

The Role of Second-Language Learning in Diagnosing Primary Student's Gaps of Knowledge: Towards a Symptomatic Use of Interdisciplinarity

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Abstract. This discussion-paper aims to present a concrete, albeit untested, hypothesis regarding how second-language learning lessons could prove useful in diagnosing essential signs of confusion, misunderstanding, or of any other kind of cognitive blunder which affects the scientific knowledge of late primary-education students (aged 10-12). In opposition to the somewhat rigid means of evaluation normally employed in content-oriented subjects such as History, Biology, etc. —exams, tests and written assignments which are carried out, as a rule, in the children’s native language—, this paper defends that the accuracy of the students’ knowledge may also, though not only, be evaluated by paying attention to their creative discourse; furthermore, to the creative discourse they produce in a second-language. In fact, such discourse would fulfill a similar role to the one held by free-association in psycho-analytic therapy. In this case, however, the teacher’s attention would not focus on pupils’ unconscious thoughts or desires, but on any sign of ignorance or misunderstanding revealed in this imaginative use of language. Accordingly, story-telling activities, wishful expressions, descriptions of ideal societies, ideal animals, ideal families, etc., could all offer a viable side-road to access the child’s conceptual knowledge in relation to scientific contents. Children’s acquaintance with the basic aspects of the social and natural sciences, as dictated by their education curriculum, could be further analyzed in this way.

Keywords: enlightenment, interdisciplinarity, symptomaticity, second-language learning, imagination, knowledge.

1. Introduction: on the tracks of the Enlightenment

In his 1930 address *Mission of the University* (delivered not too long before his home country broke apart), Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset (2010) advocated in favour of an university the main task of which —its mission, he claimed— should be to synthesise and make intelligible to the “average man” the fundamental scientific discoveries of the day (49-50). Undoubtedly, Ortega was herein gearing up his own ideas to a dominant philosophical tradition, the Enlightenment, the main object of which Kant (2001) formulated as accomplishing “*man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity*” (1). Spanish versions of this famous, Kantian motto translate the German “Unmündigkeit” as “*minoría de edad*”, a term which (in contrast to the English

“immaturity”) conveys an objective and not a subjective state of affairs. Actually, it applies to anyone who hasn’t yet biologically come of age, according to the legal dispositions of a country, disregardless of other character, moral or knowledge factors. Notwithstanding the differences we may find between Kant’s and Ortega’s overall projects (differences which owe to one and a half century progress in the social sciences, halfway through which, incidentally, intervened Marxism), a common purpose seems to underlie both. We may describe it as the popularization, and promotion, of scientific rationality among all the members of society, and especially among the unprivileged social classes.

Our present contribution shares this general aim, which inheres in any viable re-enactment of the enlightened project. Ours, however, is characterized in addition by two concrete differences, to whose combination our paper owes whatever originality, if any, it may contain. Firstly, our intervention takes place in the context of second-language learning. Though this relationship may sound uncommon, we shall soon discover that some methodological reasons account for it. Secondly, in contrast to Kant’s approach, we attempt to tackle ignorance in individuals who have not yet come of age; the addressees of our method are, therefore, children, particularly those in the last years of primary education, or first years of secondary —that is, aged 10 to 12, according to the Spanish educational policy. Our method could be applied to older students, however. Regarding this issue, Ortega y Gasset (2010) already raised attention, in his pedagogical writings, to the fact that the time-span during which teaching and learning can be properly conducted is all but long, while the demands society places on education and the educative institutions are inevitably growing. He referred to this unbalance as the *economic problem of education* (47-49). Following along this same track, Sigmund Freud (1915-17) summarized the reasons why psycho-analysis also advocated in favour of early and intense scientific teaching, before it was too late: “educability practice”, he warned, “ceases with the full onset of the sexual instinct” (573). That is, when the child reaches puberty.

Taking these two opinions into account, we can conclude that it is essential for certain things to be learnt by children, and be learnt well. However, we cannot but identify a plain economic problem in the way time, effort and resources are generally managed in courses devoted to second-language learning (and also to improving a native language), for they are conducted as if the only existing aim was to provide the child with a purely instrumental command of a second-language. Bearing in mind that second-languages are generally taught during the early years of schooling (that is, when students are better suited to learn, according to psycho-analysis), it seems worthwhile to make the most out of these courses. As Susan House (1997) has reminded us, “when you are working with primary school children [...] every moment of your time with your students is, potentially, learning time and you should take full advantage of this” (7). In contrast to the merely instrumental perspective most often adopted in second-language courses, we want to present an alternative whereby these lessons could participate in the general aims pursued by the primary education curricula, and our so-called enlightened project. In fact, the evaluation and didactic strategy hereby presented is in itself an example of how language courses could contribute more effectively to the

building up of children's rational and scientific knowledge—an object in relation to which such courses, I'm afraid, have remained neutral to this day, with the exception of a few activities, such as the so-called "projects" (House, 1997: 58-61). "Teaching a language is different from teaching other subjects insofar as our aim is communication", she claims (10). When this thesis is taken to the extreme, however, it becomes the dogma we want to combat in this paper. From House's words it simply doesn't follow that language lessons mustn't teach children some truths. On the contrary, communication has a whole real world to refer to. As defended by Scott and Ytreberg (2004), "When you are concentrating on a particular topic, the content of the lessons automatically becomes more important than the language itself" (84).

We have already said that very concrete methodological reasons will be given, later on, to justify why the setting afforded by second-language learning classes may reveal adequate to fulfil this object. So let us focus first on our decision to choose primary students as the main recipients of our enlightened project, and do so in opposition to Kant's and Ortega's perspective—for the former centred on mankind, and the latter on adults. The reason is simple enough: we believe that releasing children from ignorance may discharge society from the more difficult task of having to release adults, later on, from their self- or social-incurred immaturity. Indeed, experience has proven this second mission to be close to an impossible task, far beyond the powers of the university. In addition to this idea, our approach recognizes its debt to another one of Freud's claims; in this case, the thesis that the sooner rational scientificity is encouraged in children (also regarding sexual matters), the better for their own psychic development and, accordingly, for the social body as a whole. Freud's (2009) deep belief was that society would benefit from a programme of education that was reality-oriented—"education to reality" (47), he called it—, and not from one which, like the one prevalent in his day, pursued "a retardation of sexual development and premature religious influence" (45). But let us have no misunderstanding. As pointed out in "The Sexual Enlightenment of Children", this suggestion was perfectly consistent with the need for adults to introduce scientific knowledge to children in a simplified or adapted fashion, as for instance Freud himself recommended it be done in response to their early questions on sexuality (1907: 120-121). We also share this understanding.

2. Interdisciplinarity

Our aim is therefore to present, first, a methodological hypothesis, and next to give some details concerning the experimental setting which could prove or rebuke it. In fact, in so far as our hypothesis hasn't been tested yet (though our expectations are to do so in a near future), its only justification lies presently in the logic derived from a consistent set of theoretical premises, ones we have inherited from the work of previous thinkers who contributed seminal ideas to the field of education, pedagogy and beyond. Ortega y Gasset, Freud and Kant we have already mentioned, all of whom occupy a *canonical seat*, so to speak, in the philosophical tradition. It is not by chance that their works can be subsumed within the general parameters of the Enlightenment. In the present section, however, we will only refer to contributions made to the more specific

and possibly humble field of didactics, educational and pedagogical methodology. Regarding this concrete field of knowledge, the key concepts in our approach will be those of *symptomaticity* and *interdisciplinarity*. Let us deal first with the second one of these, whose importance for primary education teaching has already been emphasized by several authors.

Generally speaking, by interdisciplinarity (or cross-curricular teaching) one can understand the possibility of combining educational aims that, curriculum-wise, pertain to diverse subjects. At the time being, an obvious institutional factor testifies in favour of using this approach during primary education; namely the fact that, during this cycle, a single teacher is normally in charge of more than one school subject. To this, one may add the tendency towards bilingualism, which is gradually gaining momentum, to the extent that it may soon become dominant both in private and public schooling. Accordingly, for teachers to take responsibility over content-oriented subjects (by these, I refer to History, Biology, Maths, Social Knowledge...) as well as over second-language learning courses, may soon become common practice. This tendency, for instance, is taking over in bilingual as well as in non-bilingual schools where History, Biology, Maths, etc., are taught in the students' native language, widening thus the potential applicability of our method. In both cases we expect teachers to summon their academic freedom to devise original strategies allowing them to take advantage of the educational potentialities afforded by such context. According to Scott and Ytreberg (2004), "topic-based teaching allows you to arrange your material to suit what is happening generally at the time of teaching. It allows you to work across the curriculum in a way which structure-based or strictly text-book base language teaching doesn't" (85).

Let us now resort to some examples. As early as in 1966, for instance, Oxford University Press published an *English Studies Series* volume gathering short, unsimplified passages from books or essays dealing with issues on anthropology, psychology, education, language and philosophy. This volume was prepared by M. J. Clark; it included 30 excerpts signed by Raymond Firth, Russell, A. J. Ayer, Isaiah Berlin, Simeon Potter and many other prominent authors and researchers. Each excerpt was followed by a glossary and by a number of language-focussed exercises. While the volume was addressed to upper-intermediate students (and while some of the texts it included may already have seemed as suspicious then as they appear so today), what still remains interesting about it is that it attempted, not only to "help students studying the subjects mentioned above to understand English and to express themselves in it on their special subjects" (Clarke, 1970: ix), but also to educate them content-wise, that is to say, to contribute to their general knowledge of philosophy and the social sciences. It did so precisely by offering them "examples and sources of which the student can make use in his own writing". As a tool, its main object was, therefore, to train students in the learning of a second language; however, the volume displayed both the imagination and the courage to set itself higher aims, linked with the satisfaction of a more general and wholesome educational project, consistent with our enlightened approach.

Advancing along this line, though focussing this time on primary education students, Susan Helliwell (2004) presented some time ago a book containing several exercises

addressed to “integrate language work and other subjects” (130). We shall soon see how this is precisely the approach we have adopted in our methodological hypothesis: we also look forward to the teacher being able to synthesize the aims of second-language learning with those of content-oriented subjects, whose *raison-d’être* is for pupils to obtain the basic concepts of the social and natural sciences. Thus, Helliwell’s book *Teaching English in the Primary Classroom* summarises in a clear manner the way interdisciplinarity has habitually been understood and applied in primary education — whenever this has actually been the case, for teachers have not always overcome the extended belief in the “idea of integration [being] rather unrealistic” (131). Most frequently, teachers feel “there [is] no time for it in the packed syllabus”, as noted by another author whose work we are also interested in; or that they are “not qualified enough to work cross-curricular topics” (Svecová, 2009: vi). So, against the grain, Helliwell’s (2004) book provides interesting examples concerning how techniques used to enhance mathematical language and thinking (i.e. pie charts, block graphs, intersecting sets, logical connectives, etc.) can be successfully introduced in (second) language lessons (133-137), in order to strengthen abstract thought, and categorizing processes. She consequently designs “a mini-demonstration in the language lesson of something which ties in with work to be dealt with later in a mother tongue lesson” (138) —in this case, a simple lab experiment.

Likewise, Oxford University Press booklet, *Cross-curricular activities*, by Hana Svecová (2009), details thirty activities through which primary students can become acquainted with contents pertaining to the field of biology, geography, history, maths, literature, physical education, and even music; and do so at the same time as they learn or reinforce their knowledge of how to use different verb tenses, for instance (6, 14, 20, 22, 24, 30, 32, 48, 50, 52, 56, 60), prepositions (16, 34, 60), question forms (10, 44), and of course specific pools of vocabulary (28, 36, 38, 42, 44, 46, 58).

But let us return to Helliwell’s (2004) contribution. At this point, it is important for us to clarify that our present proposal doesn’t coincide with any of the four practical ways in which she considers, and applies, interdisciplinarity —“use work from language classes as the basis for work in other lessons; take techniques which the children are learning in other subjects and use them to promote language work; use topics from other subjects in language lessons; teach other subjects wholly in the target language” (Helliwell, 2004: 133). Even though our approach vaguely relates to the third option just presented, which deals with how a teacher may “use topics from other subjects in language lessons” (133, 138-140), it takes an altogether different point of departure. The reason why our stand on interdisciplinary diverges so much from the way it has up to now been applied in primary classrooms lies, really, in the way we allow interdisciplinarity to combine with the other important category which characterizes our methodological hypothesis: *symptomaticity*.

3. Symptomaticity

Regarding this second concept, it may be worth saying that Louis Althusser was probably the first thinker to use it outside the field of the natural sciences, and outside

medicine. While his own rendition of the concept allegedly owed to Freud—who, as we know, considered himself a practitioner physician—, Althusser originally applied this category to a cultural artefact, not to a biological reality; and this cultural artefact was no other than Marx's *Capital*. Interestingly enough, however, Althusser's (2008a) approach, which he called the *symptomatic reading* (22), formally reproduced the axis involved in psycho-analytic therapy, though different realities came into play in this case, of course. Still, the parallelisms remained quite evident. In order to underline them, let us simply recall Freud's search for unconscious determinations, how he did not only look for them in the symptoms which manifested themselves in the daily conduct of patients, but also in any other irregular feature which interfered in the free-association discourse the latter had to produce before him. Repetitions, awkward associations, ungrammatical formulas and unjustified silences were, among many other linguistic or extra-linguistic features, regarded as signals betraying unconscious motives, even though the latter's true nature did not become evident in the conscious chain of discourse. Actually, due to repression, the unconscious content only appeared in the guise of symptoms, so their nature had to be deciphered, or even reconstructed, from these symptomatic formations—*surrogate creations*, Freud called them.

As complex as this logic is, its overall structure was transferred to Althusser's reading of Marx. Let us underscore the main parallelisms that resulted from this transference. Just like Freud tried to find the unconscious desires, fantasies, etc., which determined a patient's discourse and conduct unbeknownst to him or her, Althusser set himself to trace down the conceptual progress Marx's thought necessarily had to undergo in order to reach the main theses and discoveries contained in his *Capital*. For, according to Althusser, this revolutionary book was the result of a methodological advance in Marx's thought which, however, was not explicitly theorized therein. *Capital* only contained this progress in a "*practical form*" (2008: 175-176), in a practical state the explanation of which Althusser ventured to scan in its pages, in search for the theoretical symptoms which could provide an understanding on the genesis of Marx's discovery.

The truth is, though, that Althusser's symptomatic reading was also deeply indebted to Marx's own cultural criticism, whose main subject matter was Hegel's philosophy and neo-classic economic thought. Marx's approach is contained in his theory of *ideology* and of the *phenomenal forms* (Marx, 2007: Chapter III-xii, 272; Chapter III-xlvi, 265, 285), concepts based on the famous premise that socio-economic factors determine ideological configurations, and—in a similar way to what psycho-analysis defends about the unconscious—do so unbeknownst to the individuals producing them. Like the unconscious Freudian wishes, the interference of economic variables is ignored by he or she who undergoes it, and hence is never recognized as such (qua economic factors) within the cultural artefacts which are thus influenced. Artists, writers, journalists, philosophers and even scientists, despite being conditioned by such factors in the course of their activities, misinterpret this influence to the extent that their resulting ideas don't account for it, nor compensate its effect. As a rule, economic determination appears distorted in these outcomes, misrepresented therein as if they were due to something else. For instance, cultural or merely subjective factors (including purely biographical events) may be erroneously held responsible for what

only economic variables can explain. This is the reason why, regarding the ideological artefacts it lays its hands on, economic determination always appears as an “absent cause” (Althusser, 2008a: 404), opaque to the very creations it colours in. It is represented therein as something different to what it really is —a very similar logic, indeed, to the one governing various instances in psycho-analysis.

4. The symptomatic-interdisciplinary axis

Which aim are we pursuing in having introduced this conceptual network? In which way is it relevant for the hypothesis we want to put forward, as well as for the experimental activity that should be designed to contrast it? The answer we offer is that our present article involves a set-up, the arrangement of which is formally identical to the design which holds together the concepts of Marxism and psycho-analysis. Our subject matters are different from those included in these theories, obviously; inside the classroom, neither ideology nor the unconscious are the most relevant subject matters, for other realities concern, in this case, the teaching and learning of a second-language more directly. However, the complex, symptomatic relationship which holds in psychoanalysis between (a) unconscious representations and (b) conscious discourse, or in Marxism between (a') the economic determinations and (b') ideological configurations, will be kept and reproduced in our educational context, precisely by our paying attention to the way (a'') *conceptual knowledge* and (b'') *creative discourse* respectively interrelate. According to this equation, *conceptual knowledge affects creativity in a similar way to which the unconscious affects an individual's consciousness, or economy determines the production of ideology in a given society*. Our thesis says that, in all three cases, traces of the former instances (a, a', a'') can be detected in the latter instances (b, b', b'') as symptomatic formations. As we shall see, this parallelism already involves additional premises, the nucleus of which we will disclose later on.

In keeping with this hypothesis, our aim will be to conceive of an experimental setting which enables us to link content-oriented subjects and a second-language learning course in such a way as to allow teachers to use whatever creative work their students do in a second-language class as, for instance, Freud used free-association discourse in his therapy —namely, to spot a symptomatic determination. In our case, however, the creative discourse students generate inside the classroom (in relation to certain activities) will function as the background against which primary-teachers will interpret and identify their students' conceptual shortcomings regarding scientific knowledge. Incorrect ideas, confusion, knowledge gaps, conceptual misapprehensions and any other gross cognitive blunder will surface the creative productions carried out in the second language, in the form of symptoms. The symptomatic-interdisciplinary axis is thus configured.

5. Overcoming the emotional blockage

In due time, we will refer to some activities that can already be found in books and which, if slightly modified, may well serve our purpose. But before that, let us make explicit two additional premises our proposal takes for granted. One of them deals with some of the advantages interdisciplinarity could bring about to students, from a psychological viewpoint, as well as with the favourable consequences for evaluation that may derive therefrom. The other premise will further elicit the symptomatic relationship that holds between imagination and knowledge. We will start by making reference to the first issue.

Undoubtedly, students' emotional blockage is an obstacle we encounter every time we evaluate students. We believe our method may reveal itself as a possible way out of this problem. In psycho-analytic therapy, for instance, the symptomatic approach has already proven capable of overcoming those emotional resistances that, on the part of the patient, receive the name of *repression*. Insofar as we have taken this therapeutic setting as our model, we are justified to believe that some other resistances —this time specific of the evaluation context, and of a conscious and not an unconscious nature—, could, in our case, likewise be surmounted. The type of negative affects we are talking about stem from the well-known fact that no student takes pleasure on exams; that, on the contrary, shyness, inhibition, embarrassment frequently take hold of students, as anxiety-ridden responses to evaluation. Furthermore, the stings of such emotions are sometimes so pungent that children prefer to leave a question blank than to answer it fully; or either to write barely a couple of sentences as an answer. In the worst cases, such dynamics may develop into a “vicious circle” inside which —and incapable of leaving it behind— “the student fails once and perceives him/herself as a bad learner”. This situation, besides, “often lasts for the student's entire schooling” (House, 1997: 10), throughout which the student commonly feels more preoccupied with hiding his or her ideas than interested in expressing them, for fear of being criticized. On such occasions (and independently of the fact exams are failed or passed), we identify a grave problem in teachers being absolutely incapable of knowing what exactly hides behind a blank or single-sentence answer; incapable, thus, of correcting or remedying whatever cognitive blunder may have become installed in the student's mind, playing havoc with his or her knowledge. Who knows which misunderstandings lie behind exam questions that are left unanswered?

In order to counteract this tendency, our method provides the teacher with a rational way of analysing the students' knowledge without the latter knowing, and therefore without their suffering the negative consequences derived from anxiety. Should teachers find a way of interpreting children's creative outpourings from the standpoint of the correct or incorrect knowledge which may be determining them, they would then be able to access a wider and in some way more faithful array of evidence, and to analyse therefrom their students' conceptual shortcomings. Students are far from feeling anxious when asked to write, or take part in, a creative language activity; even more so if they are encouraged to use their imagination freely. As a result, they may be keen to express themselves far more abundantly than in exams, or regular written assignments through which their knowledge is put under scrutiny. If, in addition, they are told to write an imaginative task in a second-language, they may feel a bit concerned about

their own grammatical correctness but, on the other hand, probably become even more stress-free regarding the content-aspect of the exercise. This being the case, chances are students will express their own thoughts sincerely. The appropriateness of this approach is furthered borne out by a detail in the history of the psycho-analytic movement. In his decisive biographical work on the inventor of psycho-analysis, *Freud and his followers*, Paul Roazen pays attention to an idea that Freud already announced in the second chapter of his *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, and which could not pass unobserved to any scholar interested in psychoanalysis and language. Roazen narrates how Freud encouraged an American patient to carry out his analysis in German, a language the patient had studied in his prime youth but in which he was no longer so proficient, and certainly less competent than Freud himself was in English. And yet, Freud expected that the patient's lack of control over a second language would help slips of the tongue emerge during his discourse, in the same way as it causes mistakes. And it seems that experience proved him right in this case, for the patient ended up committing a revealing slip of the tongue he wouldn't have made in English (Roazen, 1975: 217). By the same token, we believe that, in paying more attention to correction, students will feel less self-conscious or concerned about presenting their most essential, spontaneous and basic ideas, which will comfortably surface up amid their language successes and mistakes. The teacher will consequently have the opportunity to take a glimpse at the students' most intimate and deep-rooted conceptual worldview, or frame of mind—for only thus can the most basic misconceptions regarding nature, society, sex, etc. be corrected. This is the main reason why our approach (which could also be put forward in language lessons conducted in the students' mother-tongue) finds its most appropriate context in second-language learning.

Before we move on, let me remind the reader that this method is devised for analysing knowledge, but that it is invalid for evaluating or grading it. In other words, it can tell the teacher whether a student bears or lacks enough acquaintance with a basic idea from the scientific curriculum, but it cannot value or measure this knowledge upon a yardstick. Thus, it is not designed to replace but to complement exams, by taking a by-route to the student's knowledge.

6. Imagination and knowledge

Second premise: Our method takes for granted that imagination is to a certain extent determined by knowledge. According to this thesis, what a child invents maintains a close relationship with what a child has actually learned, knows and takes seriously. Depending on what a child knows, he or she will accordingly imagine. Imagination departs from knowledge—which it treats as its raw material, so as to say—, by taking its ideas a step further along the way of unreality, or virtuality. However, certain imaginative possibilities will be barred to the child who lacks certain knowledge. Imagination is, thus, not an undetermined instance, as humanist approaches conceive of it; it is not the realm of chance, arbitrariness or absolute freedom, nor is it free-flowing and disconnected from the rest of cognitive and social variables. Certain facts testify in favour of this evidence. Through Marxism and psycho-analysis, 20th century scientific

development proved that much of what falls inside the concept “imagination” is conditioned by different variables. One of them undoubtedly is the unconscious — hence the richness psycho-analysis has evinced in meaningfully enlightening psychic undercurrents to art pieces. The other key variable would be, I believe, ideology. This means that Marxism and psycho-analysis discovered factors the influence of which remained active precisely while an individual *believed him or herself to be acting exclusively out of free will*. Hence Freud’s demand that his patients “freely” associate can be fully understood, for it was then (when the decrees of logic, coherence and morality were somewhat lifted) that unconscious motivations and imperatives could be felt and recorded more clearly, as symptoms in the conscious discourse. And hence, also, is the Marxist conclusion illuminated concerning how the ideological effects, which stem from the social relations of production, operate unbeknownst to the same individuals who fall prey to them. Since the latter effects find their origin in the basic class division of a given society, the ideological traits necessarily reveal themselves in every single field of culture, ranging from fiction to non-fiction writing, from *pure art* to the social science.

To unconscious wishes and ideology, I now want to add a third factor that determines imagination: the influence of conceptual knowledge. Let me explain myself. Despite the fact that all three variables act simultaneously upon imagination, each would be the dominant factor in one situation, but not another. For example, dreams (which have traditionally been regarded as purely imaginative formations) were, according to Freud, determined in the last instance by unconscious, infantile wishes, in relation to which the former afforded a fulfilment (Freud, 1900: 189). But the unconscious may no longer be the weightiest factor for someone exerting his or her imagination awake, and in a conscious manner; in such situations, on the contrary, ideology and conceptual knowledge may become more significant aspects, and provide more precise an insight into the nature of imaginative configurations. This train of thought leads us to another ambiguous point in our argument: we must readily acknowledge a certain degree of overlapping between conceptual knowledge and the ideological variable. This is a complex issue in which we cannot dwell sufficiently; and yet, we can conclude that ideology and knowledge still form independent subject matters insofar as we may identify cognitive blunders, misapprehensions and diverse degrees of knowledge within a single group of students, even when they do belong to the same social class or *ideological block* (to put it in Gramsci’s words). This conclusion gains further strength when we take into account individuals of different ages and at different formation stages.

Let us put aside, for now, the influence of the unconscious and ideology on imagination and concentrate on conceptual knowledge. From this angle, and bearing in mind the design of our experimental set-up, we can expect students’ creative work to be somewhat influenced, or shaped, by what they have learned to be true up to that day. Evidence of this basic premise being valid can already be extracted from a number of daily situations. For instance, we know that a two year-old child does not take pleasure in imagining the same situations that an eleven year-old youngster likes to fantasize with, let alone adult imaginative wanderings. Their dreams are not even shaped alike!

Thus, if a student is asked to envision his or her ideal society and write about it, whether or not he or she has acquired some sociological knowledge will then make a difference as to the final outcome. This is common-sense, and innumerable other examples could be further raised as evidence. But, all the same, a whole tradition of a Socialist aesthetics, richly spanning over the whole twentieth century, finally bears witness to the deep impact ideas and discoveries in the social (and also the natural) sciences have had in imagination. The theoretical and artistic works of Bernard Shaw and Bertolt Brecht (to mention but some of the most renown), let alone works of criticism such as *A Theory of Literary Production*, by Pierre Macherey, prove that scientific knowledge disciplines imagination, and may even take it far beyond the grip of unconscious desires and ideological motives, towards a rational and conscious end. In the case of Shaw's and Brecht's pedagogic drama, this conscious end pursued something similar to what we expect to accomplish through our enlightened project. We can conclude that, while unconscious wishes reign over imagination as exercised in dreams —and hence “the interpretation of dreams is the *via regia* to a knowledge of the unconscious element of our psychic life” (Freud, 1900: 381)—, conscious use of imagination is to a greater extent influenced by ideology and knowledge. This is precisely the balance we expect to find, not only in literature, but also in a second-language classroom, when the teacher assigns his or her students the task of writing an imaginative story.

7. A sample activity

Our aim for this last section is thus to present an activity capable of examining the influence of knowledge upon imagination, or at least of showing the way this focus could be pursued, as well as the pedagogical and evaluation benefits to be extracted from it. As we have said, such activities could help a teacher assess the student's knowledge in a novel way. In principle, any language task may serve our purpose as long as it reinforces conceptual knowledge as an experimental factor whose weight on imagination can be pinpointed. We shall see that a large variety of exercises could qualify for this aim: Wright's, Betteridge's and Bubckby's (1986) *Games for Language Learning*, for instance, or Maley's (1997) *Creating Stories with Children* (both of which have enjoyed several reprints), contain various programmed activities that, if slightly modified, would suit our experimental purposes. I have only used and combined a couple of them, and done so always in the belief that “restriction”, as Wright defends, “can produce creativity” (90). In the sample activity we are about to present, linguistic restriction has been added to the other two limitations Wright was actually referring to in the last quote, namely, “time and picture cue”. We expect linguistic self-consciousness to enhance students' sense of freedom regarding other, content-oriented aspects of the activity, so that either a basic display of ideas, or a sincere use of imagination, ensues in the end. Both could be evaluated through our method.

Incidentally, time restriction also constitutes a variable in those story games which Wright himself, though this time in collaboration with Betteridge and Bubckby (1986), groups under the heading “Silly stories” (99). The unavailability of time spurs, in this set, the humorous and surrealistic conversation exchanges presented. Though this co-

authored book contains very appropriate “Fantasy stories” from which our approach could benefit, I prefer to use Wright’s own rendition of a workshop called “Three Picture Story”. Indeed, it provides a perfect setting for our experiment. As originally conceived by this author, this activity could be carried out in class in about thirty minutes; it is addressed to pre-intermediate level students, disregarding of age; and it is to be done individually. Though we have varied some of its original characteristics, we keep its basic outline unaltered. It goes like this: The teacher asks the children to write a short, imaginary story during three consecutive four-minute intervals. At the beginning of each, a different picture is displayed. Children should produce the beginning, development and ending of their stories during each of these time lapses, though time restriction is imposed to such an extent that they are asked to put their pens down at the end of each interval —“even if they are in the middle of a sentence” (99)— and to continue during the next, right where they stopped. The rest of characteristics being kept just as the book says, our experimental set-up would gain its specific interdisciplinary and symptomatic focus through the teacher’s careful, conscious selection of the visual material children’s stories will rely upon, as a prop for their unfolding. Whether this exercise qualifies or not as a correct experiment depends, on a great extent, on such selection, for it will help create the content-background against which students’ symptomatic ignorance may either become visible or remain unnoticed. Let us suppose, for instance, that the teacher wants to analyse the children’s knowledge in relation to a subject-matter such as society, and explore socio-cultural themes: social order, social structure, inequalities among the people, etc. In this case, he or she should choose pictures illustrating differentiated, class-determined contexts (preferably to be found in the students’ society). Ethnic variables could also be incorporated. If one picture shows a poverty-ridden context, the second one may illustrate a luxurious abode, and the third the inside of a modern factory, or the queues that form at the doors of an unemployment office, or a group of underpaid immigrant workers. It would be desirable for people to appear in every picture —and, if possible, children— in order to appeal to the child’s imaginative powers through identification.

As we have already mentioned, once the activity has ended, the teacher must take for granted that ignorance has become translated into the concrete imaginative stories he just collected. It will be clear by now that the activity is designed to diagnose the students’ knowledge on the basic phenomena that shape social reality. How does society produce its wealth? How is it distributed? What creates richness, what creates poverty? What relationships (just or unjust) hold between people who pertain to different social contexts...? These are the kind of issues the students’ understanding of which the teacher should be able to analyse by symptomatically reading their compositions. Of course, the nature of these questions may vary depending on the pupils’ ages and on what their academic curriculum expects from them; I remind the reader that this concrete methodological application is designed for children aged 10 to 12. Because of this, before planning the workshop, the language teacher should check what the students are learning at the time being in other subjects, and preferably do so with the colleagues responsible for providing the specific contents of the social sciences. As we shall see

next, this dialogue should be further extended to include an agreement on the best date to put forward this experiment.

But let us move on. When the teacher has finally collected the resulting stories, he or she should use them as evidence of something different from the linguistic, creative exercises they also consist in; namely, as witnesses of whatever knowledge or ignorance may have determined them. For example, he or she may without question diagnose a patent ignorance of the kind of problems that inhere in social and economic relations if, when attempting to complicate his or her story, the student's narrative appeals to elements which are totally foreign to sociology. In order to understand this suggestion easily, let us refer back to psycho-analysis for a moment. It is well-known that Freud interpreted a neurosis if an individual had the opportunity to consummate a sexual relationship for which he had expressed a deep longing, but nevertheless didn't, and especially when such "occasion for sexual excitement elicited feelings that were preponderantly or exclusively unpleasurable" (Freud, 1997: 22). On those contradictory occasions, the analyst had to consider, "without question", the interference of a psychic motive of unconscious nature acting behind the inhibition of the sexual drive. He had to read inhibition as a symptom, that is. Taking this into account, a parallel situation could be identified in our own experiment when a child, while having at hand all the narrative elements he requires to imagine a story consistent with sociology, prefers to resort to other fantastic, magic, supernatural forces in order to create it. Which infantile and incomplete understanding of society could already be diagnosed by looking through the distorted lenses offered by that story? What conceptual misapprehensions could those fantasies be a symptom of? What could account for such sharp turn of fantasy? All other variables being well (taking for granted, that is, the child suffers from no severe neurosis), the motive behind this use of fantasy is likely to be a deep ignorance of the internal mechanisms, causes and effects that rule society —ignorance, that is, of there being an internal logic to society and a series of problems that are specific to it, all of which owe to the latter's own developments and internal processes (and which, as a matter of fact, produce real stories every day, embodied in the lives of concrete individuals). Whoever has gained knowledge of these mechanisms, knows that they can afford a social narrative.

Let us end with another example, very easy to relate to. If a child expresses the wish of growing up to become "the king of the world", for example, no one will find it surprising if this desire is defined as *immature* or *childish*. Most times, adults will simply trust time and experience to correct it —something which may or may not be the case. Actually, only education will tell. From the onset of our intervention we have treated *immaturity* and *childishness* as symptoms of conceptual ignorance which, logically speaking, have nothing to do with age. Indeed, our society is full of adults who behave as if the only rational order was to compete in the market for becoming the kings and queens of the world. We must return therefore to the Kantian motto and further indicate that education is the only means to dissolve the effects of childishness and immaturity. As such, they should be tackled from the earliest days.

Before we end, we must add a couple of methodological details concerning our hypothesis.

1) When explaining this activity to students, more emphasis should be placed on their putting the different pictures or elements in relation than on their being able to describe them. Otherwise the task may become a linguistic exercise. Stories must involve causal links, since only causality can be analyzed from the point of view of knowledge.

2) The language-teacher responsible for organising this class-activity should not be the same one who, later on, provides students with the missing knowledge whose symptomatic absence was detected in their stories. Nor should he or she add remarks concerning these conceptual blunders on the original compositions. As far as the students are concerned, they should always believe that their stories are being treated as creative linguistic exercises, and not examined otherwise. If this were not the case, the methodological benefits of our method would be rendered inefficient, especially as regards its ability to bridge over the students' emotional blockage. Furthermore, they could feel betrayed and even led to distrust the teacher. This means that such stories should also be considered from the side of language, and that once their conceptual analysis has been completed they should be handed back corrected, so that students can go over any of the mistakes they may have committed, as is it normally done in the treatment of these exercises.

3) Following along this line, in schools where the same teacher is in charge both of the second-language course and of any other content-oriented subject the basic notions of which are being tested through this method, he or she must make sure not to tackle any of the missing knowledge during the second-language learning classes. The specific subjects should be devoted for this purpose. As regards the general aims of or method, the time separating its two well-differentiated phases (one concerned with analysing knowledge, and the other with correcting it) may also turn out to be an important variable. It seems reasonable to guess that the shorter the time period extending between these phases, the easier to increase and correct the students' knowledge.

4) Finally, if second-language- and science-oriented subjects fall under the responsibility of different teachers, then the one in care of the former courses should indicate the other whatever deficits have been diagnosed through this activity; or rather, hand the imaginative stories directly to him or her, for first-hand analysis. As a matter of fact, this co-ordination should be exercised from the onset, especially for the language-teacher to bear in mind which contents to diagnose, in relation always to the knowledge expected from students that age (House, 1997: 58). Whenever this co-operation runs short, the language teacher should check the specific textbooks beforehand.

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