

The Communicative Interaction Model for Teaching and Learning Languages

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Este artículo ofrece una propuesta diseñada para verificar los niveles de conocimiento en cuanto a la adquisición de lenguas extranjeras en el ámbito de los futuros maestros y profesores de lenguas extranjeras en primaria y secundaria en una comunidad bilingüe como Galicia (España). Uno de los principales objetivos consiste en analizar lo que los estudiantes creen que saben, lo que saben realmente y lo que se supone que deben saber acerca de la didáctica de lenguas extranjeras, para así completar el proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje. Los resultados obtenidos favorecen la propuesta de un modelo de investigación e intervención en el aprendizaje de lenguas en tres fases que hemos denominado «nuevo modelo comunicativo de interacción».

Palabras clave: *interacción, didáctica, comunicación, lenguas.*

This paper aims to determine levels of knowledge about learning foreign languages among trainee primary and secondary foreign-language teachers in a bilingual region such as Galicia (Spain). One of the main goals is to analyse and reach conclusions concerning what these students know, what they think they know and what they are supposed to know about teaching foreign languages to successfully complete the teaching and learning process. The results back a three-phase research and language-learning model which we have called the «new Communicative Interaction Model».

Keywords: *interaction, teaching and learning, communication, languages.*

Cet article propose un modèle dans le but de vérifier le niveau des connaissances concernant l'acquisition des langues étrangères des futurs enseignants dans le primaire et secondaire, dans une communauté bilingue comme la Galice (Espagne). Un des objectifs principaux est celui d'analyser et d'obtenir des conclusions tout en tenant compte de ce que les élèves croient savoir, ce qu'ils savent en réalité, et ce qu'ils devraient savoir à propos de la didactique des langues étrangères pour compléter le processus d'enseignement/ apprentissage. Les résultats de notre étude vont dans le sens d'un modèle de recherche et d'intervention dans l'apprentissage des langues étrangères basée sur trois étapes que nous appelons le « nouveau modèle communicatif d'interaction ».

Mots-clés : *Interaction, didactique, communication, langues.*

1. Introduction

Teaching and learning foreign languages requires trainee teachers to put a range of innovative techniques into practice in the classroom, amongst other things. We are supposed to be able to design our own materials, strategies and techniques for the foreign-language classroom and use different learning possibilities to achieve a list of previously established goals. In addition to developing communicative competencies in the classroom, we also need analyse and assess ourselves in action-research experiences in order to detect and prevent possible mistakes and shortcomings.

This article is based on a classroom action-research in which the research question is clearly stated to identify the problems future teachers of foreign languages may have in relation to communicative competency, mainly vocabulary, syntax and interaction in short dialogues.

2. Contextual framework and objectives

As mentioned above, one of the main aims of this research is to confirm and verify the real level of future teachers' knowledge of languages at the different levels of formal education. Their knowledge of lexicon and vocabulary and their communicative competency skills will also be rated through different tests and conclusions drawn.

Moreover, the data gathered to verify the production of short oral and written texts –mainly narrative, description and dialogue– will help create the necessary tool to reach our final target, a new Communicative Interaction Model for primary and secondary schools.

Although this kind of research is useful for detecting, analysing and making final conclusions about different objects, we also need to take a step beyond preparing new proposals for raising the quality of education. This means taking action right from the start at the Education Faculties where our students train to become teachers.

It should be said that this contribution only corresponds to one of the previous steps needed to prepare a comprehensive proposal and should be complemented by research studies and future actions in the same area of knowledge.

3. Theoretical framework and methodology

Three methodological approaches will be used to carry out this research. First, the principles of didactics as a field of theory and research in language education will be set out; second, the communicative approach for teaching and learning foreign languages will be developed; and third, the benefits of the classroom action-research experiences will be addressed.

The term «didactics»¹ can be defined as the science of studying the teaching phenomena of scientific disciplines, the conditions for the transmission of scientific culture and the necessary conditions for learners to acquire knowledge. A didactical perspective is also needed for taking decisions on what kind of science should be taught and which main elements of scientific education should be taken into account.

Didactics is based mainly on theoretical models from the teaching and learning process itself, but as an interdisciplinary science it is also

1. See Estany and Izquierdo (2001).

influenced by cognitive psychology, philosophy and the history of science and sociology. All these sciences help establish a field of theory and research known as didactics, which is a new word used to refer to this broad area of knowledge also called «pedagogy», «education science» or «didactics (teaching and learning)» (Estany & Izquierdo, 2001).

The second approach used to carry out this research is based on «communicative language teaching» or what we simply call the «communicative approach» (Richards, 1989, pp. 46-47). The communicative approach² constitutes a methodological approach which arose in Great Britain in the early 1960s in the context of teaching and learning modern languages in reaction to the methods used by Structuralism. Right from the start it benefited from research in teaching and learning foreign languages, but in a graded fashion it was also incorporated into teaching and learning mother tongues. This is because both first and foreign languages are based on the same theoretical presuppositions and they share very similar approaches to teaching and learning.

Traditional methods used to teach languages failed to take account of the speaker's intention or purpose in using the language. At the same time, this intention or purpose was seen to be key to its functionality. The most interesting facet of this new dimension of language is the way the language is presented. The way in which it is organised through the concepts expressed by the speaker at a given moment and the purpose are also important factors to take into account. This new formula for teaching and organising language materials

into notions and functions for teaching and learning foreign languages gave rise to the notional-functional approach, which is now known as the communicative approach.

Since the late 1960s, however, when proposals for communicative approaches to language teaching were first advocated, methodologists associated with this philosophy have followed through the original proposal to set out principles to design syllabuses, teaching activities, instructional materials and actual classroom procedures themselves. Such proposals can no longer hide under the theoretically safer umbrella of approach, but meet the full criteria of a method, since they offer prescriptions that cover every phase in the organisation of an instructional system. They can be referred to as examples of method proposals which draw on the approach spelt out under the more general term «communicative language teaching» or simply the «communicative approach» (Richards, 1989, pp. 46-47).

In addition, we decided to implement the above methodologies and benefits of a classroom action-research³ experience because it implies a reflective process which helps teachers explore and examine aspects of their own teaching and learning knowledge and to take action to change and improve them. The term action-research was first coined by Lewin in 1944 and it was used to describe a process of planning, finding and execution of facts. According to Kemmis's definition, action-research is a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social, including educational, situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of:

2. See Richards (1989).

3. Kemmis (2007).

1. Their own social or educational practices,
2. Their understanding of these practices, and
3. The situations in which the practices are carried out (Kemmis, 2007, p. 168).

Classroom action-research provides a framework for trying out different approaches and ideas, improves student learning, enables teachers to make choices and decisions about their teaching styles and helps both teachers and students develop reflective practice and confidence.

4. Development/Analysis

A sample of each of the above targets will be presented. Three main stages will be established according to three chronological sequences, starting from the research on simple vocabulary items based on ordinary things and objects to show students' abilities to produce short dialogues and then short descriptive/narrative writing texts.

4.1 First stage

The first stage is aimed at determining students' knowledge of vocabulary related to fifteen ordinary things or objects which can be seen or used in our everyday lives. The pictures are inspired by a picture book: *Věci, květiny, zvířátka a lidé pro děti* by V. Nezval⁴ and illustrated by Jiří Trnka (1912-1969)⁵, a famous Czech animator and puppeteer (see figure 1).

Nezval's picture book was thought to establish metaphoric relations among ordinary objects, animals, flowers and ordinary jobs

Figure 1. Illustration by Jiří Trnka



combining pictures with short texts very close linked to poetry. The metaphors suggested by the pictures and the reading of a short text can be either formal metaphors (sunflower = sun) or functional metaphors (coffee grinder = the smell wakes us up as a cock-a-doodle-doo from a cock).

The sample is offered in a grid in which some instructions are given to the students (see figure 2). In order to prepare a useful sample to cover the whole part of our research, a picture, its translation into Spanish and English language and the suggested metaphor are included in the grid even though, at this first step, we will only be analyzing the items related to vocabulary.

Once our foundations have been laid through the vocabulary acquired by our students on a metaphorical basis as a starting point, the next step involves providing a dialogue model to make use of its didactic possibilities according to ordinary practices within a teaching and learning languages context.

4.2. Second stage

The second stage of this research study is based on a dialogue model used in a method for teaching and learning French as a foreign language known as: *Méthode de Français Pile ou*

4. Nezval (1900-1958) was one of the most prolific avant-garde Czech writers in the first half of the twentieth century and a cofounder of the Surrealist movement in Czechoslovakia.

5. J. Trnka illustrated books for children throughout the Second World War and in 1968 won the Hans Christian Andersen Award, the most distinguished prize in children's literature.

6. See Rodríguez López-Vázquez (2011).

Figure 2. Grid for vocabulary and metaphors

Name:

Date of birth:










Age: Sex:

Degree/Master:

Course:

Date of data collection

1. Please use a pen to fill in your data and answer the test.
 2. Write the **name of each picture in Spanish, English and give the suggested metaphor** in the corresponding square.
 3. If you don't know the answer, draw a line

Number	Picture	Spanish	English	Metaphor
1		araña	spider	flower
2		cola de ardilla	squirrel's tail	maize cob corn on the cob
3		cactus	cactus	dwarf
4		cangrejo	crab	knight
5		caracol	snail	clown
6		cartero	postman	carrier pigeon
7		clavel	carnation	chocolate envelope
8		girasol	sunflower	sun
9		jarra	vase	dove white pigeon








Number	Picture	Spanish	English	Metaphor
10		mariposa	butterfly	small pieces of paper thrown in the air
11		molinillo de café	coffee grinder	cockerel
12		pavo real	peacock	rainbow
13		tenazas	tongs	index finger and thumb
14		tulipán	tulip	wine glass
15		zapatos	pair of shoes	cat and dog


Figure 3. The sunflower and the sun

Picture	Dialogue
	<p>—The sunflower is like a small sun.</p> <p>—Why?</p> <p>—Because its flower looks like a sun with rays.</p> <p>—And what else?</p> <p>—Because the sunflower is always spinning round.</p> <p>—Is the sunflower yellow?</p> <p>—Yes, it is.</p> <p>—Is the sunflower bigger than the sun?</p> <p>—No, it isn't.</p> <p>—The sunflower is as yellow as the sun.</p>

Face by Jeanne Vassal⁶. By using this method and asking about shape, colour and size, for instance, students are required to create a short dialogue in which they can answer a question about what a determined element is like.

The metaphor in itself will be the starting point to create the dialogues. Both oral and written skills will be involved in this teaching and learning process. Two examples have been prepared to illustrate this stage of the research.

Figure 4. The coffee grinder and the cockerel

Picture	Dialogue
	<p>—The coffee grinder is like a cockerel.</p> <p>—Why?</p> <p>—Because it makes a smell and a noise in the morning.</p> <p>—Does the coffee grinder make a noise in the morning?</p> <p>—Yes, it does.</p> <p>—And what for?</p> <p>—Because the coffee grinder reminds us it is time to wake up in the morning.</p> <p>—Is the coffee grinder as noisy as a cockerel?</p> <p>—Yes, it is.</p> <p>—The coffee grinder is as noisy as the cockerel.</p>

The first one is based on a formal metaphor which can be easily demonstrated, sunflower = sun (figure 3), and the second one is based on a functional metaphor which is not as easy to verify but will be clearly understood when explained, coffee grinder = cockerel (figure 4).

The way of organising the dialogues depends on the idea of reinforcing the vocabulary items through wh-questions: why?, what else?, what for? This method can be used to get extra information and to repeat nouns or noun phrases in cadences so that vocabulary is easily acquired in a natural way. Moreover, adjectives are presented at various levels to practise comparative forms and their different degrees. The use of adjectives and their degrees of comparison are also useful for reinforcing the idea of acquiring vocabulary through a dialogue based on asking and giving answers to short questions around two or three noun phrases as in the examples above: sunflower, coffee grinder, sun, cockerel.

This second test, based on the construction of short dialogues through the two main elements involved in a metaphoric process, will be the basis for analysing and carrying out our re-

search on communicative competence in both oral and written skills.

4.3. Third stage

The third stage will take place after firstly verifying students' level of vocabulary through the cognitive connections made thanks to metaphors, and secondly after providing evidence of their ability to create short dialogues based on the aforementioned method. The next test will be used to gather data according to students' ability to produce oral and written texts to both narrate and/or describe ordinary things, animals and objects.

To illustrate this last stage of the research we have chosen two random examples from figure 2. Students are required to choose two pictures and are asked to prepare a short paragraph describing and/or narrating what the animal or object is about (figures 5 and 6).

If the starting point to make a short dialogue was the metaphor in itself for the second stage, now, for the third stage, it can be assumed that the metaphor in itself will be the final sentence in the explanation of the narrative/descriptive text made by the learners of a foreign language.

Figure 5. Example 1



Picture	Descriptive/Narrative short text
	<p>Tongs = index finger and thumb</p> <p>Tongs are a device consisting of two long pieces joined at one end. Tongs are usually made of metal. Tongs are used for picking up objects. Tongs are used to hold an object between them. Tongs look like our thumb and index finger.</p>

Figure 6. Example 2

Picture	Descriptive/Narrative short text
	<p>Tulip = wine glass</p> <p>A tulip is a plant. Tulips have a stem and a large bell-shaped flower. Tulips grow from a bulb. Tulips have different colours. A tulip looks like a wine glass. A tulip and a wine glass have very similar shapes.</p>

5. The distributed model of language acquisition

To give a comprehensive shape to this research, we need to give extra information about different types of models applied to textbooks in order to acquire language knowledge. Given that the model followed nowadays to plan language acquisition for primary and secondary textbooks is based on «concentration patterns», we suggest a different model based on «distribution patterns». The concentrated model usually proposes learning languages around different topics, all of them sequenced in the subject syllabus through what has been called «didactic units» or what I personally prefer to call «teaching and learning units» (TLU). To shed some light on this model and get a better understanding of this moment in our research, we aim to explain the differences between the concentrated and the distributed models through the following example.

English language teachers in primary or secondary schools are supposed to cover a series of pre-established objectives according to the four sections of contents included in the National Curriculum. The topic for this experience is «wild animals» and it is supposed to be covered in the first term of a school year. All the vocabulary, grammar structures, questions and answers concerning this topic are concentrated in a two-week period of time through two or three TLUs. Most textbooks are organised around a given number of units which are independent of one another. Therefore, it is quite unlikely that all the knowledge acquired in Unit One, for example, will be reviewed or reinforced in Unit Two and so on and so forth, so that at the end of the course all the acquired knowledge related to that topic will be lost.

This was an example of a concentrated planning with probably mistaken learning targets. However, we propose an alternative in-

cluding a distributed planning which we describe as follows. From a cognitive point of view it has been proved that most important psychologists agree on the fact that frequency and time are two variables needed to prove the acquisition of languages and they are both very closely related to one another. If we understand frequency as the number of times something happens within a particular period, and time as the part of existence which is measured in hours, weeks, months, etc., it can be assured that the frequency of using a word is strongly related to the time used to comprehend a word, which will leave our short-term memory to settle down in our long-term memory.

According to these cognitive theories (Miller, 1993), the number of times needed to keep new words in our mind is eight, but for this to be successful, these cadences must be kept in mind following a specific pattern. The alternative to changing the classical concentrated model into a distributed model is based on an alteration which implies a modification in the planning perspective, which means the fact of distributing the repetition of items along a longer period of time which goes far away from a TLU.

6. Conclusion

As we have shown throughout this paper, the idea of building up a new communicative model to facilitate interaction among students from a didactical point of view seems to be mandatory. This paper constitutes just a first approach to the development of a new Communicative Interaction Model. Thanks to the samples obtained from our students' feedback on the different levels of teacher training education, we will be able to show that this is the right path to start with and to continue along in the process of teaching and learning foreign languages. There is still a large number of proposals and research studies to complete, but thanks to this one, the pillars of a new Communicative Interaction Model are now in place. The three stages established within this model start from the acquisition and knowledge of simple vocabulary items of a foreign language based on ordinary things, followed by a demonstration of students' abilities to produce short dialogues and short descriptive or narrative texts at the end of the process. It should be mentioned that the four language skills are taken into account, including oral and written skills and receptive and productive ones.

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