

## MEANING AND DIRECTION IN FOREIGN



# LANGUAGE TEACHING



Sala de lectura de la antigua biblioteca del Colegio Minuto de Dios, 1970.

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## ABSTRACT

This document explores the possibility to link to foreign language teaching practice in the classroom, two streams of theoretical elements set by late research on neurosciences about the cognitive processes underlying learning, and the elements from sociolinguistics dealing with languages in contact. The objective of the paper is to consider those elements as an enriching source for didactics and as an alternative to practice based on recipe-like activities well designed to different settings. Reflective teaching is presented though, as the empirical tool to make language education a real part of praxeology, in which effective teaching is connected to meaningful and contextualized didactics.

Key words: learning, ontogenesis, foreign language, cognition, didactics, communication, culture

## INTRODUCTION

Universidad Uniminuto and its School of Education have shown a precise disposition to generate an appropriate and permanent environment for the second language' in the institution. It

has been established as one of the main goals to achieve in the near future as a way to promote harmonization of educational practices within the university with international research and academic activities. As a consequential step in this direction the language center has become a part of the School of Education hoping to find a more fruitful scenario for pedagogical enhancement.

That is one of the reasons for this paper: to promote mutual academic understanding among teachers from fields other than linguistics. In other words, to seek interdisciplinary studies to the common pedagogical problems faced by the community and to share our vision of praxeology, understood as the science of educational action and academic guideline in the university. Referencing different sources, coming from different educational backgrounds, using a different jargon could play a part in making meaningful communication hard among teachers. However, there is another way to look at it which is as realistic as the former, but a bit more optimistic: We could enrich our experience by accepting the 'difference' as a source of insight. There is where teachers can find the true meaning of multicultural understanding: in accepting the fact that we are not alone, that other people, groups, and communities are working as hard as we are, looking for answers to the problems of existence. There is where we can find the true meaning of interdisciplinary studies: in making an effort to perceive the world as other scholars from different fields do.

The fact that pedagogy is to education as didactics is to teaching is generally accepted. Pedagogy, as a scientific discipline, is the result of defined reflection upon

education. In the field of foreign language education though, specific didactic is the rigorous and methodical observation upon tasks and activities developed by teachers and students in the process of addressing the language. It is also accepted that both of them deal with language whether as a subject matter through learning strategies, or as an instrument to access the culture and different kinds of knowledge. Moreover, the way a language is approached is determined by the experiences, theories and beliefs teachers and students have a bout two main points: The nature of language and the process of learning.

That is why the second reason for this paper is to explore how different perceptions about the nature of language as much as the different view and understanding of learning, affect specific didactics. Therefore some elements are provided to answer questions such as: Why do we teach a foreign language? Is our practice guided by a concrete and grounded conviction of its suitability? Are we embracing an academic attitude regarding the history of languages in contact? If so, does it correspond to a clear vision of our place and responsibility as educators? How languages are taught? Are they learnable at all? What can we learn about it from today's research on neurosciences?

Initially, different perspectives on the nature of languages and their possible influence on teacher and student's activities addressing the language are suggested. Then, the process of learning languages is presented as a human (cultural as much as biological) experience of communication in which specific didactics finds meaning and direction. Finally, some elements are brought in to suggest coincidences and common points between reflective teaching as the foundation specific didactics, and praxeology.

#### NATURE OF LANGUAGE AND SPECIFIC DIDACTICS IN EFL

Elucidating the nature of language seems to be a huge and complex duty for science today. However, everybody seems to have a theory to explain what the lan-

guage is, how it works and how to use it properly. The almost one hundred percent rate of success in first language acquisition, the fact that it normally requires no formal instruction, and the seemingly effortless way kids master it, make us take language for granted. Nevertheless, discrepancies in the way scientists describe language; suggest that the phenomenon is not as simplistic as it looks at first sight.

We will now explore three main tendencies to understand the nature of language: Initially, the perception of language as a cultural artifact, in other words, language understood as a body of knowledge we can learn as we learn to play chess or to deal with constitutional law. Then a view of language as a scientific discipline; and finally, language perceived as a cultural learned skill. Hopefully, it'll help us understand different practices in foreign language's specific didactics.

Language as a cultural artifact. If this idea of language is grounded in our minds, we would probably believe that could make us a cultivated member of the community. Being language a human discovery of invention, the sophistication of certain languages, a dis-

tinguishing human feature, would greatly vary. This perception is grounded on the belief that culture depends very little, if some, on biology and brain; but a lot on social interaction. This way, language is somewhat a synonym of communication in which natural evolution plays a secondary role; it is implicit that language is some miasma that seeps into people through their skin. But culture and language of course, relies on the neural circuitry that allows us to learn.<sup>2</sup>

This way, learning English, as well as learning other languages such as German, French or Japanese (prestigious languages), would help decorating the professional CV with sophistication. Moreover, the successful learner would be able to communicate directly with people who belong to a culture considered whether superior or inferior to the culture expressed in the mother tongue. Arguments such as the importance of a global language, no matter how enchanting it might be; boost language learning as an opportunity to improve the learner's possibilities in the labor market. The tendency could be a little harmful to the process of learning of certain students, especially if they perceive in the teacher or the com-



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munity, a tendency to consider the foreign culture and its language as superior. The teacher's belief in this sense may be projecting the idea of successful students only when they are able to master language and technology. It is a tacit promise of a future in a heaven of technology and easiness if they pay eternal devotion to technology.<sup>3</sup> Is it our roll to promote the interest in a foreign culture and a foreign language? It certainly seems to be the case. However, are our beliefs making us project and encourage the idea of 'a-culturation'?

Another evidence of such a perspective on the nature language might be found in the way national and multinational institutes sometimes advertise their courses. In a recent TV commercial, we could see a person shrinking as other people discover he can not understand a conversation in English. The foreigner interlocutor is able to speak normally but the native person having a bad time, he seems to be shame of himself: he cannot speak English. Many other commercials appeal to the same feeling of shame. In 'developing' countries the multiple necessities make it possible to believe there is an easy way out of need by magic formulas; especially when people want to pay for the solutions.

If language is a cultural artifact linguistic variations would show us language superiority. Talking about linguistic variations, Spolsky,<sup>4</sup> tell us that studying dialects have been especially relevant since flourishing of historic linguistics in the XVIII and XIX centuries. Diachronic studies were later challenged by synchronic studies of linguistic systems. Are there any intrinsic differences on the quality of the human faculty of language? Can we express intelligent thought in Spanish which are not possible to decipher in Cuebo? Ideas expressed in English are untranslatable to Palenquero? Two possible answers come out depending on our perception on the nature of language. One of them is that expressed by Max Weinreich: "Language is a dialect with an army and a navy."<sup>5</sup> Second the one expressed by Otto Jespersen and also quoted by Pinker:

"There is one expression that continually comes to my mind whenever I think of the English language and compare it with others: it seems to be positively and expressly masculine, it is the language of a grown-up man and has very little childish of feminine about it..."

It seems that when talking about linguistic diversity, according to Maria Trillos (2003), people have the fondness to believe their native language is more beautiful and can express better the answers to the problems of existence. However, some indigenous communities reject their own language to favor the language of "white people" for their kids. The perception of language a cultural artifact, support the idea of replacing languages by those of "better cultures". A society may give up their language and culture, but it is rather a sense of helplessness in front a culture that is not only huge but strong (bigger and stronger army and navy). Are teachers suggesting such attitude towards their own mother tongue? We are sorry to say there are plenty of symptomatic facts and evidences: schools are hiring and paying more to a British teacher whose education in language teaching was received in a 30 day's course. A teacher from Colombia with five or more years of university education would be a second option in Colombian bilingual schools. We have been hiring teachers from Canada, England and the USA, even if we have to pay them more: American dollars and British pound, instead of hiring native speakers, if necessary, in the school of education of the university of Guyana in George Town or the university of West Indies at Barbados or any other Latin American English spoken countries. Doesn't the language have the same quality?

When talking about school practices, most of the discussion is about the way we do it<sup>6</sup>. We show concern about planning, curriculum, and activities to make learning fun and effective. We also carry out research to uncover the way computers can help in teaching different subjects or how to teach skills such as reading or writing. "iWe worry —if we ever do...!-for the



Interior de la actual biblioteca del colegio Rafael García Herreros.

how, forgetting the why or presupposing that we all know it and share it."<sup>7</sup> The nature of language could help us understand our tendency to behave in the classroom in different ways, our professional practice is widely influence by the way we see language. There are alternatives to see what the language is. In the next apart, we will present another way we have found to be part of teachers beliefs.

Language as a cultural learned skill. According to which, empowering cognitive structures and improving their flexibility<sup>8</sup> as much as elevating our multicultural understanding are two enormous ad-

vantages of learning a foreign or second language. Students could improve their ability to think, to study, and to understand reality by learning languages. Besides, it could enormously improve the ability of students to understand other cultures by developing the potency of understanding and accepting differences. This perception of language implies that language teaching is not only convenient but necessary in the process of education.

Perceiving language this way, teachers and students favor language contact and its different possibilities. One of them is known as the CIP or Canadian immersion

program. Some bilingual programs in Colombia work with a very similar philosophy. The basic assumption is to equip and young students with a powerful tool to generate universal academic enrichment. But it is also important to access different ways of facing the challenges of existence, and there is no better way of approaching different cultures than being able to listen from themselves. Counting on languages such as English and Spanish second and third more spoken languages in the world, make the reward bigger.

However, languages in contact have need of guidelines. Colombia has over 62 reported indigenous languages, two creoles and Spanish. Many of them could be threatened by the possibility of extinction; after all, languages died; however, a poor care of this garden of languages as called by Ofelia Garcia,<sup>9</sup> may lead to murder. What could happen to a community who lose the mother tongue?" What could happen to a society with no respect for its cultural diversity?

Las relaciones lingüísticas que se dan en Colombia producen casos tan interesantes como los siguientes: en la sierra nevada de santa Marta Los Koguis siguen sus ritos religiosos en teyuan, pactan alianzas con los wiwas en damana; en español establecen estrategias de convivencia con los campesinos y en familia se comunican en koguián. En el Vaupés, un individuo escoge pareja en un grupo de habla diferente a la suya, en la maloca interactúa en diferentes lenguas, reserva el tucano para las transacciones comerciales, utiliza el español y el portugués en las interacciones con colombianos y brasileños. En el archipiélago de San Andrés, los raizales expresan el amor y los afectos en criol, en el templo bautista oran en inglés, en estas dos lenguas suelen relacionarse con sus parientes culturales de Portobelo a Bluefield, en español hablan con los representantes del estado colombiano. (Trillos 2003)

Teaching languages, then, requires on the part of teachers, a clear understanding of the process of languages in contact. Besides the language taught should be ap-

preciated in a local and global context. Prestigious languages threatening other languages and thus disturbing linguistic diversity, should be carefully monitored by language planners, but as far as education is concern, teachers and students should at least aware of the process in which they are participating. A global language is not a new necessity, and today it is part of the mankind's scenario, as much as Greek or Latin were in past. That is why, teachers who understand language as a culturally learned skill, boost awareness and intercultural understanding.

#### THE PROCESS OF LEARNING AND SPECIFIC DIDACTICS IN EFL

Effective teaching strategies are the main objective of specific didactics in EFL. Didactics, understood as a recipe of activities to be developed in the classroom, would no necessarily lead to effective teaching. Permanent growth as educators requires commitment to critically study of educational traditions as much as consuetudinary practices." Besides, as stated before, it is necessary to keep revising our beliefs and experiences if we are to understand what happens in our professional experience. What is learning? What are the activities we engage in while learning? What is the most effective way to teach so that students can really learn? Up to what extent is learning a biologically determined process?

Some statements in the history of language teaching show us different trenes in the appreciation of learning as a process to master a language. "El lenguaje humano no es innato ni se aprende a partir de la imitacion."<sup>12</sup> "El aprendizaje del lenguaje es un proceso de invencion social y personal" Goodman, (1986). During the same period, a very influential theory presented learning and acquiring as a dichotomy: rather than learned, languages are acquired supported by Krashen . And the process of acquisition is better achieved when comprehensible input is provided in low anxiety and stress free environments. Meaningful and attractive academic contents are also essential to achieve acquisition.

Goodman opposed learning to innateness. In a different direction Krashen also do it. However contrasting learning as a cognitive process to the theories of innateness seems not very appropriate. When focusing on the innate faculty of language what scholars have done is precisely to provide a possible explanation to learning, not an alternative. The innate faculty of language is a mechanism to learn the language, "it is an instinct to acquire an art"<sup>13</sup>

Dealing with language teaching, learning is a fundamental factor to consider. How language is received by students? How is language stored and retrieved when needed.<sup>14</sup>

That is why our suggestion is to address scientific disciplines which subject of study is the living brain. As stated by Pinker,<sup>15</sup> trying to understand the language and thinking process, psychology works as inverse engineering. Projectual engineering design a machine to do something, inverse engineering tries to explain why a machine what built for. Our interest in this session is to explore the explanation of how the language learning machine works (neural circuitry and cultural interaction), and how learning could provide meaning and direction to specific didactics in foreign language learning.

## NOTES

1 The use of the term "Segundo Idioma" does not refer to the context ESL-EFL, but to the language learnt after the mother tongue.

2 (Pinker, The Blank Slate. The Modern Denial of Human Nature (2003. p 60).

3 (Postman, 1999).

4 Spolsky B. (1998).

5 Quoted by Pinker (1994). The Language Instinct. P. 29

6 Postman, N. (1999). El Fin de la educación. Una Nueva Definición del Valor de la Educación. Eumo Octaedro.

7 Savater, F (2000). La Educación Desconcertada. In Lecturas Dominicales. El Tiempo. May 31st

8 Peal, E and Wallace L. (1962).

9 Baker, C. (1993). Foundations of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism. Multilingual Matters. p. 39

10 An answer to this question is provided by sociolinguist Joshua Fishman in his presentation called "What do You Lose When You Lose a Language" A brief of the presentation could be found in the official Web page of Teaching Indigenous Languages. <http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~jar/TIL.html>.

11 Pineda C. (2002). Knowledge Base for EFL/ESL Educators: What does it mean? In Profile: Issues in Teachers' Professional Development. Number 3. (pp 9 -14) Universidad Nacional de Colombia. Bogotá.

12 Goodman, K. (1986). El Lenguaje Integral. Aiaque. Serie de la Palabra. Buenos Aires.

13 Pinker, S. (1994). Op. cit., p 23.

14 Ibid. P. 11

15 Pinker, S. (2000). Cómo Funciona la Mente. Ediciones Destino. Colección Ancora y Delfín. P 40