

TUNING-UP MODELS IN FLT

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The methodological trends in Foreign Language Teaching during the last decade seem to have been successfully illuminated by the theoretical proposals which reanalyzed the Chomskian notion of 'competence' (knowledge of the rules of the language) and granted special focus to 'communicative competence', that is, the social dimension of language which is implicit in communicative interaction (Hymes, 1977).

The FLT literature produced in the seventies marked the shift of emphasis from the traditional approach, more concerned with the formal aspect (mechanical manipulation of structures and specific stress on grammar rules) to the new communicative language teaching approach which is centered in the functional use of language in natural situations.

The detection of organizational principles beyond the lexico-grammatical level, with the development of discourse analysis, brought out new notions based on speech interactions and the textual level thus characterizing the borderline between the formulaic aspects of language expressions (grammatical structures, symbolic meanings found in the system) and the pragmatic side of the communicative process, extending symbolic meanings into particular indexes provided by contextual frame-work (Widdowson, 1984).

The emerging set of principles introduced a whole range of dichotomies: usage/use; sentence/utterance; locution/illocu-tion; cohesion/coherence, among others. The theoretical distinctions aimed at correcting the bias of the previous linguistic framework, which "decontextualized" sentences from their natural occurrences.

Under the influence of the new principles, communicative-oriented syllabuses came into existence. Wilkins (1972) provided a set of semantic-grammatical notions concerned with 'time', 'space', 'quality', 'matter' and 'deixis' together with modal notions, and a set of communicative function categories with the objective of projecting a typology of functions characterizing language use. In this way, the notional-functional approach was institutionalized.

Parallel to the linguistic brush-up, the emergence of cognitive psychology triggered changes in thinking about human comprehension. The emphasis made on models of mental processes had a particular impact on reading skills. Bearing the new language models in mind, psycholinguistic researchers opened new channels for the study of comprehension processes. Goodman's

empirical observations in reading research (1967,1976) showed that poor readers stick to linear decoding strategies (information is processed word by word within the sentence limits) , while good readers resort to 'general schema' strategies building up the overall structure of the text by means of predictions of meanings. This "psycholinguistic guessing game" is based on essential interaction between language in context and thought in the reading process. Goodman's model had its greatest impact on conceptions about reading instruction and has had an impressive influence on teaching of reading strategies in FL.

The switch from concentration on grammar to more realistic use of language seems to be an unquestionable move towards improvement in FL language activities, but a totally different thing is to exclude the grammatical aspect from communicative syllabuses. Recently, as a matter of fact, several applied linguists, methodologists, and materials developers have questioned functional-centered syllabuses on the ground that they lack an integration with 'knowledge of the system'. The problem seems to be crucial at the beginner's level because at the initial stages, the learner cannot be expected to solve communication problems of a language he does not know. Brumfit (1979) believes that 'what needs to be taught is defined by the failures to communicate at the first stage'. In this way the methodology becomes 'student -centered'. Canale (1981) in a reexamination of communicative competence based on work carried out in Canada with students of French as a second language in elementary schools,points out some important problems remaining in theory and practice:

there remains much disagreement and little careful research on the applications of communicative competence in second language pedagogy. Rather within applied linguistics one also finds confusion and lack of consideration of many basic concepts involved in this notion. The view here is that the current disarray in conceptualization, research and application in the area of communicative language pedagogy results in large part from the failure to consider and develop an adequate theoretical framework. (p.2)

Canale postulates that 'communicative competence' consists minimally of four underlying systems of 'knowledge' and 'skills' required for actual communications: grammatical competence, concerned with the mastery of the code and including 'features and rules of the language such as vocabulary, word formation, sentence formation, pronunciation, spelling and linguistic semantics'; sociolinguistic competence, including rules of appropriateness of both meanings and grammatical forms in different sociolinguistic contexts; discourse competence, the knowledge required to combine forms and meanings to achieve unified spoken texts or written texts (cohesion and coherence); and strategic competence, 'composed of verbal and non-verbal communication strategies' which are activated by the language learner in order to supplement for his limitation in understanding or producing language (lexico-grammatical shortcoming or communicative effectiveness).

From the perspective of Canale's model it can be clearly seen that the systemic aspect of language (the grammar part) is interactive with the functional aspect (the pragmatic side) throughout the four proposed types of competence subsystems .

There are reasons for assuming Canale's theoretical framework as a working hypothesis since it has been developed on the basis of a careful analysis of empirical studies bearing on communicative competence. One of the interesting aspects of this type of framework is that it analyses communicative competence as 'composed of separated factors (areas of competence) that interact'. This implies adopting a modular view, a situation which is more in accordance with the reality of learners. Different learners will certainly have different problems and different strategies. Research in this aspect will have to center in the areas of constraint which will probably relate to the four subsystems of competence sketched here.

By analogy with what has been going on in a reappraisal of communicative teaching methodology in the general English language classroom, some interesting research could be mentioned in the area of foreign language reading process. Ruth Berman (1984) in a recent study concerned with the nature and role of syntactic problems encountered by advanced-level students in reading foreign language texts came up with the following hypotheses:

- 1) Efficient FL readers must rely in part - though not exclusively - on syntactic devices to get at text meaning.
- 2) Successful reading, like all linguistic decoding, requires the reader to extract the basic positional content of sentences. That means that he must be able to manipulate the following interrelated strategies:
 - a) constituent structure awareness ('what the parts

of a sentence are and how they interrelate hierarchically').

b) pinning-down structural items (spotting function words and affixes which serve as markers of grammatical relations and of constituent and rhetorical structure')

c) detecting dependencies - 'relations expressed between discontinuous elements'.

Experimental research carried out in the late seventies has characterized two types of reading-processing models: a) bottom-up processes (in which the text itself provide clues to decode meanings: and b) top-down processes (the reader samples the text information to check his predictions and verify his hypotheses to infer the general schema. In the first case the reader is a text-analyst, in the second, a reconstructor. More updated versions of reading models (Rumelhart, 1977) Levy (1980) contemplate and integrative view of both 'bottom-up' and 'top-down' processes, where the reader becomes both an analyst and a reconstructor of the text.

Berman's research, more than emphasizing a linear decoding strategy, is pointing out interesting shortcomings in the reading process, which ESP teachers in Brazil have also discussed in their regional seminars. Several kinds of mental strategies in the reader appear to play an important role at the clausal level. There are complex reference problems in the ways words and phrases refer to mental objects and important decoding gaps are created because of lack of 'metalinguistic awareness'. N+N formation, adjective stacking, lack of insight about structures that omit relative forms, or syntactic overloading define

tely obscure reading comprehension.

Reevaluating models and theoretical language frameworks within the perspective of the activities carried out in the language classrooms together with the problems encountered by the learners is a fundamental step in constructing pedagogic models. To make claim that the grammatical oriented activities are insufficient is not to dismiss them as unnecessary for the development of communicative competence. (In reference to grammar exercises, Terrell (1977) claims: 'Explanation and practice with form is essential if we expect any improvement in the output of the students 'developing grammars'...)

Most language teaching pedagogy is based on the understanding of the nature of language, on the one hand, and on the actual acquisition process as experienced by the FL learner on the other. The proposal that has been hinted here implies bringing into a unified, or better 'integrative' framework the "systemic", the "pragmatic" and the "strategic" areas of "communicative competence" 'a la Canale'. The answer to how the different factors "interact" is in the classroom, inside the learners. There is no claim for a mid-point solution of pendulum swinging from the "communicative side" to the "grammar end". The problem is simply that we can't leave 'grammar' (a pedagogical one, of course) out.

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