

TOWARDS A TEACHING SKILLS PROFILE OF THE PRIMARY FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHER

Manuel Jiménez Raya, University of Granada

1. INTRODUCTION

The need to define what competent teaching of foreign languages at the primary level consists of has existed for a long time both at a national and international level (Gerngross 1998, Report on Council of Europe Workshop 8B). Despite the several attempts to define competent teaching, debate about what constitutes good teaching practice in this area continues. Some argue that there are good teaching practices, which are effective for all teachers, learners, and contexts. However, what is seldom mentioned is the importance of differences that some of the basic research findings about the nature of learning and human nature itself have shown.

Teacher education can only be effective if teacher educators are clear in their minds about what is meant by *educating* because only then can they truly know the kinds of outcomes that their programmes should achieve. There is more than one way to determine the nature of competent teaching of foreign languages at the primary level. One way is to ask teachers themselves; another is to review the literature on effective teaching and language teaching methodology. These two methods are not incompatible with each other, and it is a good idea to use both. In my effort to construct a teaching skills profile, I have drawn on the two previous sources, on the literature on language learning and teaching plus on my own understanding of what competent foreign language teaching is.

One of the first tasks in the development of this profile was to determine its structure so that it was not just a list of skills. I felt that some kind of structure was necessary. This structure should be clear and intelligible for the trainers and for practising teachers themselves. I always had teachers themselves in mind. The dictionary helped me when I looked up the meaning of *skill*. In the determination of the structure, Shulman's (1987: 7) definition of teaching convinced me that the division of the teaching operation in three phases was satisfactory, and useful. This states that teaching necessarily begins 'with a teacher's understanding of what is to be learned and how it is to be taught'. It proceeds through a series of activities during which the students are provided with specific instruction and opportunities for learning.'

The profile has been divided in four sections:

- background knowledge,
- planning phase of teaching,
- implementation phase of teaching,
- evaluation phase of teaching.

The aim of the first section is to define the desirable approach to the teaching of foreign languages at the primary level in Europe. For this purpose, I have followed Richards and Rodgers (1986), and have endeavoured to define a working theory of language and a theory of language learning. Both are indispensable and always implicitly present. In fact, one can go so far as to say that all teachers have them. This does not mean that teachers are capable of

formulating their theories. However, these theories manifest themselves in all the decisions made by teachers at the level of materials chosen for language teaching, activities suggested, and emphases placed on different aspects of subject matter content, for instance.

The reason for the inclusion of a section on background knowledge can be found in the definition of skill as knowledge and ability. Furthermore, background knowledge is 'what a person knows that affects thinking, interpretation and planning action' (Woods, 1996: 69). Fenstermacher (1986) argues that good teaching is not only effective behaviourally, but also must rest on a foundation of adequately grounded premises. All teachers have a conception of what language is, as well as how learning takes place. In their teaching decisions, they are always guided by this conception, which in most cases is implicit, but still very powerful. In all aspects of our lives, we are guided by our ideas. It is no different in the case of FL teaching. This knowledge base includes facts, principles, and experiences, which are used as a basis for reasoning. More specifically our proposal includes knowledge of the foreign language, knowledge of methods, knowledge of students, and knowledge of the target language culture among others. Thus, a language teacher's horizons will be shaped in part by his or her own personal experiences, but also by traditional ways in which other language teachers throughout history have made sense of what it means to be a language teacher (Williams and Burden, 1997).

In addition, this structure has the advantage of being transparent for teachers. It is not difficult for them to see that their job basically involves three phases, all of which require different types of knowledge and skills. However, I admit that in the classroom the division is not always that clear and straightforward in a sequential way. For instance, the evaluation phase usually takes place simultaneously with the implementation phase, but the nature of the two is sufficiently distinct for them to be considered as separate. Furthermore, their underlying purposes are also different.

In the planning phase, teachers determine what should happen in the classroom and the learning that should take place over variable lengths of time. Planning may be carried out to transform the curriculum, to allocate instructional time, to study and review content, as well as to align content, objectives, methodology and assessment.

In the implementation phase, teachers are actively engaged with students and foreign language content in the teaching/learning process. Some of their main concerns are the creation and management of the learning environment, scaffolding students towards autonomous language use, and maximising the time students spend actively involved in meaningful activities.

In the evaluation phase, teachers are expected to monitor and evaluate student learning with a view to improving teaching. Teachers assess students for various reasons: to understand students' knowledge, skills, and attitudes; to give marks; to make decisions about appropriate content and objectives for students. In this phase, teachers are also expected to reflect on their own teaching and students' responses in order to find out what was successful and what was not, so that they can refine their own teaching.

Once I had decided on the nature of the framework, I wanted to compare my view of competent teaching with that of others by reviewing what others had written. To my knowledge, the only paper that deals with competent teaching and includes a similar structure is Reynolds (1992), who identifies three broad domains of teacher tasks. The three tasks domains are pre-active, interactive, and post-active.

Table 1: Teaching tasks domains according to Reynolds (1992:4)

I. Pre-active tasks	Comprehend content and materials Critique content, materials, and teaching methods Adapt content, plans, and materials Prepare plans, materials, and physical space
II. Interactive tasks	Implement and adjust plans during instruction Organise and monitor students, time, and materials during instruction Evaluate student learning
III. Post-active tasks	Reflect on one's own actions and students' responses to improve teaching Continue professional development Interact with colleagues

The next step in the development of the teaching skills profile was to determine the nature of teaching because underlying any approach to the development of teachers is a conception of what good teaching is and what essential knowledge and skills teachers need. For this, I turned to the literature on effective teaching (Bennet 1987; Brophy and Good 1986; Gow and Kember 1993; Reynolds 1992; Shulman 1987). One of the problems I have faced is that the literature on effective teaching too often concentrates on personal traits that teachers are expected to exhibit. These lists are of little value for initial teacher education or in-service teacher education. Examples of such character traits include enthusiasm, flexibility, self-confidence, and interest in people. As Brophy and Good (1986: 328) point out, 'teacher effectiveness' is a matter of definition, and most definitions include success in the socialisation of students and in the promotion of their affective and personal development as well as their success in fostering their mastery of formal curricula.

Many other characterisations of teaching focus on the teacher's management of the classroom. Some of these, also place emphasis on the management of ideas (Shulman 1987). Ericksen (1984:3), for instance, reached the following conclusion: 'an outstanding teacher should be an inspiring instructor who is concerned about students, an active scholar who is respected by discipline peers, and an efficient organised professional to students and colleagues'.

As Posner (1985) observes, various theories of teaching have produced different understandings of what happens in the classroom. One trend of thought regards teaching as the transmission of knowledge through clear presentations, demonstrations or discussions. Alternatively, another trend considers that students can generate knowledge themselves through their own active involvement with concepts and principles, and that they should be encouraged to have experiences and conduct experiments which permit them to discover principles for themselves. Still another is more focused on the affective outcomes of schooling, learning how to learn, and enhancing creativity and human potential. This is called the humanistic education movement. Humanistic educators usually put as much value on affective goals of education as on cognitive learning goals. Accordingly, they argue that it is more important for students to become responsible and caring adults than to achieve a few more points on a standardised test. Humanistic educators recommend that teachers emphasise values such as consideration, co-operativeness, mutual respect, and honesty, both by setting an example and by discussing and reinforcing these values when appropriate.

By definition a teaching skills profile may be considered as implying a behaviouristic view of teacher education. Fenstermacher (1986) maintains that the goal of teacher education is not to indoctrinate teachers to act in certain ways, but to educate teachers to use reason soundly and to be capable of skilful performance. Sound reasoning requires a process of thinking

about what one is doing and an appropriate knowledge base that should provide the grounds for choices and actions.

The absence of a firm knowledge base for teacher education has led to a wide-ranging search for the sort of expertise that would be helpful to the practitioner and at the same time raise the status of foreign language teacher education. One of the dominant presuppositions of this approach is underlined by Brophy (1980:3): 'the key to improvement has been to concentrate on developing knowledge about effective teaching and translating it into algorithms that teachers can learn and incorporate in their planning prior to teaching.' According to Lanier and Little (1986), twenty years of experimental and quasi-experimental research have confirmed that some classroom practices lend themselves well to skills training. Teachers can learn a variety of instructional skills from such projects and can demonstrate them in simulated or actual classroom situations. Nevertheless, this document is not intended to imply a skills training or prescriptive approach to foreign language teacher education, even if practising teachers' expectation is one of 'tell us what we should do', or 'tell us the magic recipe'. It goes without saying that teaching is a highly context-dependent activity, and does not lend itself to straightforward generalisation and prescription. Furthermore, I would like to stress that this document should be understood as a general framework that allows for different paths. It is also respectful of national curricula in their options to recommend or proscribe the teaching of certain aspects, as is the case of Austria. The Austrian curriculum for primary language teaching does not consider the teaching of writing as appropriate for this level. Therefore, its inclusion in this profile is not intended as a criticism.

Teacher education cannot be exclusively focused on how things are to be done in classrooms to the exclusion of the 'why'. On the contrary, teacher education should encourage responsibility and reflection, and intellectual career in teaching. Nevertheless, for this to come about, we must have a clear picture of the final product. This profile should give teachers the impression that a large body of knowledge is necessary to be a good teacher. For this reason, it is exhaustive, but non-prescriptive in the sense that there is no intention of imposing one way of teaching.

It goes without saying that knowing the story of teaching involves more than is usually considered. Knowing how to teach does not simply entail behavioural knowledge of how to do particular things in the classroom; it involves a cognitive dimension that links thought with activity, centring on the context-embedded, interpretative process of knowing what to do (Freeman 1996). Teaching is knowing what to do under particular and unique circumstances; to borrow from Paley (1986), it is a constant search for the learners' point of view.

2. TEACHING SKILLS PROFILE¹

The primary school foreign language teacher is a professional decision maker who has mastered the minimum competences/teaching skills and has also learned when to apply them and how to orchestrate them, acting as a reflective practitioner. Reflective practitioners reflect on their teaching, developing knowledge and theories of teaching.

1. Background knowledge

Primary school teachers are expected to:

- Have a competent command of the foreign language and be familiar with the structure and main features of the language, as well as with the relevant aspects of the target culture.
- Be familiar with the idea of language as a communication tool, and as a system for the expression of meaning.
- Be familiar with the basic principles and techniques of communicative language teaching.
- Show some degree of familiarity with Total Physical Response, task-based learning, and learner-centredness.
- Be familiar with the principles for teaching language along the cultural fault line to help students understand the nature of cultural and national prejudice, so as to be able to prevent it arising, or combat it, if it does.
- Have some knowledge of children's developmental characteristics.
- Be familiar with the basic principles of language learning at the primary level, and the implications for teaching in the classroom.
- Understand foreign language education/teaching as a complex interactive process that involves the learning process itself, the teacher's intentions and actions, the learners' background and personality.
- Show positive attitudes and an open mind towards new ideas and insights.

2. Planning stage of teaching

As far as knowledge is concerned planning teaching includes minimally:

- a knowledge of students, their needs, and interests
- awareness of what is to be achieved
- a personal view of the nature of language and learning
- knowledge of supplementary materials for teaching the foreign language to children.

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Teachers are expected to show some degree of expertise in the following areas:

- Textbook analysis and evaluation in order to choose the most suitable one to conform to their view of teaching and learning and learners' needs.
- Planning of individual lessons and entire units. This entails:
 - ◊ setting objectives, concerning language content and the learning process
 - ◊ evaluating the appropriateness of the activities suggested in the textbook unit
 - ◊ sequencing and pacing activities that address the world of children
 - ◊ planning challenging tasks within the capabilities of the learners so as to meet the needs of sub-groups within the class
 - ◊ supplementing units of work
 - ◊ deciding what procedures are necessary for the classroom to function effectively
 - ◊ planning the most suitable evaluation instruments and procedures for learners and the learning process.
- Adapting the available resources and materials to suit their learners' needs and the learning process.
- Co-operating with other teachers to ensure effective planning.

3. Implementation phase of teaching

Primary language teachers are expected to show technical competence in FL instruction and classroom management. This involves the following skills:

- Creation of an appropriate and supportive climate in the classroom within which cognitive, social and emotional development take place simultaneously.
- Clarification of goals to students. This can be done by stating learning objectives and providing information about the organisation of content. Student learning is enhanced when they have a clear understanding of what they are learning, what outcomes are expected, and how this relates to prior learning. Without knowing why they are performing an activity, students are unlikely to derive any benefit from it.
- Giving clear instructions to students.
- Effective presentation of new language. The teacher has to make the foreign language available and accessible to pupils, he or she must be able to teach them the meaning of new items, and do what is needed to fix them in pupils' memories
- Promote meaningful learning by using activities that involve real communication, carrying out meaningful tasks, and by using language that is meaningful to the learner.
- Provision of extensive practice opportunities of what is to be learnt, using a range of appropriate teaching techniques and opportunities for communicative interaction under varied conditions, providing feedback and interactive instruction.
- Expertise in guiding pupils to autonomous language use i.e. to express their own meanings with a limited range of language resources.

- Ability to foster various learning-to-learn strategies, and to equip students with sufficient metacognition so that they can begin to make informed choices about the use of those strategies.
- Flexible management of resources to suit the learning styles of different learners and the different stages of the learning process.
- Teaching the foreign language through the foreign language. This entails the ability to create input rich environments by using the foreign language for classroom management purposes, and by rephrasing what they say in order to make their input abundant and redundant, allowing for greater variability in the patterns of communication so as to maximise learners' linguistic and interactional competencies and create more opportunities for them to participate in and learn from classroom events.
- Ability to incorporate culture into the foreign language lesson.
- Capacity to use story-telling techniques to present and practise new language, using appropriate skills or resources to make meaning clear.
- Expertise in using visuals to stimulate and support learning.
- Simulation of real-life situations and use of mime to stimulate learning and to make meaning clear.
- Ability to incorporate TPR techniques.
- Ability to use songs, chants, rhymes, puppets, and games for different purposes, i.e., present, practise and consolidate new language.
- Checking meaning, understanding, and checking comprehension of instructions and goals.
- Use different correction techniques flexibly (repeating, echoing, denial, questioning, non-verbal feedback). The correction technique used by the teacher should be compatible with the learners' current level of proficiency, and should involve the learner purposefully. Correction should always be perceived by learners as positive.
- Ability to use activities and tasks that foster the integration of several language skills.
- Classroom management skills to maintain effective classroom organisation. This is based on the premise that variables in the classroom environment, such as the specific behaviours of the teacher and the manner in which the classroom is arranged influence student behaviour and student learning.
- Flexible grouping includes: lockstep, pair work, group work, individual.
 - ◊ Discipline handling techniques.
 - ◊ Effective use of classroom time; amount and intensity of learner engagement in school learning.
 - ◊ On-line monitoring of teaching and learning.

- Skill to adopt different roles flexibly, according to the demands of the teaching/learning activity. The most important role of the teacher is that of mediator of the learning process, showing expertise in 'scaffolding' the children in their route to autonomous language use. A mediator is expected to establish a climate where confidence is built up, where learners can use the language without embarrassment (mistakes can be made without fear), where all the contributions are equally valid, where tasks lead to feelings of success. Basically, the teacher is expected to act as a facilitator of the communication process, learning process manager, needs analyst.
- Creation of an environment in which learners are able to work independently of direct teacher supervision.
- Ability to make links between the FL and the children's native language.
- Ability to encourage children, try to help them stay on task, express joy at the children's accomplishments, and so forth. Learning proceeds smoothly when child and mediator are in synchrony.
- Ability to foster the exploitation of the FL outside the classroom i.e. in the community or elsewhere in the school.
- Interpersonal communication skills in order to involve parents, making them understand what they can expect from the teaching and learning process in the school, and how they can support their children. These should also be used to promote the status of the FL within the wider curriculum amongst other staff members.

4. Evaluation phase of teaching

In this phase of teaching, teachers are concerned with determining how well students have done, they are also involved in determining how well teaching has met the curricular goals. Evaluation at the primary level includes the following:

- Understanding of the basic functions of assessment and knowledge of the various types of tests items and their validity.
- Ability to elaborate his/her own tests and observation sheets.
- Ability to assess learners in terms of a programme's goals and objectives, including process and product.
- Ability to encourage learner self-monitoring and self-assessment.
- Ability to evaluate critically their own performance and the behaviour of their learners.
- Ability to provide continuous diagnosis, monitoring, evaluation, and feedback.

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