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ABSTRACT

       "Skill-using" in second-language learning is often
given less priority than "skill-getting" activities. The first and
second year of language instruction should concentrate on longer and
more varied sequences of tasks in which the learner is communicating
and using "real" language. In addition, the learner's focus should be
shifted from his errors to his correct choices in producing an
utterance. Many activities lend themselves to language proficiency
goals. These include "interviewing" the instructor or other students,
vocabulary games, riddles, games based on television programs, and
other role-playing situations which provide opportunities for
interaction in the target language and which emphasize communication.
(AM)

DEVELOPING LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

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Proficiency, may be seen to include *communicative competency*, and *linguistic competency*. The emphasis given to the latter will depend upon the judgment of the curriculum designers, upon those who implement the curriculum, and finally upon the students themselves. The writer will submit that, traditionally, we have given far greater emphasis to the development of *linguistic competency* in our schools' programs, at the expense of student motivation, humaneness, and proficiency itself.

Many such curricula provide an environment in which language features are presented to the students, explained, drilled, and after a minimum of activities, if any, in the use of the given feature in a "real language" context, the class moves on to other material. It seems fair to say that "skill-using" is given a much lower priority than "skill-getting" activities, in spite of the likelihood that the former will provide more motivation and greater opportunity for the student to move closer to proficiency. Students find greater satisfaction in activities where they use their acquired and increased skills than they do in completing assigned work from text materials. Finishing from page fifty to fifty-three does not give a learner the same sense of achievement as being able to express himself in another language, limited though the context may be in the beginning.

Thus, the writer would propose longer and more varied sequences of "skill-using" activities, loosely structured and open-ended exercises, and tasks in which the learner is actually communicating, and using "real language" rather than "drill language" or memorized expressions and segments pulled from the dialogue. Doubtless, such a modification will lessen the amount of content we will "cover", but, the so-called first year or second year text is not a realistic course of study for the student of average aptitude and commitment, either at secondary or college level. Perhaps, in these sequences of "skill-using activities", it would be well to reconsider our attitude toward the importance of correctness of language. When the student performs, other than mechanically, he is called upon to make many decisions involving (1) which phonological, grammatical and lexical units he must retrieve and (2) how to use them: units for which there may be positive transfer, negative transfer, or no transfer from his native language. It is often the case that the student makes eight or more correct decisions, in producing an utterance, but his attention is usually focussed on what he did wrong. The writer would contend that this practice is counterproductive.

But what might be suggested, specifically, as activities for a language program that has proficiency as its primary goal? One avenue might lead from manipulative use of language, or drills, but, during which the student was *actively* aware of the semantic and syntactic functions of the elements he was hearing and using, and through less tightly structured activities, some using particular language features, and finally to free expression in a variety of role-playing situations, and in communicating his own ideas. It is altogether possible, even feasible, to attend to goals, of *linguistic competency* in a communicative context.

Various types of objectives and activities may be designed and used to elicit performance with some given structure(s) and lexical content. In such sequences it may be profitable to correct only the errors the student has made with the specific feature. Indeed, one foreign language educator has advocated permitting students to use gestures, or words from their source language, as they perform communicative activities.[1]

Many activities and formats may be recommended, most of which are extremely adaptable to small-group participations.

We may choose an exercise to use one category of grammatical structures, in which each member of the group repeats the response of the previous student, adding an increment of his own. In a child's game that is similar, the leader says, "I am going on a trip. I will take a suitcase," and the next player responds, repeating the utterance of the first, and adding an element of his own (*tickets, money, an airline schedule,* or some other appropriate item.) The third player will do likewise, repeating what the second player said and adding something new. The following examples are but a few of the many applications. In each, the first player of the group would be given the beginning option.

(1) *Paso los sábados trabajando.* The several students might add such words or phrases as *estudiando, escribiendo, cartas, mirando la televisión, jugando básquetbol, tocando el piano,* etc. It may be

useful, from time to time, to ascertain whether the student knows what he has actually said. (use of present participles)

(2) *Mi hermano es moreno.* Other students may add such words as *gordo, estúpido, perezoso, alto,* etc., depending upon their particular opinion of their sibling. Obviously, the beginning could use *hermana, hermanos,* or *hermanas,* or any other noun. (agreement of nouns and adjectives)

(3) *Mamá, ese niño tiene mi abrigo!* Other students may add *lápiz, pluma, guantes, libros, zapatos,* etc. (use of familiar words for articles of clothing, school materials, etc., use of proper short form of possessive adjective)

Another type of exercise gives the student opportunities to express his thoughts and feelings within a limited range of vocabulary and grammar. He may be asked to tell his group such things as

(1) where he likes to be, and why:
(2) when he is happy/sad/proud:[2]
(3) what his ideal teacher is like:
(4) what he would do if _____ ; and other similar monologues may be elicited. Recently published materials also suggest a procedure in which the student places himself on a continuum: sad — happy, impulsive — deliberate, extrovert — introvert, short — tall, relaxed — tense; and offers some reasons for, and evidence of, his belonging at that particular place on the scale.[3] In this, and in the preceding exercise, other members of the group are to reiterate complete responses of one or more of their classmates.

For a simple but more interactive use of language, the students may be asked to prepare five questions to ask their instructor. After several such sequences in which the instructor has responded to their questions, and as the students have accumulated a small vocabulary, two or three of the class may be asked to take the instructor's, or group leader's place. As a further step, the student may be asked to prepare a possible rejoinder for the expected answer to his questions. It may be seen that such an activity is just a short step removed from carrying on an interview, in which case the interviewee may assume one of several possible roles.

In another type of activity, which is a little beyond the familiar "directed dialogue," the student may be given a task, written in English, which he will carry out and report to the class or to his small group. Only his directions will be in English; his information-seeking activities, his classmates' responses, and of course, his final report, will be in the second language.

(1) *Find out from another student his name, the name of his friend, where his friend is now, where his house is, and where his school is.*

(2) *Find out from a classmate if he is very busy, if he studies much, if he works, and where, if he works hard, and if his job/classes are interesting.* Any number of tasks may be set up in this way, as simple or as complex, as long or as short, as the instructor may choose. The situation can be taken from a textbook dialogue, from which even the accompanying questions can be slightly reworded and used, or from any other context for which the students have adequate structure and vocabulary.

For a slight change in direction, and to focus attention on various grammatical categories, we may ask a student to do the following:

(1) *Tell the group five things you would do if you were rich.* (conditional)
(2) *Complain about how much everybody disturbed you while you were trying to study, listing at least six things someone was doing that annoyed you.* (imperfect)
(3) *Tell the group six places where you can hide yourself, or different articles, in your house. Use such words as 'cerca', 'sobre', 'detrás', 'en', 'bajo', etc.* (prepositional phrases)
(4) *Tell six things that your parents wanted you to do last week.*

Students may be asked to prepare (if necessary) and give short monologues in which they use relatively simple structures. Such tasks as the following may serve to illustrate:

(1) *A friend of yours is moving to the city where you live. He has asked about the weather at different times of the year. Describe it to your friend as fully as you can.*

(2) *You would like to invite a friend to spend a weekend at your house. Describe your friend to your parents: behaviour in school, physical appearance, personal qualities, and anything that you think will make a stronger case to your parents.*

Games may provide opportunities for the students to use their language skills, though it should be pointed out that most so-called language games are quite limited in that the participant does little more than manipulate, as in drill behaviour, give a vocabulary item of one category or another, or give some type of response to a courtesy expression. In some games, however, a higher level of language behaviour will be required. Popular television games are also quite adaptable; consider, for examples, "What's My Line?", "I've Got a Secret", "Twenty Questions", and "Jeopardy". Riddles provide a similar skill-using activity. The leader may announce that he is thinking of an item within plain sight of everyone in the room.

He will then give one clue. After a specified number of unsuccessful guesses he will provide another clue. A suitable point system may be established for the person who can stump the class after having given them four genuine clues — misleading ones are not accepted. To make the game a little more challenging, the use of *ser* may be outlawed. A well-known party game calls for the participants to find out who they are supposed to be (a sign, with the name of some well-known personage, is placed on their back.) They may ask only yes or no questions. G-H-O-S-T is a familiar spelling game that can be adapted to use with sentences; each player must add a word to continue the sentence, but he may not use *pero, o,* or *y.* The task may be structured somewhat by the leader who starts the sentence with a particular group of words or context. *No salgan de la clase hasta _____;* *Si ellos _____; Papa no queria que _____.* *Buscaba una chica que_____. A pesar _____. No tenemos dinero; por eso _____;* and other such problems.

A game which calls upon the students for various types of language performance is quite adaptable for a review lesson. Though it is known by several names, depending upon which language class uses it, it is basically a race between two teams, the members of which will choose to perform very simple tasks, less simple ones, or more complex ones, assortments of which have been prepared previously. The individual's correct response will move his team's counter one, two or three spaces forward, respectively. An incorrect response will net him one space back, and if the team's counter lands on a darkened space it is moved back ten.

Pictures afford a limitless variety of activities to practice receptive and productive skills, with statements and questions, convergent and divergent, and with a great variety of grammatical structures or categories.

Tasks that call for creative thinking may be used also, without exacting too complex a behaviour from beginning and intermediate students.

(1) *You suddenly find that you are able to read people's thoughts. Describe the ways in which your life is different now.*

(2) *In the state where you now live, a law has been passed that requires everyone to walk on all fours. You have returned to your old home town to visit your friends. Describe the ways in which your life is different now.*

"Advice to the Lovelorn" columns may provide many entertaining and provocative discussions in an intermediate and advanced class. Other topics are

quite usable, also, though they are not within the scope of this paper.

One may design performance objectives to elicit behaviour in a somewhat less artificial context than what we see in much of the literature. In some texts, that provide objectives with their content, tasks seldom go beyond manipulation within a very tight system. If the student is able to meet them, we have found out only that he can perform in a drill-like activity, something that we knew already. A different type, some of which may be seen in the literature from time to time, can yield more useful information as to whether the student is likely to use certain language features correctly in a more open-ended task.

(1) *Given a simple drawing, ask six questions that will yield certain bits of information about the scene and the situation depicted. Use a different interrogative word in each question, with no more than one error in choice and/or form.*

(2) *List ten tasks that you and various members of your family have to do around the house next week (errands, odd jobs, etc.). Eight of your responses should be correct in the construction that shows obligation and in verb forms that follow.*

(3) *Given a picture sequence of a common scene, relate a story about them, as if the events took place in the past. Also describe the setting as necessary. Maximum number of errors in tense: two, in ten statements.*

Role-playing situations provide a wide range of activities through which students may interact in the target language. Such situations and roles may be taken from a dialogue, a reading selection, a play, or from a situation devised by the instructor or students. The activity is well within the reach of beginning students, though obviously the more advanced students will be far less limited.

Some guidelines and alternatives may be offered as aids in management and implementation of role-playing in the language classroom.

It may be rather tightly structured, with each part somewhat closely drawn in which the students may practice with each other or through an audiotutorial (in the form of "simulated conversations"). In another type of treatment, one student may take the part of a monolingual speaker of the target language, a second, that of a bilingual, who will act as interpreter, and the instructor may take the part of a monolingual English speaker. In that way the latter may control more easily the lexical context and the linguistic difficulty. The instructor/group leader poses the problem to the "bilingual": "I have just arrived in

the city and I noticed an ad in the paper about an apartment at this address", or "I would like to rent a room at this boarding house", or "I am looking for a present, preferably jewelry, for a friend," or "I would like to order dinner, although I know it is quite late," or "My car doesn't seem to be where I parked it," (as it has been towed away). And the conversation will proceed, using the context of a lesson, or a less restricted one. The instructor continues his input after each translated response of the owner of the house, a landlord overly eager for lodgers, a shop-keeper, an irritable waitress, or a policeman, respectively. The roles may rotate, if we wish, and the activity can be taken over by small groups, with stronger students as group leaders.

It is sometimes helpful for the students to practice the role for a few minutes in their own language, not necessarily so that they may say the same thing in the target language but so that they may begin to think in that context. The instructor will find it necessary to ignore language errors much more than in the usual activity. Doubtless, many language teachers will find such practices distasteful, though the writer has found them profitable. Communication is to be stressed above all else.

The most entertaining type of activity, to both the class and the instructor, is a conflict or problem situation, realistic and humorous, and often quite provocative. Such situations as the following have been used with intermediate classes at secondary and college level, and with strong beginning college classes. Advanced classes may be able to do them with no previous preparation; generally it is necessary for the instructors, to work with each group, previously.

(1) You would like _____ to come to your house for supper on a particular night, but he does not seem too interested. You may change days or times, but your acquaintance continues to decline. Try to influence the reluctant recipient of your invitation, as he continues to refuse very diplomatically.[4]

(2) You would like to borrow some article of clothing from your brother/sister, who is somewhat reluctant to lend it to you. You feel that you really need it badly at this particular time. Your brother/sister brings up some of your past sins in that area, and you are to defend yourself, describing the circumstances, making excuses, and trying to persuade him/her to let you use it.[5]

(3) Make excuses to your instructor for not having completed a long-term assignment. Try to get an extension. Your teacher is opposed to it, as you have been known to do this on many other occasions.

We may draw many such situations from our own lives, from radio or television, from textbooks, from the comic sections of the newspaper, from jokes that we have heard, from past incidents, or others that might occur to us as plausible and/or interesting. Even relatively weak classes, including non-Regents classes, are able to carry on such activities, provided that their communication is viewed as more important than their linguistic accuracy. Furthermore, the motivational value provided may enhance other aspects of their performance and their efforts.

We hope for the student to attain or show progress toward a language proficiency, recombining those elements he has learned in many ways that are novel for him. This problem-solving ability is most likely to be developed by practice in solving problems. He may be helped toward proficiency by our controlling and gradually raising the level of such problems, and by our showing him what he can do, rather than by emphasizing to him what he does incorrectly. He may derive a greater sense of achievement and satisfaction.

The theoretical rationale and practical efforts and alternatives that have been offered here represent some of our attempts to make more accessible to the students what may be the most valid goal for a language curriculum — *proficiency*.

Footnotes

[1] Sandra Savignon, *Communicative Competence: An Experiment in Foreign Language Teaching* (Philadelphia: Center for Curriculum Development, 1972), pp. 25-32.

[2] A variety of such activities are suggested in Toni Gabriel, "Mind Expanding," *American Foreign Language Teacher*, IV, 1 (Fall, 1973), p. 25.

[3] Virginia Wilson and Beverly Wattenmaker, *Real Communication in Spanish* (Upper Jay, New York: Adirondack Mountain Humanistic Education Center, 1973).

[4] Terence L. Hansen and Ernest J. Wilkins suggest a number of such activities in *Español a lo vivo*, Level One, 3rd edition (Lexington: Xerox College Publishing, 1974).

[5] Sidney N. J. Zelson, "Skill-Using Activities in the Foreign Language Classroom," *American Foreign Language Teacher*, IV, 3 (Spring, 1974), p. 33.

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