OBJECTIVES FOR MODERN LANGUAGE LEARNING

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Abstract: *Foreign language learning objectives are relevant to both teacher and learner if they are described in terms of the specific areas of knowledge and ability. A possible approach to defining relevant objectives for the foreign language learners consists in using a taxonomy of language skills. Thus, teachers become increasingly aware of the significance of their pedagogical action: teaching and evaluation are seen as interdependent, purpose-oriented tasks which focus on the learner's communicative competence.*

Keywords: *learning objectives, a taxonomy of language skills, a selections of skills.*

One of the most troublesome areas teachers deal with in their interactions with their EFL learners is the definition of language-learning objectives. This may seem a trivial problem if you belive that setting objectives for a lesson is a rather formal and unnecessary task which is carried out just for the sake of teacher-training demands. Objectives, and plans in general, are things too many teachers are suspicious of. "It's a waste of time!" they say.

Surprisingly, methodologists themselves have had little to say on the subject. When looking through the teaching EFL literature in search of practical guidelines, one usually finds objectives described either as global tasks learners are supposed to accomplish, like "writing a letter of complaint", or as expressions of the teacher's intentions, like "teaching students to write a letter of complaint." The difference is just one of focus – on the learner or on the teacher – not one of content, and any specification going further than this is hard to find.

This situation is strange, since one of the main theoretical concerns within language education has been the clarification of FL teaching/learning contents and aims. The semantic approach to course design, particularly the work carried out by the Council of Europe, appears to be contradicted by a widespread tendency by practitioners to overlook the specification of language-learning objectives when planning units, lessons, and tests.

Despite the generally negative and simplistic attitude towards the definitions of what it is that learners are supposed to learn, we would like to stress the fact that *objectives do make a difference.* The way you choose to define them affects all that you do as a teacher, because objectives stand for what you believe is the goal of your and your students' actions; they show your personal perception of the teaching-learning situation; they reflect your teaching and testing priorities; they determine your choice of activities and materials; they influence your teaching procedures, your attitude towards learner errors, even your occurs in your classroom.

Given the importance of objectives, why is it that they constitute a problematic area for FL teachers? How do we define language learning objectives? Within the context of teacher training in general, teachers have been encouraged to use taxonomies from curriculum theory, in which affective, cognitive, and psychomotor categories of learning content and behaviour are organized hierarchically. However important it is to have these taxonomies in mind, one must question their value in the context of EFL

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teaching and evaluation for one simple reason: they do not specify communicative competence, which is, in fact, the goal of language learning. Objectives derived from such taxonomies can bring about a sense of frustration and uselessness among EFL teachers, because they do not provide a clear definition of the linguistic skills to be developed in the classroom.

Foreign language learning objectives are relevant to both teacher and learner only if they are described in terms of the specific areas of knowledge and ability involved in the development of communicative competence. One might argue that learners must also "learn how to learn the language", that is, acquire "learning competence." Our reason for focusing only on communicative competence is simply a matter of priority: until we determine what we want our students to learn, it is impossible to establish how they should learn it or what learning skills and strategies they should develop.

A possible approach to defining relevant objectives for the FL classroom consists in using a taxonomy of language skills. Munby's taxonomy is still the most complete one. Our proposal is based on it, and is intended as a contribution to a reflection on its potential application in planning units, lessons and tests.

Munby is particularly well-know for his complex socio-linguistic model for specifying the content of purpose-specific language programmes. In his *Communicative Syllabus Design* he presents a taxonomy of 54 language skills, with a total of 260 subcategories of productive and receptive language use. His purpose was to facilitate the process of selecting skills appropriate to previously specified activities. A "skill" is conceived as a microconcept, to be distinguished from the macroconcept of an activity, to which its relation is that of enabling factor to resultant activity. A linguistic activity like "ensuring a passenger understands regulations on illegal exports" would imply the use of enabling skills like "expressing information explicitly" or "using indicators in discourse for emphasizing a point".

According to the activity-skill distinction, we can say that there has been a tendency to overlook "skills" and to identify learning objectives more in terms of activities, like writing a letter or reporting. But when you decide to teach your students to write a letter or to make a report, what do they have to do in order to accomplish those linguistic activities successfully? What skills must they develop? If you are not able to answer this question, you cannot possibly know what your students should learn and what you should do to help them learn it.

Munby groups his 54 skills into 14 skill types:

- Motor – Perceptual Skills (e.g., "articulating sounds in isolated word forms: phoneme sequences");
- Understanding and Conveying Meaning (e.g., "producing intonation patterns: neutral position of nucleus and use of tone, in respect of falling tone with declarative/moodless clauses");
- Inferencing (e.g., "deducing the meaning and use of unfamiliar lexical items through contextual clues");
- Understanting and Expressing Information (e.g., "expressing information implicitly through inference");
- Understanting and Expressing Conceptual Meaning (e.g., "understanding conceptual meaning, especially time: tense and aspect");

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- Understanting and Conveying Communicative Value (e.g., “understanding the communicative value-function of sentences and utterances with explicit indicators”);
- Understanding and Expressing Relations (e.g., “expressing relations between parts of a text through lexical cohesion devices of repetition”);
- Relating textual to Extra-Textual Information (e.g., “interpreting text by going outside it, reading between the lines”);
- Understanding and Using Discourse Coherence Devices (e.g., “using indicators in discourse for introducing an idea”);
- Summarising (e.g., “extracting salient points to summarise the whole text”);
- Reference, Skimming and Scanning (e.g., “basic reference skills: understanding and use of table of contents and index”);
- Initiating, Maintaining, and Terminating Discourse (e.g., “initiating in discourse: how to initiate the discourse – elicit, inform, direct, etc.”);
- Planning and Organising Information (e.g., “planning and organizing information in expository language, using rhetorical functions, especially description of process”);
- Transcoding and Recoding Information (e.g., “transcoding information presented in diagrammatic display, involving straight conversion of diagram/table/graph into speech/writing”);

This taxonomy has great potential as a tool for language planning and monitoring in general. One can build a checklist of skills to be covered throughout a period of time, and make a regular register of when and how they are taught and/or tested. The same list can be used in class/individual progress charts, where performance levels for each skill are established. It can also be used in the definition of lesson/unit/test objectives. Teachers working within this framework become increasingly aware of the significance of their pedagogical action: teaching and evaluation are seen as interdependent, purpose-oriented tasks which focus on the learner’s communicative competence.

The need for conversing is always present in the teaching-learning process of EFL. Our students demand activities that will ensure the development of conversational skills, and teachers must be able to develop conversational competence in the target language, which is as important for the student as is grammatical competence. The problem of developing conversational competence has a solution if we take into account the following assumptions:

- Conversation has a specific structure that is different from that of other forms of oral speech, such as interviews, talks, debates, lectures, and so on, and therefore should not be studied and developed in the same way.
- We should speak of stimulating students or participants to converse rather than giving them ready-made formulas.
- We should emphasize the interactional encounter, which is the centre of the conversational process, and stimulate the negotiation between participants on the basis of chains of utterances rather than chains of sentences.

These assumptions are the frame that holds together the design of what we believe stimulates the students, and they determine the type of activity that will be

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undertaken. We may think of an activity where the participants improvise dialogues to fit a situation that is described beforehand, and then perform it. There are two kinds of improvisations. In both the participants act without referring to a script. In the first, the situation is described and analyzed with the teacher in a sort of panel meeting. The story is studied and alternatives proposed for the action and the development of the plot. Once it is performed, the teacher corrects language mistakes and gives suggestions for the performance. Then the scene can be played once more and evaluated again.

In the other type of improvisation, time for preparation is limited to five minutes and then performers act it out, inventing the dialogue as they proceed. The "actors" do what they think best and enjoy their experience. The teacher does not interfere in any way, and the spectators – the rest of the participating group – can give their opinions only at the end of the performance. The scene cannot be done over again and another interpretation of the situation would be another improvisation, a new one altogether. Therefore, it is a unique experience for both actors and spectators.

If we want students to play the game, we must introduce them little by little to free spontaneous work. If we do not supply them with appropriate warm-up sessions, the participants will not be able to fight their own natural inhibitions, and thus will not learn how to extend their abilities gradually. We must get them to relax and gain some practice in dramatics, so that they will become more self-confident and less reluctant to enter into the game.

Reading and performing a play is not meant to be an end in itself but a step toward fostering a climate of confidence among the students, engendering group cohesion, which is of paramount importance in creative work. Since performing the play is not an end in itself, the students are not required to reproduce it before an audience. The teacher can go on to the second stage if he/she finds that the students have overcome some of the difficulties they had at the beginning and that they are confident enough to start creating their own short sketches. We must not force the participants beyond their capabilities, and we must always remember that the dramatic activity is a means of developing conversational skills. Therefore when students claim that they do not want to perform before an audience because they do not want to become actors or actresses, we must refrain from forcing them to act, and we must go back to the text, revising the language used and making them converse.

As paraphrasing the play becomes a demanding activity for students, we think it would be better to go back to play reading. However, the experience has appealed to the participants, and they want to meet the challenge and go on with the exercise. Therefore, we have to encourage them to do what they can: this means that some parts of the action are skipped, and the lines, in general, lose the vitality they have had in the original play. Little to little, the students begin to grasp that lines are appeals for action and that the dialogue works in the same way as a conversation. By imagining that the characters are talking to each other, rather than actors performing a play written by somebody else, the students are able to use their own language unaided by the script.

Once the students have performed this exercise, they are ready to explain why they have developed the sketch they did and what limitations kept them from choosing some other approach. In this way, we give the students more opportunities to bring in their own personalities, experience, and opinions and they feel freer to invent and create in a relaxed atmosphere.

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The teacher must know how to plan the activities, what to do first, and how to lead the students into performing. This does not mean that teachers must be actors, or even directors. What is required is class experience and how to manage groups of students. The teacher's class experience is particularly valuable, and so is the teacher's interest in activating the language class, in making it livelier and more participative. Courses and manuals are helpful, but it is the teacher's common sense that must be relied on and the knowledge he/she has of the interaction process when people decide to communicate with one another.

In our work as teachers we can make some adaptations on Munby's taxonomy and, consequently, find it important to make a few changes in order to make the taxonomy simpler and to expand it so as to include two dimensions of language learning: the metalinguistic/cultural and the strategic:

- **a.** a selection of skills more relevant to low-level learners;
- **b.** some simplification of their original formulation;
- **c.** specification of the possible relations between each skill and the macro skill area;
- **d.** rearrangement of skills according to four broad components of communicative competence: grapho-phonic, grammatical, sociolinguistic, and strategic.

A large number of beginning teachers have used a version of Munby's taxonomy with success in planning units, lessons, and tests. Clearly, this kind of work facilitates a good perception of teaching direction, thus providing a sound platform for teaching action. This approach can be used in any EFL class if the students have attained the necessary level of competence in English. At all levels, students probably have information they would like to give us about our lessons and their learning. From our point of view as teachers we have to find out more specifically how the students are feeling and what difficulties they may be experiencing so that we can respond more closely to their needs.

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