Comprensión y tratamiento de las complejidades lingüísticas del inglés en el proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje

Understanding and treating language complexities in English as a foreign language teaching-learning process

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RESUMEN
El presente trabajo se deriva de un proyecto de investigación concluido y en proceso de introducción de sus resultados en el Departamento de Educación Lenguas Extranjeras de la UHO. La tarea atiende las complejidades y dificultades en el aprendizaje del inglés como lengua extranjera por parte de los estudiantes que se forman como profesores de este idioma. Existen insuficiencias en los niveles de competencia comunicativa y en el dominio metalingüístico que logra el proceso de formación. La sistematización de experiencias sobre errores comunes permitió identificar unidades lingüísticas complejas por su grado de singularidad en la lengua inglesa. La apropiación de estas formas marcadas requiere de la transformación de ciertos mecanismos neuropsicológicos para que dichas unidades lingüísticas sean actas al procesamiento por el sujeto. El objetivo es orientar a profesores y estudiantes sobre la naturaleza del proceso de aprendizaje en el desarrollo gradual de la interlengua y sobre las contradicciones que el sujeto enfrenta en interacción con el objeto de estudio. El trabajo proporciona alternativas de estrategias de aprendizaje y procedimientos experimentados en la práctica que benefician la apropiación, lo que conduce a una mayor independencia cognoscitiva y a aprender a aprender. En tal sentido, se ofrece un sistema de procedimientos que, mediante la autoreflexión, la autovaloración, la retroalimentación y la autorregulación, contribuye a mejorar el resultado del aprendizaje. Las experiencias en su implementación reflejan transformaciones en el proceder metodológico de los docentes y en los niveles de eficiencia comunicativa en lengua inglesa de los profesionales de la educación en formación.
Palabras clave: Competencia comunicativa; formación de profesores; complejidades lingüísticas; interlengua

ABSTRACT
This paper is part of a research project which was completed and is now in process of implementation in practice at the Department of Foreign Language Teacher Education at the University of Holguín. The research task is concerned with the difficulties and complexities in English language learning by students who are being trained as teachers of English in pre-service courses. There are insufficiencies in the level of communicative competence and in the metalinguistic capacities the future professionals achieve in the training process. The systematization of experiences on the recurrent errors favored the identification of complex linguistic units in the foreign language because they are language-specific in English. Learning these marked forms requires the transformation of certain neuropsychological mechanisms so that these complex linguistic units be accepted by the linguistic processing system (LPS) of the individual learner. Therefore, the objective has been to offer teachers and students the necessary guidance about the nature of English language learning, interlanguage development, and the controversial process of interaction of the student with the object of study. The paper also provides teachers and students with learning strategies and already implemented procedures which favor learning and lead to learning to learn and autonomy. A system of procedures is suggested to encourage self-reflection, self-assessment, feedback and self-regulation. The implementation experiences reflect transformations in the methodological procedures employed by teachers, and in the level of communicative proficiency of teachers in preparation.   .

Keywords: Communicative competence; teacher education; linguistic complexities; interlanguage

1. INTRODUCTION

Learning a foreign language (FL) is a process which causes a diversity of emotions, feelings and experiences in the students; for some of them, it is enjoyment, self-satisfaction and success, while others experience slow progress and some feelings of frustration. Those in the latter position reflect a gradual decrease of motivation for learning, an insufficient metacognitive development, thus limitations in the development of the communicative competence.

The causes of success and failure in the FL learning results constitute an area of knowledge that demands a careful scientific study of the internal psycholinguistic processes of individuals from an interdisciplinary perspective; as it is well-known the learning process has a multifaceted nature. This article deals with the issue related to the complexities of the English language and the difficulties the students face in learning; there are many specific linguistic units that tend to be difficult to the processing system from the semantic and pragmatic points of view. In addition to this, there is not a proper methodological treatment to favor learning the complexities and difficulties in the pedagogical practice. In order to give a solution to the problem, the paper offers methodological suggestions supported by linguistic, psychological and pedagogical conceptions to favor the learning process. The investigation was carried out in the context of FL (English) teacher education at the University of Holguín.

The systematization of experiences in the pedagogical practice allowed the delimitation of insufficiencies in the development of the English communicative competence (CC) of the students majoring as language teachers. They evinced limitations, specifically in the accuracy of oral and written expression in all aspects of language (pronunciation, spelling, grammar, lexicon and discourse). They manifested difficulties in the comprehension of literary, academic, and scientific oral and written texts; likewise, in the adjustment and respect to some language conventions from the semantic-pragmatic perspective. The error analysis process carried out and the study of the students' interlanguage revealed that the greater number of insufficiencies is caused by the interlinguistic influence and the intercultural phenomenon; this has received little treatment from the methodological view.

The concept *interlinguistic influence* is referred to as the influence of one language on another in an individual mind, as considered by Jasone & Huffeine (2003), Gass & Selinker (2008), and Mourssi (2012, 2013); it is a synonym of transfer (either positive or negative), the latter also known as interference. This phenomenon has been the cause of systematic errors in language learning for students of a FL. This area of knowledge and research which has the roots in the studies of Comparative Linguistics which originated the theory of *contrastive analysis*, Lado, R. (1957); and *error analysis* (EA), Corder, P. (1983); and the studies on *interlanguage*, Selinker, L. (1972); Huang, Q. (2010); Richards, J. (2010). The interlinguistic phenomenon is included within the intercultural or cross-cultural phenomenon, and in this context is used to refer to differences in the use of the language and communication between different cultures; therefore, the linguistic and cultural phenomena are intrinsically connected.

2. METHODOLOGY

The study, here presented, was part of a broader research project to improve the methodological and communicative competence of teachers of English in preparation (English Teacher Education Major) at the University of Holguín. The sample included students in the last two years of the major, whose interlanguage development was studied through different empirical methods such as: observation, interview, and tests administered during their academic, research, and practicum performance. This facto-perceptive study was supported by theoretical methods such as analysis-synthesis, induction-deduction, historical-logical and abstract to concrete, which helped determine the systematization of the basic concepts and theoretical and methodological support. The logical research sequence followed by the authors permitted the accomplishment of the following research tasks: 1) the identification of contradictions and complexities of interlinguistic nature that hinder the learning process in the subjects, 2) the identification and formulation of interlinguistic skills required by an English as a FL educator, and 3) the elaboration of a system of methodological procedures supported by a theoretical and methodological conception to favor the efficiency of learning.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the theoretical study, which bring to light some concepts and ideas, must be clarified in order to facilitate the reader´s comprehension of this paper. When talking about *language complexities*, one makes reference to *language specific forms* (structural patterns which are typical or peculiar of the English language, such as idiomatic expressions, phrasal verbs, and proverbs. M*arked forms* can be included because they are not common, and are less frequent linguistic units whose uses can be restricted; examples given are the irregular forms of number, genre and grammatical tense.
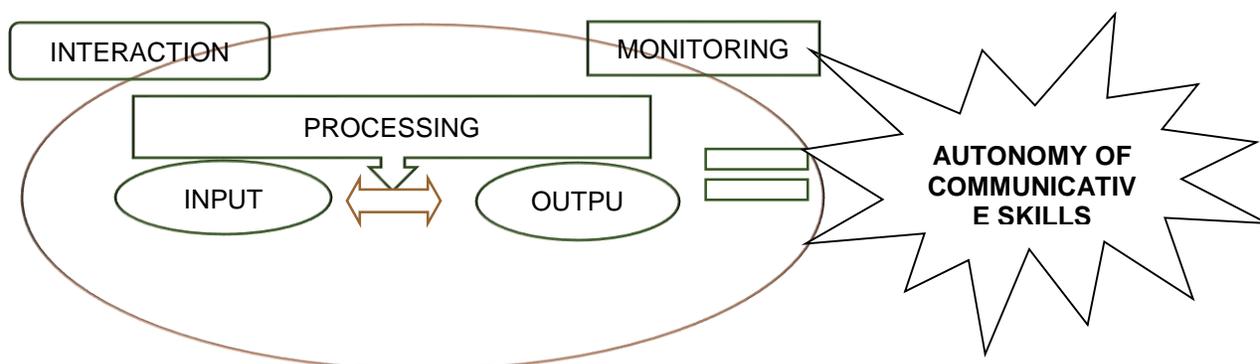
If we consider that effective learning is determined by a successful processing of the linguistic forms of the FL, then these complex forms tend to be troublesome to the individual´s processing mechanisms. There are several factors affecting the apprehensibility of this type of language units, among them: the influence of the mother tongue (L1), the influence of the FL itself, the natural tendency of learners to resort to regularities that they have hypothesized and established in their interlanguage, and the underestimation of the methodological treatment to the interlinguistic influence by teachers of the FL.

The complexities in the linguistic processing are manifested and evinced in: the tendency of the FL user to resort to *more transparent forms* (linguistic units which are closer to the L1) which sometimes leads to a less authentic communicative act, the insufficient comprehension and production of specific language forms as idiomatic expressions, phrasal verbs, collocations, proverbs, among others. The poor focus on these linguistic phenomena limits the development of metalinguistic capacities that a language teacher requires for pedagogical purposes.

In teaching a FL or second language, it is necessary for the practitioner to have a clear understanding of what *the linguistic processing system* (LPS) is; the human brain uses this system of mechanisms to process the linguistic information. According to Benedet, M. J. (2002), these neuropsychological mechanisms are configured in the brain with the development of the native language during the individual´s life, but are not apt to process a different linguistic code from that of the L1. Therefore, they need to be transformed as an unavoidable step of the learning process, Pienemann (2007). Processing linguistic information implies being able to understand and produce the communicative act satisfactorily.

The teaching-learning process of a FL must assume the pedagogical implications that in practice are demanded by the adaptation or creation of new mechanisms to process the linguistic code of the target language (TL). The actions and operations which are required to form the new mechanisms are: repetitive encounters with *language specific* forms (systematic exposition to the FL, which is also known as systematic input), an emphasis on the linguistic analysis of *language specific* units by the teacher (the use of productive methods that stimulate induction-deduction and discovery learning), repetitive practice, and the use of reflection sessions that involve the students in the conscious analysis of complexities.

The methodological system of actions involve some essential processes to ensure learning, they are: *communicative interaction*, *monitoring*, *mediation*, and *feedback*. Promoting interaction is the first important step because the rest of the processes derive from it. The input-output relationship make up a dialectical unit; output allows the learners to test hypotheses they gradually form about the use of the TL, and the evidence they receive through mediation and feedback, offered by the mediator turns into a new input opportunity. The integration of these processes in practice leads to the gradual construction of interlanguage (scaffolding); hence, autonomy in the development of communicative skills in the FL is favored.

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│     MEDIATION       │          │        HYPOTHESES          │
│                     │          │         TESTING            │
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Diagram 1: Graphic representation of the communicative learning process (elaborated by the author)

Machín, P. and Medina, A. (2016) socialized their systematization of experiences in practice, and the study of the students´ interlanguage brought about the delimitation of complex linguistic units which systematically become sources of errors and insufficiencies in the communicative acts of the students. The collection of these data helped distinguish the difficulties; hence, the formulation of interlinguistic skills, which are one of the main issues in this research.

The interlinguistic skills make up the complex content component of the FL which requires special treatment, and they include the complex linguistic units; they comprise actions and operations which the student should develop in order to be successful in the communicative act, so that it be permanently transformed to reach the expected communicative model. At the same time, a mastery of metalinguistic capacities with methodological implications is expected. Examples of these skills are:

-Distinguish distinctive phonic and graphic features of lexical items that are transparent and equivalent between the FL and the L1 *(E.g. Psychology, architecture).*

-Understand / use syntactic structure parameters which are language specific in English, e.g.: *United Nations Educational Scientific and Cutural Organization; phrasal verbs and collocations.*

- Identify / use lexical representations that are false cognates, e.g.: *Molest vs. molestar.*
-Understand lexical representations from other languages that are included in the English lexicon, e.g.: *promenade, coup d' état, déjà vu, status quo.*

-Express / paraphrase ideas conveyed by specific linguistic units of the L1 to denote meanings which are unique in the L1 sociocultural setting, especially when it is difficult to find an equivalent in the FL, e.g. : *Profesor guía, Facultad Obrera, CDR, plan Turquino, casas de cultura, among many others).*
-Understand / employ lexical items and their meanings, whose equivalents may vary between the two languages, e.g.: the word *escudo* in Spanish may designate two concepts (a symbol of the nation and a broad piece of defensive armor); however, in English two different words: shield and coat of arms. The reversed phenomenon occurs when a single linguistic unit in English as *try* may have two equivalent words in Spanish*: tratar* y *probar.* This type of interlinguistic phenomenon is very recurrent between the lexical systems of the two languages. The internal structure of each skill comprises a sequence of actions and operations which ensure the apprehension process; this sequence includes: listening (input), understanding, distinguishing distinctive features, reflecting about them, reproducing following a model and without a model in different situations, and using the linguistic units in new situations of the communicative practice.

System of procedures

1. Procedures for the orientation, comprehension, and creation of needs for the development of the communicative competence in English: This includes: a) Reflection on the personal qualities and the necessary communicative mastery of the English language teacher: frequent discussions about the desired communicative model of the English language teacher in relation to accuracy and fluency required by an intercultural communicator; b) Socializing the qualities of the good language learner and the use of comparison and reflection about the characteristics of each individual learner to achieve transformations in the modes of action as language learners; c) Reflecting about essential and specific characteristics of the English language: the teacher systematically presents examples of particular linguistic phenomena and

language complexities in the content of the subject (phonic, syntactic, morphological, pragmatic and semantic aspects) and comparisons with the L1 are made.

2. Procedures for remedial treatment and practice: a) The teacher creates opportunities to favor communicative, controlled, semi-controlled and free practice sessions; b) The teacher takes down notes about the complex linguistic forms that cause students´ errors, then he/she offers mediation, monitoring and feedback; c) Teachers offer positive or negative evidence of the students´ output and reflection sessions are developed (here the students use the evidence to verify the hypotheses they had created about the language use, which ones are correct and which are incorrect, this allows reformulation, restructuring and/or consolidation of parts of their interlanguage. Thinking processes are activated, and metalinguistic and metacognitive capacities are developed.

3. Procedures for planned remedial work in class and in office hours: a) The teacher makes decisions on the basis of frequent systematization of experiences; i.e. the communicative insufficiencies and most frequent errors of the students; b) The teacher demonstrates the use of complex linguistic units, purposefully offering an appropriate model; c) New exercises and tasks are planned and implemented which require the use of the target forms; pair work and group work activities are organized, implemented and monitored; this is complemented with feedback. The process includes reflection on complexities and difficulties; both frequent encounter and repetitive reflection favor the gradual improvement of interlanguage, often referred to as s*caffolding.*

4. Procedures for the assessment of interlanguage development through cross-sectional studies: This includes: a) planning, assigning and executing comprehensive communicative tasks in which the students have to interact in pairs, groups and produce longer chunks of discourse; b) The teacher and the rest of the class observe the performance and assess the interlanguage development reached by the students; c) The teacher promotes the use self-evaluation, co-evaluation and hetero-evaluation; d)Teachers guide reflection sessions to help the students regulate the learning process, either group or individual sessions that lead to self-improvement.

4. CONCLUSIONS

1. The systematization of experiences in the pedagogical practice allowed the delimitation of the main insufficiencies in the development of the communicative competence in English of the students in the English as a Foreign Language Teacher Education Major. This led to distinguish complex linguistic units as determined by the frequency of errors of the learners.
2. The theoretical study carried out permitted the specification of the methodological conception that supports the system of procedures. Important updated ideas and propositions about language learning are sustained by Vygotsky´s sociocultural theory and the implied processes, such as *interaction*, *mediation*, *monitoring*, and *feedback.* Likewise, the foundation considered linguistic, psycholinguistic, cognitive and neuropsychological aspects with pedagogical and methodological implications.
3. The implementation of the procedures in the pedagogical practice through self-reflection, self-assessment, feedback and self-regulation have evinced positive transformations in the students (English language teachers in preparation).
4. The alternative of learning strategies and procedures were assessed in practice and proved to be effective in favoring apprehension and leading to cognitive independence in the students.

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