Teaching Advanced English on a Sociolinguistic Basis: Some Reflections

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I must admit I haven't been writing much lately (post-retirement blues? I'm teaching again, though, Graduate School) but the pressure coming from my peers –many of them former students and assistants–, my friends and most especially from Mariela –my daughter, herself a writer– has been getting a bit too much, so I've decided to give it a try.

By no means do I intend to write an academic paper, even if it potentially proves to be of any help to academia, basically because I will simply be trying to share what I have been doing for the past forty-six years without necessarily giving any objective statistical evidence, quoting any sources or strictly following the rules of the newly established academic literacy.

Of course, I will give credit when it is due. My academic life would have never been the same if I had not had the privilege of studying with Zellig Harris, Dell Hymes and, most especially, with Bill Labov, way back in the 1970's at the University of Pennsylvania after getting a Master of Arts degree in Linguistics from Ball State University.

But getting down to business now, how can we define "advanced level" in a language? My experience tells me that it is a learning stage where the four traditional language skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing) can be handled with relative ease, without major stumbling blocks though by no

means error-free and where the user –I deliberately omit the term "student"– feels comfortable enough to occasionally monitor, edit and self-correct his oral and written production and, psychological conditions permitting, accept corrections from others.

Where can we teach Advanced English? Obviously, though not exclusively, in Teacher Training Courses, public or private courses in business corporations or any other kind of institution requiring advanced ESP (English for Special Purposes), EAP (English for Academic Purposes) or EOP (English for Occupational Purposes), in other words, English with special aims, as is often the case with specific university requirements or the kind of English training required by corporations, airline companies, etc.

Since some, if any!, eventual readers of these scribbled reflections will probably be English teachers, let me begin by sharing my experience as a Language Teacher at State Teacher Training Colleges in Buenos Aires, where we usually get four annual levels. For decades I taught Language I, Language II, Language III and several postgraduate Language courses, apart from graduate and undergraduate courses in General and Applied Linguistics.

What common features did all my Language courses have in common? At the practical level, they all dealt with the four traditional skills but in the early 1990's I included video comprehension –including cultural information (more to come)– and occasional translations. However, it is the sociolinguistic philosophy underlying my teaching I would like to discuss at some length.

Sociolinguistics

I was first exposed to Sociolinguistics as a term in the late 1960's, while I was doing my MA in Indiana. Until William Labov's publication of *The Stratification of English in New York City* in 1966, Sociolinguistics, whenever the term was used at all, was probably considered a synonym of Dialectology, a branch of Applied Linguistics which had an early start in the late nineteenth century, but really became known in the 1930's thanks to Hans Kurath's publication (1949) of his *Linguistic Atlas of American English*, a map of regional dialectal variations in American English, namely dealing with lexical and phonological variation in different geographical areas of the United States.

Other studies followed, the most famous of which being Uriel Weinreich's –Labov's mentor– study of regional variations in the Yiddish spoken in Eastern Europe by the Ashkenazic Jewry before the Second World War,

unfinished due to Weinreich's untimely death in 1967. In case the reader is not familiarized with Yiddish as a language, suffice it to say for all intents and purposes that it started approximately in the eleventh century as a dialect of German ("Yiddish" simply means "Jewish", as "Judisch" does in German). Ten centuries after and with very few native speakers remaining, namely ultra-Orthodox Jewish groups in New York, Jerusalem and a few European cities, there is often mutual listening comprehension between speakers of the two languages. It is interesting to mention that Yiddish was also spoken natively in some Jewish settlements in the Argentinian hinterland, namely in small towns in the province of Entre Rios but also in Santa Fe (e.g. Moisesville) and some towns in the province of Buenos Aires, like Carlos Casares or Ribera (actually, the speakers were bilingual speakers of Spanish and Yiddish).

Labov always referred to Weinreich as the true father of Sociolinguistics, the man who inspired and directed his master's thesis (Labov, 1963) and his doctoral dissertation, eventually published as *The Social Stratification of English in New York City* (1966), a year before Weinreich's death.

What is Sociolinguistics, then, if it is not a branch of Linguistics dealing with regional variation? Perhaps a sub-branch dealing with social variation or the relation between language and society? Sure, that too, but mainly, Sociolinguistics is a different approach to the study of language, a theory in its own right. An approach (Hymes, 1974) that, basically, incorporates Chomsky's conception of language as innate to human beings, biologically determined (Chomsky, 1986). A theory which does not necessarily question Chomsky's conception of syntax as the key element in the generation of language, in keeping with Zellig Harris's views on the centrality of syntax –but yet finds it lacking in one basic element: the incorporation of the human being and his sociocultural context as an inherent element in linguistic analysis.

What does this amount to? Why is it not, simply, a pragmatic application of linguistic knowledge? I like to answer that with a comparison between the study of the anatomy and physiology of the human organs, for instance. Would a detailed description of, say, the heart suffice to explain how and why it functions the way it does? Certainly not. Likewise, if we fail to incorporate human behavior in society into Chomsky's widely accepted notion of language as an organ, we are missing a radical part of the story.

And what does it mean "incorporating human behavior into the theory"? Let me begin by reminding ourselves that Labov showed us that different

social variables, such as social class, ethnic group, age, gender, etc., just as geographical area does, as dialectologists showed, shape the way we speak our native language. One does not need to be a professional linguist to notice linguistic differences in native speakers' speech, sometimes a source of humor or even mockery and, to the best of my knowledge, common to every language. Any New Yorker would notice that marked r-lessness (as in *fohth floh* for "fourth floor") or lengthened o's (as in *cohfi* for "coffee") would point to a lower or lower middle social class, just as frequent s-dropping in Porteño Spanish (as in *somo todo lo que (e)stamo* for "*somos todos los que estamos*") would. In 1981, my paper "*Rojo o Colorado?*" (Ghenadenik, 1984b) tried to show lexical variation in Porteño Spanish adopting a sociolinguistic approach but long before me, a comic genius like Landrú published back in the mid-1950's, a weekly comic sketch in a magazine called "Tía Vicenta", where he compared the speech of two upper-middle class girls, María Belén and Alejandra with that of a lower-middle class girl called Mirna Delma (even the choice of first and middle names points to a social difference). The sketch was always followed by two lists "*Debe decirse*" (we should say) versus "*No debe decirse*" (we shouldn't say), which captures the notions of prestige and status as determinants for the sometimes conscious choice of words and reinforced by the social location where María Belén and Alejandra met, the corner of two very prestigious avenues: Santa Fe and Callao, in Barrio Norte. Later he tried another typical corner in the heart of a Jewish lower-middle class area: Canning and Corrientes Avenues in Villa Crespo. There he tried to reproduce the speech of two lower-middle class Jewish girl, native Porteño Spanish speakers with a Yiddish substratum, typical of this group in the 50's and 60's, whose parents' native language was Yiddish.

And before Landrú we had Niní Marshall, no doubt, the funniest Argentine comic actress of all time – and one of the best in the world, just as Fanny Brice was in the United States. Her characters on radio shows and in films, and only later on television and in the theater, reflected social class and ethnic features of native and accented Porteño Spanish, so typical of the time when Argentina received large numbers of immigrants, during the first half of the twentieth century.

In short, sociolinguistic awareness is not the private property of sociolinguistic practitioners, although the approach to the socially-focused approach to the study of language may be.

What are the basic tenets of Sociolinguistics? Not very different from those of Chomsky's Universal Grammar regarding the biological foundations of

language or the existence of linguistic universals, for instance, or the syntactic analysis it proposes, basically.

However, there are a few distinguishing features that set the two theories apart.

In *Aspects*, Chomsky (1965) based his analysis on grammatically well-formed sentences culled from an *ideal homogeneous speech community*, not so different from de Saussure's view in this respect. Sociolinguistics upholds that this is a fantasy, that speech communities are, by definition, heterogeneous. If this is true –and it seems to hold true of every speech community researched so far– part of the language acquisition process will involve perceiving these differences and acting accordingly. To give some obvious examples, any adult speaker of English understands the syntactic question *What are you doing tonight?* in a call or in a message as a pre-invitation rather than as a factual question, to such an extent that often a refusal response contains an apology, like *Sorry! I already have plans*, which certainly does not answer the alleged question. A couple of affirmative statements like *I have two tickets for the game tomorrow, but John is sick* are also interpretable as a pre-invitation, and the expected response will normally be acceptance or refusal.

As a child grows older, he learns to accommodate to interlocutors in different social   situations, often made explicit by formal education, where social and cultural values have a clear role to play, often in the form of sociolinguistic variables like social class, ethnic group, ideology, etc. Age is an important sociolinguistic variable, but it seems to me that cronolects are, for the most part, liable to subconscious change. Although sometimes older adults learn the meaning of different new expressions from younger speakers –outdated, in general, when they finally learn them!– their use is discouraged. A middle-aged or older person "talking young" is often scorned or loses credibility. Perhaps, part of a speaker's sociolinguistic competence consists in adjusting to these cultural values.

Another major difference between UG and Sociolinguistics is the concept of *linguistic competence*. For Chomsky, it is the acquisition of native speech by a child in an amazingly short period of time, expressed lexo-syntactically by means of well-constructed sentences after receiving interpretation by the semantic and phonological interfaces, their source being the idealized homogeneous speech community we were referring to. Hymes (1974) coined the term *communicative competence*, which included successful linguistic behavior taking into consideration the pragmatic purpose of his use of

language. Labov spoke of *sociolinguistic competence* which, additionally to well-formed sentences constructed for a communicative goal, included the concept of *variation*, in some cases *inherent*. The acquisition of inherent variation is, in my view, a key concept in the understanding of language acquisition, the mechanisms of linguistic change and their short and long-term consequences.

What is inherent variation? Basically, the use of a linguistic variable with different degrees of frequency according to sociolinguistic variables (age, social class, etc.). For example, earlier on we mentioned r-lessness, a New York City stigmatized phonological feature as typical of lower or lower-middle class speech. Yet, there do not seem to be any upper-middle class New York speakers who do not drop their r's sometimes, even if they do it 10 or 20% of the time versus 80% of the time among lower class speakers. Although I do not have statistical evidence of this, my intuition is that every Porteño Spanish speaker drops his s's sometimes. In 1981, I tried to show that some stigmatized lexical variables like *rojo* at the time (versus *colorado*) had to be necessarily used by c*olorado* speakers in some contexts (Caperucita Roja, glóbulos rojos, etc.). I also noticed that status-seeking speakers tried to avoid the use of *rojo* at all costs, which resulted in *hypercorrection*, itself a social marker (as in *Un ramo de rosas coloradas*, as I once heard from a famous actress who is extremely aware of prestigious sociolinguistic variants). The heterogeneity of language, the existence of inherent variation in speech, the inevitability of regional and social dialects as predictable manifestations of first language acquisition and several other features have proved to be common, so far, to every language Sociolinguistics has analyzed, which leads us to the view that Sociolinguistic Universals are no different from any other Linguistic Universals proposed by Generativists. Once again, Sociolinguistics tries to correct misconceptions (e.g. the homogeneity of language) and adds basic variables, but is not critical of the basic tenets of the Innate Hypothesis.

Sociolinguistics and the EFL classroom

How is Sociolinguistics relevant to the teaching of English – or any other language, for that matter, as a second or foreign language? Or, perhaps, we should begin by asking ourselves why do we need Linguistics at all for being a teacher of languages? Actually, one sees lots of untrained foreign language teachers doing the job all over the world and yes, they do get some positive results. So why Linguistics, then; so tough and boring for some students and even teachers? Let me try a piecemeal answer: no teacher I know would deny

the importance of Grammar, Phonology or even Language in his training. One may name it otherwise, but it is still Linguistics, albeit partially and perhaps unsystematic in part. One can go further and ask: "How can Grammar or Phonology help me be a better teacher?" The answer is not hard to find: they help systematize teaching and hence facilitate learning.

Let me begin by saying –as I have repeated to audiences large and small for decades– that it is impossible to teach a language without a linguistic conception. Untrained (so-called) teachers go about their business without an explicit linguistic theory behind them but aware of it or not, one simply cannot teach a language without some conception of it. Trained teachers can often choose a set of teaching strategies based on this or that linguistic theory and "persuaded" teachers, as I like to think of myself, will base their teaching approach on a linguistic approach, a set of beliefs which does not necessarily preclude some eclectic practices.

Likewise, it is not possible to face the teaching of a second language without a set of goal-oriented teaching strategies conducive to learning that language efficiently – hopefully! It is my firm belief that this set of strategies – eclectic though they may be– should be based on a clear linguistic conception. In my personal case, my approach to language teaching is a sociolinguistic one, communicative by definition and, consequently, discarding any long-superseded methods advocating language learning as habit formation through pattern practice, blind mimicry or rote learning, which in no way rules out group and individual repetition of new items or the use of some mechanical techniques for the learning of pronunciation. Still, communication –written and/or oral– and not the study of the language of syntactic rules or of word lists *per se* will always be the target in this approach. In my view, the logical consequence of holding this view of language is that all language teaching and learning will, basically, always be situated.

And more specifically, how does a linguistic stance condition our teaching? In my long teaching career, I have sometimes heard colleagues question the "usefulness" of Linguistics – or of Literature or History, for that matter. There are some who like to think of the EFL teacher as a "technician" whose role is to solve pragmatic issues: I definitely refuse to see teachers in general as anything but well-trained, broad-minded and generous   professionals, equipped with technical and cultural tools which will help facilitate the acquisition of new skills in as pleasant a way as possible (sometimes learning can be hard and frustrating, though). Does this mean that we will share with our students all we learned during our

(on-going) training? Of course not, but we have different resources that we will adapt in order to carry out our job. Having an ideology, in this case a linguistic one, gives us psychological security, a sense of purpose and a clearer view of our goals. Naturally, a linguistic view may evolve or our ideology may change – hopefully out of a deep belief and not just to follow the mainstream at a given point.

As a teacher trainee in Buenos Aires in the mid-1960's I was compelled to use the Audio-Lingual Approach, a method of teaching based on a Structuralist view of language and a Behaviorist view of Psychology, a method I found boring and non-conducive. When I left for the States and started my training in Generative Linguistics I discovered why: the linguistic and psychological philosophy grounds behind it were unustainable (Chomsky, 1959). So I adopted Cognitive Code-Learning, a method based on a Chomskyan conception of language and, consequently, a mentalist, rather than a behavioristic psycholinguistic approach to the teaching of foreign languages. When I came back in to Argentina in 1971 for a short time to teach Linguistics and Methodology, I implemented CCL in my course, apart from giving lectures on the topic at different Argentinian universities and Teacher Training Colleges and publishing an article on Cognitive Code-Learning" (Ghenadenik, 1977).

I believed in CCL and the psycholinguistic theory behind it. I also found it far more conducive to learning than the AL approach. Still, a few years later I discovered that a communicative approach, which incorporates the social context, led me to better learning results, so I changed my mind and adopted it. I realize, of course, that *better* is subjective and I will not make any extra efforts to prove my point – except to recommend it! I also suspect that results are always better when a firm belief and a sense of purpose are behind the pedagogical strategies implemented and this, among other things , is what a linguistic theory has to offer the practitioner .

And finally, why should the incorporation of the social context make teaching more effective?

In the first place because I believe the basic function of language is establishing a relation with others. Even when we think to ourselves this relation holds; in other words, language is by definition social in nature. We probably wouldn't need it other than to relate to other human beings – perhaps it would not have developed otherwise. Not including the social context, the need to communicate with others seems pretty much like describing the

anatomy of an organ without making any reference to its physiology. In other words, my first reason for incorporating the social context and its variables (social class, age, etc.) is that it simply reflects the facts.

The second reason is motivation. I find students are far more motivated when they can talk about real situations than when there is no context justifying the use of language.

And then there is creativity as a factor: reliving or making up situations gives them a chance to be creative. Giving free vent to their imagination – even if they make mistakes– often results in more pleasurable learning and contribute to building their self-confidence in the language.

One sometimes wonders why teachers who accept the above mentioned arguments as valid will still not implement an approach based on them. I tend to think the main reasons are psychological: insecurity, cultural conditioning, a discomfort with elements they don't always feel they can control or, in some unfortunate cases, sheer neglect (take the example of teachers who have been teaching the same novels for twenty or more years because they have already "prepared" them or Phonology instructors who use the same materials I was taught with in the 1960's). Well, let's hope my arguments might help motivate change in this respect.

Model curricula for Advanced Language Classes

It is hard to give "models" for language teaching in general without running the risk of sounding dogmatic and eventually obsolete. Yet, as a teacher –and as a parent too, excuse the digression– I have always believed that neophytes in an area need a structured referent to accept, reject, improve on or even rebel against. I have always welcomed challenge from my students – with your children it is tougher, though; yet the premise has always been: "Show me why it is wrong and offer me, at least, an equally attractive alternative." I must admit they were sometimes right –often, at times!– which, at the end of the day, benefited not only their particular class but the classes that came after them.

I will now try to offer some examples of different curricula for Advanced Language classes. At this point, I will share with you what I usually did in my Language classes at the ISP "Joaquín V. Gonzalez" and how I tried to eventually reinforce their theoretical foundations in my Linguistics class, a class they normally took a year or two after Language III.

Let us begin by Language I which, in my opinion, is closer to a post-intermediate level course than to an advanced one.

Why so? To put it in a nutshell, they have serious comprehension problems, both for listening and for reading. For instance, they cannot often see the gist of a relatively intricate reading passage and it is not easy for them to follow even an initial lecture by a teacher of a more specific class like Geography, Phonology or even Grammar, three of the subjects of their freshman year. At production level their performance is even more anxiety-producing for them: they often lack accuracy and fluency –to different degrees, according to the case– in speech and their writing often lacks rhetorical coherence, apart from lack of ideas and the lexical, grammatical and "pragmatic" errors they incur.

You may at this point wonder why I still consider them post-intermediate. I do because they have already been exposed to major grammatical constructions, lexical areas and some phonological rules (Phonology is presently being less taken care of at every level possibly due to an ideological position which seems to consider near-native pronunciation as an imperialist goal, a model no one should make any effort to imitate; I could not disagree more. In all honesty I even consider it absurd. If you do not feel the need to learn the pronunciation of short vowels like /i/, which differentiates *beach* from *bitch*, why bother saying *I have seen* instead of *I have saw*? Comprehension will be achieved anyhow). Another point to consider is their sociocultural maturity.

Many of our students are only 18 years old – consenting adults, from a legal point of view, often immature teenagers, from a psychological point of view. Many of them got their High School diploma from State schools, where very little writing, especially creative writing, is ever done. Likewise with oral presentations of any kind. However, most of them have had extra-curricular training in English, often including taking international exams, which no doubt gives them an edge, therefore writing compositions or debating a topic is not an entirely new experience; hopefully, this takes some of the sting out.

A worth-mentioning social fact is that some students come from different parts of the country and often share apartments with roommates , an ordinary experience in the United States though not such a frequent one in Argentina, where there are no fraternities, sororities or even a campus dormitory to live in sometimes, a fact that may exacerbate a sense of loss or "not belonging", often affecting their academic performance. And even

those students still living at home, perhaps due to their psychological and educational immaturity, often have a hard time meeting the requirements of a tertiary or university level education.

Another relevant point is the way economic factors affect students' academic performance: many students have to work to pay their way through school; others are not required to, yet they choose to do so for the sake of what they consider their struggle for individual independence. In either case, the result is that few of these students are full-time students who can or wish to devote most of their time and energy to their studies, as is often the case in American universities, where not only the economic situation but the sociocultural perspective is totally different.

A word about "linguistic imperialism". After dealing extensively with the topic in my Linguistics class, I have reached the conclusion that extending this notion, which deals with important issues and has serious sociopolitical implications, to a refusal to try and approximate native speech as a model for the EFL learner is simply absurd. Trying to become a foreign language teacher in a language that is not one's own is a very difficult and sometimes frustrating experience – added to learning about the culture behind it and acquiring technical skills for education. The teacher trainee knows that he will probably never reach native-speaker confidence, yet why not try to reach near-native linguistic skills which will eventually enable him to have a better performance as a teacher? Does that imply "bowing to the empire"? If so, why learn its language in the first place?

Keeping these considerations in mind, I shall now move on to outline a standard Language I course for a Teacher Training College, making an earnest attempt to justify each choice, though some traditional names, which I still use, like Intensive Reading, for instance, are more related to syntactic and lexical study than to the reading skill itself.

Considering the traditional four skills, I try to devote time to each, not necessarily equal time.

We would do well to remember that at ISP "Joaquin V. González" Language I is assigned ten weekly forty-minute periods, an exceptional fact which will not repeat itself in the rest of the curriculum.

I try to divide my class-time into different areas, independent though

interdependent. I shall now proceed to discuss each area accounting for their linguistic and methodological foundations:

A. Intensive Reading (2 Periods a Week)

A time-honored term, like Reported Speech or Conditional Sentences, IR is, basically, a contextualized study of lexis and grammar culled from short stories they have read and done research on at home. Differently from what I do with Home Reading, where the novels and the occasional play selected have usually been written over the past ten or fifteen years, I expose my students in the areas of IR and ER (extensive reading – to be discussed below) to short stories by well-known English-speaking authors worldwide written in the twentieth or early twenty-first centuries. Out of a total of 10-12 short stories for ER, paragraphs from no less than five or six of these stories are selected for IR. After summarizing and discussing the story in our ER area, we proceed to discuss and do dictionary work on selected lexical and syntactic items. They look up words in dictionaries, but the exemplification is always done through situational sentences and "sociolinguistic dialogues" –a term I coined in the late 1970's.

The usual homework assignment –which they can do individually or in pairs (I find pair work very helpful, especially in the preparation of sociolinguistic dialogues) for the practice of the new items– consists in discussing the different meanings and collocations of the target items, as well as the syntactic structures in which they are used. We lay special emphasis on the sociolinguistic force of the item –when applicable– and its relevant features should come out in the examples they provide. The practice consists in reading out either contextualized sentences or paragraphs which bring out the meaning of the item or sociolinguistic dialogues which may include more than one of the items assigned for homework preparation.

At least four basic questions come to mind:

1. Is this really oral work when the students are actually reading out loud something they have written? Reading out sentences, paragraphs or dialogues is not real spontaneous speech, everybody would agree.

2. What are "sociolinguistic dialogues"?

3. What are the (socio) linguistic and pedagogical foundations for this kind of approach?

4. Is there any evidence that the results obtained justify it?

As for 1, I definitely agree that this is not spontaneous speech, and as such it does not quite qualify as speaking but, on the other hand, it is not the reading skill either, where the basic goal is comprehension. To use a very old-fashioned term, let us simply say it is a form of oral "drilling", where we aim at internalizing the new items. The examples they provide should also contain relevant sociolinguistic information such as the age of the participants, their relationship, the physical location (it could be the phone and perhaps even a digitalized medium) where the dialogue is taking place, other possible linguistic variables such as socioeconomic and/or ethnic group, educational level, etc., but all of the latter really become relevant two years later, in Language III. Still, it is important that the student be aware of the function and purpose of the sentence(s) or dialogues –a fundamental sociolinguistic and even logical element which pervades all linguistic manifestations in my approach to teaching. In other words, the underlying question the student should have in mind at all times is: "Why is X saying this to Y? What goal is he trying to achieve?" To put it more bluntly, teachers should transmit the idea that every time the students open their mouth or write something, they had better have a point if they want to make sense. The same, as we will see later, applies to all forms of writing, fictional or other. We are all too familiar with dictionary – examples such as "Mary got on/off the bus" to show that get on/off as a phrasal verbs apply to transportation – not just vehicles: one gets on/off a road, too. While the sentence is grammatically and lexically correct, if not used in a situated sentence, it makes very little sense. Why would anybody say this to anyone else in the first place? Unless one provides a sensible context (it certainly does not need to be complicated or far-fetched) such as, for instance a situation where, worried about a close friend who is going through a rough time in her marriage, I could tell my wife: "You know? I'm really starting to be worried about Mary. Today she was late for work because she got off the subway at the wrong station. Should we talk to her?" This is definitely not a complicated sentence, a sentence any Language I student could write, where the inclusion of the item in question is totally justified by the context, which helps bring out the meaning of the target item.

Of course, given time limitations and often the number of students in the class, it is impossible for them to read all the sentences they may have prepared – which will go uncorrected unless they turn them in but we must remember teachers' time limitations too: we simply do not have the time, given our work load, to correct everything they do. Yet, over forty years of experience have shown me that once they understand the rationale behind

the approach, their sentences and dialogues meet the goals, even if some mistakes will go uncorrected.

A word about my approach to correction is in order at this point: In keeping with my approach to teaching, sociolinguistically – based but above all pragmatic concerning the goals I expect to reach, I believe that there are moments when corrections are useful and necessary while there are others where they could be a real hindrance, preventing the normal development of the learner's fluency and at times even putting his interest in the language at risk. Language as I see it, has a strong artistic component, therefore non-linguistic variables such as personality, cultural anomie –should there exist any–, relationship with the rest of the class, class-handling on the part of the teacher, etc. have definitely a role to play which is hard to measure quantitatively.

An efficient approach to correction is hard to attain. At times it is like damned if you do, damned if you don't. It may be both appreciated and resented. I have the impression sometimes that language learning is often felt by the student as a regression to childhood, when he is often in need of help and guidance, but at the same time regrets needing it. Yet, correction cannot be custom-made, certainly not in a large class.

So what to do? Common sense tells me that if the goal is the internalization of a new item, then correction should be intensive, including grammar, lexis, pronunciation and sociolinguistic appropriateness. If the student is reading out a homework contextualized sentence or dialogue, the focus should be on the target item in the first place, but most other mistakes, should there be any, ought to be corrected too. How one does it is rather personal – artistic, in a way, because it depends on one's perception of how much correction is desirable or at least tolerable at a given point, trying to help the student without hurting his feelings but not at the expense of inaccuracy –a lack of professionalism, in my view.

As we will see further down, if the students are acting out a sociolinguistic dialogue, making a presentation or dramatizing a scene from a novel or play, I sit at the back and make a note of important errors but I never interrupt their delivery, both for technical (helping them develop fluency) and for emotional reasons (helping them overcome stage fright).

And when we are discussing a novel or any other topic we may have chosen to debate on or simply discuss daily affairs, I simply do not correct

them at all, no matter what they say –unless they are stuck for a word– because my aim is fluency development in the most natural manner that can be achieved in a foreign-based, make-believe situation like a classroom where both teachers and students speak, albeit in 99% of the cases, the vernacular as their native language, which they can always resort to in extreme situations, differently from the situation of learning a foreign language in the country where it is the native language and where the teacher will often not be conversant with student's native language.

And then we have the anonymous sessions of error detection and correction, where the teacher writes out on the board or reads out loud sentences containing mistakes, often culled from students' mistakes in compositions or any other source the teacher deems relevant, always accounting for the nature of the mistake (lexical, grammatical or sociolinguistic). At times, the mistake can be phonological, involving segmental or suprasegmental features that are important for accurate, native-like communication, always the aim of my courses, especially when I am training future language-teaching professionals.

As for the second question, "What are sociolinguistic dialogues?", it is a term I coined back in 1976, shortly after coming back from the University of Pennsylvania and heavily influenced by Labov's and Hymes' sociolinguistic theories. Basically it is roleplay, but always keeping in mind sociolinguistic variables such as age, gender, socio-cultural relationships, etc., which should come out in the dialogue. Some may illustrate predictable cultural exchanges, such as a doctor-patient dialogue, where the doctor is the powerful actor and will ask predictable questions – sometimes revealing his own social group too ("What seems to be the trouble?"/"How are we feeling today?"); other dialogues may be of a more intimate nature (an argument between husband and wife).

A little digression: you may have noticed that I still use the masculine for generalizations (the student and *his* world) instead of the more fashionable "they" or the older "his/her". I am sure there is no intended sexist bias behind it: "they", "their", etc. are still plural to me and "his/her" and the like ("tod@s" in Spanish) I find cumbersome. I hope I am not offending anyone.

As for the (socio)linguistic foundations of the approach, let me remind you that earlier on I argued that any approach to the teaching of language –second, foreign or even the "language arts" of a native language– always involves a view, a theory –explicit or implicit– of language. The teacher may

have never received any formal training in Linguistics (hardly probable if he is a graduate teacher) or not be conversant enough with any particular linguistic theory, yet the moment he starts teaching the language he will have in mind some linguistic goal to reach, at least subconsciously, probably imitating the training he received as a student.

In my case, I firmly believe, after Chomsky, in the innateness of language, treated as a biological phenomenon. Theories of language as a habit have long been discarded and more recent theories do not seem to have the explanatory force Chomsky's does. Yet, Chomsky does not include the social function of language as a part of his theory. He places his theory of language in the context of an ideally homogeneous speech community, which is not what a human speech community is. Almost half a century ago, Labov (1972a) showed that all human speech communities are heterogeneous in nature, affected by sociocultural variables such as age, sex, social class, ethnic group, etc. Why can't we assume that these variables are essential, integral parts of language, on a par with grammar, lexis and phonology, all of them governed by a small set of principles which make language acquisition by a normal human child in an incredibly short period of time –usually complete by age four– such a wonderful feat? While it is true that formal education does its job in expanding the child's vocabulary by exposure, formal teaching and correction and in providing him with rhetorical skills as well as exposing him to the culture of our civilization and its mores, the child's basic linguistic competence is already there, including at least some sociolinguistic variables. It may not be relevant to mention it at this point, but as far back as in the early 1970's Labov showed that variability is inherent in some cases, affecting all speakers in a community to different degrees, which can be demonstrated quantitavely (Labov, 1972b).

I have not yet found a more powerful theory than the sociolinguistic theory I learned from Labov, primarily but also from Hymes, in my days at the University of Pennsylvania. I am always open to new challenges but I am not ready to trade truth for novelty. So I am still a sociolinguist!

B. Extensive Reading (1 ½ Periods a Week, on Average)

Another traditional term in ELT to refer to short stories, novels, articles and plays read by the students at home. However, I distinguish between Extensive Reading (ER) and Home Reading (HR).

In Language I, ER means, basically, reading a well-known short story

every two, maximum three weeks, depending on its length, where the meaning of all the new words –only in the particular context in which they are used, unlike IR– should be looked up. The search also includes cultural references (by way of example, where Piccadilly Circus or Times Square are and what they mean to a Londoner or a New Yorker, respectively), today much easier than in the past thanks to digital resources.

I begin by asking the class to sum up the story first in order to check comprehension and develop fluency. My correction of grammar, lexis or pronunciation is not very exhaustive since my aim here is to develop their fluency. However, my checking of understanding is more detailed because we are dealing with reading comprehension. This is then followed by a check on the understanding of the vocabulary as used in the context and of cultural references. The final step in the ER module is an open discussion of the issues in the story. They are encouraged at all times to express their personal opinions, but giving evidence as found in the story when giving opinions about the characters or the facts.

In many cases, two or three paragraphs in the story are selected for IR, as described above.

It is sometimes hard to pass up an interesting opportunity to do intensive word study when discussing the vocabulary part in the ER module, but it is my firm belief that if the Language instructor wants to take advantage of every language point that lends itself to discussion both he and the class will end up frustrated, with the feeling that the main goals of the module in question have not been attained, pretty similar to the situation where an obsessive teacher will try to correct every mistake the student makes: in the long or in the short run the student will feel inhibited and refrain from participating actively.

Incidental teaching is a different matter. Sometimes, the teacher may have learned or remembered a term or expression he has come across in a movie, overheard in a conversation with native speakers or on a recent trip: sharing this experience with students may be enriching and also fun, so long as he does not get carried away and goes afield. Spontaneity is great: we should only make sure that overdoing it will not lead us astray.

C. Home Reading (4 Periods a Month = 1 Period a Week on Average)

My students read a novel per month, written by native-speaking authors over the past ten or fifteen years. Although most of the selected writers will

be British or American, I always try to include speakers from other English-speaking countries as well. It is not an easy task to find novels (and the occasional play) which will have literary value –albeit conventional–, contain interesting language they can use as a model (standard, educated middle-class dialects) and at times containing substandard and even stigmatized varieties for them to notice the differences. Only standard varieties –regardless of regional origin– are acceptable in my classes. We may discuss the value of other options in a sociological or a sociolinguistic forum, but not as a model of ELT.

I don't assign any particular language work for the Home Reading (HR) module. I advise them to read the book at least twice: the first time for pleasure, a way of incentivating reading habits, without necessarily looking up words, unless comprehension fails. However, after the first reading, I expect them to find out information about the author and the novel, cultural references and also look up the words they may not know, although no special assignment is set. I also suggest they divide themselves up in groups and take care of an equally distributed number of pages and then send copies of the items they have looked up to the rest of the class so they may have an easier load. Nowadays we prefer to have a closed group (Facebook, Google classroom, etc.) where we can upload materials and send communications.

The above is all homework, in preparation for what we will do in class. Before starting our activities, which will take 4-6 class periods depending on different variables such as class size, their level of English or the relative difficulty of the book, I send them a couple of book reviews and guideline questions. Our first activity consists in summing up the novel and the main events taking place objectively, without giving opinions. They are encouraged to express their ideas freely when they are assigned the floor but I also call on those students who do not volunteer opinions in order to ensure equal class participation and also to make sure they have read the book.

After the brief summary comes the discussion of the novel/play. We try to follow the guideline questions I sent them, but often enough they get carried away by a certain issue presented in the novel like alcoholism, domestic violence, parental domination, etc., and share their own or other people's experiences with these issues. I find these "digressions" very useful: not only do they help them develop more self-confidence in the language, but they also contribute to their own personal growth. Some teachers may find it amenable to do some written work on the novel once the discussion is over: I don't usually do it because, as I will explain further down, I prefer to assign totally

creative written work. I do, however, send them a set of guided questions before starting the book and one or a couple of questions on the novel are always included in both the Midterm and the Endterm written tests.

D. Grammar (1 Period a Week)

Let me begin by saying that the only kind of Grammar I favor for Grammar I as a course is Traditional (Pedagogical) Grammar. I firmly disapprove of exposing post-intermediate students who are often a long way from completing their basic training in a foreign language to sophisticated linguistic theories. I have too often seen first-year students use Chomskian terms like TC or CP (Radford, 2016) or terms from Functional Grammar (Labov, 1972b) and even in the old days use Structural Grammar terms like Form Class 1 or 2 without really knowing what they were talking about. Advocates of using state-of-the art theories might argue that TG is old-fashioned and obsolete. Not so. Not if we are aiming at a Pedagogical Grammar, a system which will enable the learner to better understand –and eventually teach– the new language. Most probably because of their previous grammar training in Spanish grammar in school and the Grammar terms employed in their training in English, most students can understand everyday terms like Noun or Adjective and more elaborate concepts like Relative Clauses or Adverbial Clauses like Conditional Sentences, so why not use these terms to teach them basic rules and grammatical patterns? What's wrong with internalizing terms like Defining or Non-Defining Relative Clauses if this will teach them not to use "that" after a pause in speech or a comma in writing? In my experience, students can only really begin to manage a Chomskian linguistic analysis once they have effectively incorporated the language, often helped by rules they have learned in TG.

So what's the Language teacher's role as regards Grammar? If the two instructors can reach an agreement, the Language teacher can provide contextualized practice of the topics the students see in Grammar and plan their respective courses in unison. Unfortunately, this is not often the case, so I devote a period a week to teaching basic grammatical notions like tenses, Passive Voice, Reported Speech, etc. – notions many students are already familiar with thanks to their previous training in English courses and providing them with contextualized practice (exercises, mainly), apart from raising and answering questions on the subject. Many of us will be surprised at the gaps and the kind of queries they have.

Through the years, I have tried many techniques to make the Grammar

sessions productive. Normally, I choose a textbook containing basic features of the topics we treat, followed by exercises they can do on their own and check with the key. So often enough I appoint small groups of students who present the topic, which I usually enlarge on. We may pick a few corrected exercises and discuss why the right answer is right or whether more than one answer is possible and why but most important of all, I try to highlight different contextual possibilities and their sociolinguistic implications. There are usually questions to answer and bones to pick with the Grammar teacher –politically not easy– who sometimes presents them with a highly theoretical view of the topic or simply doesn't discuss it at all. In any case, my aim as a Language teacher is for them to internalize the different structures, their semantic content and their application in oral and/or written contexts. I will sometimes bring an exercise of my own to round off the topic, which is, anyway, continually revised and recycled.

E. Listening Comprehension and Intensive Listening (2 Periods a Month = ½ a Period a Week)

This area focuses on global –and eventually more detailed– listening comprehension. In Language I, only a standard British dialect like Estuary English and some northern American dialect such as New York standard English –the one I happen to speak– are chosen as LC materials.

The techniques I use vary according to the length and degree of difficulty of the materials I choose, from commercial LC passages taken from textbooks or exams such as TOEFL to authentic materials like speeches, interviews or talk shows that I myself record on my trips or download from the net. I sometimes run the passage for the first time, ask them global questions on it and then I run it again for them to answer multiple choice questions which we later check together and run the passage a third time for good measure.

At other times there is no previous discussion: I just play the passage twice and they answer the questions. I will give them an occasional dictation too, either a passage from their ER or a totally new passage. I have some reservations about the usefulness of dictation as a LC tool, especially because more than one skill is being tested here, but they get some training in note-taking and become more aware of the sound-letter relationship; still I would need more evidence on its usefulness in order to recommend it.

And in very good classes, towards the end of the year I have a go at "Intensive Listening", the study of expressions and how their meaning is

conveyed through different phonological features. I will enlarge upon this in a second article, when I deal with Language III.

F. Reading Comprehension (Roughly 1-2 Periods a Month)

Since their reading load is quite large, I don't often give them RC exercises, which simply consist of answering some multiple-choice questions either from commercial and later from authentic materials, pretty much as with LC. We never do word study on RC passages in order not to mix goals but I will answer questions on words they don't know or cultural features discussed.

G. Video Sessions (3 Periods a Month = Roughly 1 Period a Week)

This is done once a month. I normally play American –occasionally British– sitcoms for them. The activities change as the course unfolds. I always play the whole sitcom once and then have them answer global comprehension questions they get on a printed sheet and answer orally. Depending on the level of the class I ask for salient cultural features –if any– although given the globalized nature of our 21st century world, today the differences are fewer. I may ask if they remember any particular expressions and the contexts in which they have been used. Next I play the sitcom again, this time followed by some vocabulary exercises containing certain items (words or expressions) they have to listen for. Towards the end of the year –and in most of Language III– I ask them to take down notes and then we discuss some vocabulary items.

Perhaps the most interesting part is the last one, "Intensive Viewing Comprehension" I call it, after Intensive Reading and Intensive Listening. In this section, I play a short scene or part of a scene and we do detailed work not only on lexis, but on phonological and cultural aspects –the sociolinguistics the approach is based on– of certain expressions, not followed by any dictionary work for homework. Some may argue that they haven't got much phonological training at this point; I say you don't need it to hear the suprasegmental difference –and pronominal use– of "What IS this?" versus "What IS it?" to understand that while the first one expresses mild anger the second one expresses concern, usually a "pre-consolation" feature for someone who looks or sounds very sad and that the use of either question presupposes a non-formal relationship. As I said earlier, the only homework I assign is a sociolinguistic dialogue or a few contextualized sentences, which they should prepare in pairs or in small groups for the following class.

Later in the year, I may play –or assign, given the extended use of the net– a classic movie containing interesting vocabulary (which they have probably seen before, like "When Harry met Sally," "Forrest Gump," or the like). Even at the expense of a little waste of time, I prefer to play it in class –after all, it's only once a year– and make sure they don't watch it with subtitles or closed caption, which I prefer to avoid to check their comprehension level.

I find IV and video comprehension in general extremely useful and motivating. Comments from students like "I heard the same expression in a movie," I used this word to an American and he understood! (!!!) or questions they may pose triggered off by the different contexts like "Could I say this to a friend? To a teacher?" show their interest. Sometimes the linguistically-oriented students may ask questions that may be difficult for the teacher to answer or for them to understand the answer, as in "Why do we use *this* in one case and *it* in the other?" As we do with young children, we try to adapt the answers we give to their possibilities in order to avoid mutual frustration.

Although I still find LC more challenging, VC and IV are very motivating and the vocabulary and phonological features they pick up seem to stay longer in their minds. This should come as no surprise: it's an image world today. Images are ingrained in our cultural system and seem to facilitate learning. Some students also claim they can use this approach on their own watching their own videos. Anyway, VC seems to be an integral part of EFL courses today – or it should be, at least.

H. Writing, Error Analysis and Miscellaneous (1/1½ Periods a Week, Roughly)

Basically, I teach Narrative Writing and Opinion Pieces – not deep or long enough to be called essays (about 300 and 180 words, respectively).

They start writing the first week of class. I ask them to hand in a freewrite, which can be about anything they feel like writing, fictional or non-fictional, personal or not (I do not reveal the contents or authorship of any paper when we do error analysis the following class, on ethical principles; it's their privilege to do it if they so wish). They may sometimes be at a loss about this freedom: my answer is inevitably the same: free is free. If asked about the length of the piece, I tell them to use their common sense: neither three sentences nor more than two or three pages. Although the compositions are corrected, they do not receive a grade on them: the only requirement is to turn in a piece on an agreed date. Failure to do so results in an F on the assignment.

It's important for the student to get feedback as soon as possible, so they can have it before they write the next piece. Normally, they write one every other week, so they get their assignment corrected before they start writing the next one. As a rule, I have them write four freewrites for homework and a non-conventional fifth one – the last, as a transition to Narrative Writing, in class.

I say it's not conventional because it consists first of all of a relaxation moment, where I try to teach them what little I've learned in my yoga and meditation classes. Then I have them close their eyes and play some relaxing music followed by some slow song which they might also find inspirational, not necessarily in English. A couple of minutes later, they open their eyes and then I ask them to write down in English whatever ideas come to their mind during the next ten minutes. Finally, those who feel like doing it read out their thoughts and I simply listen, without making any corrections.

I began to use this technique years ago, when students complain that often enough –even during the final exam– they don't know what to write about. Listening to relaxing music helps, in my opinion. Even remembering some of the music might do the trick and help them relax in an exam. Anyway, this is the previous step to Narrative Writing.

Narrative writing

I introduce them to narrative writing – pretty much as I do with every activity, given my pedagogical views on language teaching, by asking them questions like why, when and to whom we narrate stories orally. An everyday question like "How was your day?" asked of a spouse, child or friend will probably be answered by some kind of short narration like ¨I saw X today after two years and guess what he told me?" and encouraged by cooperative questions like "No! What?" a story will follow. Or when we tell anecdotes to friends, children or grandchildren, where we present ourselves in different lights and for different purposes, we are narrating. Even when you have to apologize to a supervisor or a teacher, you usually tell your interlocutor the problem you had by sharing your story with them. There are other instances of oral narratives, as Labov (1972b) calls them, in everyday life.

Yet, narrative writing is not frequent at all in ordinary lives, except to occasionally e-mail an apology to someone, make up an excuse, etc. Much less so creative or fictional writing.

The pedagogical question students and some teachers occasionally raise

is "Why bother wracking your brain to learn a genre you will probably never use again after you graduate?"

While I admit that we will hardly ever use the genre again in our professional life, its value as pedagogical tool is very significative. In a narrative, we use language we would not use elsewhere, which gives us a chance to expand our vocabulary, learn new turns of phrases by mere exposure to dictionaries and different internet tools and –perhaps paradoxically– make mistakes, which otherwise we wouldn't make. I'm convinced that in the hands of a good professional. students learn more by efficient and systematic error analysis than by learning vocabulary and grammar from other sources.

I first give them a guided narrative consisting of three traditional parts: introduction, development and conclusion. But I remind them that there should always be a conflict, otherwise the narrative loses its *raison d'etre*. Without a conflict, the reader's interest is not aroused and the narration becomes pointless. We try to build up the first guided narrative together and as an assignment, I divide them up into groups, give them a title and ask them to read it out loud the following class. Corrections in this case focus on the structure of the narrative rather than on language mistakes, which we correct in passing. The next assignment is an individual, approximately three-hundred-word creative piece on an assigned rubric which they hand in on the scheduled date.

As regards the approach to follow to help them reach the goals required –not always easy and sometimes frustrating– I have tried two approaches: process writing, which involves rewriting the same piece several times, each time improving on their mistakes, as pointed out by the instructor and his assistants, if any, and assigning different rubrics every week which I correct on paper – often after most of the errors are anonymously analyzed and systematized in class and the correction has been written on the student's paper. (I don't correct on the computer; I do it manually on the printed page. I find it more personal).

There are pros and cons to both approaches: process writing can be advantageous for consciousness raising and it also gives the student time to brood on his errors without having the pressure of having to write about a new title for the following week. Sometimes I give them two weeks if the previous writing has proven too hard or frustrating, so they can have time to reflect on the corrections and maybe consult with me or my assistants about particular problems. On the other hand, process writing can be boring

and since each paper may take up a month, they end up writing very few compositions, their creativity is not stimulated and somehow their mental gym is lost by not being exposed to different topics – and this often shows in final exams, where ideas don't come easy and they are at a loss, groping for words and ideas. I have now decided on the second approach in spite of its disadvantages, namely taking into account final results.

Error analysis is the next step. I try to grade papers from one week to the next, which the students find very rewarding, first because it diminishes their anxiety and then because quick feedback accelerates the learning process.

I would love to go on discussing different issues involved in TEFL at an advanced level, such as writing opinion pieces, which I will discuss at a later date when I eventually deal with essay writing.

Unfortunately, reasons of time and space prevent me from doing so. I hope this rather relaxed discussion of some of the main topics has been stimulating in some way!

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