Classroom Language:
seeing the wood as well as the trees

María José Martínez Azorín

E. U. de Formación del Profesorado de E.G.B. Universidad de Alicante.

Despite the enormous and spreading of the so-called Communicative Language Teaching, we could say the matter of *authenticity* (one of the points advocated by this approach) is still at stake. Teachers and researchers still seem to wonder to what estent the mixture of authentic and specially written or created material is valid. Furthermore, a total agreeement as far as what we mean by authenticity does not seem to exist [1]. For expositive reasons, I will understand by *authentic for the filtered* text), and by *authentic communication* that type of interaction where there is a *real* exchange of information.

Proponents of authentic materials point out that the texts and dialogues we use in class do not adequately prepare learners for coping with the language they hear and read in the real world outside the classroom, which means if we want learners to comprehend aural and written texts in the real world, then learners need opportunities for engaging in these real-world texts in class.[2]

Concerned as we may be with the issue of authenticity, that being of materials used as input or of the tasks students are expected to fulfil, we teachers tend to focus our attention on the content of the activities we prepare for our class *(knowledge subject)*, often forgetting about class procedures which, necessarily, have to be verbalized. In a foreign language situation where the teacher is a speaker of the L1 (the native language) -that being the situation we are more familiar with in Spain- it is oftenthe case that most part of the lesson is held in the L2 (the target language), except when we come to questions such as giving instructions, forming groups, setting time limits, asking questions, confirming answers, mantaining discipline, assigning tasks and so on, in which case we automatically switch to the mother tongue. In other words, we may spend a long time on the practice of structures and sentences such as "there is a book on the table" to end up saying something like "para mañana, el ejercicio de la página 27". As Glyn S. Hughes points out, "the role of this linguistic interaction is perhaps one of the least understood aspects of teaching, but it is clearly crucial to the success of the teaching/learning event"[3], and it is also, to my mind, the only type of communication that could be called *authentic*, as "the classroom situation is a genuine social

---

[1] "The authenticity of language data". *Explorations in Applied Linguistics*. H. G. Widdowson (ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979, pp. 163-172; Phillips, M. K. and Shettlesworth, C. C. "How to Arm your Students: a Consideration of Two Approaches to Providing Materials for ESP". *English for Specific Purposes, ELT Documents 101*. London: The British Council, pp. 23-29; Geddes, M., White, R. "The Use of Semi-scripted Simulated Authentic Speech and Listening Comprehensión". *Audio Visual Language Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 3, 1978, pp. 137-145.

[2] Nunan, David. *Designing Tasks for the Communicative Classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 54.

[3] *A Handbook of Classroom English*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981, p. 5.

environment which allows "the meaningful situational use of the language", and its communicative potential is closer to real interaction than it is often assumed" [4].

It is my intention through these pages to make foreing language teachers aware of the need to carry out those fragments of our lesson -which I will call *classroom language- also* in the target language, as there are a number of advantages that can be derived from such a practice.

If we believe in the maximun use of the L2 in the classroom, we should certainly consider English as the goal of our teaching, but also as the medium of instruction and class management. We must not forget that language is, basically, a tool for communication. There is no doubt that the class period is characterized by a high occurrence of information gaps that must be filled, as both the teacher and the students need this information in order to proceed to the next stage of the lesson. That means those gaps provide a good opportunity to use the language communicatively, that is, chances for the pupils to hear genunine uncontrolled language used for genuine communicative purposes. On the other hand, whereas most of the language practice sudents are used to lacks applicability in the real world -which may have negative consequences as far as motivation is concerned, for students end up finding English a boring subjet-, most classroom management phrases can be easily transferred to "normal" social situations. Expressions such as "Sorry, could you repeat that?", for instance, can be very practical in the interaction in English outside the classroom.

In addition to that, it is also true that most classroom situations have a very clear situational link, which gives teachers the chance to vary the form of instructions in order to show the range of possibilities in the foreing language: **Everybody, please; All together now; The whole class, please, I want you all to join in.** This provides students with the practice of vocabulary in context, the development of the skill of hearing new vocabulary in context and the contextualized use of structures that are being or are going to be taught.

If we had to classify the different types of classroom language, we could come up with two basic categories: *teacher talk, and student talk (test language* could also be considered as classroom language, but due to its nature I will regard it here as part of teacher talk).

Teacher talk may seem the most complex one, due, among other reasons, to the prestiged position assigned to teachers traditionally, but also to the fact that students are not, at least at a beginning or intermediate level, equipped with the linguistic code related to their problems and needs as learners. Most of the exchanges in class are probably initiated by the teacher. That makes sometimes a heavy demand on his/her language skills, that being the reason why attention to this type of classroom interaction should become, to my mind, a focus point in our teacher training courses.

There are four language macrofunctions that teacher talk can fulfil: organization, interrogation, explanation and interaction. Each of them can, in turn, be further divided into several subfunctions which respond to different objectives. I will try to list and exemplify them as follows [5] (this list would be appropriate for intermediate learners, although it could be very easily adapted to other levels).

---

[4] *ibid.* p. 6.

[5] This list is based on G.S. Hughes proposal in *op. cit.* pp. 9-11.

A. Organization

1. *Giving instructions:*

a. The teacher gives appropriate instructions related to recurrent classroom activities (e.g. using textbooks, blackboard work, group work):

Open your books at page 15
Listen to the tape, please
Get into groups of four
Finish this off at home

b. The teacher can control the pupils' behaviour by means of commands, requests, and suggestions:

Could you try the next one
I would like you to write this down
Would you mind switching the lights on?

c. The teacher can offer the pupils alternatives, such as different working methods, themes, groups, etc:

Who would like to read?
Which topic will your group report on?
Do you want to answer question 6?

2. *Sequencing:*

a. The teacher can sequence the lesson effectively and communicate this sequencing to the pupils:

First of all today...
Right, now we will go on to exercise 2
All finished? OK, for the last thing today, let's...
Let me explain what I want you to do next

b. The teacher can check what stage the pupils have reached, whose turn it is, and so on:

Whose turn is it to read?
Next one, please
Who hasn't answered a question yet?

c. The teacher can set time limits:

You have ten minutes to do this
Your time is up
The ten minutes are over

d. The teacher can check that all pupils are equally capable of starting the next stage of the lesson:

Can you all see the board?
Are you all ready?

3. *Supervision:*

a. The teacher can direct pupils' attention to the lesson content:

Look this way
Listen to what Pedro is saying
Stop talking!

B. Interrogation

1. *Asking Questions:*

a. The teacher can ask questions using the various forms available in the foreign language:

Where is Pedro?
Is Pedro in the toilet?
Tell me where Pedro is

b.The teacher can ask questions related to specific communicative tasks, e.g. giving a description, opinion, reason or stimulating a conversation:

What was the house like?
What do you think about this problem?

2. *Replying to questions:*

a. The teacher can give verbal confirmation of pupils' replies,

Yes, that's right

guide them to the correct reply,

Almost, try it again

or give encouraging feedback:

Very good
That's more like it
Could you explain what you mean?

C. Explanation

1. *Metalanguage:*

a. The teacher can produce and also get the pupils to produce a translation, a translation, a paraphrase, a summary, a definition, a correct spelling, a correct pronunciation and grammatical corrections:

What's the Spanish for 'doll'?
Explain it in your own words
It's spelt with a capital "J"

b. The teacher can give spoken instructions for exercises:

Fill in the missing words
Mark the correct answer

2. *Reference:*

a. The teacher can give a verbal commentary to accompany pictures, slides and films:

This is a picture of a typically English castle
In the background you can see...

b. The teacher can use basic rhetorical devices to make the commentary more easily followed:

As I said earlier
Let me sum up, then

C. Interaction

1. *Affective Attitudes:*

a. The teacher can express anger, interest, surprise, fiendship, appreciation, sympathy, disappointment, etc. as needed in the classroom situation:

That's interesting
That's very kind of you
Don't worry about it

2. *Social Ritual*

a. The teacher can use everyday phrases related to recurrent social situations, e.g. greeting, leaving, apologizing, thanking, congratulating and other seasonal greetings:

Good morning
Have a nice weekend
Thanks for your help
Happy birthday
Merry Christmas

As far as students are concerned, there is a factor that should be added to the benefits from managing our class in the foreign language mentioned so far: as members of a group, they want to maintain both their positive face (their need to be appreciated by others) and their negative face (their freedom from interference from others) [6]. In our native language we all master a set of strategies that enable us to avoid difficulties, to correct ourselves, or to ask for help in case of a linguistic problem, that is, we know how to save our face and the others'. This situation, however, turns out to be very different in the foreign language: the students' inability to go on speaking because of a lack of vocabulary may be perceived as a threat to their positive face. To save their own face, students can be taught how to gain time while talking, how to hedge, how to acknowledge their limitations and ask for help, etc. These are the functions we could find in student talk, and some examples of them:

A. Face Saving

1. *Gaining time while talking:*

This is a rather difficult question to answer
As I was saying before...

[6] Kramsch, Claire J. "Interactive Discourse in Small and Large Groups", *Interactive Language Teaching,* Wilga Rivers (ed.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, pp. 20-21.

2. *Hedging:*

Well, it's hard to say...
I'm not sure...

B. Following the lesson

1. *Repeat:*

I'm sorry, I didn't understand
You are speaking too quickly
I didn't get that down, could you say it again?
Could yor repeat the last bit?
I missed the begining of what you said
Could you explain that again?

2. *Explain:*

Do you mean that we should...?
Shall we do the exercises in our workbooks?
What shall we do when we have finished?
What do we have to do next?
Can you help me, please?

3. *Media*

It's too loud/soft
I can't hear/see/follow
You are in the way

4. *Place:*

Is it my turn?
Am I next?
Shall I start?
Where are we (up to)?

C. Correctness of answers

1. *Answers:*

What was the answer to number 7?
Was the answer to number 2 a or b?

2. *Right/Wrong:*

Why can't you say..?
Can I say...?
Is this a mistake?
What's wrong with (saying)...?
Why did you mark this wrong?
Is there a mistke in sentence 3?
Shouldn't the verb be in the future?

D. Language Questions

1. *Spelling:*

How do you spell...?
Are there two "l's" or only one?
Do I need a hyphen/comma/full stop?

2. *Pronunciation:*

How do you pronunce the next word?
I'm not sure how to say the next word
Where is the accent in this word?

3. *Grammar:*

Which tense should I use?
Why do you need the article?
What's the preposition after "to depend"?
Could you use the passive here?

4. *Understanding:*

I don't undertand this word
What's the meaning of "shelter"?
It still isn't clear to me what this means
Does it mean the same as?
What's the English for this word?

5. *Finding words:*

Is there a shorter way of saying this?
Is there a word in English that means the same as...? What would be another way of saying this?

E. Politeness

1. *Apologies:*

I'm sorry I'm late, I overslept...
I'm sorry, I don't know
I'm afraid I left my book at home

2. *Requests:*

Could I leave ten minutes early?
Could I have another copy?
Have you got an extra sheet?
May I go to the toilet?

3. *Offers of help:*

Shall I turn the lights on?

I think we all agree on the importance of careful advanced planning if we want our instruction to succeed. This does not mean, however, that teachers should avoid the spontaneous or unexpected situations that keep happening in class. In fact, the teacher's willingness or ability to deviate from a lesson plan in order to make use, for example, of the pupils' own interests and suggestions can provide with opportunities for authentic communication from which students will certainly benefit. Have you ever tried, for instance, to interrupt the class for a moment after a student's sneezing just to ask the rest of the class how they would say *Jesús* in English? Or what could you say if you came into the classroom to find a face drawn on the blackboard? Why not

taking advantage of such a situation in order to make an appropriate commentor joke (*Is that me?...*) in English?

A further point I would like to deal with before coming to an end is the delicate issue of *how* to teach this classroom language. It is my opinion that as regards this matter, each teacher should decide on his/her own, always depending on his/her teaching circumstances (students' need, age and level). As far as teacher talk, I could suggest the progresive introduction of these expressións as we need them, that is, teaching them precisely in the contextual situation that calls for them (in which case gestures can turn out to be very helpful). I think, however, this strategy should be applied always keeping in mind our students' level of knowledge, using those expressións, in fact, as examples of the structures or vocabulary we happen to be teaching at that very moment or that have already been taught, as I said before (some teachers, however, may decide to teach them simply as functions that need to be fulfilled in class, even though the grammar points they contain may not have been covered in class, this technique being particularly adequate with children).

As for student talk, we could provide students with a list of the expressións that they are likely to need according to their level of competence and explain them in class, thus turning this classroom language into the content of our instruction, that is, into knowledge subject, for, after all, that is what it is. As such, we could consider classroom language as material to be included in our exams, in order to make sure our students have acquired it. Other teachers suggest the idea of fixing signs or posters to walls, evento ceiling, and let them remain there for a while, so that students can have a look at them whenever they need to, something which will probably help our pupils to learn them by heart.

Finally, although I have been advocating a maximun use of the L2, in which I firmly believe, I would not like to leave the reader with the impression that I am holdinga dogmatic position. As a matter of fact, many teachers may feel reluctant to use that classroom language in the L2 because they are afraid of unavoidable misunderstandings on the student's part. It is my opinion teachers should always feel free to use the mother tongue, althoughit is also true that a first attempt could be made in the target language. In this way, the better students have an opportunity to listen and try to understand while the weaker ones can rely more on the L1 translation.

To end with, it was my intention through this article simply to make clear the enormous intrinsic potential that the classroom situation has in language teaching: "By managing the class deliberately and flexibly in the L2, the teacher is taking an important step towards removing the barriers between controlled, and often meaningles, practice and more genuine interactional language use" [7]. In other words, as G. Hughes puts it, "the very goal of a teacher's efforts can also be used as a powerful and adaptable tool in achieving that goal", or, the other way round, let's turn our means of teaching into our goal, for once, and we will be killing two birds with one stone[8].

---

[7] Hughes, G. p. 8.

[8] *Idem.*

REFERENCES

Doff, Adrian. *Teach English: A Training course for Teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.

Hughes, G. S. *A Handbook of Classroom English*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981.

Kramsch, Claire J. "Interactive Discourse in Small and Large Groups", Interactive Language Teaching, Wilga Rivers (ed.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

Nunan, David. *Designing Tasks for the Communicative Classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

Underwood, Mary. *Effective Class Management*. New York: Longman Group Ltd., 1987.