggestions of "experts", then the issue of what they should know and be able to do cannot be side-stepped. Future teachers need an up-to-date introduction to all relevant aspects of knowledge and a training which permits them to follow up the issues during their professional lives, and means have to be found for achieving this.

Socio-cultural knowledge is generally well-represented today in teacher education, especially at university level. There has been an important re-orientation within this area towards contemporary social phenomena, at the cost of more traditional cultural knowledge. What could perhaps be strengthened is the cross-cultural dimension, developing knowledge about significant similarities and differences between the native and the target language culture.

Knowledge about foreign language learning and teaching and general pedagogy is a part of the obligatory syllabus of schools of education, but it is only

sporadically found in university degree programs. One consequence of this is that many university graduates experience a mismatch between their professionalism as regards sociocultural and metacommunicative knowledge and their language proficiency on the one hand, and their amateurism and lack of relevant knowledge with respect to foreign language learning and teaching, on the other. Overcoming this problem involves ensuring that foreign language departments in the universities are obliged to cover foreign language pedagogy.

Again, it is only fair to ask about how foreign language pedagogy could be fitted in curricula. How do we find room, without cutting down on other important areas of study? The approach to foreign language pedagogy presented in this speech helps to solve some of these problems, in that the study of the subject as traditionally defined and the study of the learning and the teaching of the subject are combined in dialectic interaction. For instance, in an integrated program of study of learner language and the grammar of English, the student not only develops metalinguistic knowledge of grammar but an ability to improve their own correctness. Relevant constituents for such a program could include the following: ways in which grammatical rules may be simplified for different purposes, the adequacy of different grammatical descriptions, error correction, the contribution of grammatical knowledge to learners' proficiency development, etc. In working with learner language analyses and language learning systematically, the student's knowledge will be put to use in ways which help to relate theoretical description to practice.

The learner language approach to foreign language pedagogy represents an integrative solution to the problem of how both to qualify students in specific subject areas and to prepare them for teaching. The approach therefore differs from the one traditionally adopted at schools of education. Here one department is responsible for the subject English, including foreign language pedagogy, and other departments cover general pedagogy, didactics, educational psychology and teaching practice respectively, so that there is a risk that the different areas of study never form a coherent whole. Even though the organizational framework is not ideal and more collaboration between departments is desirable, it is possible to achieve many of the goals of foreign language pedagogy in teacher training by adopting a learner language approach.

At universities, students can seldom supplement their study of the foreign language with the study of general didactics, special didactics or educational

psychology. In this situation, the responsibility of the foreign language teachers becomes even greater than that of the teachers at schools of education. They have to ensure that the study of foreign language pedagogy does not stop at the level of learner language analysis, but also relates this to a wider didactic, educational and socio-political framework.

8. CONCLUSION

We are facing, not only the best, but also the worst of times! To me, this is the best of times in the profession of EFL because almost everywhere we turn, we find lectures, articles, textbooks, workshops, courses, and conferences on the art and science of EFL/ESL. This variety of resources had never been available to us as it is today!

On the other hand, this is also the worst of times in that we are a very long way from finding ultimate

answers to many questions and we have become accustomed to the absence of final solutions as we discover that there are multiple variables intervening in the process of EFL.

This National Conference is an indication that we can rejoice because here we have found that no matter how elusive the phenomenon of EFL is, we can still continue to make questions and this makes the quest more exciting! The clear picture I see for the profession of EFL in Colombia is, as the title of this speech suggests, a utopian one. My utopia of innovation and change claims that we surely are learning to ask better questions about our profession. We have given many small steps which will help us make a giant leap toward success. We have innovated. We have changed. Because of this, EFL teachers have grown. One could claim that this is a utopian statement, but I take full responsibility for this utopia. After all that is what I consider the profession to be all about.



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