Teaching and Learning Languages Within the Framework of the Universal Design for Learning: The Need to "Reflect"

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Abstract

In recent years, the terms "accessibility" and "inclusion" have become increasingly important in the field of education and language teaching. The application of guidelines such as those from the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) helps to remove barriers to learning difficulties in the language classroom by designing inclusive and *glocal* educational interventions, based on the linguistic and cognitive profiles of students. To do that, special attention should be given to the reflective practice (Dewey, 1933; Farrell, 2022; Schön, 1983; Wallace, 1991), including its emotional affective aspects. In this paper we would like to highlight the importance of the practice of reflection as a primary tool for ensuring inclusion and accessibility when teaching and learning a foreign language, and to stress the power of observation and reflection cycles as an educational device oriented to future action: an action that is new, justified, effective, just, and motivating. We will illustrate this by drawing on my experience teaching foreign languages (FL) at the University of Cape Town, moving as "teacher-researcher", and utilizing the reflection practice firstly as a primary tool for the creation of the content to be used in class, and secondly to observe the interaction between the learners and the new inputs that are gradually experimented. Guaranteeing equality and real access in the FL classroom can, in addition to preventing loss of motivation, stimulate greater interest in the language and, in the long term, produce lasting *trans-formations* for the individuals and their society, in the logic of *No one left behind*.

Keywords: inclusion, accessibility of language teaching, reflective practitioner, reflection-for-action, engagement

Introduction

This paper highlights the importance of the practice of reflection as a primary tool for ensuring inclusion and accessibility when teaching and learning a foreign language, and it remarks the power of observation cycles with an informed eye as an educational device oriented to future action: an action that is new, justified, effective, just, and motivating. In this respect, a reference point is the model of the evolution of the teacher profile (Bujol et al., 2000, p. 43), including six stages and the pivotal moment of professional growth in the transition between the fourth and fifth, when the professionals begin to observe themselves critically in order to contribute to growth outside themselves.

Our research was conducted in the foreign language classroom at the University of Cape Town (UCT), with an Action Research approach (Barber, 2006; Burns, 1999), moving as a "teacher-researcher" (Bissex, 1986, p. 482), that is with the first round of observation understood as a focused gaze, with the aim of collecting data to be interpreted and evaluated later, and followed by the first cycle of self-reflection and by the analysis of the educational, and especially linguistic, needs of our learners' profile. The choice fell on the Participatory Action Research because of its dual speculative and operational nature, as well as the fact that it is a research project on possible and alternative ways of working within the foreign language classroom, co-constructed by teachers and students. In fact, the object of the research and the method of collecting and analysing unstructured data allow us to observe a heterogeneous and highly diversified phenomenon, such as the nature of the (language) classroom in the South African university context. In the Action Research perspective, our own research involves cycles of self-reflection which arise from the idea to plan a change, and then pivot from action to the observation of the process and the consequences of change, to reflection, and so on. This research therefore starts from the classroom group and teaching techniques, and it follows a down-top trend, i.e., it stems from the observation of the (linguistic) teaching environment and learners' interaction with the activities, to arrive at designing and/or adapting effective learning materials. It is intended to inform teaching planning and to make itself known at higher levels and in an interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary perspective (primarily among related foreign language courses), suggesting the adoption of particular devices and with the ultimate goal already stated, namely the self-determination of learners, and the sustainable and long-lasting transformation of the society of which they are the main actors.

The Reflective Teacher

The first major philosopher associated with the concept of reflection is Dewey (1933): he maintained that reflection should be systematic and intentional and that teachers can become slaves to routine decision-making if they do not engage in reflection. Another important reference is the concept of the reflective teacher, found in the literature since 1983 with Schön's "reflective practitioner" and Wallace's "reflective approach" (1991, p. 56): critical reflection stems from the fact that one is concerned with a certain context that one knows well and for which one wants to implement systematic and conscious interventions, underpinned by theoretical and experiential knowledge and by one's own research and that of others. For Schön, professional knowledge is developed within action, as it has been articulated within action. When new knowing-in-action is developed, we are "reflecting-in-action", actively and non-propositionally processing our experiences. Later, in his second book, Schön gives special attention to what he refers to as "the reflective practicum" (1987), since he believes that with the help of expert teachers, students can gain their knowing-in-

action. Further on, Schön[1] (1988) defines what he means with "reflective teaching" – "giving the kids reasons to listen to what teachers say" and invokes a reflective supervision to support practitioners in becoming more reflective-in-action.

In addition to reflection-on-action (reflecting on one's own experience) and reflection-in-action (reflecting on and implementing the changes underway), Farrell recently proposed reflection-for-action, a circular holistic model consisting of five progressive stages with a view to making coherent didactic choices in relation to the context (2022, p. 17). According to him: "the act of reflective practice has become 'routinised', as teachers are encouraged to only answer retrospective questions about their practice (such as what happened, why did this happen, what comes next) in order to 'improve' their teaching" (Farrell, 2024, p. 10), therefore he added to this by prompting teachers to reflect on their philosophy, principles, theory, practice and critically reflect beyond practice.

Figure 1
Framework for Reflecting on Practice

Source: Farrell (2022, p. 21)

The Reflective Learner

With our research, we place ourselves in the wake of works which realised the critical role of the environment in disabling or enabling the learning process, a shift of focus that led the Center for Applied Special Technology[2] (CAST)[3] to develop and articulate the principles and practices of the Universal Design for Learning (UDL), a term taken from product-design and architecture field,[4] which acquires here a new orientation on access to all aspects of learning.

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[1] "Schön, in our view is not making the claim that reflection-in-action is a frequent event. But he does argue that it is a process outside of our control: it is not the sort of thing one can switch on or off. For school administrators, the important question is whether the school environment encourages teachers to explore new frames, or to ignore them." (Munby, 1989, p. 36).

[2] CAST is a non-profit education research and development organization that created the Universal Design for Learning framework and UDL Guidelines, now used all over the world to make learning more inclusive. The acronym "CAST" derives from the original name of the organization, Center for Applied Special Technology. Now they are simply CAST (cast.org/about/about-cast).

[3] The Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) researched, developed, and articulated the principles and practices of Universal Design for Learning (CAST, 2011, p. 3).

[4] The term's origin comes from Ron Mace, North Carolina State University.

When designing this framework, they conceptualised a customizable design, as opposed to the previous inflexible, "one-size-fits-all" curriculum, which leaves learners who are "in the margin" in a condition of vulnerability, and unintentionally raises barriers to their learning. Also, it may at the same time not even cater for the imaginary "average" learner (Rose & Meyer, 2002). This goal can be achieved through the implementation of accessibility principles to language teaching from the very initial planning phases of a course, in the spirit of the recommendations made by the Universal Design for Learning and on the basis of evidence-based teaching strategies (Hattie, 2008, 2012; Mitchell, 2014).

This philosophy states that materials and learning activities should make the learning goals reachable for learners who are different from one another in terms of visual, listening, movement, reading, and writing skills. Educators should apply these accessibility principles in their classes in a wide-reaching way, without limiting their actions to restructuring learning materials or adjusting the means of presentation, but also extending them to methodologies, strategies, and classroom climate. If we want to understand the characteristics of a student with language learning difficulties, we need models that not only focus on the learner, listing "problems", but also help us to understand the extent to which the characteristics of the context in which they are placed affect their performance, since these barriers can represent a big hurdle, and thus recognising and removing them is a first step towards an accessible classroom (Rose & Meyer, 2006).

Recently, the UDL framework has been carefully reviewed by education researchers, neuroscientists, practitioners, teachers, instructional coaches, professional development leaders, faculty members, so that now all used verbs signal that the UDL Guidelines 3.0[5] are a tool that can be used by learners as well as educators, for example they changed the "provide" language to "design" for all three principles and all nine guidelines and replaced the term "checkpoints" with the term "considerations" as they are not meant to be a "checklist," but they are a set of research-based prompts that can be mixed and matched according to specific learning goals. The aim is to achieve the young learner's autonomy, which at university level is particularly significant, since the development of conscious study techniques and knowledge of oneself and one's own learning style go hand in hand with linguistic acquisition.

In the updated version the overarching goal itself contains a reference to *reflective learner agency,*[6] as explained in the Rationale (CAST, 2024b), and Guideline 9.3 refers to the *promotion of individual and collective reflection.*[7] Knowing *how to learn* represents one of the central aspects of didactics in a university context where the short duration of courses that are often intensive and concentrated in a limited number of hours as in the case of the foreign languages courses makes one lean more towards the use of cognitive, metacognitive, and communicative strategies oriented in this sense. Looking at learning through the UDL lens means considering that the notable differences among learners particularly in terms of metacognition are significant: some students are more aware of their progress toward goals and can learn from their mistakes, while others may need more direct instruction and modelling. It is crucial for learners to have access to various models and supports for self-

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[5] The graphic organizer of the UDL Guidelines 3.0 can be found at https://udlguidelines.cast.org/
[6] The goal of UDL is learner agency that is purposeful & reflective, resourceful & authentic, strategic & action-oriented (CAST, 2024a).
[7] The Rationale states that the changes address feedback that the previous checkpoint ("Develop self-assessment and reflection") was too teacher-centric and the update attempts to create space to develop both individual and collective reflection (CAST, 2024b).

and group-assessment techniques so they can identify and select the ones that work best for them. During these moments, they may have the opportunity to realize that they are making progress toward a goal, which could act as a powerful motivator itself, since, on the other hand, a major factor in a decline of motivation occurs when students are not guided in recognizing either their own or the group's progress.

Conclusion and Reflection for Accessibility

As far as the foreign language classroom is concerned, a reference point is the teaching procedure named *Language Teaching Cycle.*[8] This is derived from the key principles of traditional models but integrates them with new insights in the psycholinguistic processes proper of language learning which should be considered when wanting to promote the inclusion in the class of Foreign Language. This evidence-based procedure, which is in line with the UDL and with its theoretical background, could be summarised as follows:

- *Learners* cannot be separated from the educational and social environments in which they find themselves,
- *Education* has always also a linguistic form (Halliday & Matthiessen, 1999). Almost everything that is learned in an educational context passes through language, which conveys knowledge and in the case of language education is also the substance of learning,
- *Language, mind, and body* are closely interconnected: language has a functional value, aimed at action as well as at the transmission of thought, and each person is a social agent, engaged in activities that require the joint and integrated use of several skills, and
- *Language proficiency* means activating a network of existential, linguistic, and strategic competences.

The Theory of Language Teaching Accessibility is core and guides us as a compass: it is structured around five poles, called principles, which in turn dictate the set of methodological choices and didactic actions that promote equal learning opportunities: its graphic representation is particularly clear because it highlights the supporting role of the teacher, who plays a mediating function in the case of the first three principles, while the other two principles are implemented through collaboration between the teacher and learners and between peers.

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[8] Daloiso (2012, 2023a).

Figure 2
Principles of the Language Accessibility Theory
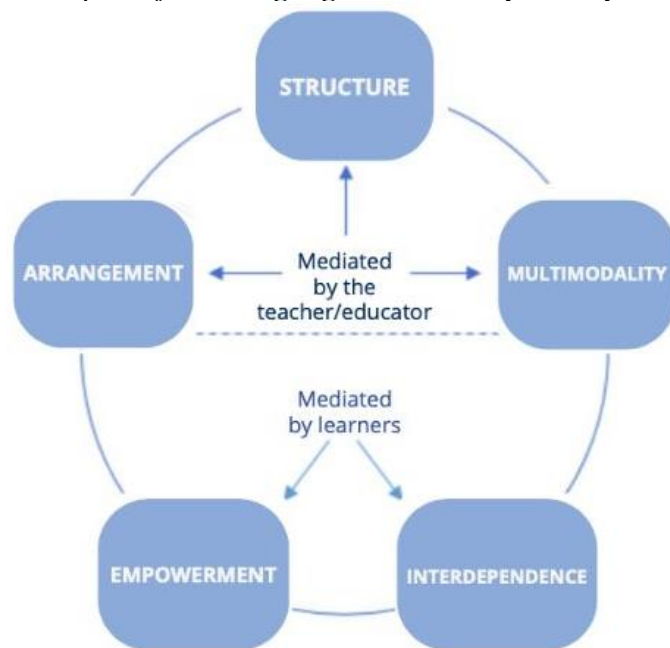
Source: Daloiso (2023b, p. 171)

Structure refers to the creation of lessons plans and activities that are sustainable and understandable, starting with clear steps and objectives, to conclude with recap moments and summaries.

Multimodality, as in the UDL Guidelines, includes the use of both multisensory and multimedia supports, to be carefully diversified and graded depending on the learners' profiles and progression in the language acquisition.

Arrangement means the adaptation of the input for the promotion of the reception skills (listening and reading) and of the output for the production and interaction skills (speaking and writing) in order to meet the students' needs.

Interdependence, or cooperative learning, consists in the collaboration which stimulates a language learning mediated by peers.

Empowerment is based on the learner's self-regulation and self-determination and it includes the "beyond-the-classroom" opportunities linked to language learning.

As lecturers, we are encouraged to adopt protocols that promote individual and collective reflections, and to incorporate activities that provide learners with feedback and offer alternative supports (such as tables, charts, templates, or feedback displays) to help them understand their progress in a clear and timely manner. When self-questioning on what the strengths and weaknesses of our lesson plans are in due course, we have the means and the time to work upon some areas and implement some changes: actions like these are aimed at enhancing the accessibility levels of our courses, providing alternative scaffolds, including all learners by engaging, representing, and expressing them and their multiple identities. Hence, we can see that language teaching accessibility does not lie so much in the way content is presented, but rather in its foundation, it is an educational philosophy with a theory structured

in principles and usable through a didactic device. As we have also seen in the graphic representation of the principles (three involve the intervention of the educator and two are peer-to-peer), accessibility is neither given, nor imposed, nor standardised, but constructed in sharing with the learners with the aim of improving their language skills, without leaving anyone behind. By doing so, the language teacher assumes the role of one who grasps different styles, assigns complementary roles, manages diversity in order to pursue harmony, like an orchestra conductor.[9]

As we have said in fact, UDL Guidelines recommend designing a reflection tool for our students as well, to use at the end of each unit or during a module: aids or charts to help individuals and groups gather, organize, and visualize data about their progress, enabling reflection and progress tracking,[10] bearing in mind that the aim of the teaching is to build learners' progressive autonomy so that they are equipped to face their university studies with confidence, thanks to a wide and varied baggage of (linguistic) learning and existential strategies. This is particularly valid because we consider the FL classroom as a fertile linguistic "field" where to reflect on teaching practices and redefine the learning environment in light of these theoretical assumptions, a space which goes beyond the mere foreign language(s) learning: "Since much teaching and learning occurs through language, difficulties in school learning often have linguistic roots. Therefore, it is essential to underline that when we refer to the Theory of Language Teaching Accessibility, we are referring to the removal of barriers in learning not only for the study of a language (HL, 2ndL, FL, classical), but also as a fundamental tool for learning itself" (Daloiso, 2023a, p. 29, our translation).

From the perspective of Critical Applied Linguistics, it should also be remembered that the line of research on teaching procedures, although it attempts to develop teaching devices based on "universal" principles, is still the product of a specific cultural perspective (Daloiso, 2023c, p. 297), therefore every empirical research, like ours, admits the fact that it will have to vary its experimental conditions, promoting the *glocalization* of the procedure as the result of negotiation with local educational traditions, different political-educational visions, which determine various organizational systems. Therefore, in order to prove the validity of the application of any teaching procedure to any context, one should also carefully consider the school system, the educational reality and the transcultural positioning of their proposal, in a "glocalised" perspective, where personal, local and global levels interplay and contribute to sustainability and well-being on a single, societal and overall extent.

Orienting the education to the principle of inclusion, equality, and accessibility, brings us to the recognition of the transformative character of education which requires a constant critical reflection in the direction of improvement. Thinking of inclusion as a continuous attempt to eliminate barriers, in fact, implies thinking of education as transformative for society – the commitment to reducing injustices, overcoming categorizations, and promoting the valorisation of differences consider the educational context as a place where a transformation can take place, one that aims to transfer these values to the world outside the school or university reality. By orienting educational action to the principle of equality, we recognize the political character of education and entrust inclusion with the role of changemaker.

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[9] In this regard, we find the following quote relevant: "Each student plays their instrument; it's no use going against that. The delicate part is to really know our musicians and find the harmony. A good class isn't a regiment marching in step; it's an orchestra working on the same symphony." (Pennac, 2007).

[10] As examples, there are "The Reflective Cycle" (Gibbs, 1988) and "The 5R Framework for Reflection" (Bain *et al.*, 2002).

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