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Personal Response and Humanistic Activities: Enhancing Personal Involvement in Language Teaching.

Abstract I: Can language learning contribute to the complex process of education? In the present work, I assume that activities which require a personal involvement of the student can enhance the significance of the learning experience both within and beyond school. Within this educational perspective, I analyse the effectiveness of two types of activities, namely Personal Response Activities and Humanistic Activities, which require a different level of personal involvement of the individual (experiences, ideas, opinions, emotions, etc.) during school work.

Abstract II: Quali sono le possibili ricadute che una prospettiva di educazione intesa come sviluppo integrato della persona può avere sull'apprendimento linguistico? In quest'ottica si analizza l'efficacia di due particolari tipi di attività linguistiche dette "Personal Response Activities" e "Humanistic Activities", che prevedono livelli diversi di coinvolgimento personale dell'individuo (esperienze, idee, opinioni, emozioni, ecc.) durante l'attività scolastica. Si ritiene, infatti, che l'attuazione di attività personalmente rilevanti per lo studente possa essere determinante per un'esperienza di apprendimento realmente educativa e significativa per l'individuo anche oltre l'attività scolastica.

1. Can language learning contribute to the education of the whole person?

"School is a place where we learn not only subject matter; it is a place where we learn about ourselves and also life" (Moskowitz 1999: 177). Often, however "what students study in school may seem meaningless and boring, with no application to their lives" (Moskowits 1999: 177), school may be seen as something disjointed from the rest of their lives and this can lower their

motivation to learn. In the present work I assume with Arnold that "[p]ossibly the only topic in existence that is of interest to all students everywhere is that which Humanistic Language Teaching proposes including at times as part of the classroom activities: oneself" (Arnold 2001: 4).

Here I am going to deal with two types of activities that require the student's personal involvement, namely Personal Response and Humanistic Activities. I also assume, together with Williams and Burden, that an effective language teaching/learning experience should be considered as "part of the process of education [which] to be truly educative it must give a broader value and meaning to the learner's life. It must be concerned with educating the whole person" (Williams and Burden 1997: 6). In Rogers' words, "learning by the *whole person*" implies bringing together the cognitive and the affective-experiential aspects of learning, "it involves learning of a *unified* sort, at the cognitive, feeling, and gut levels, with a clear *awareness* of the different aspects of this unified learning" (Rogers 1980: 266). This holistic perspective implies the development of learners as fully integrated individuals.

The theoretical approach that supports my discussion is Williams and Burden's social constructivist approach, which provides a model of learning as a dynamic interaction between the *learner*, the *teacher*, the *task* and the *context*. Within a constructivist perspective, language learning is a process of making sense of the world through social interactions, and the learning experience is something unique: "no two teachers, and no two teaching situations are ever the same" (Williams and Burden 1997: 53). "[B]oth the content of any lesson and the way in which it is offered are part of the person of each individual teacher", who need to be aware of the fact that "they themselves [as well as the content of the lesson] are being construed by their learners and that their words, their actions and interactions form part of every individual learner's own construction of knowledge" (Williams and Burden 1997: 53). Each individual has his own subjective experiential world, nevertheless it is through language that we can construct a common understanding of things and be able to communicate with each other. From an educational perspective, it is important to understand that "[e]ducation can never be value-free. It must be underpinned by a set of beliefs about the kind of society that we are trying to construct and the kinds of explicit and implicit messages that will best convey those beliefs. These will be manifest also in the ways in which we interact with our students" (Williams and Burden 1997: 44). It is also important to understand what a teacher can do to "empower learners both within and beyond the classroom situation" (Williams and Burden 1997: 5).

This approach encompasses today's widespread Communicative Approach to language learning, since language is seen both as *communication* and *interaction*. Language is the means through which people in a specific situation exchange meaningful, authentic messages, i.e. messages that contain information relevant for both the speaker (or writer) and the listener (or reader) (Richards and Rodgers 2001: 21). The focus is on meaningful, purposeful, and fluent communication in specific socio-cultural contexts. The goal of language

teaching/learning is therefore to develop a *communicative language competence* (*C.E.F.* 2001: 13), i.e. to gain knowledge about the language and ability to use it for different purposes in different contexts.

In this perspective users/learners of a language are seen "primarily as 'social agents', i.e. members of society who have tasks (not exclusively language-related) to accomplish in a given set of circumstances, in a specific environment and within a particular field of action. While acts of speech occur within language activities, these activities form part of a wider social context, which alone is able to give them their full meaning" (*C.E.F.* 2001: 9). Language learning, then, is not to be considered as separated from the education of the whole person, since it does not take place in isolation.

Within this educational perspective, the aim of this work is to try to find an answer to the following questions: *Can Personal Response and Humanistic activities promote meaningful communication relevant for the student? How far can they favour a learning experience that can be perceived by the student as significant for the education of the whole person?* The reflections and conclusions I am going to present here are not only based on theoretical assumptions, but also on the observation and analysis of my practice training experience in class during SSIS (1) course.

2. Can Personal Response and Humanistic Activities promote meaningful communication?

2.1. What are Personal Response Activities?

The expression Personal Response Activities (PRA) refers both to the idea these activities are supposed to be relevant for the learner, i.e. connected to the learner's own personal world of experience, opinion and views (*personal*), and to the idea that they require oral or written production related to a specific topic and especially, though not necessarily, to a reading task (*response*).

The term *activity* is a general and broad term that indicates a part of the lesson during which the learner is actively involved or required to perform some kind of action, whose purpose could be fulfilled in the activity itself or could go beyond it. The term, therefore, is more comprehensive than the term task which, according to the definition used in the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (*C.E.F.*), is "any purposeful action considered by an individual as necessary in order to achieve a given result in the context of a problem to be solved, an obligation to fulfil or an objective to be achieved" (*C.E.F.* 2004: 10). The focus of this definition is both on the activation of specific strategies and on the goal and specific outcome that every task requires to achieve: "Communication is an integral part of tasks" (*C.E.F.* 2004: 157).

In the *C.E.F.*, tasks are classified into two main categories: "*real-life*", "*target*" or "*rehearsal*" tasks and "*pedagogic*" tasks. "Real-life" tasks "are chosen on the basis of learners' needs outside the classroom, whether in the personal and public domains, or related to more specific occupational or educational needs"

(*C.E.F.* 2004: 157). While "other kinds of classroom tasks are specifically 'pedagogic' in nature and have their basis in the social and interactive nature and immediacy of the classroom situation where learners engage in a 'wilful suspension of disbelief' and accept the use of the target language rather than the easier and more natural mother tongue to carry out meaning-focused tasks. These pedagogic tasks are only indirectly related to real-life tasks and learner needs, and aim to develop communicative competence" (*C.E.F.* 2001: 157).

PRA share this "pedagogic" dimension because the type of response required is adjusted to take into consideration the learner's competences and characteristics (cognitive and affective), as well as the linguistic and pedagogical objectives of the lesson. They are also related to the specific *topic* of the lesson, thus the type of communication might or might not be seen as having an immediate connection with the learner's "real-life".

The use of the term *response* also stresses one of the basic elements of communication which is the *feedback* provided when a message is received and allows the other person to continue or to adjust his/her oral/written production.

PRA have also a theoretical basis on what is known as Reader-Response approach to teaching literature in E.L.T. contexts, which is also related to Reader-Response literary criticism. This approach based on constructivism sees the reader as actively involved in the interpretation, evaluation and construction of meaning of the text. Reading is a "dialogue" between the reader and the text, in which "the reader with his past experiences, beliefs, expectations and assumptions, interacts with the perspectives in the text, and meaning is determined as a result of this transaction" (Aly 2003). The Reader-Response approach "encourages learners to respond both intellectually and emotionally to the text, and to express their own ideas, opinions and feelings freely" (Aly 2003). There is no such a thing as "the ultimate" interpretation of a text, but alternative and/or multiple interpretations that can coexist. The teacher should stimulate "creative and critical thinking to take place in an atmosphere where there are no threats nor any compulsion to learn for the 'correct' answer or to compete for the 'best' interpretation" (Aly 2003). The aim is to make students aware of their personal contribution to the text.

The role of the teacher in the choice of the reading texts is fundamental, because it is at the level of the topic/theme that interest, perceived value of the learning experience, and motivation in general can be enhanced. At this level a wider educational perspective can find a place. Through his/her choice the teacher can "promote methods of modern language teaching which will strengthen independence of thought, judgement and action, combined with social skills and responsibility" (*C.E.F.* 2001: 4). Reading, and especially reading literature, "can also act as a powerful change agent" (Aly 2003) giving the students the chance to develop an intercultural awareness, to nurture empathy and emotional intelligence (Goleman 1995) (e.g. through identification with the character of a novel) and a tolerance for diversity (e.g. in terms of cultural diversity and or multiplicity of opinions and interpretations). Examples of PRA are:

open questions that require students to express their ideas and opinions about a particular topic, creative writing activities that require the students to elaborate on a specific theme. Generally they are related to specific reading tasks, as it will be clear in the following section.

2.2. What are Humanistic Activities?

Humanistic approaches to language learning focus on the conditions of the learning situation that can enhance language learning. They stress the relevance of a class atmosphere free from inhibiting and negative emotional factors, such as anxiety (Arnold and Brown 1999: 8 *et passim*), and the importance to promote a situation in which individuals can develop and grow in an integrated manner.

Some of the basic theoretical principles that have influenced the development of humanistic approaches to learning are the humanistic psychological theories developed by Maslow (1970) and Rogers (1951, 1980) among others. Maslow's work on motivation is especially related to the idea that human behaviour is driven by the desire to meet certain needs. He suggested that human needs can be presented in a hierarchical order. At the basis of Maslow's pyramid of needs we find: basic physiological needs followed by needs for safety, for interpersonal closeness and for self-esteem. These are called *deficiency needs* and unless they are fulfilled, learning cannot take place. The full potential of the human being is realised to the full, when *being needs* are also fulfilled. They entail cognitive, aesthetic and self actualisation needs.

Rogers's work focuses on a similar idea that human beings have a natural potential for change, development and learning. According to this "actualising tendency" potentials are turned into actualities to maintain and enhance the organism and the whole person. He suggested that "significant learning will only take place when the subject matter is perceived to be of personal relevance to the learner and when it involves his/her active participation, i.e. experiential learning. Learning which is self-initiated and which involves feelings as well as cognition is most likely to be lasting and pervasive." (Williams and Burden 1997: 35). According to Rogers, threat to the self would hinder learning, therefore he suggested that the teacher should show empathy and unconditional acceptance, and encourage the student to set his/her own learning goals and to evaluate his/her own achievements.

Research in this field provides evidence that individual personality traits (e.g. extroversion-introversion), the level of motivation, learner cognitive styles, and existential competences (2) in general, strongly influence language learning. Adopting humanistic approaches to language learning, therefore, means focusing on the learner's needs, on their specific ways in which they make sense of the world (together with the strategies they choose to do this) and on the impact that the learning experience has for the education of the whole person.

In this perspective, "[t]he heart of the humanistic exercise is a personal experience and a group experience in the here and now, which is where the

language flows from" (Rinvolucri 1999: 199). During Humanistic Activities (HA) students have the chance to talk about themselves, "their hopes and dreams and their ambitions; their experiences, memories and desires; their interests, values and insights; their feelings, strengths and much more" (Moskowitz 1999: 178). Thus, HA focus their attention both on communicative language learning and on the enhancing of self esteem and self-awareness; on positive relationships between the teacher and the learners and among peers. The result is that deficiency needs for interpersonal closeness and for self-esteem are met. Each student feels appreciated and gets to know and respect others.

Both Moskowitz (1999) and Rinvolucri (1999) report about a significant improvement in the students' and in the teacher's attitudes toward the learning experience, as well as in the quality of the students' language production, when HA are used on a long-term basis as part of the class work. In this type of activities students "are trying to say things that they cannot yet express clearly in English, […they] feel [such] an internal emotional pressure […] that they have to over-stretch themselves and grasp for language they do not yet have" (Rinvolucri 1999: 200). This can happen especially when the teacher and the other peers are really interested in what they are going to express.

Rinvolucri (1999) also draws a distinction between "semi-communicative" and humanistic exercises (see also "pedagogic" vs "real-life" tasks), because communicative language activities not always provide opportunities for meaningful, real communication. For example, information-gap activities and role-plays are certainly useful and involving because they point to the development of communicative language competence, which is also related to language use in specific "real-life" situations (e.g. tourists in a hotel, business transactions, etc.). However, when the focus is on accurate production and on form, rather that on meaning, even "controlled practice in which the communicative stage is sometimes referred to as 'transfer to the student's own life'" (Rinvolucri 1999: 196) does not produce the same "internal emotional pressure" to exchange personal information.

To give an example of what I have been arguing so far, during my practice training I once used real "Agony Letters" in magazines (which are also known as "Problem Page Letters"). First of all students were required to read an "Agony Letter" and do some reading activities related to it. Then, they had to suggest possible solutions to the problem presented in the magazine letter (this is an example of PRA). And finally, in a HA required each student to write an anonymous letter to the class requiring some suggestions for a personal problem, that would be discussed at a class level. Both in PRA and in HA I observed a high level of participation, but it is when students had to write about their personal problems that I observed a strive to improve their language and a more sophisticated use of the language. They "needed" to be precise.

Another example of how class organisation can be useful to improve class atmosphere is "Circle Time" (White 1992). This technique requires a circular seating arrangement. Its aim is to create a space in which students can communicate freely, discuss, reflect and respond also in an emotional way. It is

about exploring oneself and getting know the others better. It is supposed to develop both speaking and listening skills in a positive, acceptant and non-threatening atmosphere. The teacher is perceived as one of the group and is supposed to make sure that everybody is listened to and respected in order to enhance feelings of self-esteem.

3. Conclusions

On the basis of my observations during my practice training and according to the dynamic social constructivist model of the teaching/learning situation (Williams and Burden 1997), here I will briefly summarise my conclusions about the use of PRA and HA as part of class work.

As already mentioned, language learning is promoted when meaningful communication takes place and when the learning experience is perceived as relevant for the student within and beyond school. In this perspective, both PRA and HA involve the student's personal world of experience and create the space for meaningful interaction in a respectful and supportive atmosphere.

However, since PRA have an essentially pedagogic nature, the type of communication they trigger off is meaningful to the extent that it requires a "transfer to the student's own life" (Rinvolucri 1999: 196). The significance does not reside in the activity itself but in the topic of the lesson, which might or might not be immediately seen as having a personal relevance for the student's life beyond school. Moreover, they create the opportunity to practise the language that students already know.

Communication in HA, instead, is real and meaningful in the "here and now" of the lesson and it involves both the cognitive and the affective dimension of the person. They are more involving and motivating, since they stimulate in the student a desire to develop his/her communicative language competence to talk about themselves and find out interesting things about other people. They can encourage self-awareness and empathic, respectful behaviour towards others.

The role of the teacher is similar in both types of activities because he/she is supposed to be supportive and empathic. Both create the space for an oral and written production which is not assessed in terms of content, but each student's idea is equally accepted by the teacher and it should be accepted by the class. The atmosphere improves, especially because the students are never compelled to share their ideas and are given time to think before being asked to give answers or opinions. If we consider the context in terms of organisation of the class interaction, activities like pairwork and class discussion (especially during "Circle Time") can promote participation and sense of belonging as long as each student's idea is accepted and respected as a contribution to a common construction of meaning. On the basis of my observations, it is when I used HA that I have seen the highest level of involvement and emotional arousal. I assume therefore that the students perceived that the activities were relevant for them as individuals.

PRA have the advantage of involving the students without demanding too much public exposure, thus PRA could be used to build up a positive atmosphere and an educational relationship free from anxiety. PRA could also be used to pave the way for the introduction of HA, which in turn can increase the perceived value of the learning experience and the desire for learning the language. Incorporating PRA and (above all) HA as part of the language activities means enhancing the learning experience as something perceived as relevant beyond classroom work.

I think that the teacher should be committed and sensitive not only to the choice of activities, but also to the development of respectful, acceptant and responsible relationships with the students. The learning experience is also an educational/formative process for the teacher, who can always improve his/her self-awareness and question whether what he/she does is coherent with his/her values and beliefs. Thus, feedback from students and from colleagues is a valuable source of self-awareness, together with professional specialization in a perspective of life-long learning.

NOTES:
1. SSIS (Scuola di Specializzazione per l'Insegnamento nella Scuola Secondaria) is the Italian postgraduate training course for secondary school teachers.
2. Existential competence (as part of a person's general competences) "may be considered as the sum of the individual characteristics, personality traits and attitudes which concern, for example, self-image and one's view of others and willingness to engage with other people in social interaction. This type of competence is not seen simply as resulting from immutable personality characteristics [...] they are capable of being acquired or modified in use and through learning" (*C.E.F.* 2001: 11-12).

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Michela Damonte si è laureata nel 2003 in Lingue e Letterature Straniere presso l'Università degli Studi di Udine con una tesi dal titolo *Vita e racconto. La costruzione del soggetto in An Angel at My Table, l'autobiografia di Janet Frame*. Nel giugno 2005 si è specializzata nell'insegnamento dell'inglese come lingua straniera presso la SSIS (Scuola di Specializzazione per l'Insegnamento nella Scuola Secondaria) di Udine. Interessi costanti di ricerca sono l'autobiografia e l'insegnamento dell'inglese come lingua straniera. Attualmente si sta specializzando in Process Counseling.
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