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# FOREIGN LANGUAGE IN THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL (FLES): A CURRICULUM PROPOSAL FOR FIRST GRADES 

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## I. Background

The need to learn English in Costa Rica has increased greatly in the past few years. It has certainly become a second language spoken by large numbers of the current population of Costa Rica. This has led many parents to be interested in having their children learn English from an early age. From a psycholinguistic point of view, this interest can be supported by what Lenneberg (Clark and Clark), says about the so-called «critical period» for language learning:
> «There is a critical periodfor the acquisition of language. This period is related to the process of lateralization. Lateralization takes place gradually between birth and puberty, and the completion of lateralization marks the end of the critical period.» ${ }^{1}$

Thus, most parents want their children to learn the second language before the end of the critical period so that their children can acquire English in much the same way they acquire their first language.

Costa Rica has many private bilingual kindergartens, schools and high schools, but they have not been successful in achieving the goals proposed in their curriculum. The curriculum proposed below is one way to improve

[^0]the teaching of English in Costa Rica. First, however, it is necessary to mention some of the major causes of failure of most primary schools. One of the most outstanding is the lack of personnel qualified to teach English. This can be viewed from different perspectives:
A. The low level of teachers' language proficiency.
B. Most of the teachers are not up-to-date regarding new methodologies in ESL/EFL teaching (not to mention the fact that up-to-date didactic material is not even available in many areas).
C. Most teachers have been trained to work with adults but not with children. It has already been proven that there is a great difference between the two audiences. Dr. Cortez has pointed out some of the most relevant ones: ${ }^{2}$

1. Children possess shorter attention spans compared to those of adults.
2. Children have better pronunciation than adults.
3. A child's knowledge of the world is not as sophisticated as that of the adult. That is, children have mastered fewer concepts.
4. Children are teacher-dependent while adults are less dependent.
5. The study skills which children use are not really well developed. On the other hand, adults have their own study skills.
6. Children are more receptive to praise. Adults are receptive but not quite as much.
7. Children need more secondary motivation. Adults, on the contrary, have primary motivation.
8. Children are motivated by their environment. The teacher manipulates it in terms of learning and teaching.
9. Children are more tolerant to repetition if it is something they like. On the other hand, most adults do not enjoy repetition.
10. Children enjoy choral reading and recitation.
11. Children are less attentive to details; that is, they lack attentiveness.

[^1]12. Children have limited reading skills; adults' reading skills are more sophisticated.
13. Children can be open and sincere. They tell the teacher what they are doing. This gives the teacher a potential to apply his/ her creativity.
14. Children respond to games, dramatics, puppets, visuals, music. Adults do not respond as well to them.
15. The teacher should give children what they are looking for, for instance, humor.
16. For adults, grammar has a place. They always say «I want grammar.» For children, the teacher must keep the grammar simple.
17. Children acquire the language while adults learn it. Children always go for meaning (concepts) and consequently, grammatical patterns are acquired.
D. Most of the teachers have never been to an English speaking country. Thus, they do not have any knowledge about important aspects related to the target culture. This has led sometimes to avoidance of cultural topics. Furthermore, the language they teach is sometimes unrealistic. It is based primarily on the written standard text language they learned when they studied English. As a result, most of the children who visit the target culture have reported how lost they felt and how difficult it was for them to get their messages across.
E. Usually, the students' needs and interests are not taken into account. However, it is important to consider the students' needs and interests since it is a way to increase motivation and lower the affective filter. Improvement in the learning process can also be increased. Richards states that:

> «...Needs analysis serves three main purposes: it provides a means of obtaining wider input into the content, design and implementation of language programming; it can be used in developing goals, objectives and content; and it can provide data for reviewing and evaluating an existing programme.»

[^2]It is important to relate this to what Krashen suggests about providing the students with meaningful and comprehensible input. Omaggio says that «we acquire more language only when we are exposed to comprehensible input.» ${ }^{4}$
F. The learning and cognitive styles of the students are not considered. Rebecca L. Oxford reports that:
> «Teachers need to realize that many of the learner's behaviours or strategies are directly related to learners' styles, as well as to other factors such as emotional state, language learning goals, task requirements, institutional expectations, and so on. The role of styles and strategies may be crucial in determining language learners success.» ${ }^{5}$

Knowing the learners' styles is also useful in order to avoid conflicts between the teacher and the learner. Oxford offers a good example of this kind of conflict between a student and her teacher. ${ }^{6}$ She describes Faisal as an ESL student who wants to learn globally and through intuition. But Mr. Ridge, the teacher, insists on a step-by-step approach. Faisal wants to avoid small, detailed, linear tasks because he considers them boring. However, Mr. Ridge considers that Faisal is very lazy. They usually get frustrated and angry at each other. This is a good example that supports the importance of knowing the learner's cognitive styles since it is a way of preventing conflicts in the classroom and improving the students' achievements.
G. There is usually a lack of authentic materials to engage the students in communicative situations likely to be encountered in the target culture. Alice Omaggio supports this by saying:

[^3]«The contexts for language practice should be devised, as much as possible from culturally authentic sources. The use of real or simulated travel documents, hotel registration forms, biographical data sheets, train and plane schedules, authentic restaurant menus, newspapers and magazines will acquaint the students more directly with real language than with any set of contrived classroom materials used alone.> ${ }^{7}$

These are some of the major problems private primary schools in Costa Rica face. Thus an attempt will be made to overcome these deficiencies by the development of this curriculum whose main characteristics are listed below.

## II. Description of the curriculum

Although the target children for this curriculum are in primary school, this particular curriculum proposal is particularly designed for first graders. However, the same format can also be used with higher grades. One of the first aspects which we have to consider is the target audience. The age of the learners ranges between 6 and 7 years. The learners who will begin first grade will already have been exposed to some spoken English. Most of them will have attended a bilingual kindergarten for one or two years. They will already have some basic knowledge about the following topics in English, including certain linguistic forms of the language. For example, they will be familiar with greetings, numbers, days of the week, months of the year, seasons, colors, basic structures such as this/these, that/those, and some parts of the body.

This curriculum aims for the learners to reach the low-intermediate level according to the ACTFL proficiency guidelines. These guidelines provide experiential data regarding the contents, (context) functions, and the degree of accuracy to be expected of the students. Taking all these factors into account we can easily evaluate and create appropriate materials for the language class. These guidelines are also suited for organizing instruction because they are progressive in nature.

[^4]The functions in the area of oral communication of this curriculum are:

1. Naming.
2. Identifying objects, people, places, signs.
3. Using memorized materials in simple statement or question form.
4. Giving name, place of origin, simple personal information.
5. Expressing belonging to an organization, family, institution.
6. Expressing minimal courtesy, expressing agreement/disagreement.

The main functions in the listening skill area include understanding short utterances drawn from familiar material and identifying types of authentic listening texts, such as radio, commercials, newscasts.

The main reading functions in the curriculum are:

1. Picking out main ideas and key words in familiar material.
2. Reading short narratives and dialogues using familiar memorized material.
3. Recognizing isolated words and expressions.

The main functions in the writing skill area include listing, identifying, labeling, supplying simple biographical information on forms, writing very simple paragraphs using memorized or extremely familiar material.

A variety of cultural topics will be covered with an emphasis on the children's native culture. Some aspects include holidays, seasons, weather, food, clothing (lifestyles), activities, family relationships, and sports.

It is important to take into consideration the proficiency principle, as outlined in Teaching Language in Context. ${ }^{8}$ The rationale for taking it into account relies on the acceptance of proficiency as an organizing principle, for we can choose or evaluate the communicative approach by asking several proficiency-related questions. Are the students being provided opportunities

[^5]to practice using the language in authentic situations likely to be encountered in the target culture? Are we developing cultural understanding in our students? Does the class allow for the acquisition of language functions that the students will need to master for effective communication with native speakers in the target language? Are we providing effective and authentic language?

Based on these principles, it is easier to organize the curriculum and choose the communicative approach to meet the goals set in the curriculum.

## METHODOLOGY

Communicative approach:
A communicative approach will be used since the focus of this curriculum is communication. This approach to language pedagogy is characterized by several features mentioned by The Learning-Centered Curriculum: ${ }^{9}$

1. Focus on communication.
2. Language items are selected on the basis of what the learner needs to know in order to get things done.
3. The sequence of the material is based on content, meaning and interest rather than on the linguistic forms of language.
4. Genuine everyday language is emphasized.
5. The aim is to have students communicate effectively and in a manner appropriate to the context they are working in.
6. Spoken interactions are regarded as important as reading and writing.
7. They are student-centered.
8. Incorrect utterances are seen as such rather than just wrong.
9. Content rather than form is emphasized.

These characteristics make the communicative approach the best choice to suit the aims of this curriculum.
9. Nunan, pp. 26-27.

One of the aspects which the communicative approach stresses is the importance of providing comprehensible input. However, comprehensible output is equally important since it is a way of giving the students the chance to practice the target language. This can be achieved only through the tasks and activities the students will be engaged in while in the classroom. Nunan argues that «learners need not only the opportunity of producing the target language, but they also need the opportunity of being able to negotiate the new input, thereby ensuring that the language which is heard is modified to exactly the level of comprehensibility they can manage.» ${ }^{10}$

Long and Porter «suggest that small group work in the classroom provides the optimum environment for negotiated comprehensible output.»" Based on these assumptions, most of the tasks in this curriculum should be student-centered. The main characteristics of these tasks are listed below.

1. The content will come from the teacher but will be indirectly determined by the students' needs and interests.
2. There will be high physical and psychological involvement.
3. The participation of the students will be creative and personalized; however, the degree of participation will depend on the students' level of proficiency.
4. Most of the tasks reflect the cooperative principle which is one characteristic of student-centered tasks; that is, the students have to cooperate and help one another to find a solution.
5. There will be teacher-directed correction. This means that the students are somewhat responsible for corrective feedback. At higher levels of proficiency, however, the students will become more responsible for their evaluation and achievements (there will be more self-evaluation and self-correction).

There will be a large amount of group work in which the slow and fast learners will be mixed. This will allow for peer help and cooperative learning.

[^6]The material to be used should be authentic. It will include realia, pictures, classroom objects. Radio broadcasts, slides, videos, newspapers and magazines will be used.

## Goals:

The following goals will be achieved through this curriculum.

## A. Language learning goals

Students will be able to develop and apply different techniques and strategies to learn the language and get their message across.

Outcomes: Students use different strategies. The strategies have been selected according to the students' ages. The strategies are based on a list outlined by Joan Rubin. ${ }^{12}$
a. Getting process:

1. Clarification strategies:

- Asking for repetition, paraphrasing, explanation or example.
- Observing the teacher's mouth for correct pronunciation.

2. Guessing/inductive/inferencing strategies:

- Use own language or second language to infer meaning (prior knowledge).
- Use knowledge of the world, culture to infer meaning.

3. Deductive reasoning strategies:

- Infer grammatical rules or word formation by analogy.
- Look for regularities and exceptions in grammar.

12. Joan Rubin, «Strategies Used in Cognitive Learning,» Applied Linguistics, 2,2 (1989).
b. Storing process:
13. Memorization strategies:

- Kinesthetics
- Visuals
- Auditory
c. Retrieving and using process:

1. Practice strategies:

- Repeat
- Rehearse
- Imitate

2. Monitoring strategies:

- Make corrections

3. Social strategies:

- Count on our friends for help
- Work with peers
B. Language Use

1. Students will be able to perform different communicative functions in an oral form.
2. Students will comprehend basic (simple) written texts.
3. Students will use the writing system to meet practical needs.
4. Students will be able to read short and simple passages.

Outcomes:
Students will be able to:

1. Perform communicative functions (those mentioned above).
2. List, identify, label, supply simple biographical information on forms.
3. Write very simple paragraphs using memorized or familiar material.
4. Understand short utterances drawn from familiar material and identify types of authentic listening texts.
5. Pick out main ideas and key words in familiar material.
6. Read short narratives and dialogues using familiar memorized materials.
C. Knowledge about Language

Students will be able to:

1. Acquire a variety of vocabulary including expressions related to topics such as seasons, family relationships, clothing, food.
2. Use some rules for spelling words.
3. See the relationship between the graphemes and phonemes of the language.
4. Have an understanding of grammar rules or linguistic forms of the language and how they apply to the four skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing.

Outcomes: The accuracy expected in the following outcomes is 95 to $100 \%$.
Students will be able to:

1. Use the present, present progressive, future and past tenses in different contexts.
2. Make statements with auxiliary verbs such as can, may, must, should, would.
3. Use the negative with the verb be, and with modals.
4. Ask questions using the auxiliaries do, does, did, the verb be, and some Wh- words.
5. Use possessives. Students can use collective and quantitative words (some, any, many, much).
6. Use words that indicate measurement and quantity (how much, how many, how long).
7. Use contractions such as don't, can't, isn't, haven't, etc.
8. Use different modifiers in sentences such as: This is a pretty girl; She sings beautifully.
9. Use a variety of commands.
10. Distinguish selected sounds of the target language.
11. Use different vocabulary to cope with different real life situations they will be engaged in.
12. Understand and use prepositions, regular and irregular verb forms.
13. Understand and apply different grammar rules such as subject-verb agreement, agreement of subject and predicate, sentence word order, and, the definite and indefinite articles.

## D. Culture

The students will understand some of the differences and similarities between the native and target cultures.

Outcomes: The students identify differences and similarities between the two cultures regarding holidays, clothing, sports (activities), food, weather.

Based on the above, the next section contains a sample unit which is part of several other units of the curriculum just described.

## UNIT OUTLINE

## Rationale for the Development of the Unit

The following unit on Clothing has been prepared for a period of two weeks in which the students will meet an hour and a half each day. There are different situations in which the students will be involved where they will perform different functions such as describing, buying, selling and identifying. These functions will allow the learners to handle situations that they might have to face in either their native culture, when dealing with native speakers, or when traveling to an English-speaking country. A spiral approach will permit the teacher to introduce more complex structures and functions according to the students' level of proficiency. However, at this level, low-intermediate, the students will be expected to perform the functions mentioned above by making use of the content specified in each of the following categories.
A. Language use

1. Inquiry: questions, answers, listening and reading for specific information.
2. Tense: present progressive and future.
3. Quantity: prices, sizes, numbers.
4. Colors.
B. Knowledge about the language
5. Simple present. Students will review answering and asking questions in the present tense using the auxiliaries do and does.
6. Present progressive. The present progressive with be $+i n g$ in negative and affirmative questions will be introduced.
7. Adjectives: expensive, cheap, nice, beautiful, colorful, long and short.
8. Quantities: ten dollars, fifteen dollars, five dollars, twenty dollars.
9. Sizes: small, medium, large.
10. Verbs: want, like/dislike, prefer, buy, take off, put on, try on, dress, undress, wear, button, unbutton, zip, unzip, tie, untie.
11. The future tense with going to in negative and affirmative sentences will be introduced.
12. Expressions such as May I help you? and would you like in questions.
13. Vocabulary:

| underwear | bonnet | pajamas | slip |
| :--- | :--- | :--- | :--- |
| robe | dress | stockings | slippers |
| blouse | jacket | button | skirt |
| coat | lace | buttonhole | shirt |
| hat | zipper | pants | gloves |
| sock | suit | mittens | sleeves |
| tie | scarf | collar | belt |
| snowsuit | handkerchief | sweater | shoes |

C. Culture

The students will see the differences and similarities in clothing between the two cultures which are determined by the presence of the four seasons in the United States as opposed to only the dry and rainy seasons in Costa Rica. Since the topic of the seasons was already studied, the students will easily be able to make the link between the two topics.
D. Language Learning

In order to get their message across, students will use the following strategies:

1. Asking for repetition.
2. Kinesthetics.
3. Explanation or example.
4. Association of a word or group of words according to visuals.
5. Imitating.

## Unit Objectives

At the end of the unit be students will be able to:

1. Listen to descriptions of how different people are dressed and identify on a picture chart the person being described with nearly $100 \%$ accuracy.
2. Assume the role of salesman or customer in order to carry out the functions of selling and buying based on a given situation, such as at the department store. They will perform these functions with nearly $100 \%$ accuracy.
3. Find a solution to a given situation such as buying the appropriate clothes to go to a party or to the beach, to go skiing, to go camping. Accuracy expected: 100\%.
4. Identify the items being described in mail-order catalogue, magazine, or newspaper. Accuracy expected: $100 \%$.
5. Write a short paragraph about the things they would like to wear for different occasions based on several questions provided by the teacher as a guide. Accuracy expected: $100 \%$.
6. Develop learning strategies such as imitation or asking for repetition.
7. Realize that there are differences and similarities between the target culture and the native culture concerning clothing.

## The Unit

1. Presenting language
a. Pre-communicative activity: The teacher will introduce the unit by asking the students some questions about weather and the relationship they think there is between a particular season and the way people dress. This is a way to go from the known to the unknown and activate the students' schema. Some of the questions which the teacher may ask include the following:
> - How many seasons are there in Costa Rica?
> - Do you use the same kind of clothes during the summer and the rainy season?
> -What seasons do you like the most?
> -What do you do in summer? (winter or rainy season)
> - Do you think that people from the United States wear the same type of clothing throughout the whole year?
b. Introduction of Structures and Vocabulary: The teacher will introduce the vocabulary by means of using realia, flash cards, and pictures. The teacher will say each new word followed by a sentence so that the students can see how the word is used in context. There will be repetition. The students repeat the words and patterns provided by the teacher. The teacher
may also ask individual students to make up a sentence with a given word and the rest of the class will repeat it. In this way, there will be modeling done not only by the teacher (T) but also by the students. As an example:

T: Dress.
T: This is a dress.
T : María, your classmate, is wearing a nice dress.
T : Who else is wearing a dress today?
After the teacher has presented the new vocabulary, she asks personalized questions as follows:

- Do you prefer to wear dresses or skirts?
- Do you prefer to wear short or long pants?
- How many shirts/skirts/pants do you have? What color are they?
- What do you like to wear during the winter/summer?

Some question/answer exchanges will also take place between one student and another. Also, the presentation of the new vocabulary and structures can be reinforced by having a volunteer student go to the front of the class to be interviewed about his/her preferences related to clothing, seasons, and any other related activity.
2. Student-Centered Activities (See Appendices A and B for additional activities.)
a. Students will listen to descriptions of people and how they are dressed and try to match the descriptions with the appropriate pictures they will have on a chart. Then, the students will form pairs in order to share their responses and determine the season in the target culture in which those clothes will be best suited for. They will also identify some differences and similarities regarding clothing between the two cultures and they will share their findings with the rest of the class. See Appendix A for another activity in case the patterns need reinforcement.
b. Role-play: The students will make groups of two, three, or four depending on the situation provided. The students should be given enough
time to work on the situations and then act them out in front of the class. The following situations are typical:
-For a group of two: You want to buy a tie. You tell the salesperson the color you want and the salesperson helps you.
-For a group of three or four: Tomorrow is your teacher's birthday. You need to decide what to buy for her. The salesperson can be of help. -For a group of three: It's Christmas time. You and two more friends are planning to visit your uncle who lives in the United States. Make a list of the type of clothes you will need.
-For a group of three or four: You and your classmates have been invited to a wedding. Use the list provided by your teacher, to decide what would be more appropriate for you to wear on that day.
c. Interviewing: The students will interview three of their classmates in order to fill out a chart. When students have the chart filled out, they will share the information with the class. Some of the questions in the questionnaire include:
-What is your favorite color?

- What gift would you buy for you mother?
- What gift would you buy for your father?
- What gift would you buy for yourself?
- How much money would you spend on each?


## 3. Games

a. Letter game: The class will be divided into two teams. A player from one of the teams will call out a letter. A player from the opposite team has to give a word that begins with the letter and make up a short sentence, as in the following example.

Group A: Letter «D».
Group B: Dress. Mary is wearing a dress today.
Group A: Letter «S».
Group B: Shoes (shirts, socks). I have two pairs of shoes.
b. Jigsaw story: The class will be divided into two teams. The teacher will distribute a bag of word sets to each team, instructing the players to spread the word slips on the table. Then, the teacher will read a short paragraph repeatedly as the teams arrange the sentences. When a team declares that it has completed the story, the teacher will go to its table and check its sentences. If the reproduction is not correct, the teacher will inform the players but would not indicate the location of the mistakes. Then, the teacher will resume repetition of the paragraph until one of the teams wins by completing an identical reconstruction. The winning team members will take turns reading the sentences while the other teams arrange the words in correct order.
c. Picture Jumble: This game is similar to a jigsaw story in that students piece together visual material to match a corresponding listening selection. However, in this game pictures are going to be used instead of words.

Procedure: The students will be divided into pairs and will be given an envelope with different pictures. Then, the teacher will play (or read) a short dialogue while the pairs of students attempt to re-arrange the pictures in chronological order. After several repetitions, the teacher will play or read the first part of the selection up to the point where the first picture is indicated. Then, the teacher will pause and ask the students to hold up the correct picture. She/he will have the students check their work by showing them the right picture. Afterwards, the students will paraphrase the conversation in their own words. They can either delete or add new information but they have to use the pictures as aids in keeping the conversation going.

## 4. Homework

Students will write a paragraph or a list of sentences about their favorite season and the things they wear and do. The students can also be asked to bring different pictures from home and describe the way different members of the family/friends are dressed.

## 5. Evaluation

The evaluation is task-oriented. This means that the teacher will determine whether the objectives have been achieved based on the students'
output in each one of the tasks. One way to do this is to write observations about the students' performance. Students will not be involved in selfevaluation because first graders are too young to deal with it. However, a short questionnaire will be used with the learners in order to get feedback from them regarding the learning process they have gone through. The questionnaire will include questions such as:

- Did you like the group-work? Why?
- Which activity did you enjoy the most?
- Did all students participate actively in the group-work?
- What did you learn about «Clothing»?


## III. IMPLICATIONS

It is hoped that the sample unit and the curriculum presented here will serve as a practical guide which will enable English teachers who are working in the primary school to make their classes more appropriate to the children's needs. In addition, these principles may be applied to adapt texts and materials which are already being used. In this way time spent in class will have better and more-lasting results.

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## APPENDIX A

Activity 1 (for the pre-communicative stage):

Flannel board characters with pieces of clothing or cutout dolls with paper clothing are used to specify a specific weather condition.

Procedure:

Each student has a pile of clothing and selects the clothing after a weather condition is stated by the teacher. The students may describe the clothing chosen: «I have the girl's white boots,» or «I have the boy's raincoat.» If the item is appropriate, the students may place the item on the figure and say: «She has white boots,» or «He has a yellow raincoat.»

## Activity 2:

## Clothes Song

To the tune of «Here we go round the Mulberry Bush.»

This is the way we wash our clothes, Wash our clothes, Wash our clothes, Wash our clothes, This is the way we wash our clothes early Monday morning.

This is the way we dry our clothes early Tuesday morning. This is the way we iron our clothes early Wednesday morning. This is the way we hang up our clothes early Thursday morning. This is the way we wear our clothes early Friday morning. This is the way we shop for clothes early Saturday morning. This is the say we show off our clothes early Sunday morning.

## APPENDIX B

Activity 1 (for the communicative stage or for reinforcement):
The class forms a circle with one student remaining outside the circle. This student asks, «Do you see my friend?» The class replies, «What is your friend wearing?» The student outside the circle describes one of the other classmates. When this friend recognizes his/her description, he/she runs around the circle twice to reach his/her original position without being tagged by the student outside the circle; otherwise, he must look for a friend.

Activity 2 (for reinforcement of the new vocabulary):

## Bingo

The students will be given a piece of cardboard with different pictures related to the topic just studied. Then, the teacher will say a sentence related to each and the students will select the correct one. They can either put a bean or a piece of paper on the right picture. Since each student will have at least one different picture from each other, there will be a winner at the end of the game. Although the students are not required to use the language creatively, there is high physical involvement and the students can review while having fun.


[^0]:    1. Herbert H. Clark and Eve V. Clark, Psychology and Language: An Introduction to Psycholinguistics (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977), p. 520.
[^1]:    2. Course: Foreign Language in the Elementary School with Professor Emilio Cortez, West Chester University, October, 1989.
[^2]:    3. David Nunan, The Learner-Centered Curriculum (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 43.
[^3]:    4. Alice C. Omaggio, Teaching Language in Context: Proficiency-Oriented Instruction (Boston: Heinle and Heinle Publishers, 1986), p. 29.
    5. Rebecca L. Oxford, Language Learning Strategies and Beyond: A Look at Strategies in the Context of Styles (New York: Newbury House Publishers, 1989), p. 46.
    6. Oxford, p. 46.
[^4]:    7. Omaggio, p. 47.
[^5]:    8. Omaggio, pp. 34-36.
[^6]:    10. Nunan, pp. 83-84.
    11. Nunan, p. 83.
