COMMUNICATION AND EXPOSURE IN THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH FOR INTERACTION

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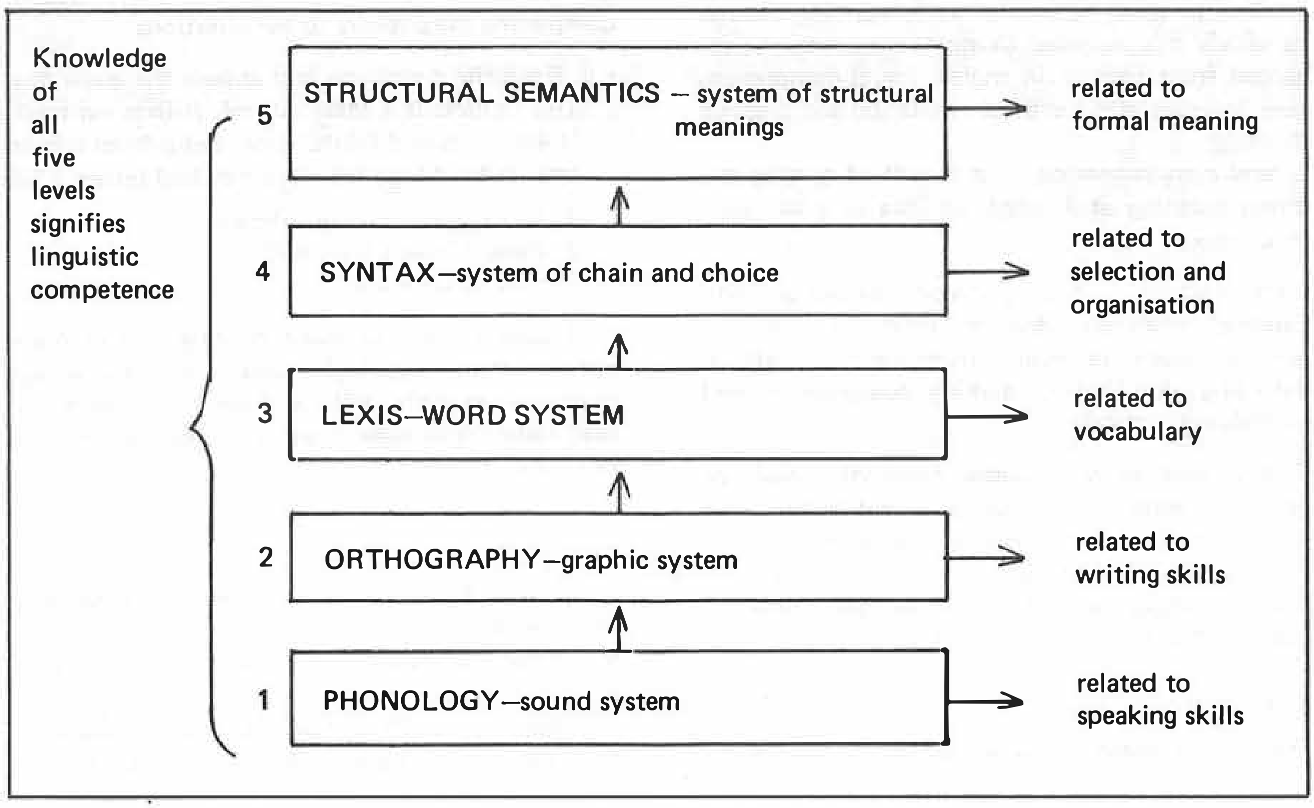
This article is written with the intention of provoking thought which may result in some measure of reader response. By responding to this article, teachers who share the common experience of teaching English as a second language may engage in a dialogue pertaining to new methods and techniques which they have used with success in their language classes.

What possibly could be the difference between the teaching of a first language and the learning of a second language? The underlying assumption that teaching is a L1 phenomenon and learning an L2 event is by no means an attempt at severing the nexus that exists between teaching and learning. However, this separation has been made for the purpose of focus. Somehow it seems acceptable through observation of the past tradition of teaching English as an L1 in Malaysia that a teacher goes into an L1 class to teach, specifically the rules. His primary intention in a teaching-learning encounter seems to be to teach the knowledge component of the language. We, as teachers, cannot deny the fact that language although regarded as a skill has the primary component of knowledge. This component is normally regarded as the learner's knowledge of language usage. Put simply, this means the rules of a language. Thus we have the incremental method or the building-block approach to the teaching of linguistic competence. This may also be one reason why the structural syllabus was in vogue then. The basic principle here is the mastery of a linguistic item before the introduction of a new and a more complex item. The following diagram may offer some insight into the components which make up what is known as linguistic competence.



COMPONENTS WHICH CONTRIBUTE TOWARDS LINGUISTIC COMPETENCE

In an L1 situation, therefore, the teacher need only teach the rules of the language since what is learnt should be put to use. The learner is supported by a rich natural language environment in which the rules taught are put to use. We are in this instance reminded of Chomsky's notion of a 'homogeneous speech community' which supports this type of teaching. This speech community will provide the learner with diverse instances where the rules learnt can be put to use for a purpose.

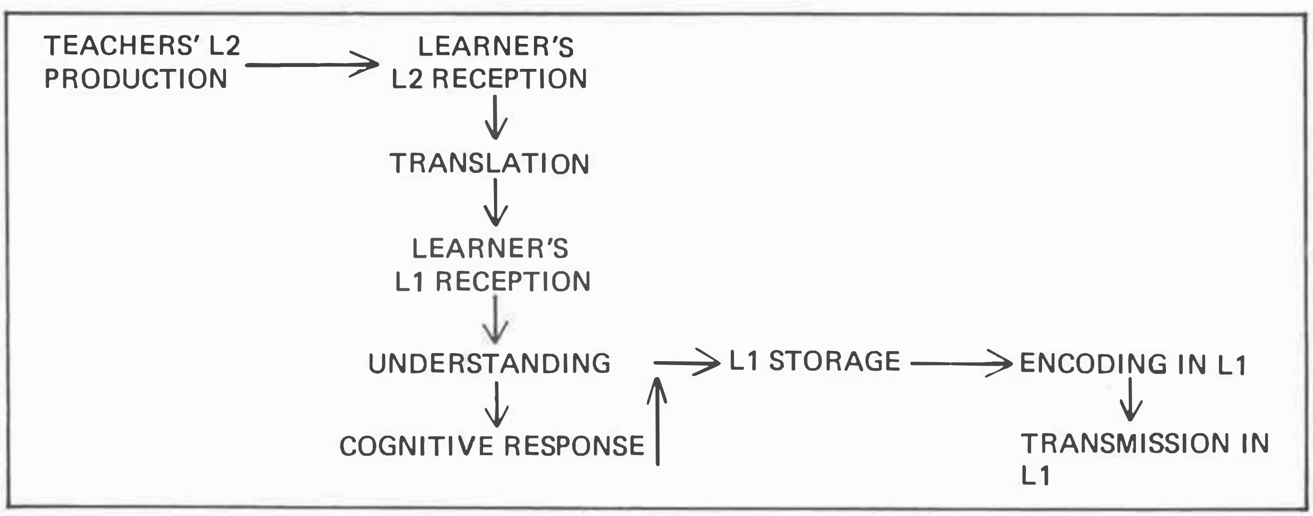
However, in an L2 learning situation where the L2 is an official L2 with few ascribed functions the task of the teacher is more complex. He has to teach the rules and the use of the language all within the confines of the classroom. In short, he has to engage the learner to learn. Learning becomes the intent and the learner becomes the focus in a teaching-learning encounter. Since there is little societal support for hypothesis testing to occur out of the classroom, the teacher has the added task of simulating societal use. He needs to create communication within the class domain for instances of multiple language use which may or may not occur outside this domain.

The teacher has to work on the premise that communication cannot be nil. When a child hears a language, especially in a formal situation, there has to be a response. The only problem here may be that this response may not be overt. Thus the teacher may think that the learner is not mentally engaged. It is appropriate at this juncture to refer to the distinction commonly made by language specialists between the hearer and the listener. The listener is one who is mentally and emotionally engaged in an act of communication. However, the hearer is one who although bodily present in an act or instance of language communication is not mentally and emotionally attuned to participating in a speech act. Yet he is aware that language is being used. The reasons as to why he is practising non-participation may be multiple. But generally it may be because of his inherent need to resist. It is important for language teachers to acknowledge the reality of language resistance as part of the process of language learning if they wish to tailor their language lessons to meet the need of relevance. It is important for us to know that if the lesson designed does not match the relevance factor necessary to promote learning, then we help in distancing and alienating the learner from the language being taught.

Thus if our intention is to teach language for communication, what are the types of communication we should envisage? Personally, I feel that there are three main types of communication: (a) resistance; (b) acceptance; (c) participation.

'Resistance communication' is the result of the learner's attitude towards the language being taught. Once the learner has negative attitudes towards the language then he will psychologically resist the language. This is where the idea of negative or nil motivation comes in. We, as teachers, must realize that this resistance is actually a response. And this response should be seen as a starting point of teaching language for use.

The second type of communication is 'acceptance communication'. If we view language learning



ACCEPTANCE COMMUNICATION MODEL

as linearly organised, in short a movement psychologically from resistance to participation, then level two should be seen as acceptance. Acceptance communication is a process in language learning which should result in participation communication, the third and final stage of language use. At the stage of acceptance communication it may be likely to observe learners constantly code-switching. Also the receptive and the productive skills need not be in the same language. Generally it seems to be a truism that reception in a second language precedes production in that language. Thus we find within the L2 classroom teachers using the L2 for communication and the learners decoding the teachers, L2 and then through a process of translation encoding the response in the L1 before transmitting it. The diagram on page 13 may help to illustrate this.

We term the second type of communication as a process since the learner at this stage may use elements of his L1 and his L2 in responding to a speaker in the second language.

The third type of communication can be termed 'participation communication'. Here there is attitudinal acceptance of the second language by the learner and therefore there would be naturalness, confidence and fluency in the use of the second language. The use of the second language may be domain specific yet we can assume that the learner has mastered the second language since the second language is actually taught for particular use-related purposes.

It is the last stage which signifies successful second language teaching and in order to achieve the third stage we have to realize that exposure is a necessary prerequisite. Exposure here should be seen as secondary exposure since it is generally confined to the classroom unlike in an L1 situation where exposure is primary. The learner is exposed to the L1 inside and outside the formal language learning situation. How we can achieve effective secondary exposure in an L2 classroom seems to be the question at hand. It is here that reader participation is necessary. If we can think about the ways and means of capturing an audience through secondary exposure to teach a second language for a purpose then we may eventually arrive at a design for effective L2 teaching.

We have just observed how communication can be classified and why it is necessary to see second language teaching from the perspective of domain specific or purpose related language communication. May be the next time we can have some insights into how we can promote secondary exposure in an L2 classroom. Help! Anyone to the rescue?