

Elements for a redefinition of TEFL in Spanish Secondary Education

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Abstract

This paper introduces a framework to redefine TEFL in Spanish Secondary Education. In spite of the undeniable progress of language education in Spain, there are a number of problems which frustrate teachers and learners provoking poor results. Some of the problems involve decisions about language and methodology taken by teachers who are still too concerned about form and grammar.

This redefinition of TEFL is based on four pillars: the task-based approach, the content-based approach, language awareness and intercultural competence. The task-based approach is the framework in which academic contents are dealt with. Language awareness represents a new perspective on form and grammar within a communicative approach. Finally, the intercultural competence is the educational objective of language education. Each of these four concepts have theoretical and practical implications which may help redefine the curricular design of English teaching in Spain.

Resumen

Este trabajo presenta un marco para redefinir la enseñanza de inglés como lengua extranjera en la educación secundaria española. A pesar del innegable progreso de la educación lingüística en España, hay ciertos problemas que frustran a profesores y estudiantes provocando malos resultados. Algunos de estos problemas incluyen decisiones tomadas por los profesores en relación con la lengua y la metodología, demasiado preocupados aún por la forma y la gramática.

Esta redefinición de la enseñanza del español como lengua extranjera se basa en cuatro pilares: el enfoque basado en tareas, el enfoque basado en contenidos, la conciencia lingüística y la competencia intercultural. El enfoque basado en tareas es el marco en el cual tratar contenidos académicos. La conciencia lingüística representa una nueva perspectiva acerca de la forma y la gramática dentro de un enfoque comunicativo. Por último, la competencia intercultural es el objetivo educativo de la educación lingüística. Cada uno de estos cuatro conceptos tiene implicaciones teóricas y prácticas que pueden ayudar a redefinir el diseño curricular de la enseñanza del inglés en España.

Key Words

Task-based, Content-based approach, Language Awareness, Intercultural Competence

1. Introduction

In recent days a number of publications have announced a “paradigm shift”, following T.S. Kuhn’s terminology (1970), in second language teaching. This revolutionary paradigm shift takes second language teaching from positivism to post-positivism (Jacobs and Farrell, 2001:2) or, in a more specific comparison of educational paradigms, from a positivistic to a constructivist-interpretive and, finally, a critical-emancipatory paradigm (Kohonen, 2001:15).

There is no doubt that something is changing in the profession, at least considering those recent publications. However, is that change taking place in the schools? The case of TEFL in Spain is particularly interesting. TEFL in Spain has run a long distance in a very short period of time. The situation has changed from almost the total absence of English in the educational system up to the 70s to an overwhelming presence over other foreign languages. Nowadays a child can start learning English within the educational system from her early childhood, with specialised teachers and in a motivating and positive social context. However, there seems to be a growing sense of dissatisfaction among language teachers in Spain. The efforts made in teaching does not seem to correlate with enough fluency or accuracy, being the communicative competence still a utopia.

There may be a number of reasons for this frustration. Some of them are historical, ranging from a poor tradition in language teaching, anchored in the grammar-translation method, to the difficulty of finding parents who can speak in English to support their children. Other reasons are structural problems of the educational system. One of these, for example, is the ratio of students per teacher, which is still too large (not to mention the university, of course).

The solutions to these problems depend on many different people and institutions. The government must make a continuous effort to improve education in general and FLL in particular; schools should participate facilitating cooperation of teachers across the curriculum and even bilingual programs as well as in-service teacher training; parents could accept the responsibility of promoting the acquisition of a foreign language at home; teachers must make the effort of using the best techniques to teach the language, being critical with themselves and earnestly demanding whatever they may need to improve their practice.

One of the problems which may be hampering the acquisition of English in the educational system affects teachers directly. In Spain there is a generation of teachers of English working in the schools who have learnt themselves with the methodologies of the 60s and 70s, basically the grammar-translation and the audiolingual methods. However, this

generation of teachers has been trained at the university in the communicative and more up-to-date approaches.

This situation is provoking a dilemma in the teachers' minds, who would like to use communicative activities in a learner-centred curriculum but who actually tend to implement more structural, guided, teacher-centred activities in the classroom. Furthermore, teachers see themselves compelled to do this by all the problems mentioned above, as they perceive that sort of methodology works better when there are too many students, sometimes with problems of discipline and very little motivation. However, this way of thinking becomes, in the long run, the main source of dissatisfaction. Due to all those problems, teachers believe that they cannot use the most efficient methods to teach a language¹, which then provokes poor results, not in relation to the assessment but to the communicative competence they have aimed at.

This vicious circle can be broken by the teacher. A redefinition of the teaching practice is needed to establish which are the objectives of learning a foreign language within the educational system as well as the procedures to achieve them. Furthermore, this redefinition is particularly necessary in Secondary Education, when children make the most important effort, in number of hours, to learn the language. In fact, that growing sense of dissatisfaction we have commented upon above is especially acute among Secondary teachers, overloaded with responsibility and problems, and this paper is written with their situation in mind.

Hence, this paper tries to suggest some ideas for this redefinition of TEFL in Secondary Education. Four key concepts are discussed: the task-based approach, the content-based approach, language awareness and the intercultural competence. These four concepts, supported by research on Second Language Acquisition, represent a step forward of teachers as the people directly responsible for FLT.

2. The task-based approach

The notion of "task" is, on the one hand, as old as humankind may be in the common sense of the concept and it is even quite well established in the rapidly changing world of TEFL. On the other hand, it is still a "new" term in the lexicon of many TEFL practitioners in Spain. In TEFL, the term task has received a number of definitions, which are summarised in Nunan (1989: 5-11). Nunan himself defines it as

a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on

meaning rather than form. The task should also have a sense of completeness, being able to stand alone as a communicative act in its own right. (Nunan 1989:10)

Skehan (1998: 95) prefers to collect the most important features of tasks from other authors' works, saying that "a task is an activity in which:

- meaning is primary;
- there is some communication problem to solve;
- there is some sort of relationship to comparable real-world activities;
- task completion has some priority;
- the assessment of the task is in terms of outcome."

From our perspective, a task is the sum of activities performed to produce something from an input. These activities are the means to achieve the goals established in the teaching-learning process. The output of the task must be a real-world material product. During the performance of the activities the teacher and the learners must assume different roles, which go beyond the teacher as the centre of the classroom.

The emphasis on a productⁱⁱ as a result of the task is justified for two reasons: on the one hand, research on second language acquisition has shown that, apart from some comprehensible input, it is necessary to produce some comprehensible output to provoke acquisition, and the creation of a material product and its subsequent presentation can foster that comprehensible output (Ellis 1985: 157-159; Swain, 1995; Skehan, 1998: 16-22); on the other hand, the realization of the product is part of the activity motivation which tasks seek to promote (Ellis, 1985:300). The product is the rationale for the task, and for that reason the realization of the product must be related to the learners' interests and needs.

In Spain, even though the term task is not new at all in the academic field (Zanón 1990 y 1999, among others), the concept is not part of the lexicon of TEFL practitioners in the schools. The more well-known concept of the "didactic unit" is frequently used for planning the syllabus. However, both terms are not exclusive, but complementary, tasks representing a methodological option which does not exclude, for instance, the use of textbooks and other common teaching practices.

Regarding the organization and planning of tasks, Dave Willis and Jane Willis (2001:163), after stating six propositions to guide FLT, explain that what is needed is a methodology rooted in meanings and which exploits natural language behaviour, activities which encourage a focus on form and a syllabus which is holistic and which is specified both pragmatically and linguistically.

To achieve these demands, they create a task-based framework (Willis and Willis 1996 and 2001). This task-based framework, which creates a bridge between the concepts of “task” and “didactic unit”, consists of three parts and some sub-elements:

PRE-TASK

Introduction to topic and task

TASK CYCLE

Task > Planning > Report

LANGUAGE FOCUS

Analysis and Practice

This task-based framework represents an interesting way of organising the FLT curriculum, at least for the Spanish FLT traditional procedures. On the one hand, the teacher does not explicitly establish the list of structures and the range of vocabulary which would be studied during a unit, but they devise tasks to fulfil some goals based on the learners’ needs and interests. On the other hand, it goes beyond the traditional method of organizing language teaching described by Skehan (1998:93-95) as the 3Ps, Presentation, Practice and Production.

Furthermore, this framework, like the task-based approach itself, has some interesting advantages. First, it focuses on meaning while it does not forget about form. Second, it fosters not only individual work, but basically pair- and group-work. Third, this framework does not constrain the selection of activities or the use of the textbook. Moreover, the task-based approach encourages the integration of skills in a realistic manner. Finally, this framework moves beyond the concept of assessment as the measure of the acquisition of a closed set of linguistic items predefined by the teacher.

In conclusion, a task-based approach, within this task-based framework, can provide teachers and students with a space for communication which is not present in many Spanish language lessons. Now, this approach must be complemented with the three following elements, the content-based approach, language awareness and the intercultural competence.

3. The content-based approach

The second element for the redefinition of TEFL in Secondary Education is the content-based approach. This approach is originally related to the immersion programmes in Canada and the USA as a response to the problems of language learners who must cope with a new language and with the contents of curricular areas in second language contexts. From this original objective, it has evolved to become a way of language instruction used in foreign

as well as second language situations, and in that sense it is related to some of the most important teaching movements in TEFL, namely the natural approach, the communicative approach, experiential learning or the whole language movement (Madrid and García Sánchez 2001).

Basically, the content-based approach, also called “curricular integration” (Jacobs and Farrell, 2001: 6-7) can be described as that type of instruction in which “ESL, bilingual, or foreign language teachers use academic texts, tasks, and techniques as a vehicle for developing language, content, and thinking/study skills” (Crandall 1993: 114). Jacobs and Farrell (op.cit.: 6) define it and at the same time explain its advantages:

Curricular integration serves to overcome the phenomenon in which students study one subject in one period, close their textbook and go to another class, open another textbook and study another subject. When various subject areas are taught jointly, learners have more opportunities to see the links between subject areas. By appreciating these links, students develop a stronger grasp of a subject matter, a deeper purpose for learning and a greater ability to analyze situations in a holistic manner.

Mimi Met (1994:159-182) describes, step by step, how to implement a content-based approach. Some very interesting suggestions are made in that chapter, such as the difference between content-obligatory and content-compatible language objectives (ibid.:161), the importance of experiential, hands-on, cognitively engaging and collaborative activities (ibid.:164), the integration of culture in the syllabus (ibid.:166), the negotiation of meaning (ibid.:167), the roles of the teacher (ibid.:170-173), and the need of adequate assessment procedures.

In the Spanish context, Quincannon y Navés (1999: 51) introduce some techniques and strategies to develop a content-based approach: 1) use of visual aids (graphs, diagrams, tables, etc.); 2) use of redundancy and reformulation; 3) active learning through experiments, manipulation, problem solving, etc.; 4) comprehension checks by different procedures (including TPR); 5) inclusion of cognitive skills in the language planning, and 6) learn-to-learn techniques. Obviously, these techniques and strategies require more than an adaptation; the authors are describing a real modification of TEFL through the integration of tasks and contents.

There are a number of reasons for implementing a content-based approach. The content-based approach can be beneficial from the language learning perspective as well as the cognitive perspective. Thus, Stoller (1999: 9) explains the following benefits of a content-based approach:

1. A content-based approach eliminates the artificial separation that often exists between language instruction and subject-matter courses, lending a degree of reality and purpose to the language classroom.
2. Students learn content in the L2 and in the process develop both language and academic skills.
3. Content-based instructional units lend themselves naturally to an integrated-skills approach.
4. Thematically organized materials, which are typical of content-based classrooms, are easier to remember and learn.

So, the content-based approach can help develop the foreign language, but it can also help the cognitive growth of the learners, as it is explained in McKeon (1994:28). The developmental sequence of the curricular areas is also followed in the foreign language classroom, where, instead of considering concepts from their everyday realities, the learners deal with contents with an increasing level of abstraction and complexity.

Furthermore, the content-based approach suits the task-based approach described above. Tasks represent the *how* whereas the academic contents represent the *what* of the teaching process. Thus, the task cycle can include mathematical problems, natural science projects or historical argumentation, among many others.

Similarly, the content-based approach is closely related to cooperative learning. Fathman and Kessler (1993: 128) define it as follows: “Cooperative learning refers to group work which is carefully structured so that all learners interact, exchange information, and are held accountable for learning.” Then, they make clear the value and use of this technique: “Cooperative learning is designed to engage learners actively in the learning process. Through inquiry and interaction with peers in small groups, learners work together towards a common goal.” (Fathman and Kessler, *ibid.*: 127) Therefore, tasks, contents and cooperative learning can become a powerful collection of techniques to redefine TEFL.

In that sense, the content-based approach would run against the traditional isolation of ELT as a separate subject, different from the other, more “serious” curricular areas. The whole curriculum would gain coherence and the students might see that the contents of one subject are not relevant only during one hour, but for them as individuals and members of a community, as it is reflected by the coordinated work of the ELT teacher and the rest of the staff.

But, then, logically this approach requires from the staff a greater coordination than it is normally found. It implies sharing information about each one’s curricular areas, not only

about the contents but also about the methodology used in each subject, including the activities which are normally performed. These activities would be, after the normal adaptation to a language learning situation, the axis of the task-based approach (see Vale and Feunteun 1995 for suggestions on a content-based approach within an activity-based framework in primary education, and Martí 2002 for a description of a content-based experience at a school in Barcelona; see <http://www.ugr.es/local/ftsaez/enlaces> for a collection of links on cooperative learning).

4. Language Awareness

One of the characteristics of the Spanish language teaching culture is its concern about the grammatical aspects of language teaching. In spite of the progressive introduction of new methodologies, the general acceptance of the communicative approach and the use of notions and functions, grammar is still at the core of language teaching, sometimes explicitly but normally implicitly under more or less communicative syllabuses. For that reason, it is important to make clear this concept of “Language Awareness” as a new way of incorporating a focus on form into language teaching.

The term “Language Awareness” is used here in two senses. First, it refers to “any pedagogical effort which is used to draw the learners’ attention to language form either implicitly or explicitly” (Spada 1997, 73). Second, it also means the conscious attention of language learners towards language form as a procedure to improve learning. So, language awareness covers many other terms such as attention focusing, focus on form (Williams, 1995), consciousness raising (Fotos 1993; Schmidt, 1990), noticing, explicit instruction, or analytic teaching.

Interestingly, research on SLA has shown that the “best way” to learn a second or foreign language is through comprehensible input and comprehensible output or negotiated interaction. These two pillars of the communicative approach, however, must be accompanied by a monitor device in order to avoid the lack of accuracy in favour of fluency (Schmidt 1993). That monitor device is Language Awareness.

It should be noticed, however, that this paper does not advocate a grammar-based instruction. What is being discussed here is a focus on form within a communicative task-based approach. Thus, Spada (ibid.:77) explains, in the light of SLA, how to implement Language Awareness: “learners who benefited most in these studies were those who received form-focussed instruction which was operationalized as a combination of metalinguistic

teaching and corrective feedback provided within an overall context of communicative practice.” So, two of the basic instruments of Language Awareness should be metalinguistic teaching and corrective feedback.

Three procedures will be mentioned in relation to metalinguistic teaching, namely input flood, input enhancement and grammar consciousness-raising tasks. Input flood implies the inclusion of a great number of samples of the structure under focus in the texts being used. Input enhancement refers to the artificial highlighting of the structure by means of typographic devices such as underlining, bold letters, etc. Finally, grammar consciousness-raising tasks are a type of task which provides learners with grammar problems to solve interactively (Fotos 1994).

Six possible types of corrective feedback have been analysed (Lightbown and Spada, 1999: 103-106): Explicit correction, recasts, clarification requests, metalinguistic feedback, elicitation and repetition. This list of types of corrective feedback requires two comments. First, research has shown that, in general, explicit methods of correction are more effective than implicit methods, elicitation, clarification requests, metalinguistic feedback and repetitions being the most efficient ones (Spada, 1997:78-79). However, and that is our second comment, the importance of corrective feedback compels teachers to investigate their own practice on correction, in order to find out not only which type of corrective feedback one normally uses, but also the effectiveness of that feedback.

Finally, with this third element, language awareness, the outline to redefine the teaching practice in Secondary Education is complete. The suggestion made here is that teachers should wisely use a task-based approach in which the contents from other curricular areas might be at the centre of the syllabus and in which the focus on form should have an important role but within a communicative framework.

However, a fourth element is missing. Learning a language cannot be considered simply as skill development. Learning a language is a very complex educational adventure which engages the whole person and the whole group. Terms such as “negotiation of meaning” or “collaborative learning”, so common in those theoretical issues we referred to at the beginning of this paper, demonstrate that language learning aims at something more than learning the present progressive. That “something” is the Intercultural Competence.

5. Intercultural Competence

In a recent article Dwight Atkinson (1999: 625) stated that “(e)xcept for *language, learning and teaching*, there is perhaps no more important concept in the field of TESOL than *culture*.” Probably this has been so since the very first historical attempts of learning a foreign language as a way of approaching a community of speakers and their cultureⁱⁱⁱ. However, in recent years there has been a special emphasis put on the relation between culture and learning, as well as on the importance of culture in language learning^{iv}.

One of the most difficult issues in relation to culture is its own definition (Lessard-Clouston (1997) reports that Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1963) found over three hundred definitions of culture, nearly forty years ago!) . Culture in FLT has received, traditionally, two types of definitions (Bueno, 1995: 362). First, Formal Culture is said to include the history, the arts and the great achievements of a community. Second, Deep Culture includes the customs and the way of life of a community. A third definition, more updated from the anthropological point of view, could be added, Cognitive Culture, which is defined as “learned and shared systems of meaning and understanding, communicated primarily by means of natural language”. (D’Andrade, 1990: 65)

So, considering, primarily, these definitions of culture, what is the intercultural competence? To begin with, it must be said that the “intercultural competence” is a term which appears not exclusively in the field of language teaching. The wider field of Education coined the expression “multicultural and intercultural education”, from which the intercultural competence is derived^v. Secondly, the appearance of the intercultural competence is related to the evolution of language teaching objectives expressed as competences (Trujillo Sáez, 2001) and to the general evolution of the field of language teaching as explained in the introduction to this paper.

Oliveras (2000:35) has analyzed the different proposals and establishes two sets of definitions of the Intercultural Competence. On the one hand, it is defined as a skill or ability to behave adequately in a multicultural context (as, for example, Meyer’s (1991:137) definition). On the other hand, it is defined as an attitudinal stance towards cultures in general or a culture in particular. So, according to these definitions, the Intercultural competence consists of three components: attitude, knowledge and skills.

Kramsch (1993: 205-6; 1998) proposes four new ways of dealing with language and culture in a teaching context: first, establishing a “sphere of interculturality”, which means not only a transfer of information but a deep reflection on the target and on the native culture; second, teaching culture as a interpersonal process which “applies itself to understanding foreignness or otherness”; third, teaching culture as difference, showing diversity as an

inherent feature of culture; and, finally, crossing disciplinary boundaries to include studies from other social sciences.

From that perspective, we define interculturality as critical participation in communication, having in mind that the view of “cultures” as watertight compartments is a simplification of a complex reality marked by diversity as its main feature; the intercultural competence^{vi}, then, is defined as the development of the cognitive environments of the students to understand and accept diversity as a constituent of society, and critical analysis and communication as instruments of knowledge and awareness in a complex society. Thus, the intercultural competence means, among other things, critical education, cooperative learning and reflection on social problems at the language classroom.

Hence, the Intercultural Competence becomes the authentic educational objective of FLT, as a number of authors have suggested (see Castro Prieto 1999 for a reflection on the European dimension of FLL). In that sense, Vez (1996: 20) redefines the purpose of ELL:

English language learning from the point of view of the curriculum does not simply aim to fulfil practical and utilitarian purposes. And neither is this the underlying philosophy of a communicative approach to language teaching. Through the process of learning a foreign language at school students are also encouraged to become involved in the construction of the world around them.

Thus, modern FLT must regain the educational, humanistic and cultural ambition which originally underpinned learning a foreign language. Learning a foreign language, as seen from the perspective of the intercultural competence, contributes to personal development. Second, it also contributes to intellectual development, as learning about other languages and cultures enhances your general knowledge of the world; and, finally, adding a cultural element to FLL can also help improve the receptive and productive language skills, as some aspects of language are culture-bound, as the contrastive rhetoric hypothesis has explained (Connor 1996; Trujillo 2001b).

6. Conclusion

The gap between theory and practice is the space where teachers can act to improve their practice and enlighten the theory with classroom results. This action, which constitutes a real lifelong learning process, will provoke an improvement in their students’ learning and will ameliorate the teaching experience. In this paper a framework has been introduced to redefine TEFL in the Spanish Secondary Education. The framework is defined by four pillars,

tasks, contents, language awareness and the intercultural competence. The latter defines FLT as an educational enterprise, while the three first concepts establish the procedures to make it a fruitful venture.

Learning a language is, then, one of the most exciting personal decisions and one of the most relevant cultural projects. Communication is a sociocultural event which involves people in a complex process of cooperation and negotiation of meanings. This same definition applies to a language learning context: activity, cooperation, negotiation, culture, communication.

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ⁱ "Research has demonstrated that learners do benefit considerably from communicative interaction and instruction which is meaning based." (Lightbown and Spada, 1999:150)

ⁱⁱ Obviously, we are not using the term product in the sense of the dichotomy product vs. process, but in the more colloquial sense of "something that is produced as a result of a number of activities".

ⁱⁱⁱ "Although some L2/FL teachers seem to think that the presence of culture in current writings is relatively recent, a review of the L2/FL literature shows that this is clearly not the case." (Lessard-Clouston, M. 1997)

^{iv} See Madrid 1993 for an analysis of the presence of cultural elements in the Spanish Educational Law.

^v See García Castaño and Granados Martínez (1999) for an analysis of the meaning and evolution of the concept in Spain.

^{vi} The term "intercultural competence" is based on the metaphor of the person between two cultures, which is an obvious simplification; "cultural competence" would be a more appropriate term according to our definition of interculturality. However, we use the first term not to add confusion to our argumentation.