

WHICH COMMUNICATION FOR WHICH SOCIO-EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT?

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ABSTRACT

This work relates to the teaching of English as a foreign language in the context of the language departments of the Algerian university. It focuses on the development of one aspect of communicative competence, namely the cultural aspect in oral communication. It attempts to explain the impact of the foreign language classroom as a limited (and limiting) target socio-cultural environment on students' outcome. The assumptions behind this work are based on the author's experience and observation of many students' difficulties to comprehend and transmit messages with ease in their own educational context. Such learners will probably be more defiant if/when found in genuine cross –cultural interactional situations.

Introduction

Efficient skill of communication has become a passport to success during these last decades. People are judged according to how well they master the skills of communication in various aspects of their lives: professional, social, and private. Many competencies are measured according to our ability to express ourselves in a clear and convincing and why not elegant way.

The evolutionary character of language education suggests that in order to offer effective teaching, university language departments need to revise their programmes and methodology, and adapt them to current related research. Thus evolution in the field of foreign language education cannot take place in a vacuum. It has to be based on an understanding of basic issues as the nature of language knowledge, culture and communication and the impact of context on the outcome of foreign language pedagogy.

The cultural dimension in oral communication

Two aspects of communication namely language and culture are indissociable. In this respect, any attempt to understand how oral communication should be taught and/or evaluated without taking into account the ethnological dimension of the target language is restricted. A conventional view of communication widely adopted by most applied linguists and foreign language teachers consists of the following well-known scheme: SENDER ► MESSAGE ► RECEIVER

Such traditional model proposes a schematization that is of little use and help to applied linguists and language teaching methodology in the sense that it does not reveal nor reflect the complex mechanism of spontaneous interaction.

Students difficulties to function in the TL

The ‘...teaching of culture should become an integral part of foreign language instruction’ (Thanasoulas, D., 2001). The development of oral communication skills should take into account the cultural awareness or ‘knowledge’ any native language user possesses and uses when communicating. It is such awareness that most foreign language learners’ lack, the thing that makes them use the TL correctly, but not appropriately. A lack of or limited cultural awareness results in FL learners producing an inter-communication as one aspect of their overall inter-language rather than a genuine, real-like communication.

After several years of instruction (middle school, high school, and university) in the target language (English in our case), most students have difficulty communicating appropriately. Their difficulties may be manifested at various levels: vocabulary, pronunciation, intonation, fluency, and inappropriate cultural reference and use. Many students communicate in English with a local (native) cultural connotation. The end product is a type of communication which is quite

distant and deviant from the genuine target communication. It is a “local communication” that may be shared by students and their teachers inside the university departments, but which may not be the one they are likely to encounter within the target community if/when the need to communicate with native speakers comes.

The foreign language classroom: its cultural potential

The assumption underlying this work is that the extent to which students attain this goal is highly determined by what goes on in their classroom. This is not to say that there is a systematic, direct relationship between all that teachers do and make learners do in the classroom and the type or level of competence these learners achieve. Language development is to a large extent, an individual accomplishment. But typically this private process takes place in the public context of the classroom, the individual is one of a group, a member of the class, and the activities which are to set the process in train are determined by the teacher. In any language classroom there seems to be a specific general pattern of teaching/learning: some tasks, types of interaction, activities, and attitudes appear to be more common and customary than others. It is these that are believed to affect the outcome of a classroom experience.

In this respect, students’ lack of cultural awareness and their frequent inappropriate communication reactions and exchanges are due to their limited exposure to the target culture. Very little reference is made to the culture of the language they are learning as well as the people who use it. This may be due to the following reasons:

- I-** Some teachers do not give the culture of the target language enough importance, and stress instead the linguistic aspect, when in fact they “...are expected to go beyond their traditional roles as purveyors of supposedly neutral linguistic codes and

serve instead as teachers of intercultural competence” Fichtner,F. &Chapman. (2011)

- 2- Some teachers believe that since their students are learning the TL in a typically foreign language situation, they have very little chance to engage in NS/NNS type of interaction and that consequently they do not need to communicate as native speakers do.
- 3- Many teachers have themselves a limited awareness and familiarity with the culture of the language they are teaching. Many teachers have never come into contact with a native speaker of English and so never experienced a NS/NNS interaction. Most of these teachers have never travelled to an English native speaking country to get in contact with its culture and way of life of its peoples.

Assessment of various aspects of oral communication

Besides, if the oral class is to reflect inter-cultural communication what aspects of this skill should be evaluated? What should teachers look at and/or listen to when the difficult task of evaluation is required? Teachers often find it difficult to test their learners' oral production capacities as there are no reliable objective tests so far. Thus, some use the reading of texts and dialogues as a written support to oral testing while others make individual interviews or do their assessment through 'exposés'. There is no doubt, however, that such techniques give teachers little 'information' on how well learners can use the TL in true and natural communication.

Assessment of oral communication with its various facets (cultural awareness, appropriate and correct language use, naturalness, fluency, etc.) may be done individually or by assessing pairs or even small groups of learners at the same time. A first step towards designing adequate assessment of fluency in oral communication may be to identify the 'ingredients' or features of this skill and set them in an analytical scheme. Assessing students' performance is made easier

and more dependable when/ if the assessor has a detailed account of what he will assess, and in this respect he will need to be aware of what oral communication different elements are, and what features fluency entails.

Research perspectives

First a purely theoretical research needs to be undertaken to examine the various concepts (communication, cultural awareness, and assessment) related to the subject. Besides, in order to find out the way oral communication and culture are taught as well as assessed; an empirical research will be needed. Thus teachers and learners ought to be interviewed, recorded; they will be requested to answer questionnaires. Oral classes will be observed and recorded in order to be transcribed later. It is on the basis of these transcriptions that the analysis will be made and the final discussions and conclusions may be drawn.

Issues related to the process of assessing interaction include concepts such as rating scores, assigning evaluation tasks, rating checklists, validity and reliability of assessment techniques and procedures. Furthermore, future research may contribute to answer the question that may be asked at this level: should teachers help foreign language learners use a fluent inter-communication with its local characteristics and specificities or should they try to make them develop a near-native skill of communication knowing that such learners are learning this TL in a foreign language environment in which they are most likely to be engaged in NNS/NNS than in NS/NNS interaction?

Liddicoat, A.J. & Crozet, C., (1997) rightly acknowledged today that the teacher is “...the principle mediator between cultures who has to consider both the learners’ own cultural expectations and understandings and at the same time introduce them to the new cultural view point enshrined in the target language.” Hence what is at stake today, is an attempt to revise the way oral communication is “taught” in most English departments (as is the case in Djilali Liabes University) together with an

adaptation of a more targeted methodology which is most likely to help us (both students and teachers) progress towards this aim. Our mission is clear and pressing. Changes need to take place in our classes: new attitudes, ways of doing things and simply a revised way of looking at our responsibility as influential partners in this learning/teaching experience are highly desired.

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