

"Discourse on Reading, Writing: Analysis of Algerian Students' Sociocultural Representations in Learning a Foreign Language"

Dr Brakni Dalila
Department of English
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
University of Blida

ABSTRACT

If we adopt the teaching/learning approach centered on the learner we must start with learners and their actual attitudinal and conceptual background. Their attitudes, beliefs and values about reading/writing and the reading and writing learning process influence their approaches to learning a foreign language.

The present paper is based on the observation of Algerian undergraduates learning 'academic English'. It examines the nature, role sources and effects of their representations which are broadly sociocultural. It will also examines the methodological difficulties met while gathering and analysing learners' discourse.

Representations

During a conversation with friends on the choice of a foreign language for their children, the discussion was based on a common point: Russian is difficult because of its alphabet, English has no grammar, Italian is a beautiful language, and German is difficult because of its grammar. If we consider these statements, they are all authentic because they belong to that amorphous mass of beliefs, attitudes called 'representations'.

This term has a Latin origin and means 'symbolizing' or 'standing for' and since the 16th century it has been used with reference to memory and mental imagery that is, 'presentation to the mind of something already known' if we refer to the Oxford Dictionary of Etymology. A modern definition of its usage reads as follows: "... the process of mental conservation that consists in the presenting to itself by the mind of objects previously known" (Encyclopedia Britannica).

It was not until the late 19th century that the term 'representations' has acquired a social connotation, mainly under the influence of Emile Durkheim (1912) who considered them as ideas or symbols "...widely accepted and socially forceful because they are collectively created through the interaction of many minds...

(and are) the result of an immense cooperation...to make them, a multitude of minds have associated, united and combined their ideas and sentiments...”
(Durkheim, 1912, p. 627).

These two definitions are at the heart of the contemporary debate on the representation of knowledge. Firstly, we have the use of ‘representations’ to refer to some aspects of the individual’s cognitive processing of data like storage and retrieval. In this case, ‘representation’ is associated with the memory functioning and lexicon, and with knowledge of the internal structures, phonological, morphological and syntactic of the linguistic code (Riley, 1996).

This approach is mainly psycholinguistic. When it is applied to English as a foreign language (EFL) learning process, it will focus on the investigation of inter-language that is, the learner’s provisional grammar (Corder, 1982, Riley, 1996) as a sentence can be a representation of knowledge (idem).

The other approach can be socio-cultural as the term ‘representation’ refers to knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, values and culture, and it is important to both sociolinguists and didacticians. If this approach is applied to EFL learning and/or acquisition, it will imply the study of developmental sociolinguistics that is, of how learners acquire communicative competence (Andersen, 1992, Riley, 1996) and of code-switching i.e. of how the way speakers alternate between language varieties shows their representations of social realities (Riley, 1996). It will also imply to take into consideration the socio-cultural dimension in the learning process

If this approach is adopted, the researcher will be examining the influence of the learners’ representations on the ways in which they develop socio-cultural communicative competence and achieve success in anyone of the four skills that make up a language. This without assuming that cognitive organization and processing are isolated categories as a sentence is a social structure, and there are social constraints on grammatical systems if the focus is on writing
(Halliday and Hasan, 1986).

Both types of ‘representation’ need to be studied but in a socio-cultural context as language reflects its culture (Lynch and Pilbeam, 2000). The first type of representation, referred to as R1, is the difference between the ways we think, and the second one called R2, is the way we think we think. Subsequently R2 has representations about R1. In other words, in R2 are to be found metalinguistic ideas related to the learner’s beliefs, notions and values that reflect and make up his/her socio-cultural realities.

These ideas will be found in the naive sense; they are popular beliefs about the nature of language(s), its structure(s), the relationship between thought and language (Vygotsky), identity and language... This will imply a qualitative difference between exploring R1 and R2. Psycholinguists will work on R1 within an objective positivist paradigm as they will be looking for ‘the Truth’, that is, the real nature of mental processing. Sociolinguists and didacticians alike will examine R2 within a subjective, other-oriented paradigm, that is, looking

for the participants' truth i.e. the real nature of the user's world as shared and understood by the members of his/her group – a post-positivist view in a post-modernist debate.

As representations are defined as social objects (Durkheim, 1912) not physical ones, the investigatory paradigms do not provide appropriate conceptual or methodological tools for their investigation. Social objects are part of the wide intersubjective world of shared knowledge, meanings and attitudes (Vygotsky, 1962) and can take many different forms as they belong to different categories (socioprofessional activities, speech acts, value judgement, literary genres, a foreign language...). For this reason, the methodological tools for their investigation must be carefully selected.

Methodological Exploration of Representations

It must be reflective of an effective rigor in order to be able to identify and describe them. Any approach should include the following steps:

- A) Identification and 'epistemologisation' of domain in addition to bibliographical search, and an identification of problems, and formulation of objectives, and selection of tools
- B) Criteria for data collecting, that is, situation, population and discourse types
- C) Pilot study: preliminary interviews, questionnaires, pre-testing to confirm or revise A) and B), then identification of analytical criteria and units
- D) Data collection of discourse from interviews/questionnaires/ diaries/audio-video tapes...
- E) Discourse analysis and comparison between representations and discourse behavior

-G) Proposals of remediation/suggestions

This framework for studying the learners' representations of reading/ writing/ speaking/ listening and learning to read/write/speak/listen is being run in the Postgraduate Department of English in the context of the LMD study scheme at the University of Blida, and it represents one of the many projects on various aspects of learning EFL. As these studies have not yet been completed, we cannot give quantified results. However, we are in a position to say that, from observations already made, these studies are of a great interest and therefore justify discussion.

To illustrate the above point, we can cite some examples of the speech-writing relationship. In an EFL classroom context of a British Civilization course, when the students, who were working in groups, were asked whether they find it easier to speak or write English, a minority of them answered by relating the two forms:

- English is easier to speak because we can correct ourselves*
- English is easier to speak because it is not timed when we look for new words*

-It is easier because oral is more flexible than writing

-It is easier because we need less vocabulary than in writing

-Oral English is easier because we can make mistakes

Other students who find writing easier say that they do so because they are shy of speaking in front of others, and it is easier to correct it than speech because we have more time for that. Thus, the students' preference was based on an opposition between speech and writing according to three criteria: grammatical rules and practices, importance of errors and corrective feedback, and time afforded for remediation. According to the students' representations speech is seen as less grammatical, mistakes are not important, and you have more time for hesitating and changing.

When the same students were asked about the best way of learning to write English, fewer students answered 'practising' than those who mentioned 'reading' or 'grammatical accuracy'. The following are examples:

-We must learn the exact sentence structure; we must use verbs, adjectives and adverbs

-The best way is to learn grammar

-The best way is to use correct verb tenses

-The best way is to be economical with words and more direct

-Reading is the best way to learn and use new expressions

-Reading novels, newspapers, dictionaries...

- To learn vocabulary and grammar in the dictionary

-Reading is the first step to pick up a maximum of language to be used in writing

These statements may simply reflect a teaching-induced error of appreciation since teachers are constantly insisting that their sentences should be grammatically correct and simple. The 'economy and directness' may be interpreted as having a link with the widespread lexical differences between Arabic as L1/ French as L2 and English as L3 with Arabic and French favoring abstract nouns and long sentences where English tends to have verbal forms, concrete nouns and short and accurate linguistic forms.

Aim of Investigating Learners' Representations

From a scientific point of view, we can say that many students' representations are naive, inaccurate and then not interesting to investigate them. However, many researchers, language teachers consider them as an important field of investigation and aspect of their professional role. From previous studies undertaken in this field, from our experience and research¹, we can state that, if ignored, representations, especially the negative ones, refuse to go away. They

¹ Refer to Dalila Brakni's doctorate defended at the University of Blida in 2006 and other magister theses on French as a foreign language and doctorates in process since 2001 in the context of the French doctoral school and LMD study scheme at the University of Blida since 2009.

remain as a filter to all cognitive intake and then affect both the processing of data and output as they provide at the same time the fundamental bases for memorizing, processing, interpretation, understanding and acquisition.

They reflect the how and the what of the language learning-process and are consequently linked to the learning in the broad sense that is, learning attitudes, motivations, styles, aims and objectives, problem-solving situations the learners face in their everyday life. Representations also reflect the presuppositions upon which some, if not many, teaching practices are built as an expression of an underlying methodology, a theory of how you learn and how you teach.

Pedagogical Implications

The exploration and analysis of representations is of utmost importance as it helps approach the individual and collective mental life through the cognitive processes reflected by them. On the other hand, these notions of representation are a good theory which should lead to a good practice. We can reach them through discourse analysis which reflects the learner's socio-cultural representations. We use tools such as questionnaires, interviews, diaries and other types of investigation to reduce risks of bias to cause them to appear as they lie unconsciously in ourselves.

The priority while investigating them in a learner-centered approach is to focus on these two important considerations: what it is they think they are doing while learning, and what it is they think they are learning. This in turn implies reflecting on both the learner's learning and language culture. This dichotomy is an important and useful starting point for both the students- and teachers-researchers for the learner-training and language awareness studies undertaken by the magister, master and doctorate students at the Department of English of the University of Blida in the LMD study scheme since 2009.

Conclusion

Any approach to the teaching/learning of foreign languages, in a learner-centered approach, needs to take into consideration the learner's representations as they are an important field of investigation for both teachers and researchers.

It will also be a convenient basis for organising more adequate contents of courses for developing more reflexive activities. Our goal in the Postgraduate Department of English at the University of Blida is to encourage investigation in the field of socio-cultural representations by correlating learners' representations with the researchers' statement of the problem in order to understand the Learners' (mis)representations and to

examine how they can be harnessed for more effective learning in order to achieve the students' cross-cultural communicative competence.

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