

**Appropriating & Using Conceptual Tools of Literacy:  
A qualitative study of two novice foreign language teaching assistants**

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**CASE #1: ELENA**

**DEVELOPING CONCEPTUAL KNOWLEDGE OF LITERACY DURING AND AFTER METHODS SEMINAR**

**Notions of literacy- Pre-Questionnaire (8/26/2010)**

“*the acquisition of minimal educational requirements* which allow persons to navigate in an educational or cultural system ... it means to not feel intimidated *to produce in a FL despite the mistakes* (grammatical or others) that you would eventually do”

**RTJ#2 (9/12/2010)**

“So far the activities that are occurring more regularly are *the performing of dialogues in pairs, and I am progressively introducing other activities with more emphasis in meaning comprehension and the developing of writing abilities* ... [L]ast week I presented students with a poem of Cuban poet Nicolas Guillén, “Tengo lo que tenía que tener,” *to introduce more abstract uses of the verb “Tener”* (to have). After making them identify some of the uses of this verb in the text (without focusing on the whole meaning of the poem), I requested them to write and read a poem using the verb “Tener”. The result was very good and surprising for me. In general some students produced very nice poems showing they grasped the used of the verb “Tener” in different ways, and *they even incorporated some of the vocabulary and grammatical forms introduced in previous classes*. At the same time they were using the grammatical points, they connected the poems with their personal life experiences, which I think also shows they were acquiring the meaning of the verb and were able to apply it to their social contexts ... There are always challenges in class preparation, like when I introduced the poem and some of them showed some frustration because they were not able to understand, but it's interesting and encouraging when they showed they were able to use the verb “Tener” in different ways in their own writing assignments. *The usefulness of this approach of introducing grammar by promoting certain comprehension of texts has proved successful so far in class, therefore I intend to keep on using it in the future.*”

**Notions of literacy- Midterm (10/6/2010)**

At midterm, Elena could not provide an answer to the question “What are the 7 principles of literacy?”, she identified two of the four curricular components (situated practice and overt instruction), their features evaded her and she related the two only to vocabulary and grammar.

**RTJ #4 Midterm Reflection (10/14/2010)**

“The conceptual map first presents the Teaching Objectives, described in the inner circle of the map. I identified 6 general Teaching objectives so far: *Familiarization with the Target Language, Cultural Literacy, Communication, Vocabulary, Grammar, Communication and Progressive Text Comprehension*. These objectives are *in line with the framework of the Literacy Teaching Approach*, the readings we have done so far in class and the translation of these approach in the 101 class I have started teaching this semester. The concepts described in the outer circle corresponds with the Teaching Strategies that I have used so far in class, in order to accomplish the teaching objectives described above. They are also contextualized within the same conceptual framework of Literacy Approach ... I am devoting each class in a way or another to make sure students:

--The *introduction of grammar and vocabulary as a constant objective throughout the course*, using *overt-instruction and situated practice* with emphasis in the interrelation between reading, writing and speaking, *to help students establish a basic structural basis of the target language that eventually would help them with meaning creation and production in the L2*.

--Establishing communication in the target language, through for example *the regular performance of instructional activities like dialogues* in pairs and in groups

-- [...] I also have been *progressively presenting students with different kind of texts* like poems, fragments of literary stories, personal calendars, TV guides, city guides, etc, *to relate them with the use of vocabulary and grammar introduced in class at the same time that I am exposing them to the cultural elements contained in this media artifacts*

[...] All of the above has the overall aim of making students acquire a greater familiarization and basic level of proficiency in the target language at the end of the semester.”

### RTJ #7 Final Reflection (11/30/2010)

“I guess that since mid semester there have not been any substantial changes in the main concepts that are guiding my teaching practice. However, there is a more progressive awareness on the importance of incorporating the literacy approach to my teaching philosophy as I have stated in a previous journal. ***I realized for example that the introduction of vocabulary and grammar are not necessarily ends in itself, but ways to promote for example more effective language use and cultural knowledge to make students more familiar with the target language.*** I guess overall the concept of Communication is my guiding teaching principle, as a progressive process of making students develop their listening, reading and writing skills in the L2, but also ***as a framework which allows students to go a step further in order to create meaning, and to start thinking on how it is produced and could be transformed into their own performance of L2. I think that last part is a long-term approach, especially considering that we are teaching a beginner class level.*** However, through the introduction of for example controlled activities to approach different kind of texts, as well as with the introduction of cultural elements in different forms, I am creating a basis to implement that long-term objective in my class. ***So I think that under the umbrella of Communication as my overall objective, I consider that Language Use, Conventions, Problem Solving, Cultural Knowledge, Interpretation and Reflection and Self-Reflection have been all equally important as my teaching objectives. [...] The introduction of conventions could be effectively done not only through isolated presentations, but also through exposing them with cultural texts like videos and websites, which with the adequate contextualization, scaffolding and modeling could lead to the comprehension of those conventions and the additional familiarization with cultural elements that could deepen student's understanding of the L2.***”

### Notions of literacy-End of term Interview (12/7/2010)

“I think now literacy ... it's an approach as well as techniques that allows ***to contextualize the teaching of foreign languages ...*** I think the focus of literacy approach is to integrate the FL teaching but based in the context. The integration of the different techniques or to integrate reading, writing, and listening as ***integral parts of the whole approach and relate it to the real world as much as possible.***”

## APPLYING CONCEPTUAL AND PEDAGOGICAL TOOLS OF LITERACY IN INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN

### RTJ#2 (9/12/2010)

“ [L]ast week I presented students with a poem of Cuban poet Nicolas Guillén, “Tengo lo que tenía que tener,” ***to introduce more abstract uses of the verb “Tener” (to have).*** After making them identify some of the uses of this verb in the text (without focusing on the whole meaning of the poem), I requested them to write and read a poem using the verb “Tener”. The result was very good and surprising for me. In general some students produced very nice poems showing they grasped the used of the verb “Tener” in different ways, and ***they even incorporated some of the vocabulary and grammatical forms introduced in previous classes.*** At the same time they were using the grammatical points, they connected the poems with their personal life experiences, which I think also shows they were acquiring the meaning of the verb and were able to apply it to their social contexts ... ***There are always challenges in class preparation, like when I introduced the poem and some of them showed some frustration because they were not able to understand, but it's interesting and encouraging when they showed they were able to use the verb “Tener” in different ways in their own writing assignments. The usefulness of this approach of introducing grammar by promoting certain comprehension of texts has proved successful so far in class, therefore I intend to keep on using it in the future.***”

### RTJ #6 Reflection on Teaching Lesson (11/10/2010)

“In the case of the four curricular components, I guess I am becoming more confident in the design of activities like Over-Instruction and Situated Practice. ***The former because considering that we are teaching a beginner level, it's important to emphasize in the introduction of structural elements like grammar and vocabulary to create the foundations for the acquisition of the target language.*** Situated Practice because I think it is relatively ***easy to identify conceptually and to put it into practice.*** Having said that, I am also ***incorporating Transformed Practice and Critical Framing activities, recognizing the advantages of the introduction of cultural components as an integral part of foreign language learning; and also of the use of texts of diverse kinds (visual, literary, media, etc) as a useful and challenging tool in this regard.*** Another thing I am realizing is that any of these activities could be regularly incorporated to a beginner level, and that the emphasis should be on how to design and redesigned them (based on previous experiences) in order to make them really effective. [...]

I recently designed a class about “Los Dias Feriados y las Actividades” (Holidays and Activities). [...]***Even though the lesson plan as a whole went fine, I had to recognize that the Transformed Practice and Cultural Practice proved difficult for students.*** On the one hand they got familiar with many cultural elements associated with Christmas celebration in

different cultural context, and some of them even contrasted that with their own cultural perspectives and traditions. On the other hand they elaborated letters without taking too much into consideration the information provided in the basic texts but more on their own personal experiences.”

#### **RTJ #7 Final Reflection (11/30/2010)**

“[...] I guess overall the concept of Communication is my guiding teaching principle, as a progressive process of making students develop their listening, reading and writing skills in the L2, but also as a framework which allows students to go a step further in order to create meaning, and to start thinking on how it is produced and could be transformed into their own performance of L2. ***I think that last part is a long-term approach, especially considering that we are teaching a beginner class level.*** However, through the introduction of for example controlled activities to approach different kind of texts, as well as with the introduction of cultural elements in different forms, I am creating a basis to implement that long-term objective in my class. So I think that under the umbrella of Communication as my overall objective, I consider that Language Use, Conventions, Problem Solving, Cultural Knowledge, Interpretation and Reflection and Self-Reflection have been all equally important as my teaching objectives.”

### **CONSTRAINTS TO INSTANTIATING LITERACY-BASED TEACHING**

#### **RTJ #6 Reflection on Teaching Lesson (11/10/2010)**

“I tried to incorporate a literacy-based lesson in my classes as much as I can, to make it part of my teaching philosophy as well as of the student's learning philosophy as well. One of the main challenges I face in this regard is in ***the selection of materials***, and more ***specifically due to the amount of time required for this versus the limited time we usually have as teacher/students.***”

#### **End of term Interview (12/7/2010)**

“My only problem with the literacy approach is the time, and I’ve said that in my journals. ***It would be very helpful if there is a way to have like a database of materials already proposed by other colleagues. That would save time.*** I see that it is very time-consuming. ***You want to give them the very best materials and that makes it extremely long that part you have to be creative ... sometimes you have the model and it’s not enough ...*** [Another] problem is the frequency of classes, we teach three times a week and even if you want to ... now I think with the portfolio I’m in better shape for next semester to introduce it. Because now I have a better overall idea of what it is, I have done the different models. But at the beginning I didn’t know what was expected of me and ***I have the book and I was kind of confused if the book was ... on the roles of the different tools that I have.*** So what I did was some days I introduced some activities when I had more time. ***But mostly it was hectic because of the timing and the frequency.*** You don’t have time to think. One of the main things in this approach is that you need to prepare well and I’m not going to do it if I can’t do it well.”

### **CASE #2: ARMANDO**

#### **DEVELOPING CONCEPTUAL KNOWLEDGE OF LITERACY DURING AND AFTER METHODS SEMINAR**

#### **Notions of literacy-Pre-Questionnaire (8/26/2010)**

“the capacity to ***read and understand a language and also be able to interact with others***”  
“to ***share (written / spoken) knowledge***”

#### **RTJ#2 (9/12/2010)**

“I use at the same ***time an inductive and deductive method.*** Sometimes I must to ***explain what I’m doing in grammar since this is a beginners’ class and they are not able yet to find the ‘why’ of some rules.*** Sometimes ***I use cognates to make them think about the meaning of a word and they participate enthusiastically.***”

#### **Notions of literacy-Midterm (10/6/2010)**

Did not provide an answer to the question “What are the 7 principles of literacy?”; identified three of the four curricular components (critical framing, situated practice and overt instruction) but could not explain what they were, provide any specific activities that align with the tools, was not aware of conceptual underpinnings.

#### **RTJ #4 Midterm Reflection (10/14/2010)**

“Since this is a college class, I understand that ***this is not about teaching a language as a simple tool but rather also a gateway to provide new perspectives of the world thru the use of target language.*** This is the reason because I divided my conceptual map in two main sections: Cultural awareness and Language immersion. Both are deeply connected however I

wanted differentiate them since I had previous experiences where language did not have any connection with the culture. [...] *About the language immersion process, videos, texts and audios are very important.* During the last week I *briefly showed them news about Vargas Llosa Nobel prize and also about the Chilean Miners rescue.* They were very interested about those issues. *The use of real news provide them the sensation that they are learning a ‘real language’.*”

#### **Notions of literacy-End of term Interview (12/7/2010)**

“Literacy is a way, *an approach, that involves not just to learn a language like words and vocabulary but also something that implies a cultural awareness and all the manifestations that allow to make the student be involved with the discourse* ... that means culture but also expressions and interactions that make the learning process useful.”

#### **RTJ #7 Final Reflection (11/30/2010)**

“I still think that the major concept that guides my teaching is: to provide a new perspective of the world thru a language. [...] I believe that this new perspective can be only offered considering a literacy-based approach. *In my last map I put in two different sections ‘Cultural Awareness’ and ‘Language Immersion’. Now I put them together since they actually go together in my class.* The readings available in the book are about traditions from Hispanic Countries, also the videos or the listening that I choose for class. They include commons expressions or some information that require putting them in a context. *My technique is also based in the use of games, or to propose a playful environment.* For example, when we talked about the present progressive (i.e.: *estoy cantando*), I also told them that there is a verb that doesn’t exist in English: *tararear* (the closes translation would be ‘to hum’, but we actually open the mouth while we say ‘*tarara...*’ to sing a song we don’t know the lyrics). So they started to ‘*tararear*’ and make their partners guess the song they were ‘*tarareando* (and at the same time, practicing a grammar issue)

Is also very important to use as much as possible the target language and be aware of the connection between the L1-L2, especially with the use of cognates. But when I also think on L1-L2 it comes to my mind that also means Culture 1-Culture 2.”

### **APPLYING CONCEPTUAL AND PEDAGOGICAL TOOLS OF LITERACY IN INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN**

#### **RTJ #4 Midterm Reflection (10/14/2010)**

“During the last week I *briefly showed them news about Vargas Llosa Nobel prize and also about the Chilean Miners rescue.* They were very interested about those issues. *The use of real news provide them the sensation that they are learning a ‘real language’.*”

#### **RTJ #6 Reflection on Teaching Lesson (11/10/2010)**

Today I use a Panamanian song (and the lyrics) with my students. First, we listened to the song and I checked how much they were able to understand. Then we took a look at the lyrics (every students got a copy). There was *a words bank but also I explained to them some expressions or cultural information.* [...] Also, we made an activity to *reinforce grammar and orthography:* they had to look for the ‘Indirect object pronouns’ forms in the lyrics and also to they had find when the word “Tu” required a stress: *Tú* (you), *tu* (your). [...] *Instead of just making a regular review I thought that the use of a song would be nicer for them.* [...] This activity was basically an Overt instruction with some Situated practice.

#### **End of term Interview (12/7/2010)**

“Oh yeah, well I used uh... I just uh... without the... let’s say that it was like the..., the..., it was based on the reading... [...] Yeah, *the pre-reading, the reading, the first reading, but in this case, I also include the part of not giving them the links... lyrics. Ah, because it was a song.*”

### **CONSTRAINTS TO INSTANTIATING LITERACY-BASED TEACHING**

#### **End of term Interview (12/7/2010)**

“Well, actually, I still have not tried that strategy because *I think that we just cannot show any video, we have to have a really good story to use that work.*”

#### **Professional Development Plan (1/15/2011)**

“It was the first time teaching and *I had to get used to plan my lessons and be aware of simple details* like: times, the order of the book, find a method to check the homework, etc.”