

Culture, Discourse and EFL Teaching

Abbes NEDDAR

Université de Mostaganem

To achieve proficiency students need the social knowledge that would enable them to convert the linguistic type into an actual behaviour. This requires a special focus on the social and cultural knowledge of the target language, i.e., give the students a general idea about what, when and how an expression is said in a particular social-cultural event. It is said that when the teacher tries to facilitate access to a particular schema, this might veer him/her from teaching language to that of culture, and it is agreed, at least among certain pedagogical circles, that teaching language is not teaching culture. So, there is a paradox here. On one hand there is a need to give the students a social knowledge about the target language, and on the other we are not asked to focus on the social construct (cultural elements) of the language studied. This poses a problem. Can we dissociate language from culture?

Language can mean in two different ways: either through what it says (semantics) or through what it refers to (pragmatics) both of which are intimately linked to culture. Our students cannot acquire the semantic - pragmatic dimension unless they are introduced to the culture of the foreign language. There is no other way of doing without it. Students must learn when and how to

use particular expressions in particular contexts. An expression can be totally right semantically but wrong pragmatically. It can be *acceptable* but not *speaking*. Saying *'It's me'* when answering a phone call addressed to you is grammatically right. However, at the cultural level the English would find such an answer as bizarre as it is not pragmatically appropriate. Indeed, this is not a conventional English means of identification over the telephone. What is contextually right is the expression *'speaking'* which is used more or less conventionally with its literal meaning to convey a certain implicature. How are our students to know such things if they are not given an *'aperçu'* about the social use of the language they are learning?

These questions remain unanswered unless we open a frank debate about the policy behind foreign language teaching. This must start by determining the function that we want to assign to the language itself: its pragmatic relevance outside the classroom world. There is no need striving oneself to learn something that one sees of no use at all in his professional or social life. It seems that that is the case, for English in Algeria today and probably elsewhere, where a second / foreign language as French or another is the dominant one. I will dwell on this point later.

I feel myself compelled to talk about another problem which I tried to avoid throughout this discussion: that of non-native EFL teachers with no living experience in the UK or the USA. How can they give their students this *'aperçu'* and teach pragmatic

discourse if they themselves lack the social dimension of the language? The situation is very hard and must rely totally upon the teachers' understanding of both the language and its culture. The following exercise may illustrate the point I am trying to make:

illustrate the point I am trying to make:

● **Everyday English**

Notices

1 When you first go to a foreign country, reading notices can be difficult. Here are some typical English notices. Match each notice with a place below.

a. 10.55 EDINBURGH
calling at
YORK
NEWCASTLE

b. **FOREIGN EXCHANGE**

c. VICTORIA LINE
SOUTHBOUND

d. *Afternoon Tea Served*

e. please have the EXACT fare ready

f. UNDER 18s
WILL NOT BE SERVED

g. engaged

h. EEC Passport Holders Only

i. keep your distance

j. PLEASE DO NOT FEED THE ANIMALS

k. ~~OUT OF ORDER~~

l. NO CYCLING ON THE FOOTPATHS

m. **QUEUE THIS SIDE PLEASE**

1 A bank _____ 8 A park _____ 2 **T.33** You will hear five short recordings. Where are the dialogues taking place?

2 Outside a cinema _____ 9 A zoo _____

3 A drinks machine _____ 10 A hotel _____

4 A bus _____ 11 A railway station _____

5 An airport _____ 12 A public toilet _____

6 A pub _____ 13 A motorway _____

7 The Underground _____

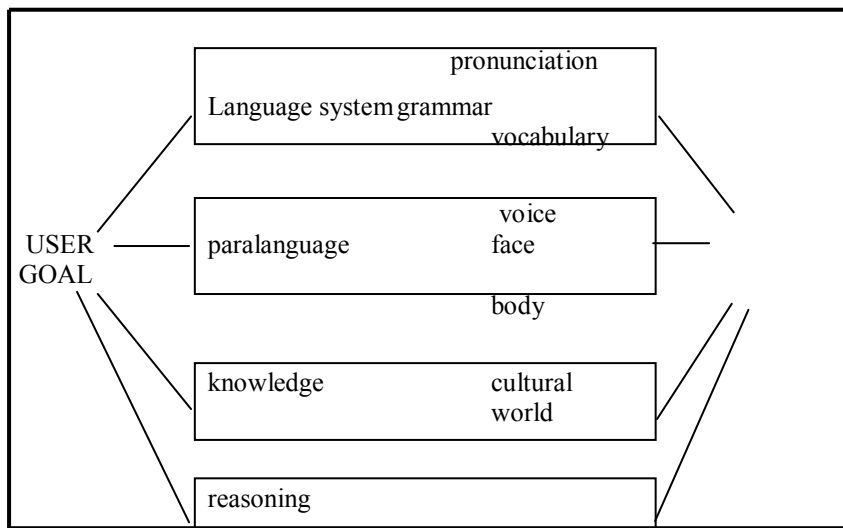
3 Work in pairs.
Choose two other places, and write conversations that could happen there. Tell the rest of the class, and see if they can guess the place.

83

(John and Liz Soars 1991: 83)

How is the teacher going to play his /her role of a facilitator if he /she has no living experience in the UK? How is he /she going to match notice (c) for example, with the adequate place if he /she does not know that it refers to a particular tube line in London called Victoria line and indicated in blue in London Underground maps. He/ she may guess when doing this exercise, but guessing is not enough when it comes to teaching students the adequate expressions of the foreign language. What I am pinpointing at is the issue of the extent to which pragmatic interpretation and discourse structure are culture specific, and the extent to which they need to be- or can be –taught. In order *'to do things with words'* either as addressers, that is as language producers, or addressees, as language interpreters we need- as I have already mentioned -more than the formal knowledge of the system. We need as Morgan (1998:656) points out a knowledge of use. This involves *'convention of usage, convention governing the use of meaning-bearing expressions on certain occasion, for certain purposes'* (ibid).

Cook (1989:42) represents the need of the language user as follows:



Unless these components: pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary and so on are taught as a whole, they cannot be efficient in foreign language learning. Until recently - the late seventies- language teaching has focused on the three elements of the language system: pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary. This is mostly due to the fact that linguistics as a discipline has always impinged on language teaching. The implicit assumption was that what is relevant in linguistic description must necessarily be directly relevant to pedagogy. This is not always true. Even Chomsky expressed scepticism about the significance of linguistics for language teaching (see

Widdowson 1990: 09). So, the idea went on that once the student masters these discrete components of language, he / she can later integrate them with success in any communicative situation. But, I do take the view that no matter how successful we are in the mastering of these components, we need to be taught both the cultural variation of any pragmatic discourse interpretation - whatever its variation might be- and the fact that its interaction with the form is language specific. This may seem a somewhat fanciful claim, but no less a person than Hymes (1972: 279) has made such a suggestion when asserting that the acquisition of competence for use must go side by side with the acquisition of competence for grammar. That is what foreign language teachers either tend to forget or totally ignore.

The relative failure of foreign language teaching is, I would argue, a failure in the grasp of the cultural elements of the language. Language is - is it not? - a means through which we not only communicate but also commune. It has, as Kramersch (1998: 3) said, a cultural value and thus, it symbolises cultural reality. An utterance cannot be understood, unless it has first met certain required culturally defined conditions or contexts. This seems to me a key point for success in any foreign language learning.

Very few foreign language learners sound like native speakers. The reason is twofold: first, language has always been taught as an idealised version that is not only standardised, but also decontextualised, i.e., deprived from its social semiotic dimension. Students are

introduced to linguistic signs without being aware of their social motivation and how they have been developed to express social meanings. They are presented with language items called *sentences* rather than with language items called *utterances*. . The content of language teaching courses has always been defined in terms of the formal elements of the code rather than of the identification of the concepts of these elements and what social functions or illocutions they account as. Yet, it has been proved that ‘what *people want to do through language is more important than mastery of the language as an unapplied system*’ (Wilkins, 1976: 42). Unfortunately, teachers seem to have no clear definition of what exactly is meant by communication or comprehensible input. No matter how good the methodology applied in the classroom might be, it cannot compensate for the lack of one’s ignorance of a key concept in language teaching. The achievement of proficiency ultimately depends on the degree of awareness of what is pragmatically distinctive of the language studied. Devising activities that make students talk in the classroom, though may stimulate interest and encourage learners to speak, bears little if no resemblance to communication, though some honour it with the name.

The second reason for the relative failure of our students to achieve fluency in any foreign language is related to relevance. Let me dwell a bit on this point. The question of relevance is obviously a question of utility. What is learning a foreign language for? What good is it to anybody? What practical uses can it be put to ? One response to such questions is, of course, to deny

the presupposition that it needs any practical justification at all. Like other disciplines, learning a foreign language is an intellectual activity and hence an intellectual enquiry. It is a quest for explanation and that is sufficient justification in itself. Acquiring knowledge does not have to be accountable to practical utility, particularly when it concerns something that is so essential and a distinctive feature of the human species: language.

Whether or not learning a foreign language should be accountable, it has been turned to practical account. Indeed, one important impetus for the development of a second language acquisition -English in particular- is the scientific and technical dominance of the English speaking nations such as America and Britain. English is the language of the twenty first century. It is obvious, then, that special interest should be given to this language, and that is what accounts for the emergence and the success of ESP (English for Specific Purposes). However, this dominance is not enough on its own. I have talked about the pragmatic relevance of language learning outside the classroom world. This cannot be achieved unless we work out a reflexive, interdependent relationship between what is done in the classroom, and what will be done with the language learnt outside the classroom. Between the pedagogical act of learning as an abstract entity and its actualisation in the social life as a behaviour in contexts of use. Goals and aims of foreign language learning must be laid out in advance and made very clear to the learners. Once, these done, we can set our criteria of significance. This will necessarily promote motivation among learners.

The success of this enterprise, to which all of us should be presumably committed, depends also on some political decisions that those who are in charge of our political and educational administration must take: offer our students the adequate linguistic environment outside the classroom sphere. How? And when? These are questions that can be dealt with when there is a real political will and readiness to take in charge this problem.

Bibliography

Cook, G. 1989. *Discourse*. Oxford: University Press.

Hymes, D.H. 1972. "On Communicative Competence" in *Sociolinguistics*. ed. by Pride, J.B. and Holmes, J. London : Penguin.

Kramersch, C. 1998. *Language and Culture*. O.U. P

Morgan, J.L. 1989. "Two Types of Convention In Indirect Speech Acts." in *Pragmatics: Critical Concepts*. ed. by

Kasher, A. London: Routledge: 639-59

Soars, J. and Soars, L. 1991. *Headway Pre-intermediate: Student's Book*. Oxford: University Press.

Widdowson, H.G. 1990. *Aspects of language Teaching*. Oxford: University Press.

Wilkins, D.A. 1976. *Notional Syllabus*. London: Oxford University Press.