

# **Learning didactics while developing Oral Communicative Competence in a foreign language.**

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## **Abstract**

Spain, has to revise and adapt language teaching to the framework of higher education in Europe. Our society needs good foreign language and CLIL teachers, ready to prepare individuals for the XXI century. We show ways of making future teachers learn didactics in a practical way while developing their oral skills and make them reflect about the teaching practice.

This paper is also an attempt to show how FL learning gets better results when emotional intelligence is taking into account. The research carried out tries to show that under a humanistic approach and starting from students' needs, it is possible to create an appropriate learning atmosphere. We suggest that oral communicative competence can be easier and better developed when M.E.S.T.A is promoted.

## **Key words:**

Communicative competence, L2 learning, emotional intelligence, teacher training.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

A global world requires individuals who can master, at least, one foreign language (FL). Many competences have to be developed by students since early years and teachers should be prepared for that difficult enterprise. Above all competences, the development of Oral Communicative Competence seems to be the most important one for future FL teachers as well as Content and Language Integrated Learning teachers.

In this paper, we would like to show ways of facilitating future teachers to learn a foreign language under a humanistic approach (Stevick, 1990; Arnold,2006) where the learner is the centre of his/her own process of learning. As motivation, affect and students' emotional intelligence play an exceptional role on L2 learning it has been carefully studied. On the other hand, an application of the theory of multiple intelligencies (Gardner, 1983; Fonseca, 2004) has obviously been considered in this research.

## **2.- CONTEXT**

This recent study (2010) has been carried out in a higher education context in the south of Spain where a group of 36 Primary and Pre-Primary teachers were studying to

get a degree on English Primary School Teachers. A very heterogeneous group, not only in age (22- 37), also in their personal situations but specially on their L2 acquisition level. It is inserted in one of the subjects which aim was developing L2 linguistic skills.

### **3. OBJECTIVES**

There are two main aims. Our first aim is to show how the teacher can help students to improve their Communicative Competence in L2 considering the multiple intelligencies theory and the role that emotional intelligence plays. First question is: *What qualities share people who can learn languages easily?* Undoubtedly, there are certain personal innate qualities that help individuals to achieve better results than others in Second Language Acquisition. We would suggest that it is the mixture of the following five elements what can help to achieve success in SLA.: (1) MOTIVATION; (2) EFFORT; (3) SELF CONFIDENCE; (4) TALKATIVENESS and (5) ATTENTION. (M.E.S.T.A.) A FL learner should be motivated (MacIntyre, 2002, Masgoret & Gardner, 2003; Hernández 2006; Rodríguez Prieto 2010; Dornyei 2010). But apart from motivation the student has to pay attention (Tomlin & Villa (1994). Learning requires an effort on student's side, obviously. To develop speaking skill we need two more elements: be self-confident, not afraid of talking (Kubo, 2007) and be a talkative person..

On the other hand, our conception of a good FL teacher is not only a person who knows FL very well but also a person who is able to teach it appropriately. Someone who can find paths to make L2 easier for students. For that reason, our second aim is to show the possibility of making future teachers learn how to teach but not in an isolated subject as we think it can be more significant for students learning didactics while they are engaged in developing their oral competence.

## **4. METHODOLOGY**

Methodology used in this experience had five well defined parts destined to:

- a) investigate the context through a needs analysis test and daily observation.
- b) create a comfortable atmosphere among students to let L2 fluency develop in class.
- c) promote M.E.S.T.A. through the communicative approach
- d) get feedback on the methodology as well as on students' self-evaluation.
- e) evaluate the process.

## **5. RESULTS**

### **5.1. About the classroom context.**

In order to have a deeper knowledge of the persons in the group, a needs analysis test was carried out the very first day of the course which clearly showed aspects from students personality and attitude towards learning FL and students' preferences and hobbies. This valuable information helped the teacher to organise and propose activities that could suit all the students trying to get the most of them.

### **5.2. On creating an appropriate learning atmosphere.**

Games and group dynamics were carried out always using L2 and making all students participate voluntarily.

### **5.3. Promoting M.E.S.T.A**

Different activities were implemented through the year, starting with a personal presentation to the rest of the classmates. After a personal exposition they could talk about their main hobbies. Everybody agreed that it had been an excellent way to know their partners and they all could check how their L2 fluency had increased during the exposition and after it when the communicative dialogue was established as the students demanded more details about different aspects. Excellent communicative

activity, students stated, as it could make them speak under great expectation and interest. They were attentive to all details, and real information was transferred in FL. After the presentation, the teacher asked a few questions to check if they had understood all details observing that they had had a very good listening comprehension. They were using L2 as a communication vehicle but at the same time they were learning L2 as they managed to solve all language problems they faced, mostly reformulating the wrong sentences without using their mother tongue. Through this activity students could notice differences among their classmates not only referred to their language competence level but also differences related to personality and skills that woke up their interest on their partners and valued them more. They discovered, for example, that a member of the class was a poet who was going to see his first work published in short, another one was an excellent dancer and so on. Students could freely talk about their lives, concerns and dreams because the classroom atmosphere invited to do it with the teacher help undoubtedly as she had tried, since the very first moment, to give cohesion to the group with group dynamics. M.E.S.T.A was being promoted as students were highly motivated, making an effort to communicate, not so afraid to speak in public, talkative and they were paying attention. Some people find it difficult to talk in public even in their mother tongue, only when they trust on the group can try to speak. Group dynamics is an excellent tool to be used in any class but specially in the FL class because it allows students to interrelate with their partners. Shamim (1996) studying the action zone that it exists in all classes observed that students tend to sit down always in the same place. The teacher in our research could check it observing that sitting on the same place means having the same partners in all the classes and talking to the same people whenever oral activities were made. To avoid this, group dynamics were very often carried out, mixing language activities with games in English. Any game contains

three elements: rules, a goal and fun. For us, the last element is the most essential. Children, teenagers or adults adore fun but avoiding competition, *co-operative games* were mostly selected. There is a long list of games to be used (Hadfield, 1987): matching, guessing, exchanging information or searching games. Given a context, many dialogues have been created by students and presented to the classmates as role plays. On the other hand, after watching a soundless film scene students completed the dialogue and give voice to the characters.

It is possible to observe that group work was always present. In pairs or in small groups of students they were using L2 in different situations without working always with the same partners. Teacher managed to change their places with different games before proposing the group work activity so although they were choosing their partners from the closest ones they were interacting with different students each time. Changing groups seems to be an excellent way to make students less shy to talk and more cooperative, specially in the activities where they had to create dialogues according to different contexts. Sometimes, it can be troublesome for the teacher to evaluate students as they have taken part in different groups but in this research we have witnessed the benefit that this proceeding brings to the future teachers as they improve their communicative competence, on one hand and at the same time they can experiment on themselves how to work in groups of different size. Teamwork was reinforced whenever there was an opportunity as Voli (2004) suggests and little by little it could be observed that important changes in the individuals started to take place as the increase of motivation and self confidence.

Being all students already Primary school teachers and considering their answers in the needs analysis test, different debates about current educational problems at school were proposed. Students had time to prepare it thoroughly. As they knew about the

topic, they had experience as learners and some of them like teachers, they could express their own opinions. From different points of view, opinions about how to deal with discipline problems in class or didactics were often commented but surely, what really helped them to be conscious about didactics was the fact that after implementing an activity, the teacher usually made them reflect about it with questions like these: (1) what was the main aim of the task?; (2) was it achieved? (3) How did you feel when doing it? Why?; (4) What difficulties did you find? (5) How did you manage to solve them? (6) What other activities would you have suggested to achieve the same objective? Mini-debates appeared. These little reflections gave feedback about the activities and, as a consequence, the teacher made changes in the didactic design but, above all, they helped students to think about didactics and understand the necessity of self-reflections in class either as a student or as a teacher. Sometimes, the aims of the activity were presented before doing tasks in order to explain the aims they have to achieve and ways to do it, working on emotional intelligence (Goleman,2001)

#### **5.4.- About questionnaires**

##### **5.4.1. Subject evaluation:**

A very high percentage of students (87'5%) liked this subject although 72'7% considered it was difficult. They showed special interest for language games and oral activities in L2 because they could participate more but they didn't like doing listening or grammar activities. Students showed a clear preference to work in *small groups* (43'8% ). The second option was *in pairs* (34'4%). In third place, working *individually* (12'5%) and finally working with the *whole group* (9'4%). This information is very relevant for us. Small groups of three or four members seemed to be better than pairs. Maybe this is due to the fact that generally not all classmates have the same level of communicative competence. Student with a good L2 acquisition level finds easier

someone to communicate. Only one person didn't like working in groups because he thought *'it was a waste of time and students could speak in the mother tongue'*. Obviously, they have to be conscious that to learn L2 they have to make the effort to speak in English all the time. Only by being very motivated either intrinsically or extrinsically can students get involve in the task using L2.

#### **5.4.2 Self-evaluation**

One of the questions asked was if they were making an effort to speak in English during the whole class and 85'7% of students answered positively. It was possible to know that 68'75% didn't study L2 everyday although 87'5 % affirmed to do the activities proposed regularly.

43'75 % of the students stated that they didn't understand everything in class but 51'7% said that they usually asked doubts to the teacher. Finally, the most difficult skill seemed to be listening, followed by speaking, writing and reading. Considering this data and some suggestions like doing more listening activities or watching films, the teacher increased the number of listening activities.

#### **5.5. Process evaluation**

There was another questionnaire for students at the end of the course with a double purpose: First, to get feedback about different issues concerning (1) the way students used to feel in class; (2) if they always used L2 in class or (3) ways to deal with English problems within the L2 classroom.

The second purpose in this questionnaire was to make students reflect about the effectiveness of activities implemented not only connected with the development of L2 communicative competence but also in relation with the classroom learning atmosphere.

Data showed that students had felt very well in class: comfortable (39'3%), interested (21'4%) and relaxed (17'9%) although some learners had felt nervous

(10'7%) and the same percentage bored.(10'7%). On the other hand, 61'9% considered that they had spoken not very much versus 38'1% who believed that they had participated a lot in L2. The reason given by 52% of students for not speaking much English in class was that they couldn't speak very well. When they had problems at the beginning of the year, they used to translate words or sentences into Spanish but at the end they tried to reformulate the sentences in L2. 95% of students believed that their English fluency had improved.

33'4% manifested to get on well with their classmates and 61'9% affirmed that the relationship had been excellent. Only one student did not answer to that question. Surprisingly, at the beginning of the year only 4 students knew five or six persons and at the end they were good friends that were even planning journeys abroad. The reason was related to the number of hours they had spent together and the communicative activities.s. Personal presentations and games were the activities that had helped them more to understand their classmates and 95% of the class considered that communicative activities, like presentations, debates or the creation of dialogues in contexts, was the best way to develop communicative competence. Once more they stated their preference for working in groups of three instead than pairwork.

Finally, we have to say that class results were excellent as 98% of the students who assisted regularly to classes passed the exams.

## **6. DISCUSSION**

In this paper we have tried to show how a good teaching-learning atmosphere, where each student feels cared and valued as Briggs(1997) suggests, can help students to develop their oral communicative competence. We believe that when the teacher knows the reality of the group it is easier to propose activities connected with students' preferences. At the same time, all students should know their partners in order to feel as

a member of a group before starting to work as a team. Group dynamics are extremely useful. With the communicative approach oral skills can be easily developed, specially with activities promoting M.E.S.T.A., essential elements for being a good FL learner. There is a long list of activities that can be implemented but although the activity selection is very important, it is not this choice the only one that teachers should consider. In our opinion, the way the activity is presented and carried out is determinant.

In our opinion, learning didactics while doing activities is the best way to teach how to teach. Frequent feedback is needed and can be obtained through questionnaires about classroom development and self-evaluation. Being anonymous, students are free to express themselves and give hints about ways to improve the teaching process. Teacher can also know student's implication level and how MESTA elements are being developed by learners. Changes maybe needed, methodology should be revised and FL teachers should realise that changes on methodology have to be made and adapted to each group.

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