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DEVELOPING THE ADVANCED LEARNER'S PRODUCTIVE SKILLS

Introduction

Approaches to teaching speaking and writing, as well as other aspects of a foreign language (L2), have always been very strongly influenced by changing views on the nature of foreign language education. These changes have automatically been reflected in the objectives and content of L2 syllabuses and materials.

In traditional methods, for example, speaking meant memorisation of texts, repetition after the teacher or tape, and other drill-based activities with stress on learning pronunciation. Since the emergence of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approaches to foreign language learning have undergone a further metamorphosis. The key priority for most learners is now fluency, or more precisely, spoken fluency, which seems to have become the goal of contemporary language education. This widespread promotion of fluency, additionally reinforced by the role of English as today's, and probably tomorrow's 'global language' of the 'global world' (Crystal 2003), has led to a real abundance of tasks focusing on oral communication. Yet, while the development of productive skills, and speaking in particular, holds such a prominent place in 21st century foreign language teaching (FLT), for the advanced language learner these two skills invariably remain the most difficult ones to master. The forthcoming sections of the article attempt to identify and investigate the potential causes of the problem and examine some alternative solutions.

Fads and fashions

Naturally, the first question which needs to be addressed concerns the effectiveness of current teaching methods.

Focus on fluency

In contemporary EFL course books, which dutifully reflect prevailing communicative trends and, of course, the general language policy of the Council of Europe (CoE), fluency is practised and developed through various forms of activities based on students' interaction (in pairs or groups), and the principle of information gap. In fact, information gap, defined in terms of factual knowledge gap, has become a characteristic feature of communicative activities. "The bulk of these information-

-gap activities in a typical textbook creates the impression that the core of the social communicative activity relies on role-play, spot-the-difference activities, bridging the gap on the basis of personal forms, picture description tasks, and developing notes into full texts" (Dakowska 2003: 96–97).

This one-dimensional perception on the nature of communication leads to pseudo-authentic classroom simulations which simply cannot become effective production activities as they involve roles or situations which are often not even remotely related to students' experience, interests, knowledge and needs (lack of common ground), for which students are simply not ready, e.g. "Work in groups of four. You are on the Board of Directors of All Seasons. You are going to decide how to save the company. Before the meeting, prepare your ideas and review your notes from the consultant's report. Student A, B, C, D: go to page..." (Cotton et al. 2010: 55). Another frequent shortcoming of CLT speaking tasks is that they tend to be repetitive and tedious, e.g. "If you happened to win £100, what would you do with it? Discuss" (Wilson and Clare 2007: 66), or very mechanical: all they really ask the student to do is rearrange the elements of the information given – no intellectual effort required (e.g. writing letters of application based on the provided model).

As a result, learners become seemingly fluent, but only in the sphere of basic, linguistically and cognitively undemanding communication (Wenzel 2001). Therefore, it can be argued that tasks solely preoccupied with simulated communicative practice play a rather secondary role in terms of educational experience they provide for the advanced learner.

Focus on pair work

The whole discussion on communicative activities brings us to another characteristic feature of CLT-based programmes, namely pair work and group work. Communicative Language Teaching simply thrives on peer interaction. Throughout all the levels of ELT, group and pair work format is encouraged for all kinds of activities, the assumption being that it greatly increases the amount of time devoted to active speaking and generates more opportunities for student talk and input, i.e. communicative interaction. This, indeed, might be the case, especially at the stage of in-class brainstorming for ideas, critical discussions or planning. However, as Dakowska (2003: 103–104) points out, "peer input reaching the learner in pair and group work is not of the same quality as native or native-like input which can push the learner's development further. With limited error correction, various communicative activities may help proceduralization of incomplete knowledge and practicing incomplete strategies." It is mainly in this sense, i.e. lack of quality input and constructive feedback on error, that excessive dependence on pair and group work often turns out to be counterproductive, particularly in view of the needs and goals of the advanced learner.

Accuracy and correctness – out of focus

As we can see, CLT not only places communicative fluency on a pedestal, but also neglects many other valid aspects of foreign language learning. "The impressively fluent behaviour of the competent speaker is regarded both as a means and the end to the means" (Dakowska 2003: 105). As such, however, communicative teaching alone, while effective in developing communication skills, does not enable the

learner to achieve a high level of linguistic competence. With its unbalanced focus on fluency and processing language for meaning, the communicative school of teaching promotes and develops only top-down strategies based on context, at the expense of bottom-up strategies aiming at the decoding and encoding of the linguistic form (Ellis, Loewen and Basturkmen 2003).

Unfortunately, this kind of approach is educationally harmful. It completely disregards the fact that speaking and writing for the linguistic aims, i.e. conscious language study and practice of linguistic correctness (classification adopted from Wenzel 2001), are equally significant in foreign language education. Ironically enough, it is while developing the productive skills, and writing in particular, that accuracy and correctness of verbal expression can be thoroughly refined and cultivated. Therefore, as Dakowska (2003: 99) concludes, "the treatment of communicative effectiveness as more important than accuracy goes against the grain of the quintessential nature of language as a system of signs."

Viewed from this perspective, communicative approaches, with their overemphasis on fluency and simultaneous neglect of linguistic precision and correctness, are more likely to impede than facilitate the advanced learner's progress to higher proficiency levels. From the above observations it follows that despite its numerous achievements in the field of foreign language didactics, "it would be a mistake to consider the contribution of Communicative Language Teaching as a final word in matters of developing foreign language skills, especially speaking, because of the narrow view of communication underlying CLT" (Dakowska 2005: 232).

It is therefore one of the aims of this paper to suggest that the development of productive skills must not be restricted to simulations of real-life communication (simulated communicative practice). Both speaking and writing should be equally effectively used as a stimulus for the expansion of students' linguistic knowledge. I am convinced that continuous development of this knowledge, rather than fluency-oriented "communicative" pair work, can aid the advanced learner in expanding his/her linguistic competence beyond the modest range of expressions and structures acquired at lower levels.

The advanced student – a fossil

It follows that further development of the linguistic aims plays an exceptionally significant role in the process of language education at the highest proficiency levels. The present section attempts to address this issue in view of the distinctive features of advanced students.

Today's advanced learners share several characteristics. First of all, they are all children of the communicative revolution. That is why it should come as no surprise that their command of L2 mirrors most of the virtues and vices of the communicative trend. Since day one of their EFL adventure these learners have followed a rigorous communicative diet, which, while simultaneously nurturing their fluency, cut out almost all accuracy. What it means in terms of their productive skills is that at the advanced level (C1 according to CEF) students are generally able to handle communication in most situations and express themselves on most topics fluently, spontaneously and coherently. They also know how to engage the reader or listener and how to construct extended stretches of discourse. Yet, although they

seem communicatively successful, their flow of speech is neither entirely natural nor correct. Conceptually difficult topics continue to hinder fluency while students struggle to recall or find the precise word, collocation, idiom needed to express some nuances or finer shades of meaning. They still tend to produce inaccuracies and inappropriacies, also in pronunciation and spelling, although these generally do not affect the clarity of the message (North 2007, University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations).

Having achieved a comfortable level of communicative fluency, it is these advanced learners in particular who find it extremely difficult to expand their active linguistic repertoire. As the grammar and vocabulary which have been automatised so far allow them to function successfully in everyday communication, they generally cease to advance any further. They basically come to a point in their L2 education when they get stuck in a phase of learning or, in other words, reach a plateau in language acquisition.

This naturally brings us to the issue of fossilisation, traditionally associated with lower proficiency levels, which turns out to be also one of the key problems of the advanced learner. Interestingly enough, fossilisation at this level predominantly affects the productive skills whereas the receptive skills generally continue to evolve. Apparently, the areas of particular concern are lexicon, register and pronunciation. The safe and conveniently available routine structures and lexis become “fixed in the mind and always ready to be used, blocking [...] the use of new structures and words, which have been explained to the students, but which have been used in the more passive spheres of listening and reading” (Wenzel 2001: 98). Consequently, as Marton (1977: 36) reports, almost all advanced learners, in spite of their continual exposure to the target language, do not show any marked improvement in their linguistic development. Regardless of their seemingly impressive communication skills, they continue to rely on the language acquired at earlier stages of learning.

For the most part, they resort to compensatory and avoidance strategies, such as paraphrase, approximation, circumlocution, message reduction, semantic avoidance, etc. (Chesterman 1998). Broadly speaking, when they do not know or are not certain of the correct applications of particular words, collocations or structures, they play it safe by choosing the tried and tested semi-equivalents, preferably the ones which do not involve any risk of making a mistake and guarantee their communicative success (Rivers 1973, Marton 1974). These communication strategies enable learners to express themselves correctly yet inadequately. Nonetheless, no matter how linguistically imperfect the learner’s discourse is, on the whole the output is comprehensible, and so communication is achieved (Marton 1977).

It appears, however, that although through all levels of the Common European Framework (CoE 2006) the emphasis is clearly on “getting-by” in a foreign language, the good advanced learner is no longer satisfied with conveying a message which is merely understandable. Rather, his/her objective is to be able to do it with the accuracy and fluency of a well-educated native speaker – WENS (term adopted from North 2005). To put it in other words, advanced learners expect to become bilingual and bicultural, perhaps not in an absolute sense, but to the greatest possible extent. Regrettably, in most cases their level of proficiency in terms of lexical precision, grammatical and discourse sophistication is not sufficiently developed. Although

they often reach near-native level in receptive skills, their productive skills hardly improve at all.

Consequently, when they finally arrive at the level of language learning where they function as independent users – C1/good operational proficiency (CEF), they begin to realise that despite the time and effort invested in learning L2, their active command of the language is by no means perfect. In other words, what they have achieved seems very limited in relation to their expected ideal: bilingual and bicultural competence. Thus, the most important question which arises at this stage is how to assist the learners in pursuing this dream.

Implications for the advanced level

It goes without saying that students at the highest proficiency levels are in need of excellent, academic and non-academic, written and oral language skills for use in their studies and future careers. Although verbal fluency, especially in speaking, is of primary importance in this day and age, it cannot be denied that also accuracy and correctness in speech as well as outstanding written abilities are indispensable in achieving high-level communication. If today's students, but tomorrow's leading economists, politicians, doctors and lawyers, cannot produce the standard of language that is effective and accepted as appropriate, they are likely to be disempowered in important areas of their professional and private lives. That is why the challenge is to find solutions which will enable these learners to further develop not only fluency but also accuracy, appropriateness and sophistication of language use – all the essential elements in reaching superior proficiency levels.

It is my firm conviction that in order to do it effectively, the syllabus has to address the neglected, less developed areas. Unfortunately, lists with words and phrases provided in the course book with the instruction, for example: "Discuss in pairs. Try to use some of the expressions in the *How to...* box" (Wilson and Clare 2007: 68) are perhaps not the most fortunate solution. Similarly, learning to write successfully does not mean copying a range of model texts and reshuffling some elements. At this level, students should be assigned more demanding and linguistically sophisticated tasks, which require a dramatically different scale of precision and correctness to that expected of lower-levels. One such alternative solution is briefly introduced in the subsequent section, which looks at the possibility of implementing translation as a complementary approach to the teaching of productive skills at advanced levels.

Focus on translation

Due to some mistaken associations with the old Grammar Translation Method (GMT), many methodologists still maintain that translation is bad pedagogy. Nonetheless, translation is the oldest method of learning a second language, and the fact that we cannot practise GMT without using translation certainly does not mean that we cannot use translation in FLT without practising the Grammar Translation Method (Claypole 2010: 77). In this part of the article it will be argued that despite its fairly limited popularity in the communicative EFL classroom, translation can become an invaluable component of advanced EFL courses.

For the sake of clarity, however, it needs to be emphasized at this point that the present discussion should not be interpreted as an appeal for a revival of the Grammar Translation Method. Neither does it intend to imply that translation ought to be a primary teaching or learning activity in a foreign language classroom. Instead, the main intention is to speak in favour of making use of translation as a complementary resource for the development of linguistic sophistication, accuracy and correctness of expression combined with the conscious study of a foreign language.

Benefits for the learner

The underlying conviction is that, for a balanced and uninterrupted development of advanced level productive skills, the practice of translation proper, i.e. interlingual L1 to L2 translation, carried out at all text levels (total translation) is a sophisticated task offering a myriad of long-term benefits to the advanced student.

Firstly, the practice of translation allows students to focus on form in the full context of a message-oriented activity: it primarily draws students' attention to conveying message content and yet, throughout most of the stages, it also focuses on form. As a result, within a single activity, students receive extensive communicative practice reinforced by conscious language development. By bridging the gap between advanced learners' high-level fluency and sub-standard accuracy and correctness of linguistic expression, translation can help them make a leap from the stage of learning plateau to higher proficiency levels, or from level B2/C1 to C2 and beyond the CEF scale.

Secondly, since translation for the advancement of productive skills is interpreted here as the transfer of meaning from students' L1 to L2 across linguistic and cultural boundaries, in translation tasks the student has to decode/interpret and then encode/re-express the meaning/message of the source text relying on textual information – the linguistic material, as well as contextual information – the context in which something is said. Naturally, while translating, students inevitably stumble upon some problems inherent in translation, e.g. its culture-bound aspects, translatability and untranslatability, etc. to which they have to work out some adequate solutions. In the process of total translation – complete translation at all levels of functional equivalence (Catford 1965), linguistic precision and appropriateness go beyond lexical and syntactical correctness. They entail the use of suitable register and adherence to the conventions of a given type of text. Seen in this light, the practice of translation is an extremely complex linguistic and cognitive activity which involves work on the linguistic, sociolinguistic and cultural levels of spoken or written discourse; an activity in the course of which the student becomes a mediator between different linguistic systems and cultural dimensions.

Thirdly, at level C1, where students have at their fingertips multiple safe structures or words to express the essence of an idea, and where over-dependence on various replacement and avoidance strategies reaches epidemic proportions, translation may prove to be the only efficient weapon against further fossilisation. One could even say that for the 21st century advanced student, slightly spoilt by the diet of communicative language teaching, translation takes on the role of a disciplinarian. According to Aarts (1968: 225) "Translation imposes a very rigid kind of discipline upon the student, because he is confronted with a text which he

cannot get away from, so to speak: he is to translate the text as it is before him with all its lexical and grammatical difficulties. [...] I am convinced that if a student fails to use certain grammatical structures or idiomatic phrases correctly in a translation, he would not be able to use them correctly in an essay or a conversation either."

Last but not least, further justification for the use of oral and written translation at post-C1 levels can also be found in the role it plays in developing the learner's autonomy. Since exercises in translation, in particular back-translation, can also be performed independently – as a form of self-education, it can be assumed that regular practice of translation will equip the learners with skills and strategies useful on their path of autonomous lifelong learning. Here the role of the teacher consists of guiding the students in their studies and in the coordination of such autonomous individual work with institutional teaching. Translation from L1 to L2 provides a multitude of opportunities for such self-development, not only for the advanced student but also for the language teacher. The tasks are extremely challenging and time-consuming as they involve searching in all kinds of resources. Nonetheless, the effort is worth it because it is "rewarded with an extensive, all-round development of the second language. The final product may not necessarily be of high artistic quality, but in terms of self-education the [...] development is remarkable" (Wenzel 2001: 181).

Practical suggestions

In order to maximise the impact of translation on students' active command of the foreign language or, in other words, for translation to be successful, it must never be approached in a void. That is why any material selected for translation must meet at least the following criteria: varied, authentic, fully contextualised input, characterised by a high degree of cognitive appeal. As "all language is relevant to translation – all styles and registers of both speech and writing" (Duff 1996: 6), it is also recommended that the material should be wide-ranging in scope, thus allowing the learner to experience the whole language, not just the fragments randomly isolated by the authors of the course book. The range of materials and tasks suitable for translation is incredibly wide (see e.g. Duff 1981,1994), thus allowing the teacher to cater for all possible interests and educational objectives.

Additionally, today's high pace of technological innovations creates favourable conditions for overcoming the monotony associated with written translation in GTM. For speech development, for instance, it is recommended that students perform consecutive interpreting of Internet/TV recorded news, interviews, speeches, series, documentaries, extracts from feature films, etc. Their performance can be further videotaped to allow for objective and constructive feedback. For writing, on the other hand, apart from the perhaps more common translations of articles, brochures, extracts from stories or short novels, the advanced learner may be asked to create scripts or subtitles (also with the aid of subtitling software) for the media-based input mentioned earlier (e.g. Vanderplank 1988). Like the input, the product of the translation process can be in the oral or written form, although with regard to the 90-minute-limit of an average EFL class, it might be more justifiable to leave the longer, written translations for out-of-class preparation.

In fact, students at the highest proficiency levels can try their hand at any kind of translation activity. It is important, however, to bear in mind that since the focus is on speaking and writing, it is translation from Polish into English that deserves their attention as more beneficial for target language practice (Dakowska 2005: 30).

These requirements fulfilled, translation into L2 holds promise for a linguistically and cognitively demanding activity with a multitude of long-lasting benefits for the ambitious L2 learner. In fact, it is my experience and firm conviction that in language learning at the highest proficiency levels the merits of translation are so manifold that their precise description would require at least a separate article.

Concluding remarks

Although it cannot be denied that the development of L2 speaking skills is a priority of contemporary communicative task-based approaches, many advanced learners invariably lack and cease to acquire the linguistic knowledge and competences which are necessary for achieving the highest proficiency levels. In the absence of extensive immersion in an English-speaking country, most advanced learners still cannot fully comprehend, let alone produce, natural spoken or written English. Instead, they tend to generate course book English or, more appropriately perhaps, an advanced version of interlanguage, all too often characterised by inappropriate use of register, collocations, idioms and a fossilised repertoire of vocabulary.

Learning a foreign language, however, should be oriented towards the native, socially-acceptable form as “a learner’s L2 system is functional when targeted at this socially-accepted form, not at stabilising the idiosyncratic, transient approximation” (Dakowska 2003: 147). When speaking is confined only to fluency and deprived of informative teacher feedback including error correction, the development of linguistic precision and accuracy will remain an unrealistic expectation.

Therefore, as we consider how we might facilitate the attainment of these superior level competences, we come to the conclusion that L2 instruction must certainly remain communicative in the sense that it must involve the communicative aims of real-life discourse reception and production, yet it must also incorporate the linguistic aims of conscious language study and linguistic practice of correctness. When balanced development in terms of accuracy, sophistication of L2 use and WENS-like fluency is the goal of EEL instruction, the point is not to oppose these two aims of teaching but to account for such procedures which would enable the learner to develop both of them. Provided the principles outlined in the previous sections are followed, this can, for example, be co-achieved through the practice of oral and written translation.

It is hoped that the arguments presented in the article, although the list is by no means exhaustive, as well as – even more importantly – the references listed below, suffice to show that the incorporation of functional translation into a foreign language syllabus at an advanced level can considerably enhance the process of genuine development of production skills, thus contributing to the learner’s evolution from communicative fluency to full bilingual competence.

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Rozwój sprawności produktywnych u uczniów zaawansowanych

Streszczenie

Ostatnie dekady w nauczaniu języków obcych są zdominowane przez Podejście Komunikacyjne (CLT), wskazujące *używanie języka* jako główny cel nauczania. Nauczyciele na wszystkich poziomach nauczania skupiają się na rozwijaniu sprawności komunikacyjnych przez ćwiczenie rozumienia ze słuchu i mówienia. Celem niniejszego artykułu jest krytyczna ocena efektywności nauczania komunikacyjnego w rozwijaniu sprawności produktywnych na poziomie zaawansowanym, biorąc pod uwagę ogólne cele kształcenia, poziom ucznia, jego potencjał kognitywny i potrzeby edukacyjne.

Analizując wybrane techniki stosowane w podręcznikach do nauczania języka angielskiego na poziomie zaawansowanym należy stwierdzić, że Podejście Komunikacyjne nie spełnia wymagań ucznia na poziomie zaawansowanym. Proponuje się zatem alternatywne rozwiązania przez zastosowanie takich technik jak tłumaczenie, które pod koniec procesu kształcenia językowego zwiększą jego efektywność.