



Developing materials and techniques for “reflection on language” in the classroom

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The fact that more and more EFL textbooks often include “reflection on language” materials clearly indicates a widespread recognition of the value of exposing students, at some time during their learning process, to some degree of formal study of the language system. Along with a concern for *communication*, i.e. prompting students to *use* the language, teachers and textbooks seem to be more and more concerned with *reflection*, i.e. prompting students to *think* and *talk about* that same language.

After looking more closely at the *reasons* which justify the presence of “reflection on language” activities in an EFL teaching unit, this article will highlight some important criteria for developing materials and techniques for such activities in the classroom.

WHY REFLECT ON LANGUAGE?

Conscious study of the language system is usually advocated for either, or both, of the following sets of considerations:

- a) exposure to *explicit* treatment of language facts promotes the students’ linguistic competence, and thus helps them *use* the language more confidently;
- b) asking students to *think* about language facts has an intrinsic *formative* value as part of an overall “language education” curriculum.

Although these two sets of considerations

are by no means mutually exclusive, they are usually justified on quite different methodological bases. The question of *whether* formal treatment of language is useful and/or necessary in the learning process, and of *to what extent* explicit exposure to “rules” or linguistic generalizations has a direct consequence on language competence, has been long debated, and allows for no clear-cut answers¹, although most teachers would be willing to recognize the positive role of formal language study in learning a foreign language at school. Suffice it to say that if we accept explicit exposure to language facts as at least *one* of the possible ways of promoting language learning in a classroom setting, then “reflection on language” can rightfully be part of the range of alternative strategies that should be offered to students to meet their individual needs and learning styles.

The second set of considerations is certainly of a less controversial nature, since there is widespread agreement, which has also found formal recognition in the Italian official syllabi for the junior secondary school, that a comprehensive curriculum of *language education* should include “reflection on language” activities, at a level suitable to the students’ age and cognitive development. What makes such activities possible — and particularly suitable — for pre-adolescents is precisely the fact that at this age students undergo major changes in their learning abilities, which progressively enable them to think not only in terms of *concrete* experiences, but also in terms of *formal* operations.

Because they can now start thinking on the basis of abstract ideas and can handle logical relationships more confidently, pre-

1. For a discussion of this problematic issue, and for a list of reference works, cf. Mariani (1985).

adolescent and adolescent students gradually reach the stage where they can tackle language study using a variety of cognitive skills of increasing complexity, such as recognition and discrimination, classification and organization, analysis and synthesis. We shall soon see how “reflection on language” activities can make use of — and indeed help develop — this rich learning potential; however, it is important to stress right from the start that the full exploitation of this potential depends as much on the *content* of reflection activities (*what* we ask students to think about) as on the *methodology* behind materials and techniques (*how* we ask them to approach the study of language facts).

A closer analysis of the issues involved in “reflection on language” as part of a coherent *language education* curriculum will reveal a full range of possible benefits:

- a) through contacts with a foreign language and a foreign culture, and more specifically through conscious treatment of linguistic and cultural traits, adolescents are prompted to develop *an alternative conceptual system*, just at a time in their cognitive development when the handling of concepts and logical relationships becomes of outstanding significance;
- b) the explicit comparison between different linguistic and cultural systems works against the formation of stereotypes and for the development of attitudes of acceptance and tolerance;
- c) through contrastive analysis between L1 and L2 students are led to re-discover features of their mother tongue which have been acquired unconsciously, and to increase their understanding and appreciation of the potentialities of their own language system;
- d) “reflection on language” activities result in an increasing awareness both of the *content* of what students are learning and of the *ways* in which they are learning, thus helping the development of appropriate individual *learning styles*. Moreover, the awareness of being able to handle language facts in an effective and meaningful way promotes the feeling of being *active subjects*, and not just *passive recipients*, of language work.

e) exposure to “rules” and linguistic generalizations, if carried out within the context of a balanced approach to the development of both *accuracy* and *fluency* in communication, helps the students develop ways and means of assessing their own linguistic performance, and thus promotes self-evaluation and, in turn, autonomy and individualization in language learning experiences.

Such complex and varied aims are not easily realized if the *content* of “reflection on language” activities is restricted to the more traditional domains of grammar analysis, i.e. the *formal* features of *morphological* and *syntactical* items. As communication involves much more than formal mastery of such items, it is only fair that we should give our students more than superficial insights into what makes language suitable for communicative purposes, including therefore the *lexical*, *textual*, *pragmatic* and *semantic* considerations that the use of “communicative” materials and techniques will naturally elicit in the foreign language classroom². Moreover, and as we have already mentioned, the *way* in which materials and techniques for “reflection on language” are selected and implemented has further implications for the benefits these activities can bring to the students’ cognitive development. We shall therefore now turn to such more specific *methodological* considerations.

CLASSROOM MATERIALS AND TECHNIQUES

Let us examine some examples of materials for “reflection on language” in the classroom, developed for the Italian junior secondary school³.

As we look at each stage of these materials, we will highlight the relevant methodological issues. (N.B. Although these materials are presented here in *English*, they were originally developed — and are meant to be used — in *Italian*, the students’ mother tongue). The examples are part of a set of materials focussing on the formation and use of the *Present Perfect*.

2. For a discussion of the *range* of linguistic “facts” that can be brought to the student’s attention, see Ambel (1982) and Colombo (1982).

3. Abridged and adapted from Abbs, Freebairn and Mariani (1987).

1. Circle the verb forms in the following passage taken from Anne's diary:

Tuesday, 19th May, 1986

We went to a pop concert in town last Sunday. Before the concert we saw some French boys and girls near the stage but we didn't speak to them. Last night I wrote to my French pen-friend Charles and...

Four major issues should be noted here *Firstly*, students are presented with a *text* (not just isolated words and sentences), which is contextualized in order to retain its communicative purpose and value. This also helps in bridging the gap — and retaining consistency — between the “skills learning” stage and the “reflection on language” stage in a teaching unit: *texts* and *contexts*, which are what students face when the focus is on the *use* of language, should continue to appear when attention shifts to *metalinguistic* considerations. *Secondly*, these texts should reflect language which is structurally and lexically familiar to the students, i.e. language which has already been presented and practised. We are aiming at *recognition* of language items which students have previously met. *Thirdly*, discovery of the *unknown* starts from *recall* of already known items: in this particular example, recognition of Simple Past forms is a useful introduction to the discrimination of different past tenses—clearly one of the major objectives in this material. *Finally*, students are asked to *do* something with the text. Circling or underlining words may seem a trivial teaching device, but it does ensure that students are provided with a purpose, however limited, for their reading, and that successful completion of a task is signalled by explicit behavioural objectives.

2. Do the circled verb forms refer to the *present* or the *past*? Do any phrases in the text allow you do establish *when* the events Anne is writing about *actually took place*?

Students are asked to use *contextual clues*, such as the Simple Past forms of well known verbs and time phrases like *last Sunday, before the concert, last night*, to find out the relevant time relationships. Thus the notion (concept) of *time* is highlighted not only through the more obvious instances of verb forms, but also by reference to other *time markers*.

3. This is how Anne filled in a questionnaire *a year after* the events mentioned in her diary:

	YES	NO
Have you ever seen any French people in your town?	X	
Have you ever spoken to French people?		X
Have you ever written a letter in French?	X	

Do the verb forms in this questionnaire refer to specific past events in Anne's life or to general personal experiences?

The second text introduces examples of Present Perfect forms, which the students will already have met and practised in classroom activities.

The forms are lexically — and situationally — linked to the corresponding Simple Past forms in the first text, so that *discrimination* procedures can be set working in the students. Thus the basic notion of *time up to now*, conveyed by the Present Perfect, is elicited *by contrast* with the notion of *specific finished actions* signalled by the Simple Past.

Notice how close-ended questions are used — although not exclusively — to facilitate the students' progression through sometimes difficult metalinguistic considerations.

4. Look at the circled verb forms in Anne's diary: they are all examples of *Simple Past* forms. Are they *regular* or *irregular* verbs? How can you tell?

After the initial discrimination of *meaning*, attention is now shifting to *form*. Expansion of knowledge builds on existing knowledge - known items are recycled and used to introduce new ones by highlighting their network of relationships.

5. Now look at the verb forms in the questionnaire: they are all examples of *Present Perfect* forms.

The Present Perfect is *always* formed with the auxiliary verb *have* followed by the *Past Participle*. Look at these examples of Past Participle:

looked / seen / had / finished / spoken / asked / done

There are three *regular* verbs:, and, their Past Participle is formed by adding the suffix to the *base form* of the verb, just like the Simple Past.

There are also four *irregular* verbs:,, and, As you can see, irregular verbs have special Past Participle forms, which are often different from their corresponding *Simple Past* and *base* forms.

The question of *metalinguage* is an important one. On the one hand, we need some "technical" terms to talk effectively and economically *about* language; on the other hand, we do not want our students to provide analytic descriptions of linguistic phenomena — even less a philosophy of language. Thus a balance must be found, in order to use a minimum, but *well-defined* and *systematic*, body of terminology, i.e. a clearly limited set of metalinguistic terms forming a sort of "common ground" shared by (L1 and L2) teachers and *all* their students. Here, for example the meaning

4. The question aims at eliciting the different auxiliaries used in Italian: *be* for verbs such as *andare* and *tornare*, and *have* for *vedere* and *vedere*. The teacher might then go on eliciting the general rules for the choice of auxiliaries in Italian.

and use of such terms as *auxiliary*, *Past Participle*, *suffix base form*, *regular* and *irregular*, etc., should be negotiated and established beforehand.

6. Now complete:

Base form	Simple Past	Past Participle	Present Perfect
		finished	have finished
		seen	have seen
		spoken	have spoken
have			

Here students are asked, once again, to carry out a specific concrete task involving *classification* and *organization* - which helps them systematize all their previous observations. The purpose of this activity is also to help students build *their own reference materials*, thus promoting a gradual approach to autonomous learning through the practice of effective *study skills*.

7. Write the Present Perfect of the Italian verbs *vedere*, *andare*, *parlare* and *tornare*. Do you always use the same auxiliary verb?⁴

L1/L2 *contrastive* work promotes, as has already been mentioned, awareness of the language system of the students' mother tongue, besides reinforcing the insights into the L2 system.

8. JOHN: I *haven't seen* "Ghostbusters III". *Have you seen* it?

PAUL: Yes, I *have*. It's the best film I've ever *seen*.

Since we use *have* to form the Present Perfect, how will the *negative* and *interrogative* forms, and "short answers" be constructed?

If students have already extensively practised the forms of *have*, and have been exposed to the various ways of constructing negative and interrogative structures, as well as “short answers”, then the question in this section tries to elicit a revision/summary of such “rules”. Practice exercises may have preceded and/or may follow this section.

9. We have seen that the Present Perfect is often used to talk about actions and events which refer to an *indefinite* time in the past *up to now*, and which we consider as somehow still linked to the present, and thus often still possible:

JOHN: Have you ever been to Los Angeles?

PAUL: No, but I hope to go there one day.

An explicit statement serves here to bring back the focus to the *meaning* of the tense under consideration, by confirming and reinforcing concepts already elicited. At the same time, the “rule”, or, rather, the *descriptive* character of the statement, invites careful examination (and possibly discussion) of the example dialogue.

10. Now complete the blank spaces with the Simple Past or the Present Perfect of *write* and *speak*:

TOM: you that letter to your penfriend?

BOB: Yes, I it last night.

TOM: you ever to him?

BOB: Yes, I to him on the telephone last week.

What made you decide which tense to use in each case? Which time expressions helped you to identify specific, finished *past* events?

The fill-in exercise prompts *recall* and *application* of the basic information introduced so far, relating both to *form* and to *meaning*, and focusses attention on im-

portant *contrastive* elements *within the L2*. The two questions which follow are meant to promote discussion on the *linguistic* and *situational* clues which help determine the time relationships in the dialogue, thus affecting choice of *tense*.

11. Which Italian tense would you use in place of a) the English Present Perfect b) the English Simple Past in the dialogue above?

The question elicits *contrastive* uses of different tenses in the two languages, promoting useful insights, not only into tense *structure*, but also into the different *conceptual framework* that underlies perception of time relationships by speakers of different linguistic communities.

12. Complete this table to show the difference between *time* (*when* actions or events actually took place) and *tense* (the *verb forms* which are used to express such actions or events):

Time	Tense	Examples
Distant past (definite, finished actions)		He died in 1521
Recent past (definite, finished actions)		I broke my arm yesterday.
Past still linked to the present		It's the best band I've ever seen.

Students are finally led to make a synthesis of their observations in a table showing the connections between *forms* and *meaning*, i.e. between *tense* and *time*⁵.

Let us now summarize the essential features of this approach to “reflection on language” in the classroom.

1. The approach attempts to exploit the

feedback resulting from communicative activities, where language is used mainly, although not exclusively, as a tool for communication, in "learning through doing" tasks. Through information-processing activities like the ones described, language — both L1 and L2 — is used mainly as a tool to develop knowledge in "learning through thinking" tasks.

2. The approach attempts to prompt, elicit and check the hypotheses about the working of the language system, which students naturally form in their minds — at various levels of consciousness — when they are presented with and practise language items. Classroom experience suggests that students often benefit from such "elicitation" materials and techniques, partly because some kind of "metalinguistic focus" is normally part of the experience of learning a foreign language under institutional constraints, i.e. in a formal classroom setting.

3. The approach uses a *scientific methodology*, since after the initial *gather-*

ing (and/or *production*) of data, it prompts the *formulation* and *testing* of hypotheses, the *acceptance* of true hypotheses and the *rejection* of false ones, leading on to the *gathering* and/or *production* of new data. This *guided inductive approach* thus favours the development of an attitude of *active discovery* and *cognitive involvement*, and as such it should *motivate* the students to engage in metalinguistic activities, which may otherwise fail to raise their interest.

4. The kinds of materials and techniques used in this approach can best be exploited through the practice of pair- and group-work: students can then pool together and compare their hypotheses before they test them against the evidence provided by the teacher and/or the textbook. Cross-group reporting and general class discussion are also important ways of promoting a view of language as something which, far from being the exclusive domain of books, teachers and grammarians, can — and should — be part of everybody's learning experience.

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