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Criado Sánchez, R. 2010. *Activity Sequencing in Foreign Language Teaching Textbooks. A Cognitive and Communicative Processes-based Perspective*. Saarbrücken, Germany: LAP Lambert Academic Publishing AG & Co. KG. Pp: 342.

Research and publications in FLT in general and ELT in particular are significantly increasing in number and quality in our country. Such an activity runs parallel to the thousands of reviews, articles and books published every year on foreign language teaching, instructed second language acquisition, teaching materials, classroom observation, etc. all over the world. One could wonder about the multiple perspectives from which language learning and teaching may be considered and analysed. The complexity of the issue is the reason and the answer. Is there still a place for an additional topic? So it seems with *sequencing*.

Sequencing as a topic relevant for language learning/teaching has not been practically mentioned nor dealt with in the field till very recently. However, the classroom action requires sequencing the activities, and the design of teaching materials must necessarily take into account how texts and exercises or activities will follow each other. From any point of view we look at the classroom and teaching materials, sequencing is necessarily present. This idea and conviction is something the author of this book underlines in the *Introduction*, where the rationale and object of study are clearly defined. From a terminological point of view, the term *sequencing* refers to different areas within the field of language teaching. The author illustrates the issue in Part I, *Chapter 1* (Part I, “Activity Sequencing in Foreign Language Teaching”). *Sequencing* always carries the sense of “arranging in a definite order”. In that sense, we may refer to *sequencing* of materials in a syllabus, to *sequencing* of tasks in a Task Based curriculum, to *sequencing* of units in a textbook, or to *sequencing* of activities within each unit. The present study is devoted to the analysis of activities within each unit.

Sánchez (2001) relates sequencing to motivation and variety. Both components affect learning. In addition to that, this book enlarges the scope and looks at sequencing from a cognitive perspective as well. This is a clever and extremely relevant insight: the order of

the activities developed cannot but trigger specific cognitive processes in the learner, since learning lies in the mind and is the result of neural operations. If this is so, it could therefore be posed the question whether those cognitive processes ‘provoked’ from outside comply or not with the cognitive processes our mind is governed by. At first sight, it seems reasonable to expect that the biologically built-in processes and the ones promoted by a specific type of events be parallel, since disruptions in the processes would be negative for achieving the results expected. The matching of both actions and operations must be considered a sensitive and perhaps key factor in knowledge acquisition. Consequently, both from a pedagogical and cognitive point of view activity sequencing deserves our attention. The book enhances such a belief with convincing arguments.

As stated above, textbooks and teachers must always adjust to a specific sequence in the way they present activities. Does learning efficiency depend on the way activities are necessarily ordered? In other words, does a specific sequencing of activities in a teaching unit is more efficient than other possible sequences? Since the ordering of activities has traditionally not been paid any attention, the classroom (i.e., the teaching action) reflects most often the ordering of activities as found in the textbook used. Authors of textbooks, in their turn, have to order the activities, even though they are not fully conscious of the reasons behind their decision. In fact, the ordering of activities in textbooks depends on the specific method they pretend to adjust to. Authors are not necessarily aware of the cognitive processes derived from or involved in the sequencing of the activities. And they probably ignore as well the psycholinguistic or neurolinguistic implications of the cognitive process underlying language acquisition. But methods do imply specific sequencing patterns.

The Grammar-Translation method, for example, plans the teaching unit with a deductive or top-down scheme. Lessons begin with the elicitation and explanation of rules, are further developed with lists of vocabulary the students have to memorise and come to an end with exercises for building or translating sentences modelled on the rules previously explained. Such an order of actions or activities complies with the ‘explanation-practice’ pattern (you explain first –declarative knowledge–, and you practice later –aiming at proceduralization). The sequence of activities is different in the Audio-lingual Method, where the explanation of rules, for example, is strictly forbidden (no declarative knowledge!). Lessons begin with a pedagogically arranged text or dialogue in which the structures and vocabulary to be learned are included (knowledge is implicitly induced). Mechanical exercises follow immediately afterwards so as to consolidate the learning of the patterns previously ‘induced’. Such a sequence is in line with the basic pedagogical tenets of the Audio-lingual method, that is, learning can be achieved through sheer mechanical repetition. Hence, what matters is the selection of specific patterns and vocabulary (the most frequent ones) and to roughly contextualise them within a communicative situation, before they are learned by means of repetitive practice. Learning (consolidation or proceduralization of knowledge) is supposed to result from such a practice. The cognitive pattern demanded by repetitive practice excludes declarativization and focuses exclusively on proceduralization. Methods may

ask for more or less complex sequences of action, but such sequences will always promote specific cognitive processes inside our minds.

What comes from outside along the learning process will affect what happens inside our mind. The book raises a similar issue when approaching the adequacy of specific sequences of activities against the sequence our brain follows when acquiring new knowledge. Evidently, this bears further and complex connections and repercussions for language learning and acquisition. Thus, The author enters the pedagogical and psycholinguistic dimension of sequencing. This is a most exciting field of research and the idea pervades every chapter in the book.

The psycholinguistic dimension is firstly applied to one of the most 'popular' sequencing models, the P-P-P (Presentation-Practice-Production model of activity sequencing). This model is studied in detail in *Chapter 2*, and from multiple perspectives. The author also acknowledges the existence of a 'contemporary FLT materials version of the P-P-P'. Perhaps such a 'contemporary version' does not add much to the original one. The original version is certainly well established in the school tradition, it comes from old and it adjusts fairly well to the pattern adults follow when they learn: first they are given explanations on what they are supposed to learn, then practice follows with the purpose of consolidating it through repetition, and finally learners are invited to produce autonomously what they have been practicing in order to fully consolidate and automatise the knowledge acquired.

Chapter 3 deals in detail with issues related to cognitive psychology and teaching sequences. The author relates the P-P-P to two of the most relevant types of knowledge, that is, declarative (*DEC*) and procedural (*PRO*) knowledge. Psychologists and neurolinguists shed some light on how each type of knowledge is acquired and how they are stored. The author centres her analysis on Anderson's ACT-R, which she takes as the cognitive framework in this book. Consequently, as claimed by Anderson, the order in the acquisition of knowledge by adults is assumed to be first declarative; later on (mainly through practice), declarative knowledge opens the door to proceduralization. From this basis, the author concludes that the P-P-P model is very much in agreement with the *DECPRO* sequence. On the other hand following Anderson this is the learning model on which our cognitive system is based.

Moreover, this pedagogical and cognitive perspective is taken as the basis for the study of several sequencing proposals in *Chapter 4*, including the CPM ("Communicative Processes-based model of activity sequencing"). The CPM is presented as a sound alternative to the P-P-P and other models. The author considers that it is anchored in solid pedagogical and cognitive roots. In short, the CPM derives from the communicative process itself, and it claims that the order of the activities as found in communicative situations is transferable to the classroom situation. In doing so, communicative situations may become real sources of variety in the classroom, since they are many and varied in nature; and they may also be better sources of motivation for students, since they run closer to real communication. In addition to that, CPM sequences can introduce communicative situations relevant to the students' needs outside the classroom.

Communicative situations however are not designed for teaching and it is necessary to pedagogically adapt them to both the teaching situation and the cognitive route of learning (*DECPRO*).

In *Chapter 5* from Part II (“The Quasi-experimental Study”), the author engages in explaining how such an adaptation can be carried on successfully. It should be stressed again that the connection of sequencing patterns with the pedagogical action and the cognitive processes operating in the mind is one of the most brilliant ideas brought forward by the author in this study. In the same vein, the inclusion of two chapters devoted to the pedagogical and cognitive dimension of sequencing is a major credit to the author.

Any sequencing model in teaching and learning will necessarily have a bearing on the sequence in knowledge acquisition our brain is submitted to. This is why both models should comply with each other, that is, they should not proceed in opposite or divergent directions. Together with the author, it seems reasonable to assume that the pedagogical sequence as it appears in textbooks and as it is applied in the classroom should follow the natural sequence governing cognition.

This book does not address neurolinguistic issues, but they are relevant to take principled decisions on sequencing in teaching/learning contexts. Neurolinguistic studies may help to understand the mental processes underlying knowledge acquisition. After all, mental processes are not but neural processes and the understanding of their nature and function will be only achieved in so far as we gain knowledge on how our brain works. All in all, pedagogical processes must ideally take into account the neural infrastructure of our brain, where cognition is generated. Knowledge of how our brain works is still nascent, but research in the field is increasing and some basic conclusions have already been reached regarding neural computation or communication, for example.

The study is centred on sequencing. In doing so, sequencing becomes a key issue, in so far as it is presented as a key variable for achieving or not higher success in learning. The author goes a step forward and her analysis, insights and intuition open the door to a more empirical undertaking: she devised a quasi-experimental study in which the efficiency on learning is measured comparing and contrasting two different modes of teaching with different sequencing patterns: the ordering of activities following the CPM and the ordering of activities as found in a current ELT textbook. The order of activities in the CPM follows a specific communicative situation/event, while the ordering of the activities in the ELT textbook roughly adjusts to what she names the ‘contemporary FLT materials version of the P-P-P’.

Part II of the book is devoted to the empirical study itself, which is implemented with meticulousness and rigour. The study is carefully designed, controlled and managed. The results are carefully systematized, clearly interpreted and scattered all along chapter 6, and more specifically in section 6.3. Finally, the statistical measures obtained allow the author to confirm the initial hypothesis: a new and different way of sequencing the activities within a teaching unit –the CPM– produces a significant effect in the amount of learning achieved. Consequently, the assumptions advanced by the author in Part I, seem to be cemented on solid and sound ground.

RESEÑAS

A research study like this may raise various questions and suggest various answers to them. But it could be credited two remarkable achievements: (i) to highlight and bring into focus the topic of activity sequencing, which no doubt should be given the importance it deserves in language learning/teaching, and (ii) the quasi-experimental study that gives support to sound speculative ideas, insights and beliefs. The quasi-experiment revealed the efficacy of a new model of activity sequencing. This should not be necessarily taken as the unique model of sequencing, but it seems to be based on solid pedagogical and cognitive grounds. In addition to that, the book adds pressure to the need for an accurate analysis of and further research on the cognitive processes underlying learning. Such an analysis must go hand in hand with the pedagogical patterns of action in the foreign language classroom and in the field of teaching materials design. Teachers and textbook authors will find in this book a most exciting challenge when facing their daily practice in the classroom. Researchers on their side will discover in the book and the study itself a topic rich in suggestions for conducting further research, both in SLA and in ELT.

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