Blurring the Boundary Between Spoken and Written Language in EFL

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Introduction

The present lesson plan for a teacher training session will focus on the teacher's awareness about language and its context of production. The approach is theory-driven, but based on activities which can be adapted and successfully used for awareness-raising activities in language classes at different levels.

The present lesson plan is based on two main basic assumptions. First of all there is the need for the language teacher to reflect on his/her own practice. The second assumption deriving from the first is that the group of teachers addressed is not an audience, but the fundamental resource to draw upon. The teachers will be asked to think of their classroom experience and reflect critically upon it, analyse whether what is being discussed has relevance for their teaching practice, whether it can be used in class and how or whether what is being said should be simply part of the teacher's awareness of behaviours, tools, language (Hedge, 2000; Harmer, 1998; Nunan & Lamb, 1995; Woodward, 1991; Kramsch, 1993; Bygate et al., 1994; McCarthy and Carter, 1994; Carter, 1990; Cook, 1989).

In summary, the present lesson plan is based on the key concepts of reflection on one's professional practice and awareness of the people, the context and the 'tools' contributing to that practice.

In a more specific way, the sessions I outline in this plan are based on the need for the language teacher to be aware of the fundamental resources s/he is dealing with: the language and, as a consequence, its context of production, the types of participants in the communicative event and the cultural conventions.

General Approach and Procedure

Given that the focus of the session is language awareness, the approach used in planning it is theory-driven. The aims for this choice are to show the link between theory and practice in our profession and to discuss the problem of how reflection on some theoretical issues can bring about self-assessment, change and development in the teacher's practice.

However theory-driven, the approach will have to take into account the needs of language teachers and the applicability of language reflection in the classroom context and in teaching practice. Therefore the procedure will be based on theory applied to actual language and reflective tasks which, with some adjustments, may be also used in the language class.

Abbreviations

- LT: language teachers participating in the course
- TT: teacher organising the course (teacher trainer)
- L / Ls: learner or learners in the language class
- T / Ts: teacher or teachers of the foreign language class
- class: foreign language class
- SL: spoken language
- WL: written language

Teacher Training Context

Time: 3-hour session.

Target Population:

Teachers of English as a foreign language. The levels of teaching experience may be varied since the focus of the session is language awareness rather than teaching techniques.

Setting and Materials:

Ideally a well-lit, large room with comfortable tables and chairs which can be easily moved around and re-arranged according to the needs of the participants.

There should be a large enough board, O.H.P., tape recorder, video, stationery materials for writing posters and transparencies. In the first session a computer will be needed in order to show a section of a hypertext.

Assumptions

- In general LTs have a good knowledge of language phenomena. This is usually complemented by their own experience as Ls, LTs and trainees on practical teacher training courses. This background varies individually for the single teacher, but in general terms, it offers a very diversified and interesting pool of resources to draw upon.
- It will be assumed that the level of comprehension of English in the group is generally good and the spoken competence from the level of upper-intermediate upward.
- One of the main TT's targets for the sessions will be to motivate the participants, giving them fairly new or thought-provoking perspectives on knowledge about language within a self-reflective approach. The problem will, then, be to associate theory and practice, moving on from the resources of the group and motivating them enough so as to provoke debate, further ideas and constructive critical thinking about their own language awareness in relation to their students and the learning environment.

Aims

1. The general aim of the session is to focus the LTs' critical observation and reflection on what is both the most important resource and the most important goal of our profession: language use in meaningful communication and its contexts of production.

    Language is not simply a set of abstract or practical rules, a system of sounds, syntactic and semantic structures: it is first and foremost a series of communicative events deeply rooted in specific contexts informed by cultural schemata. The participants in the interaction (oral or written) can enact, reinforce, challenge or subvert conventionalised language use. No linguistic act is 'neutral' or unaffected by contextual variables. Language is value-laden and deeply engrained into the beliefs and cultural background of the participants in the communicative event. The foreign LTs confront this issue more than other teachers because they have to deal with two or more cultures and sets of linguistic conventions.

2. The critical reflection of the LTs on the language used in class, found in text-books, materials, newspapers and other media is related to the issue of how to foster critical thinking in the Ls. It seems to me that this can become an act of 'appropriation' (or re-appropriation) of the language and can be transferred, as a set of critical skills, to the first language as well.

    General reference: van Djik, 1997a, 1997b; Phillipson, 1992; Fairclough, 1989, 1992a, 1992b; Kramsch, 1993; Halliday, 1989.

3. For the trainees who are not native speakers, another indirect aim will be the practice in the foreign language.

Beginning of the Session and Presentation of Work

(10 minutes)

- Very brief introduction of the TT.

- Brief outline of the aims for the session.
- Explanation of the way the TT envisages the procedure for the session: not a lecture, but participation of the LTs in tasks, activities and critical reflection.
- If the group is relatively small (up to 25 people), it is possible to ask the trainees to introduce themselves briefly and mention some main aspects of their personal and professional life (3 personal and 3 professional aspects). This should give the TT some elements to adapt her session to the interests and teaching experience of the audience.

Stage 1

(65 minutes)

Objectives

- To focus on the differences and similarities of spoken and written language (SL and WR from now on).
- To show how the broad distinction that is usually made between SL and WL is just a simplified convention of extremely complex and multifarious sets of use. Stage 1 will try to show that traditional clear-cut categories give an inaccurate picture of authentic language use and they may become a limitation for the language learner.
- The underlying questions of Stage 1 are: why should the LTs be aware of these complexities and these niceties? To what extent is this useful in the class? What is the pedagogical relevance of it all? It is hoped that possible answers will be offered by the activities themselves. (Ong, 1982; Biber, 1988; Halliday, 1989; Mengham, 1993; Carter & McCarthy, 1997).

Procedure

1. (10 minutes)

- The LTs are asked to work in groups of 3: brainstorm and write on a piece of paper the main characteristics of SL and WL.
- They will be given about 10 minutes and then they will be asked to put the piece of paper away and keep it for a later activity.

2. (15 minutes)

- The LTs are given photocopies to work on in the same groups as before. The photocopies contain stretches of texts taken from different sources and not acknowledged. See Worksheet 1:

Worksheet 1

A. In the old days teachers used to just whack out reading texts like hot dinners. No instruction. No arousing interest. Just eyes down. Nice and quiet for the teacher, of course.

B. Art 130R provides that the following are Community objectives: preservation, protection and improvement of the quality of the environment; contribution to protecting human health; ensuring the prudent and rational utilisation of natural resources. How far this latter head relates to energy resources remain uncertain.

C. 'T'maister nobbut just buried, and Sabbath not o'ered, und t'sound o't'gospel still i'yer lugs, and ye darr be laiking! Shame on ye! Sit ye down, ill childer! there's good books eneugh if ye'll read'em: sit ye down, and think o'yer sowls.'

D. If you don't like it you can get on with it, I said.

Others can pick and choose if you can't.

E. The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative'; in other words, a set of objects, a situations, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.

F. Dear Maria,

I am glad I got your letter. I am in Manchester for two more weeks till August 5th at the Uni, doing some reading, working on my gesture program and of course, enjoying the luscious green spacious parks...

G. Would you like a biscuit?

I beg your pardon.

Would you like a biscuit?

Oh, yes please. Thank you very much.

H. D'you want a biscuit?

Erm

Biscuit?

Er yeah

All right

Yeah

I. James is officially off his head.

James is officially office head.

(end of worksheet 1)

- The LTs are asked to decide whether the texts belong to SL or WL and possibly to guess what text-type they have been taken from. Before the activity, the TT will make sure the concept of text-type is clear to everybody.

(5 minutes for the preparation of the task, 10 minutes for group work).

3. (15 minutes)

- After 10 minutes (or before if some groups have been faster) the TT tells the LTs to carry on with the next activity in their own time, when they have finished number 2.
- Once they have looked at all texts, they should try to range them on a cline of formality, from 'formal' to 'informal' language. Before starting the activity, the TT will make sure that the keywords 'formal' and 'informal' are clear, and a simplified explanation will be elicited or given (at this point a simple, conventional explanation will do). >From now on it will be assumed for the whole session that the TT will make sure that specific terminology is clear to all the participants and is explicitly defined.

(5 minutes for the explanation of the activity, 10 minutes for the task).

4. (20 minutes)

Plenary: discussion on the texts, their source, if they are SL or WL, if the distinction is really possible for all texts. What are the trickiest texts to label (texts taken from literature, for instance, or publicity)? What are the criteria they used to come to their conclusions? In what ways do contextual variables influence differently WL and SL?

5.

At the end of the activity the TT hands-out the photocopy with the list of sources from which the texts come from: Worksheet 2.

Worksheet 2

A. Tessa Woodward. 1991. Models and Metaphors in Language Teacher Training. Cambridge: C.U.P.; p. 26.

B. David Hughes. 1992. Environmental Law. London: Butterworth, p.90.

C. Joseph, the servant in Wuthering Heights by Charlotte Bronte.

D. T.S. Eliot. The Waste Land. (A Game of Chess)

E. T.S. Eliot. Hamlet.

F. personal e-mail, 21/7/98

G. Contrived conversation. Carter R. and McCarthy M. 1997. Exploring Spoken English. Cambridge: C.U.P, p.64.

H. Transcript from real conversation. Ibid.: 65.

I. Billboard advertisement for hi-fi system. Seen in Manchester and Birmingham railway stations, July 1998.

(end of worksheet 2)

6. (5 minutes)

The TT asks the LTs to look again at the distinction between SL and WL they had written at the beginning of the session and see whether they want to add something to it or change something. Again they are asked to keep the sheet of paper for a follow-up activity.

Anticipated Outcomes to Stage 1

- The activity should highlight how the commonsensical clear-cut difference between oral and written texts is insufficient to account for the complex reality of authentic texts. Some genres (keyword to clarify and define) are usually considered fairly monolithic (poetry or the novel); in actual fact, they are a melting pot of linguistic uses (due also to covert or overt intertextuality). The TT will admit at this point that she chose stretches of literary texts which are particularly difficult to identify without a larger co-text.
- Some genres can be considered prototypically spoken (face-to-face interaction) or written (academic writing), but others are in-between cases sharing characteristics of both prototypically spoken and written language. The concepts of prototypically written text-types and prototypically spoken text-types will be introduced.
- These preliminary remarks should already foster some critical thinking on the clear-cut divisions we use in class when speaking of language, its formality and genres or text-types.
- It is not possible to speak of either dichotomy or cline of written and spoken language since there is much overlapping between the two and there are clusters of variables at work, rather than just a cline of features (Biber, 1988).
- The concepts of formality and informality (and the related concepts of indirectness and directness) do not fit the written and spoken 'divide', but intertwine in complex ways with it.
- At this point the TT will decide whether the concept of formality is worth investigating and discussing or not. The decision will be made on the basis of the responses given by the LTs, the focus of their answers and the interest shown about the topic.
- When the discussion touches upon the variables which contribute to the distinction between SL and WL, it can be expected that the LTs will mention the relationship between addresser and addresse, the context, the text-type, the register, the fact that WL can be read over and over again over time, across cultures, etc.

Stage 2

(65 minutes + 10 minutes break)

Objectives

- Focusing on the language class more closely than in the previous stage (when the issue was only mentioned, but never really investigated) and looking at the most frequent text-types used in class (written, spoken and 'in-between').
- Discussing the language of text-books and pedagogical grammars and discussing whether it reflects more spoken or written usage, to what extent this can be problematic for the learner and to what extent it reflects authentic use of the language.

Procedure

1. (10 minutes for the explanations + 10 minutes break + 20 minutes group and pair work)

- In the course of the discussion at the end of Stage 1, the TT will shift the focus to texts G and H on Worksheet 1.
- The TT will elicit the reaction of the LTs to the two texts.
- The photocopy in Worksheet 3 is handed out. The TT acknowledges the source (Carter & McCarthy, 1997), explains the fact that the text is the transcript of a real conversation (taken from the CANCODE spoken corpus) and asks the LTs to work on the photocopy.

Worksheet 3

The dialogue is taken from Carter R. and McCarthy M. 1997. Exploring Spoken English. Cambridge: C.U.P, pages 64-65.

S: Speaker; the action takes place Speaker 1,2,4's kitchen. Speaker 3 is a visitor.

Transcript

1. <S 01> Now I think you'd better start the rice
2. <S 02> Yeah -- what you got there?
3. [4 secs]
4. <S 02> Will it all fit in the one?
5. <S 01> No you'll have to do two separate ones
6. <S 03> right -- what next?
7. [17 secs]
8. <S 03> Foreign body in there
9. <S 02> It's the raisins
10. <S 03> Oh is it oh it's rice with raisins is it?
11. <S 02> | No no no it's not supposed to be
12. [laughs] erm
13. <S 03> There must be a raisin for it being in there
14. <S 02> D'you want a biscuit?
15. <S 03> Erm
16. <S 02> Biscuit?
17. <S 03> r yeah
18. [9 secs]
19. <S 04> All right
20. <S 03> Yeah
21. [10 secs]
22. <S 04> Didn't know you used boiling water
23. <S 02> Pardon
24. <S 04> Didn't know you used boiling water

25. <S 02> Don't have to but erm -- they reckon it's erm quicker
26. 26 [5 secs]

(end of worksheet 3)

- The LTs form groups of 4.

A. First they have to decide on the level of formality of the language and in which sections of text the context and the familiarity between the characters make the language rather difficult to process for readers.

B. Then they should split into pairs: one pair analyses the language and decides what the characteristics of spoken language in this interaction are and how it differs from the language of coursebooks and pedagogical grammars; the other pair tries to transform the transcript into a text that might typically be found in a coursebook and can be read aloud by four people.

C. At the end, the group of 4 writes on a large poster the characteristics of spoken language they have found and prepare to read the 'coursebook' dialogue aloud, acting it out together.

2. (20 minutes)

- At the end of the discussion each group (if there are not too many of them) will read their revised dialogue.
- The posters will be put on the wall and each LT will contribute with one aspect of spoken langauge found in the dialogue until all the main aspects have been discussed.
- While this is taking place, the LTs are asked to look again at the individual sheet of paper on which they wrote the characteristics of SL and WL and complete it or change it according to the information coming from the discussion.

3. (15 minutes)

Plenary discussion:

- It will focus on the difficulties of matching pedagogical grammars, the language of text-books and the grammar of authentic spoken language (especially informal face-to-face interaction).
- Some of the most common text-types used in class are spoken, rather than written: should we be aware that the grammar and use of vocabulary of prototypically spoken language is different from what can be found in written language and in pedagogical grammars? How can we make actual use of this in the class?

Anticipated Outcomes to Stage 2

- It is hoped that the write-a-dialogue exercise will help the LTs understand the relative lack of authenticity of much of the material used in class, but also the need for language simplification and contextualisation in classroom language that authentic exchanges do not always offer. Authentic transcripts would be cumbersome and confusing for the learner; dialogues in text-books, however, have to maintain an effect of authenticity and reproduce the process of communication in the classroom context (Bachman's interactional authenticity).
- The second related issue is the grammar of prototypically spoken English as complementary, but also different from that of written English. However, the grammar and vocabulary of written language have dominated the writing of pedagogical grammars (and coursebooks) to this day. It is hoped that the discussion will highlight how some of the errors the students make in speaking are actually features of face-to-face informal interaction (ellipsis of different kinds, left-dislocation, hesitations, re-formulations, false starts, etc.).
- It will be interesting to hear the LTs' opinions about the issue of balancing the awareness of different 'grammar rules' or grammar uses for spoken English and the need for teaching 'accuracy' in the traditional sense (Bygate et al., 1994; McCarthy, 1997).
- The discussion should also broach the issue of which are the most common text-types used in class and see whether they belong to prototypically written or spoken language or, as it is often the case, they encompass characteristics of both (letters, dialogues, diaries, role playing, short essays, summaries, reports, telephone calls, etc.).
- This section of the discussion should lead to another focus area which will be only touched upon: the disappearing boundaries between SL and WL and its relevance for the class.

Stage 3

(20 minutes)

Objectives

- Once the importance of defining the difference between prototypically SL and WL has been shown, the focus is shifted to the disappearing boundaries between the two and the relevance for the LT to be aware of this phenomenon to be able to use it effectively in the class. Authentic written materials often mimic the SL especially in ads, everyday language, songs, the Internet, e-mail, MSM, hypertexts. SL can be recorded, thus becoming more permanent than the prototypical face-to-face exchange.
- The LTs should be aware that the authentic language that the students are going to be exposed to more and more (especially through modern technologies) is evolving very fast; it often mixes genres, registers, text-types and modes and it very often relies so closely on the visual modality to convey the message that the text cannot be understood without the image.

Procedure

1. (20 minutes)

- The LTs are shown some authentic materials and are asked to comment on the type of language used: Worksheet 4 (including the viewing of a short section of the hypertext 253 by Geoff Ryman). Ideally these authentic materials should change and be updated regularly using samples of found in different sources of authentic everyday language.

Worksheet 4

A. TOYS-R-US

  (name of toy factory and chain of toy shops)

B. TIME YOU CAME-N-SAURUS

  (ad about a theme park of dinosaurs in Norfolk; information brochure)

C. TAKEAWAY (paper napkin)

D. ARREST DRY SKIN

  (ad of Body Shop in The Big Issue, 13th July, 1998)

E. My Best Friends Wedding

  (leaflet advertising the film at the local cinema , July, 1989)

F. The Editor of The Guardian

G. Novel-hypertext: 253 by Geoff Ryman.

(end of worksheet 4)

- The TT will elicit a discussion about the aspects that these samples of texts draw from prototypically WL and SL.
- Discussion: how can this be relevant in the class? Why should the LTs be aware of this complexity in conveying the message?

Anticipated Outcomes to Stage 3

- The LTs will immediately see that examples A and B are the use of WL imitations of the SL to attract the attention of the reader.
- Examples C and E show how the speakers of the language tend to assimilate WL and SL (there will certainly be many examples in the American spelling that the LTs will know).
- Example D shows how the visual modality is essential for understanding the written language as in more technological text-types such as hypertexts.
- Example G from the novel-hypertext 253 by Geoff Ryman will also show how written language is changing dramatically: written texts are becoming more concise in order to be easily read on electronic pages and are relying more and more on the visuals and the sounds. Headlines, sub-titles, headwords contribute to conveying information in a more chunked, catchy, user-friendly fashion.
- Even quality newspapers tend to encode information in a similar way publishing glossy magazines or magazines similar to Reader's Digest (see The Editor, Example F). Some of the national newspapers can be also found on-line.
- The message for the language class is: use a variety of modalities for expression. Using visuals, sounds, texts of different kinds in order to maintain the link between the learner's own world and the world of the classroom.

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