Looking back into training and forward into quality: Examining a teacher-training programme.

Abstract
This paper reports on the preliminary results of a research study which analyses the oral organisational competence of graduate English teachers. Such results suggest the need for reorientation in the training of prospective teachers towards text-based classroom tasks, which should include a language-improvement component across the curriculum. This paper presents a brief introduction to the background of the study, an account and discussion of the results and, finally, the implications for teacher-training programmes.

Introduction
Changing conditions in society have created new demands in education. Thus, educational institutions must rethink their role in order to ensure the continuing relevance of their programmes to emerging needs. As members of the educational community, institutions should ask themselves whether they are doing the right thing and doing things right. In the domain of English language teaching (ELT), more specifically, the question is: Are teacher-training institutions meeting the new demands in the field?

The project reported in this paper was set up to analyse the oral competence of graduate teachers. To this purpose, it draws on Bachman’s model of communicative language ability (1990), and more specifically, on one of its components: oral organisational competence (OOC). This paper first provides specifications of the research design of the project. Then, it describes the theoretical framework within which the project is inscribed. Next, it presents and discusses its preliminary results. The paper concludes with the implications derived from the discussion of the results.
Research design

Context of the study

This paper reports on an in-progress research project at Facultad de Lenguas (FL) from the National University of Cordoba, Argentina. This institution offers, among other careers, a five-year programme in EFL teaching. The project was thought out in the context of an institution-wide debate about curricular reform. When discussing the development of more adequate curriculum, the research group thought it essential that decisions had to be data-driven. To search for that information, we decided to look outside the institution, and into our graduates’ workplace, on the assumption that involving graduates and the institutions where they work in the evaluation of instruction and study programmes may result in the improvement of quality.

Aims

The specific aims of the present study are (a) to identify the needs of the EFL professional community as regards the OOC of graduate teachers; (b) to analyse the actual OOC of teachers working in different secondary schools, and (c) to compare and contrast graduate teachers’ OOC with the demands of the EFL professional community. The study, then, is concerned with assessing the degree of systematic correlation between the OOC exhibited by FL graduate teachers and what the EFL teaching community demands in relation to this competence.

Subjects

There are two groups of subjects in our study: a) ten English-area coordinators or heads of department and b) thirty EFL graduates working at ten private and state secondary schools, five of which are bilingual institutions. The data were gathered through questionnaires and interviews, in
the case of the first group, and recordings of classroom lessons in the case of the second group.

**Theoretical framework**

This work draws on the theoretical model of language ability proposed by Bachman (1990) and later refinements of the model by Bachman and Palmer (1996), which build on earlier work in communicative competence (Hymes, 1972; Canale and Swain, 1980). According to Bachman’s model, “communicative language ability” involves two components: a) language competence and b) strategic competence. Language competence, in turn, is subdivided into organisational knowledge and pragmatic knowledge. Strategic competence, the other component in the model, involves the use of metacognitive strategies. The present study focuses on oral organisational knowledge or competence, one of the areas of the language competence component.

Bachman (1990) defines organisational competence in terms of two components:

a) grammatical knowledge, which controls the production and interpretation of what is possible in the formal system of the language – vocabulary, syntax, phonology, and graphology;

b) textual knowledge, which controls the production and interpretation of language as spoken or written text.

Given the breadth and complexity of Bachman’s model, for the purposes of our study, we have selected a set of features from each of the subcomponents of OOC as units of observation.

Grammatical knowledge
Lexical subcomponent
At the level of the lexical subcomponent, we have narrowed down the focus of analysis to the syntagmatic dimension of words, i.e., the combinations words enter when discourse is produced. We agree with McCarthy (1990:12) that collocation is fundamental to the study of language as it constitutes “an important organizing principle in the vocabulary of any language”. We will briefly consider the contributions made by the Lexical Approach (Lewis 1993, 1997, 2000) as regards collocational use.

Lewis (1993, 1997, 2000) explains that we store much of our lexis in prefabricated chunks, that is, strings of “language which, when combined, produce continuous coherent text” (1997:7). Collocations, which constitute one of the four basic types of chunks – words, collocations, fixed and semi-fixed expressions – are defined by Lewis as “the readibly observable phenomenon whereby certain words co-occur in natural text with greater than random frequency” (1997:8) or as “predictable combinations of words” (2000:51).

For the purposes of classification, it is useful to think of collocations on a cline or scale ranging from those that are unique/fixed/strong to those that are flexible/weak (Jimmie Hill, in Lewis 2000:63). Examples of unique collocations are to shrug one’s shoulders (we shrug our shoulders, not any other part of our body). Strong collocations are those in which one element of the pair may strongly suggest the other element, but this degree of fixedness is non-reciprocal (Lewis 1993:92). Strong collocations are, for instance, rancid butter. Rancid almost uniquely determines butter, but butter does not necessarily suggest rancid. Weak collocations include examples such as white wine or red wine. Medium-strength collocations, also referred to by Lewis (2000:130) as restricted collocations, constitute the main learning load for all language users. Examples of this type of combination include to hold a conversation and to make a mistake.
Syntactic subcomponent
The structural phenomena we find in spoken data, such as incomplete sentences, loose tactic relations, or joint construction of stretches of text, do not always conform to what is traditionally considered as “well-formed”. As McCarthy (1990: 90) puts it, “we cannot assume that grammars modelled on written language can simply be incorporated wholesale into the description of spoken language.” In our study, we consider the clause as the basic unit of analysis and focus, in particular, on choices of clause construction.

Phonological subcomponent
The phonological system of English includes segmental and suprasegmental features. Segmental features include the whole inventory of distinguishing characteristic vowels and consonants. Suprasegmental features involve those aspects that extend over more than one sound segment and include features of stress, rhythm and intonation. In our study, the interest centres on suprasegmental features on account of their relevance to a communicative perspective on language use.

The phonological component is considered to have an impact on both grammatical and textual competences. In the field of grammatical competence, phonological competence at the suprasegmental level involves the ability to produce features of stress and rhythm. Their appropriate use results from knowledge and instrumentation of phonological rules which govern stress placement at word and sentence levels. Stress patterns of words constitute phonological properties of words and contribute to their phonological identities. Similarly, stress configurations of sentences follow language-specific principles which relate to word class membership, rhythmic structuring constraints and fixed stress patterns in particular constructions.
In the field of textual competence, phonological knowledge includes knowledge of the discoursal conventions that regulate the use of the suprasegmental feature of intonation. Such perspective is consistent with Brazil’s (1985; 1994; 1995) description of English intonation. His discoursal model refers to intonation choices as particularly sensitive to textual organisation. If intonation choices are performed effectively, they act as substantial rhetorical and/or conversational organisers and regulators.

Textual competence
In this study, textual competence is defined as knowledge of the conventional discourse rules that govern the schematic organisation of texts and the ability to produce and/or interpret typical rhetorical and/or conversational text-organisational patterns.

Classroom lessons are a distinctive type of speech event, with its own organisational features and interactional patterns. Unlike casual conversation, classroom talk is highly routinized and it has well-defined boundaries and recurrent sequential arrangements. Typically, oral interaction is teacher-led, with the teacher controlling the topic and allocating the access to the floor. The characteristic sequence of turns is composed of chains of initiation-replication-evaluation (Sinclair and Coulthard 1975; Mehan 1985). This basic-three-part sequence is often extended when the student’s answer is partial or inadequate; in these cases the teacher provides further clues to elicit the expected answer.

The present study is mainly concerned, at the level of textual competence, with the following features:

a. discourse marking, i.e. the ways in which teachers “bracket units of talk” (Schiffrin 1987:31) or signal transitions or boundaries between functional units of varying length;
b. information management, that is, the way in which speakers build information on the basis of what is new and what is already shared with the hearers, and their ability to foreground new information;
c. the repertoire of linguistic choices made by teachers in short moves meant to acknowledge or evaluate students’ response.

Findings
The preliminary findings presented in this paper include (a) the results of the questionnaires to the English-area coordinators or heads of department and (b) the results of the recordings of classroom performance by the graduate teachers observed.

Results of questionnaires
Some clear patterns emerge from the responses to the questionnaires:

a. Coordinators prefer to select teachers for their institutions by interviewing them in English
b. The best method for evaluating performance is classroom observation
c. The most important criteria for evaluating teachers’ oral performance are “accurate grammatical structures”, “appropriate use of lexis” and “fluent and coherently organised oral discourse”.

These criteria, highlighted by the coordinators interviewed, constituted the bases on which the comparison and contrast between teachers’ performance and institutional demands was made.

Results of recorded observation
The findings in the data analysed so far show the recurrence of the features illustrated by the following excerpts of recorded teacher talk:

Grammatical competence
- Miscollocactions (underlined):
*That is something that we have to learn from heart.
*Who wants to make it? (Referring to an exercise)
*Is that the real definition?

- Deviant clause construction:
  *To the story that it belongs the picture.
  *Yesterday it happened the same.
  *You asked me when did we go there?

- Inaccurate word-stress patterns and sentence stress configurations:
  *‘pronun’ciation
  *‘great-grand’mother
  *some ‘classes a’go
  *what do you think “because” refers ‘to?

Textual competence
Most of the lessons, and most of the interactions in each of the classes observed, were teacher-led and paralleled the conventional patterns that have are found in large classes practically all over the world. Teachers allocate turns by identifying students by name or inviting bids for the floor. There is a good deal of echoing of students’ response, and echoing with expansion/repair, as in the following excerpt:

T: OK. Just expand on that … If I had …
S: I would have …
T: I would have …
S: I would have more possibilities
T: I would have more possibilities … more working possibilities, right?
OK. Gabriel?
The following excerpts, on the other hand, illustrate typical linguistic behaviour in interaction with a genuine communicative purpose:

(Teacher offers to revise topics for a test)

T: *What do you think you have to read for the parcial*? (…) *Tell me what you need* (…) *You need Passive Voice*? … *We can make some revision of that*? OK?

T: *Please please study* (…) *Vocabulary people please vocabulary is included in the test.*

As regards the use of discourse markers, the recorded data show a marked tendency to invariably exploit the same marker: “OK”.

The following excerpts show ineffective phonological choices which, from the perspective of textual organization, fail to foreground informationally salient elements (prominence is indicated by block letters):

T: *I wouldn't have economic problems, at least not the same ONES.*

T: *So PEOPLE, now you have ten minutes EXACTLY to start correcting.*

As regards minimal turns produced by teachers to evaluate, acknowledge or provide feedback, the choices made by teachers are, in most cases, restricted to “No”, “Yes”, “Perfect” and “OK”. A recurrent feature we found is the use of “Yes yes yes” as back-channelling, or “No… No … No… No” as evaluation. E.g.:

S: *There were two sisters and they wanted to go to the ball…*

T: *Yes yes yes*
Discussion

The preliminary findings of the present study seem to indicate that the oral organisational competence of the graduate teachers observed has not reached an optimal level of internalisation of the target language. At the level of grammatical competence, examples such as *When you go to other place that is not Argentina…* show a strong interference of the first language (*cualdo vas a otro lugar que no es Argentina…*).

As regards textual competence, the interaction seems to flow relatively smoothly and according to the typical sequences that characterize classroom conversation when the teacher is conducting a textbook-based or preplanned activity, such as sentence completion, comprehension questions about a reading, or error detection. The difficulties seem to arise when the talk shifts from the relatively structured exercises that are part of the lesson itself to more spontaneous, procedure-oriented talk, such as instructions, planning future activities or getting organized for a coming test.

The lack of internalisation of the second language, in tandem with interference of the first language, is evident in the use of yes yes yes as a back-channelling device. As McCarthy (1990:58) observes, “Spanish speakers often acknowledge in-coming talk with what translate to English as a machine-gun-like ‘Yes-yes-yes!’ and which frequently indicates impatience or irritation with the speaker in British English.” The narrow repertoire of choices in the realization of typical conversational moves such as acknowledging or checking understanding indicates the transfer of L1 practices to L2.

We believe that internalisation of the second language would be aided by an increment of exposure to the target language in activities which engage trainees in meaningful, purposive use of language in oral interaction, that is, activities which make use of language to “complement context”, rather than...
language to “duplicate it” (Widdowson 1998:706), to exchange information rather than “display” information. This may seem unrealistic when come to think of the large gatherings of students in our classes. However, such increment of exposure to language in use could very well be accommodated in a language-improvement component across the curriculum.

**Implications**

The analysis and discussion of the results seem to validate the need to re-evaluate our teacher-training programme in terms of goals, course contents and objectives, entry levels and outcomes of instruction. If we consider that one of the major goals of our teacher-training programme is to help trainees to become proficient users of the English language, then learners should be encouraged to develop and consolidate their lexical knowledge, grammatical accuracy, phonological competence and textual knowledge in all courses. Language improvement should not be the exclusive concern of courses such as grammar, phonology and English language. We believe that the implementation of a language-improvement component across the curriculum would ensure greater efficiency and appropriateness in the use of the target language.

Finally, as part of its objective to meet the demands of society, Facultad de Lenguas should also consider the possibility of offering this language-improvement component as part of an on-going professional development programme for graduate teachers.

**Conclusion**

This project was thought out as the first of a series of studies which we think need to be undertaken to assess the extent to which the university is meeting the demands of the community. We believe that the systematic observation of
the outcomes of instruction should be central to any serious educational enterprise.

The new demands in education in the present study are only partially represented by the criteria for assessing oral competence of teachers of English set out by coordinators and heads. These criteria also represent a benchmark by which new teachers are incorporated to ELT institutions. Thus, teacher training institutions should pay close attention to such demands and criteria to ensure the continuing relevance of their programmes and to safeguard job opportunities for their graduates.

References
Biographical note

 María Lucrecia Berrone holds an MA in Sociolinguistics (State University of New York, US) and María Alejandra Portela is finishing her MA in Applied Linguistics (University of Leicester, UK). Lucrecia is a lecturer of grammar and linguistics and Alejandra is a lecturer of English and literature at Facultad de Lenguas, Universidad Nacional de Córdoba.