

Teaching Advanced English on a Sociolinguistic Basis: Some Reflections (Part II)

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Resumen

Un curso de Lengua Inglesa I a nivel terciario o universitario no califica como un nivel avanzado, ni tampoco un curso de Lengua Inglesa II, en realidad, aunque se acerque en algunos casos. La etapa avanzada, casi nativa, generalmente no se alcanza antes del nivel de Lengua Inglesa III y no se completa en Lengua Inglesa IV. ¿Qué hace que Lengua Inglesa III sea un punto de inflexión en el plan de estudios, el punto en el que comienza el nivel avanzado? Aquí es donde, a menudo, el lenguaje y el metalenguaje parecen cristalizarse. La investigación en curso en el área y los avances tecnológicos adicionales sin duda contribuirán a facilitar el trabajo del profesor de inglés avanzado.

Palabras clave: sociolingüística; habilidades lingüísticas; variables sociolingüísticas; competencia sociolingüística; nivel avanzado; inglés como lengua extranjera; plan de estudios

Abstract

A Language I course in higher education does not quite qualify as advanced level – nor a Language II course, for that matter, although it may come close in a few cases. The advanced, near-native stage is not usually reached before Language III level and completed in Language IV. What makes Language III a turning point in the curriculum, the point when the advanced level starts? This is where the language and the metalanguage often seem to crystalize. Ongoing research in the area and further technological advances will no doubt contribute to facilitating the Advanced English teacher's job.

Keywords: sociolinguistics; linguistic skills; sociolinguistic variables; sociolinguistic competence; advanced level; English as a Foreign Language; curricula

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Some time ago, this journal published an article I wrote on this very same topic, which discussed the theoretical foundations of this approach and exemplified its implementation in a Language I course at a Buenos Aires Teacher Training College (TTC), ISP «Joaquín V. González» – INSP JVG from now on. In that article, I argued that a Language I course did not quite qualify as advanced level – nor did a Language II course, for that matter, although it came close in a few cases. In my

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opinion, the advanced, near-native stage is not usually reached before Language III level and completed in Language IV. I will now proceed to explain why I uphold this view.

A word of caution is in order: this arbitrary way of numbering the Language courses goes back to a now distant past when the teaching degree was expected to reach completion in four years at most TTC's: nowadays it would be an almost impossible feat to accomplish given the number of courses in the curricula – no less than sixty or seventy per cent more than in 1963, when the first major changes were introduced.

However, going back to the topic under discussion, what makes Language III a turning point in the curriculum, the point when the advanced level starts?

To begin with, the students have already had two or three years of exposure to different technical and sociocultural topics in English. Not only have they successfully completed two pre-advanced Language courses where they have written narrative and argumentative essays, read no less than eight contemporary novels and plays as well as, hopefully, a sizable number of short stories, developed oral fluency, etc., but they have also had two courses in phonology and laboratory practice, two English grammar courses, courses in English history, literature, geography and a variety of courses in Spanish on philosophy and education. In other words, apart from having improved their English, a whole new world has opened up for them, a world of critical thinking and exposure to great ideas. One cannot help but wonder why choose Language III as the turning point. Again, landmarks are sometimes only symbolic, arbitrary perhaps, but this is where, often, the language and the metalanguage –what we know and are able to say about the language– seem to crystalize, to “click together”, as it were. Unfortunately, I have no objective measurements to prove my point: I am only able to offer my several decades of experience in the area. Let me now go on to describe the Language III course I taught between 1976 and 2013 (2013 version only!).

As with Language I, the course is divided into different areas. Since we only have six forty-minute periods a week –versus ten for Language I–, pressure for time inevitably makes itself felt. On the other hand, the student's much higher level of English as well as their honed academic exposure, enables them to depend much less on class time and handle issues on their own, ultimately the goal of the advanced level. Some areas like listening and reading comprehension (LC, RC) are allotted much less class time while extensive short story reading (ER), grammar and the occasional dictation exercise –dictation is of questionable value anyway– are suppressed altogether. ER will be partly replaced by analysis and in some cases intensive reading (IR) of recently published newspaper and magazine articles dealing with current issues in politics, cultural values, liberal arts, etc. Other areas, like English for Special Purposes (ESP) are introduced. At all times, the focus is on linguistic and sociocultural awareness, which will eventually lead –one hopes– to improvement of the language skills.

Let me now move on to present a model of course organization for Language III, based on the same sociolinguistic theories –namely Variationist Sociolinguistics, as described in the previous article– which we need not repeat at this point. Since we only have 60% of the class time of Language I, the schedule will necessarily be tighter and harder to stick to.

Intensive Reading (1 ½ - 2 periods a week)

This section of the course, pretty much the same as with Language I, aims at expanding the students' vocabulary, reinforcing their mastery of syntax and raising their awareness of stylistic features of essay writing. Differently from Language I and II, only newspaper and magazine articles are used as IR materials –no longer short stories or excerpts from plays–, usually on topics of current issues published over the past few months. My usual sources are reputable publications like *The*

New York Times, *The Guardian*, *The Economist*, etc. and since I include a section on ESP in Language III, I try to select articles dealing with similar topics, unless major recent news (9/11 in 2001, a presidential election, #MeToo, etc.) becomes the talk of the town or the world, for that matter.

The discussion of the article usually starts with a debate on the subject. During the debate, I keep my participation to a minimum, first because it is my policy in general to reduce teacher talk more and more as students advance in their (socio)linguistic development, and then because I feel my participation might influence or inhibit their free expression. Still, I am only too glad to voice my own views if asked by the students or feel it might be useful, but only after the debate is practically over.

A word about debate conduction: we are all aware of our difficulty to hear people out without interrupting them to disqualify their opinions and express ours as well as talking out of turn or bringing up an irrelevant topic or making an irrelevant remark. In my classes, regardless of the age of my students, this is an absolute no-no. I set clear rules of turn-taking right from the start: they should raise their hands and wait for their turn to have the floor, which they will have for no longer than one minute. Of course, we are talking about an ideal class where everybody is eager to speak their mind or where some students try to monopolize the debate. This is not often the case, though. Some students shy away from expressing their views on certain topics or are simply reluctant to speak in class. Sometimes this raises a problem: should the teacher encourage participation from all the members of the class or should he just let them decide for themselves? What if the student feels he has nothing to say? Wouldn't it be embarrassing to pressure him against his will? On the other hand, this is a moment to develop the students' fluency and they are training to become teachers, and, as such, their participation in class should not be optional. I have pondered over this for many years and my experience as a drama student, albeit belated, has reinforced my position: everybody has, as I see it, an inalienable right to their own personality. Teachers, pretty much like actors, lawyers or even psychotherapists have every right to be silent or shy in their own private life but not when speaking at length is a prerequisite for the profession they have chosen for themselves. It follows that class participation is not optional for a teacher trainee and hence it should be encouraged.

Unfortunately, the time allotted to this activity should be regulated too if we expect to cover relevant vocabulary in depth. Since this activity is aimed at fluency development, I try to refrain from correcting them as they speak, unless they are stuck for a word or comprehension is lost. I make a mental note of some important errors and discuss them at a later date, without personalizing the mistakes.

Once the debate is over I go on to analyze in depth words, idioms and turns of phrase that they have already prepared (I send them the material about a week ahead, with a focus on highlighted words). After discussing the semantics of the items and their sociolinguistic implications –since it is written language there are fewer sociolinguistic features to discuss– we move on to the practice, usually in the form of situated sentences which bring out and justify the use of the target item or through sociolinguistic dialogues, which they prepare and act out in pairs or small groups, if required. Since at this point the aim is accuracy, correction (self, peer or by the teacher) is exhaustive, including phonological –segmental and suprasegmental features of speech since they have already passed Phonology II–, semanto-syntactic and sociolinguistic mistakes. Self-correction is attempted first by pointing out the error, then peer and finally teacher correction, when necessary. Ideally, there should be frequent recycling of the vocabulary learnt. Considerations of time will, as is the case with written work, eventually lead us to make a choice between larger coverage or intensity. Since we are not just dealing with adults who have reached a considerable level of proficiency but with more

mature students who are halfway through their college degree, I opt for coverage. I will enlarge on this when we deal with ESP, our next section.

English for Special Purposes – ESP (½ - 1 weekly periods on average)

There have been dramatic changes in this area since I first included it in my syllabus back in the late 1970s. Not only has it gained crucial importance in the field of TEFL but also in the academic world at large, worldwide, literally. I have actually been teaching it at graduate level as the last course before students start writing their thesis as the final requirement of a graduate degree in TEFL (*Licenciatura en Lengua Inglesa*) granted by UNLAM (*Universidad Nacional de La Matanza*) since 2015.

Before the advent and eventual widespread use of Internet, I used to treat ESP as a “special vocabulary”, culling relevant information from books which began to appear on the market as “The Language of ...” and the like plus my own compilations in the form of word lists –I abhor them as a teaching strategy in general– which I collected in the US. Today, the situation has changed radically and students are able to access all sorts of information using the tools at our disposal (multimedia, videos, articles, lists, TED Talks, etc.) so my approach now uses all these tools.

In Language III we deal with four different areas in class: Education, Medical English, Legal English and Business English. There is a group presentation of some other ESP or specialized vocabulary at the end of the year. This is later turned in as a paper for correction and comments and then distributed to the rest of the class (digitally now) as a final course requirement before the final exam.

The reason for choosing the above mentioned four areas are many and varied. Education, though not the most popular area on demand, is fundamental for a teacher trainee. Learning about the educational systems in the U.S. and the U.K., to mention the most popular English-speaking countries, will be absolutely necessary for the students to understand and get familiarized with their culture. Even if in our globalized world terms like “Master” for “a Master’s degree” or the acronym MBA have become popular, the Argentinian educational system is still very different from that of the United States, for instance, so terms like Bachelor of Arts, sophomore, BS and a host of other items have to be understood in their context. Even if translation does not just help but becomes necessary in order to learn some specific medical or legal terms, in other cases it simply will not apply. How many times have we been asked how to say “*Licenciado*” or “*Perito Mercantil*” in English, for example? The answer is there is no one-to-one equivalent, the term has to be explained. Worse still is the “translation” of the grade system. While in most American colleges a C average is considered a passing mark for an undergraduate degree, the truth is that many reputable graduate schools will not accept a candidate who has scored so low in their terms. And although most Master’s programs will consider a B grade as meeting the grade requirement, especially in the case of a terminal Master’s –some universities will not transfer all the credits to an eventual doctoral program if the candidate does not reach a 3.5 average– roughly half A’s and half B’s. Again, all these cultural features have to be learned and in many cases the English teacher’s advice will be very useful in guiding students who are preparing to study abroad and not only to help them train for international exams like the TOEFL or the GMAT.

The choice of the remaining three ESP areas (Medical, Legal and Business) responds to different needs. Medical English, and to a certain extent Legal vocabulary, might be considered as part of the “survival” English every intermediate learner, let alone teachers, should be conversant with. I have sometimes been criticized for including Business English in the curriculum for being unnecessary for teacher training, especially if our future graduates are expected to teach in the national educational system. I disagree. Ideological considerations apart, the economy has a very important

place in our life today. And even if some teachers are loath to admit it, our graduates do not just teach in state schools: they take on private work in business companies for economic as well as for professional reasons. Strange though it may seem to a number of colleagues, some of us actually enjoy teaching ESP, Business English being no exception, to motivated adults.

Materials selection is of crucial importance for the teaching of ESP. Given the almost unmanageable wealth of information existing nowadays, I find it unnecessary to hand out notes, as I did in the past, containing the relevant vocabulary. Instead, the students search the net and other sources on their own and afterwards we discuss their findings in class. I usually highlight the most important points, share cultural experiences with them, compare the systems when relevant, translate some key terms and answer the questions they might have. We then sum up and systematize the information we have collected, which will be digitalized and uploaded to a closed Facebook or Google group we share.

What kind of practice do they get? It varies. In the field of Education, it could consist of acting out sociolinguistic dialogues between two students comparing their respective educational systems, a student and an advisor when enrolling in classes and the like.

For Medical English, typical doctor-patient, receptionist-patient dialogues are in order. For Legal English, mock trials are very motivating and a large number of students get involved. Similarly, for Business English, where they can get lots of examples from TV or Netflix series like *Madmen*, *Billions*, etc. I sometimes assign some short-written exercises too, like writing up a simplified medical history or sending a business email, but that might be a little off-subject.

Home Reading (1 weekly period)

As we said earlier, I no longer do ER in Language III, only Home Reading (HR). I assign a novel per month, six in all, by English-speaking authors written over the past decade. Besides American and British writers I always include a Canadian novelist like Margaret Atwood and/or a South African one like J. M. Coetzee for the sake of variety. The novels selected should not only satisfy language requirements –a mixture of prose and dialogue, different regional and social dialects, etc.– but they should also meet high literary standards. Low quality literature sometimes contains interesting language but I am not ready to expose my students to this kind of writing. I believe that presenting good –I realize that some of you might object to such a subjective use of the word– contemporary literature in language class enhances their artistic taste and fosters the habit of reading, not so frequent in an era of screens. I do offer them exposure to slang and even curse words in Intensive Listening and Viewing (IL; IV), our next section.

The novels are discussed orally, sometimes following a questionnaire that has been uploaded beforehand, always followed by a debate where they express their views freely. I also upload reviews of the novel they are discussing and encourage them to find and share more.

No vocabulary work is done. Yet, they should look up the words they don't understand in a second reading of the book (the first one is aimed at just letting them enjoy the experience and only look up words that may be stumbling blocks for their understanding). Apart from debating the book, a follow-up exercise consists in acting out a passage from the novel as they interpret it, for which they are given a free hand. Sometimes they may try to memorize the occasional dialogue, but the emphasis is laid on the feelings the novel has stirred. There again, shyness is not a valid excuse. The classroom will be their stage for several decades ahead and dramatizing is no doubt a useful tool for the English teacher.

To round off this section, may I add that oftentimes I include a contemporary play which they can read and analyze from one week to the next, especially the first week of class, before they are ready to discuss the first novel. It not only adds variety but it also gives them an early chance to try acting out a small portion of the play.

Intensive Listening and Viewing (½ - 1 weekly period on average)

This section of the class focuses on contemporary spoken language. The materials are culled from recordings of different kinds as found on the net. Since practically everybody has access to platforms like YouTube, Netflix, etc. there is no need to waste precious classtime listening to a recording or watching a video together, unless I am testing their oral comprehension. Instead, I usually upload the materials I want to analyze beforehand and assign a set of tasks like transcribing some portions, analyzing the same or other parts sociolinguistically, commenting on slang or vulgar language as well as identifying the pragmatic implicatures of the use of some stress and intonation patterns. In the case of videos, paralinguistic features such as hand or facial gestures are identified and compared to Argentinian paralinguistic features.

No follow-up dictionary research or word study tasks are assigned: only spontaneous use of the target items –lexical, syntactic, phonological, idiomatic or paralinguistic– are set as a class task. I have often received enthusiastic feedback from my students concerning this section, probably because it is more in keeping with the times!

Writing (½ - 1 weekly period)

Not much theoretical work is required at this stage since they have been writing narratives and essays for two years, plus the occasional History or Literature paper and a specialized course in academic writing. Except perhaps for descriptions: I have practically always had to introduce description writing as a new topic throughout the years. I deal with descriptions of landscapes, faces, sensations and feelings by providing them with examples by well-known authors like John Updike, Ian McEwan, Ann Tyler and others and encourage them to look for more. We then analyze vocabulary and style and in the course of three or four weeks they turn in short descriptions, some of them as part of a guessing game, when they describe physically and/or psychologically a person known to the rest of the class (a politician, an actor, a fellow student, etc.). Eventually, the students are required to include one or more descriptive paragraphs in their narrative essays.

The students write between 12 to 16 pieces a year, depending on the size of the class –this will naturally affect the time the teacher has to correct and grade the papers–, the time available –national and special holidays, strikes (endemic in Argentina)– and miscellaneous, but 12 seems to be a desirable minimum number of compositions. Here we are faced with a conundrum: process writing or larger coverage of topics? While philosophically I am in favor of process writing, where turning in subsequent versions of the same rubric might help the students overcome some of their difficulties, implementing it implies that they will not be able to write more than four or five pieces in all, which I find unacceptable. In the first place because their creativity is not enhanced by writing on such a reduced number of topics and, secondly, because I hold the view that creative topic variety gives them a better opportunity to make mistakes, mistakes which probably would not get corrected otherwise.

Regarding error correction, similarly to what I said in the previous article, I do not correct every mistake all the time. Being overwhelmed by corrections does not seem to help the students root out their mistakes: rather, it inhibits fluency and often causes them to shy away from participating in class. Orally, corrections are exhaustive when the goal is accuracy, delayed when role-playing or acting out and practically non-existent in any form of free speech such as book reviewing and

debates. In the case of written corrections, the idea is to help the students correct their mistakes by awareness raising. Hence, I underline the mistake and write the kind of mistake it is on the margin (G for grammar, L for lexis and so on). The grade will reflect to what degree the expected standard has been met.

Eventually, I select a number of errors for analysis, correction and discussion. Usually, a list is posted one or two days before the error analysis session and then discussed in class, often to be followed by tutorial meetings with my assistants who will help to consolidate the corrected version by means of oral and written practice.

As mentioned earlier, students are expected to turn in no less than 12-16 written assignments a year, plus two midterm tests (in class) and a group project. The genres they focus on are freewrites, narrative and objective essays and short descriptions. The freewrites –their first three or four written assignments– are aimed at developing their self-confidence without the pressure of a grade, hence they do not get one on them, yet are penalized if they fail to turn them in.

Evaluation and Assessment

Evaluation is an intricate problem *per se*. How objective can the instructor be when evaluating creative writing? How much depends on personal tastes and preferences? Should we assess in terms of established “serious” grammatical mistakes lists? What about style, relevance, commitment, idiomaticity and the like? What part should they play when deciding whether the expected standards have been met? What is the most appropriate and fairest way to assess oral production? How fair is fair, anyway?

These questions, the subject of endless talks with colleagues and specialists in other fields, have been haunting me for decades. I realize cultural changes and ideology have a role to play, too. Institutionally, passing marks based on expected standards are usually agreed on. Personally, I feel that an uninterrupted flow of speech, free of morphological or major syntactic errors, “decently” (subjective, I know) idiomatic and easy to follow phonologically constitutes a desirable level concerning oracy. As for the written counterpart, the standards will be a bit higher given that a written piece can be revised and corrected. Fewer grammatical or important lexical errors will be “tolerated”, for want of a less aggressive word, and rather strict levels of cohesion and coherence found acceptable.

I set two written term tests during the year, both involving creative writing often related to the novels they have discussed in the term and also semi-creative exercises in the form of situational sentences and sociolinguistic dialogues illustrating the linguistic items covered. After each test the students are given exhaustive feedback –by me or by members of my team, if any– where corrections are discussed and objections on their part, should they arise, are duly attended to.

Final exams, a relevant consolidation experience where the yearly work is held in review, will depend on institutional criteria that follow school or departmental policies but which I hardly ever find to be ideology-free. In any case, I must insist that final exams –stressful by definition, just like any kind of test– normally prove to be beneficial as a learning experience. I am sure there might appear other, perhaps better, evaluation procedures in the years ahead: I look forward to them.

Miscellaneous

Informal conversation, discussion of recent events, miscellaneous questions –I normally circulate a question box, today a digital Q&A section in our Facebook or Google group, where students have the chance to ask all sort of (socio)linguistic questions if they fail to find a proper answer in the

search machine– are also part of the course. I give individual answers (or my team does) but if the point is discussion-worthy I share it with the rest of the class.

Once again, this section of the course is constrained by time limitations as well as by the instructor's personal limitations: a Language III course could turn into a full-time job if not properly managed. It is up to the teacher to decide how much of his time he is ready and willing to devote to his class.

Advanced English Outside the Teacher Training

Where else can we teach Advanced English other than the Teacher Training course?

The first place that comes to mind is business enterprises, where often enough high or middle-ranking executives need to reach a high level of proficiency in English, not only to do business with native English speakers but with other foreign nationals as well. Off-hand one would argue, fairly reasonably, that this is a case of ESP. Basically yes, yet often enough there are social functions involved (business lunches, dinner and weekend invitations, getting to meet the family of the business associate, taking the prospective customer on a tour of the country, either for business or for social purposes, etc.) and our student requires the necessary training to carry out these tasks.

Another typical area is the medical world. Again, ESP will certainly do part of the job, but there is a host of social occasions similar to those described above, apart from chit-chat after a procedure, cafeteria talk, talking and texting on the phone, etc.

And then there is a miscellany of other prospective students like literary critics, film reviewers and translators, literature scholars, international examination candidates and the list goes on.

In most cases I recommend tailor-made service courses, where the student or group of students present their needs and the teacher implements the necessary techniques to meet them. The theoretical foundations upon which the approach is built are the same ones we have been discussing thus far, more explicitly stated in the first article. What varies radically is the kind of materials and situations that will be presented. I feel that while the teacher can suggest some of them given his expertise (sometimes!), the student is much better prepared to decide what resources he should have at hand.

Since often enough these classes are one-on-one, the teacher should be prepared with a variety of techniques to face moments of (mutual) boredom, attention flagging, interruptions, moods and the like. Although situations of this kind might also come up in a teacher training class, as a rule students enjoy the language class and activities are usually carried on as planned. They may enjoy linguistics, history or geography more or less but if they don't like the English language, what are they doing in an English Teacher Training course (unless the teacher is a hopeless bore)? This, unfortunately, is not always the case in private tutoring. Even when students have a fairly high command of the language and have valid reasons for furthering their training, internal and external situations sometimes conspire to boycott successful learning (pressure at work, frequent interruptions, cultural anomie, a feeling of "childishness" for having to go through a language learning process). At times like these, teacher personality could be of great help. On the other hand, the personal features of the teacher (age, gender, social class, nationality) may have either a positive or a negative impact on classroom dynamics: this is beyond our control.

By no means does this brief discussion exhaust every topic: I simply hope it has helped shed some light on some of the main issues. I am positive that ongoing research in the area and further technological advances will no doubt contribute to facilitating the Advanced English teacher's job: I certainly look forward to it.