Using Games in Testing Activities: Some Experiences in Italian Primary Schools

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1. Introduction

The basic assumption is that the teaching of foreign languages in primary schools requires a very special approach.

Children aged 8-10 (that is, the age group to which foreign languages are first taught in Italian primary schools) generally have no real motivation to learn another language. While adults and even young adults have a "utilitarian" approach to this kind of study (job requirements, plans for holidays abroad, wish to understand pop songs and films, etc.), children need to be given some sort of motivation, so that all the activities may have a purpose and thus make sense. This kind of motivation is normally provided by games, which have a purpose in themselves; the same may apply to songs and rhymes, practical activities such as drawing and colouring, or even play-acting. All these activities are consistent with an approach that aims to be "student-centred", and therefore tries to base the teaching process on the specificity of the learners, their interests and their requirements.

The lesson presented needs to be appropriate and to be relevant for the learners: at first it should be centred on the child's own "self" - family, friends, school and games; then, gradually, it can encompass other areas as well: the city, friends and pen-friends from abroad, holidays and travel.

What all these areas have in common is that they should all be presented in a meaningful way; in a way, that is, which can be understood by the learners, so that they may acquire these new areas of language and re-use them appropriately. Connections with other subjects are clearly of great help in this respect, because children become aware of the relationships between what they have learnt in their own language and the foreign language, that is the new subject they are just dealing with; the latter is not isolated and seen as just an episode in the week's activities, but it is linked with everything else. In this way activities that would be typical of certain subjects (such as problem-solving, singing or drawing) are extended to the foreign language as well.

It was with these considerations in mind that materials were developed and activities were planned for EFL lessons in Italian primary schools. Teachers in various schools have tested these suggestions and their feedback has proved extremely valuable, because all these materials have recently been collected and published as a teacher's book with three audiocassettes and three books for the learners.

In these materials, all skills are taken into consideration, although oral skills are emphasized, as is suggested in the *Programmi Ministeriali* (= National Curriculum) and as is appropriate to avoid phonological interference with written words. Written skills are introduced gradually: first of all through reading, then through guided writing and freer production.

In a typical teaching unit, the follow-up to the previous unit and the warm-up for the new unit (two sides of the same coin) are generally based on rhymes, songs, drawing and colouring, so that the linguistic aspect is not over-emphasized before the presentation of the new content, but it is in the background anyway. The actual stage of presentation usually includes a

dialogue between children or, more rarely, between children and adults; the context is always well-defined, and there has been a constant attempt to find links with aspects of culture as well (1). For guided practice and for freer production, a series of games and role-playing activities have been suggested, so that the children may use the new exponents in a meaningful way while avoiding too personal an involvement, which might be awkward for shyer children (2). Actually, the formative value of foreign language learning for the age group that is being considered has been among the key factors around which these materials have been structured. For this reason in all the units (44 altogether) special attention has been given to the psychological aspects of interaction, so that the children may always operate in a "user-friendly" atmosphere.

2. What about testing?

So far we have outlined the general framework within which new structures, functions and exponents are presented to young learners and what activities are normally organized, in order to facilitate the acquisition of such new language. At this stage, however, it is important to see how young learners are tested in this context, that is what kinds of tasks are recommended.

It is quite clear that the phase of testing and evaluation should be as consistent as possible with the previous stages of the teaching unit, so the materials to which we are referring include suggestions for testing at the end of each teaching unit. Both listening comprehension and oral production are tested regularly; moreover there are specific sections, e.g. in "consolidation units", in which vocabulary and reading comprehension are tested as well.

Both traditional and more innovative tasks are suggested, so that a variety of techniques may be employed to suit different needs at different levels of competence.

In this way, the pursuit of consistency is twofold: on the one hand testing sections are always balanced, so that the teacher may find it easier to follow the development in the learner's performance, whilst on the other hand tasks are varied and have a fairly strict correlation with the activities that were suggested in the previous parts of the teaching unit. It was quite interesting to see that the more unusual tasks (typically games) were favoured choices at the lower levels, so, before we discuss that any further, we shall draw up an inventory of the tasks that were commonly suggested for testing, and see at what skills they are aimed.

A. LISTENING COMPREHENSION - Most passages for listening comprehension are on tape, but the teacher may choose not to use the tape, in order to simplify the task by letting the children listen to a familiar voice/accent.

Tasks:

1. choose the right picture (multiple choice)

2. is the picture correct? (true/false)

3. odd one out (with pictures)

4. complete / colour / match the picture(s)

B. ORAL PRODUCTION - Ideally the children should be tested in pairs, so that the interaction may take place between peers, rather than with the teacher, at as homogeneous a level of competence as possible.

Tasks:

1. listen to the sounds and speak (for example, the children listen to some clock chimes and say what time it is)

2. cued dialogues / role-playing (the cues are provided by pictures: these can be on cards that the children pick and they may represent a certain linguistic function: for example, the picture of a telephone with a question mark means "Ask your friend for his/her telephone number").

3. descriptions based on photographs (own family, house, etc.)

4. games (in pairs or in teams, in the classroom, in the gym or outdoors; for example, one child of one team asks a question to another child in the other team, who answers; if the exchange is correct the team scores one point. Another possibility is to set verbal exchanges on a track in the gym: one child runs a certain distance, says his name, then skips another short distance and says how old he is, etc.; when one has come full circle, another begins).

C. READING COMPREHENSION - This is usually based on illustrated texts.

Tasks:

1. match pictures and captions

2. sequencing (pictures and captions)

D. WRITTEN PRODUCTION - These activities are usually guided

Tasks:

1. cloze tests (with cues provided by pictures, diagrams, etc.)

2. parallel letters (the children complete given letters with personal information after reading similar letters).

E. VOCABULARY - These tasks are normally set in the context of the appropriate unit.

Tasks:

1. find what is missing in the picture (e.g. objects in the classroom, items of clothing, etc.)

2. spot the differences in the pictures.

As we see, a certain variety of tasks allows different uses in different scenarios: more traditional tasks are used alongside others, whose testing function may be less apparent, but which are extremely valuable even for this reason.

As a matter of fact, the choice of such different types of tests has considerable advantages. First of all, this allows for flexibility; as we said, different tests are suggested for different linguistic functions in different units; most of them can be scored objectively, and, last but not least, a certain integration of skills is pursued throughout the process (3). It is for this reason that, especially in monolingual classes like ours, games have proved so popular and so valuable as tests.

In games, there is a real need to communicate in the target language, no matter what the language of the interlocutor may be, and the linguistic tasks are "hidden" by the motivating goals of the game. In this way the children listen to each other more carefully and speak more freely, since the involvement in the game lowers the level of anxiety that would otherwise be caused by the fact of being tested, and thus the test becomes more reliable.

The danger is, of course, that the children may be so deeply involved in the game that their linguistic performance becomes less accurate, but it has been reckoned that an increase in the motivation to use the foreign language is a positive result in itself. Another possibility that should be taken into account is that some children may get fewer opportunities to speak if they are in the same team as other children whose linguistic competence and/or whose willingness to communicate is greater. The teacher ought to pay special attention to the formation of groups, pairs, or teams, so that everybody gets equal opportunities to participate (and therefore be tested!), while at the same time it is important to safeguard a certain balance in mixed-ability groups. The criteria of assessment, then, ought to correspond to the actual tasks that were performed, so if some children asked questions in one turn, they should answer in the next.

3. Conclusions

Once again, we notice the importance of having a "student-centred" approach to testing; this is extremely relevant in primary schools, where the specificity of the context implies an even greater attention to the cognitive aspects of foreign language teaching and learning.

The assessment of the learners' achievement should be constant, at fairly regular intervals, and systematic, with formative evaluation as the main focus of the testing process.

Of course summative testing also has to be planned very carefully, but, particularly in compulsory education, it is crucial that formative tests should be as coherent as possible with the methodological approach that has been selected for such young learners.

As far as evaluation is concerned, the Ministry has provided grids in which indicators of competence are described in 5 bands (4), so it should be easier for teachers and parents to identify the level which is closest to the child's actual linguistic competence. However, accurate evaluation is also important for the children themselves: to realize that they are actually learning something new, that they can do things they could not do before, and that they are setting the pace of the teaching process with the results of their tests (5).

But of course they need not realize that these tests are a special part of the teaching unit: there need not be a clear-cut boundary between them and the other activities and, as we have seen, games can bridge this gap with positive consequences, both for learner motivation and for learner performance.

Notes:

1. For example, the dialogue which presents the function "Identifying people" is set in the context of Halloween: one child, wearing a mask, knocks on another child's door, and the latter asks: "Who is it?"

2. It is for this reason that puppets are often used in these situations.

3. Parallel letters, for example, are based on reading and writing; games imply listening and speaking, and they sometimes involve reading as well.

4. These grids assess listening comprehension, reading comprehension, use of lexis, oral production (in the form of conversation) and interest in the foreign language and culture. In the five bands of evaluation A corresponds to the highest mark and only refers to linguistic competence, whereas B, C, D, and E also express a judgment on the child's attitude.

5. Especially at this school level, teachers are aware of the fact that new language areas should only be introduced when the class is quite familiar with the previous ones, so that what is "new" may be connected with what is already "given" and may thus be acquired easily.

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