

Communicative language teaching and socio-cultural competence: An ongoing process

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Abstract: Communicative language teaching is undoubtedly the most widely adopted teaching approach, however sometimes the learners turn out to be 'fluent fools', especially when the balance between language forms (accuracy/usage) and language functions (fluency/use) are not linked to culture.

Culture should not be considered a fifth skill, neither something to be taught deductively, reduced to a list of features to be learned. Culture is always in the background, challenging our ability to make sense of the world around us, so the teacher must raise students' awareness and develop a broad communicative competence encompassing linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic competences, especially when he/she teaches a *lingua franca* such as English.

In this paper I will try to formulate a practical model offering some principles that may prove useful for the development of skills and methods appropriate to a *lingua franca speaker*, or rather, an *intercultural speaker*.

Thus becoming an intercultural speaker implies developing a solid basis of intercultural awareness, and this implies a shift from description (usually linked to cross-cultural studies), to modelling, in order to design a process of competence building.

Descriptions cannot be taught, they can be memorized and are useful only when the right situation appears, while models can be taught and competences, based on models, can be developed and adapted to many different situations.

Key Words: intercultural education, pragmatics, language teaching methodology

Communicative Language Teaching and communicative competence

Communication is defined as an exchange of ideas and information between two or more persons (Crystal 1992, Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary 1980). A communicative system consists of at least three components: a medium, a sender, and a receiver. A message is shaped by the sender, it may be verbal or nonverbal. It is then encoded into the nervous and muscular system. The message leaves the sender and is transmitted via air (ear - spoken mode) or paper (eye - written mode) to the brain of the receiver, where it is decoded and converted into concepts.

The communicative approach to language teaching refers to the principle of language as communication. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) dates back to the Seventies and can be considered one of the current dominant methodologies, together with CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning).

In the communicative approach the main purpose of teaching a foreign, or second language, is communication. CLT desired outcome is for the learner to communicate successfully in real situations using the target language, with conscious knowledge of the rules governing that language as a secondary outcome.

The goal of language teaching is to develop, in learners, what Hymes (1964, 1972) termed communicative competence, as opposed to Chomsky's (1965) theory of competence (linguistic competence vs. performance).

Hymes (1972) explained what a speaker needs to know in order to be communicatively competent, and assumed that a person who acquires communicative competence will have also acquired both knowledge of and the ability to use the language of communication.

The notion of developing learners' ability to use language appropriately in sociocultural contexts has been reformulated by later scholars such as Canale and Swain (1980) and van Ek (1986). Their interpretations of communicative competence cover two aspects: linguistic competence and pragmatic competence. Canale and Swain have identified four dimensions in communicative competence: grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic competences.

Grammatical competence refers to Chomsky's linguistic competence and to Hymes' possibility (formally possible); it refers to language codes (grammar and lexis). Sociolinguistic competence refers to

knowledge and understanding of the social context in which communication takes place, the different relations between and purposes of the actors. It deals with the socio-cultural use of language: a speaker must know how to appropriately use words (vocabulary choice), register, style, in a given situation. Discourse competence encompasses the way meaning is represented, hence how message elements are interpreted and inferred, in the context of the entire discourse or text. Strategic competence implies knowledge of verbal and nonverbal communication strategies, as well as the strategies used to initiate, terminate, maintain and repair a communication. Grammatical competence refers to accuracy and usage, while sociolinguistic competence to fluency and use.

According to the Council of Europe (COE 2001), communicative language competence can be considered as comprising several areas: *linguistic*, *sociolinguistic* and *pragmatic*. Each of these components is postulated as comprising, in particular, knowledge and skills and know-how.

Hymes (1972) stated that competent speakers should not only be able to generate appropriate sentences but also should be aware that sociolinguistic rules must be included in the analysis of a language, arguing that language study cannot be restricted to discussion of linguistics rules.

A speech act refers to the performance of a certain act through words. Olshtain and Cohen (1983) defined sociolinguistic competence as "the speakers' ability to determine the pragmatic appropriateness of a particular speech act in a given context. At the production level it involves the selection of one of several grammatically acceptable forms according to the formality of the situation and to the number of available forms".

Crystal (1985) affirmed that pragmatics is the study of language from the point of view of users, in particular, of the choices they make, of the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction and of the effects their use of language has on other participants in the act of communication. Pragmatics is the study of communicative action in its sociocultural context; it includes not only speech acts such as requesting, greeting, and so on, but also participation in conversation, engaging in different types of discourse, and maintaining interaction in complex speech events.

Learners of a second language have to learn the conventionalized forms in the new language, as well as specificities of interactional styles.

Intercultural communicative competence

Intercultural communicative competence widens the concept of communicative competence to include intercultural competence.

Appropriateness and effectiveness of communicative actions and of speech acts such as politeness strategies, requesting, greetings, apologizing, are culturally bound. In a foreign language not only does the linguistic realization of the same speech act differ in terms of lexical choices, the *intention* and the *force* of the act are different as well. For example, in Italian culture, accepting an offer immediately may be considered impolite, so it is better to refuse at least twice before accepting and, depending on the situation, the refusal may be strong in terms of vehemence.

Intercultural competence is the term used to describe the ability to work across cultures with an understanding of cultures on a general level, it includes communication and knowledge of the world.

Language teaching and learning involves the knowledge of a new language and in some cases of new contents related to a subject (such as in CLIL methodology).

Students must be offered a new frame of reference in terms of culture specific and culture general knowledge and of insights into the way in which culture affects language and communication. The idea of offering foreign language students a structured world-view is not new; it can be traced back to the 17th Century, to Comenius' *Orbis Pictus*. However any representation of the target culture must be carefully constructed: sometimes folkloristic stereotypes may correspond to the traditional way a people see themselves and they can be used, but in order to develop sociocultural knowledge and intercultural skills it is much more productive to consider a model with three components, which Balboni (2006) identified as:

- software of the mind
- communication software
- context software

Software of the mind refers to the cultural factors which affect communication during the exchange of messages between two or more people who are pursuing specific goals through communicating with others. This software works like the software in a computer: the user is unaware of it until a warning message appears on the screen. This software is our cultural values.

Communication software refers to the verbal and nonverbal codes in use. The communicator's attention is mainly focused on verbal acts, and little or no consideration is given to non-verbal communication, which, in many cases, is (wrongly) thought to be universal.

Context software is the socio-pragmatic software which governs the beginning, the direction, and the conclusion of a communicative event (whether monocultural or intercultural).

Pragmatic competences are concerned with the functional use of linguistic resources in scenarios or scripts of interactional exchanges and it is very important to stress the major impact of interactions and cultural environments in which such abilities are constructed.

Sociolinguistic competences refer to the sociocultural conditions of language use. Highly sensitive to social conventions, the sociolinguistic component strongly affects all language communication between representatives of different cultures, even though participants may often be unaware of its influence.

When two strangers lightly bump into each other, if they are British and Mediterranean people they may evaluate this bump similarly in terms of degrees of seriousness, and as a result they may not have similar conceptions as to whether a verbal apology is required.

Richards & Sukwiwatt (1983) referred to a situation in which a Japanese learner (JE) has to express gratitude in English to a native speaker (E) may go as follows:

E: Look what I've got for you (maybe a gift)

JE: Oh! I'm sorry (*thank you* does not sound sincere enough in Japanese)

E: Why sorry?

Indeed Italians often add: "We must have lunch /a coffee together sometime" to their repertoire of leave-taking formulae, which in English are: See you, Take care, Goodbye, and other formal or informal phrases, depending on the situations. But what Italians add is not meant to be a suggestion, it is a formula, and the foreign interlocutor may be puzzled, waiting for an invitation that doesn't come. To an offer in English, Italians may answer: "Yes, thank you" instead of "Yes, please" if they don't master the offers, refusals and requests speech acts.

Intercultural awareness

Learners of a second language have to learn the conventionalized forms in the new language, as well as peculiarities of interactional styles. The Council of Europe (2001) has stated that the need for communication presupposes a 'communication gap', which can however be bridged because of the overlap, or partial congruence, between the mental context of the user in focus and the mental context of the interlocutor(s). The effect – and often all or part of the function – of a communicative act is to increase the area of congruence in the understanding of the situation in the interests of effective communication so as to serve the purposes of the participants. Differences in values and beliefs, politeness conventions, social expectations, etc. in terms of which the parties interpret the interaction are more difficult to bridge, unless the latter have acquired the necessary intercultural awareness.

In Gass and Neu (1995:2) the following incident is reported:

One morning, Mrs. G, a native speaker of English now living in Israel, was doing her daily shopping at the local supermarket. As she was pushing her shopping cart she unintentionally bumped into Mr. Y, a native Israeli. Her natural reaction was to say "I am sorry" (in Hebrew). Mr. Y turned to her and said "Lady, you could at least apologise." On another occasion the very same Mr. Y. arrived late for a meeting conducted by Mr. W (a native speaker of English) in English. As he walked into the room he said, "The bus was late", and sat down. Mr. W, obviously annoyed, muttered to himself, "These Israelis, why don't they ever apologise!" (Olshtain and Cohen, 1989).

What the incident tells us is that saying 'I'm sorry' in Hebrew is considered not strong enough by the native Israeli; on the other hand the native speaker of English cannot decode the words Mr. Y. utters as an apology.

In the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment* (CEFR) (COE 2001) cultural awareness is defined as:

Knowledge, awareness and understanding of the relation (similarities and distinctive differences) between the 'world of origin' and the 'world of the target community' produce an intercultural awareness. It is, of course, important to note that intercultural awareness includes an awareness of regional and social diversity in both worlds. It is also enriched by awareness of a wider range of

cultures than those carried by the learner's L1 and L2. This wider awareness helps to place both of these in context. In addition to objective knowledge, intercultural awareness covers an awareness of how each community appears from the perspective of the other, often in the form of national stereotypes.

The intercultural dimension of language education and intercultural competence has been widely researched by Byram and Flemming (1998), Byram (1997), and Byram and Zarate (1997).

Communicating in a lingua franca and the intercultural speaker

The use of English, or another language, as a *lingua franca* and the growing awareness that while it might resolve a specific communication problem between people, could not provide a basis for real communication.

It is a useful shortcut and may help; nonetheless, according to Crystal (1997) language has no independent existence, it lives in some sort of mystical space apart from the people who speak it. It exists in the brains, mouths, ears, hands and eyes of its users, and when they succeed on the international stage, their language succeeds, and when they fail, their language fails.

When two people conversing are from different countries, speaking in a language which is a foreign or a second language for one of them, or which is foreign to both of them, they may still be highly aware of their national identities. This awareness leads to feeling the other is different and such a situation may influence what they say and how they say it, because they see the other person as a representative of a country, or a nation. This focus on national identity, and the accompanying risk of relying on stereotypes, reduces the individual from a complex human being to someone who is seen as representative of a country or 'culture'.

Regardless of the language, individuals must thus be sensitized to what underlies communication: the fact is that using a lingua franca is not always a suitable or successful solution to all problems. They must learn to cope with the complexities of intercultural communication, where grammatical or lexical correctness, important though they are, may not be the decisive factor in communicative success. Neither may a satisfactory control of language functions be enough (Jackobson 1963; Halliday 1973), however essential it may be. Even a basic generalized knowledge of the foreign language's culture may not be a guarantee of success, as it may lead to or enhance existing stereotypes (Steele and Suozzo 1994). Kramsch (1998).

According to Byram (2001) linguistic and grammatical competence are part of the process of teaching a foreign language, nonetheless a reflection on the nature of interaction between native speakers of a language and foreign speakers of that language, or between foreign speakers of a language which is serving them as a lingua franca, has led to the recognition that it is neither appropriate nor desirable for learners to model themselves on native speakers with respect to the learning about and understanding another culture.

The term *intercultural* is normative and carries values, as opposed to *cross-cultural* which is considered neutral, a mere description of elements that may vary in different cultures. Interculturality has moral and ethical dimensions for it incorporates respect for what is different and underlies a contact, a change, in both the sender and the receiver, which, after the encounter, will be an irremediable change (Pavan 2009).

Being an intercultural speaker implies being able to engage with complexity and multiple identities, and so avoiding the stereotyping which accompanies perceiving someone through a single identity. It is based on perceiving the interlocutor as an individual whose qualities are to be discovered, rather than as a representative of an externally attributed identity. According to Kramsch (1998) this implies a language learner who acts as a mediator between two cultures, interprets and understands other perspectives, as well as questions what is taken for granted in his/her own society.

Byram (2001) affirms that the intercultural speaker is:

“someone who has an ability to interact with ‘others’, to accept other perspectives and perceptions of the world, to mediate between different perspectives to be conscious of their evaluations of difference (Byram and Zarate, 1997; see also Kramsch, 1998). Where the otherness which learners meet is that of a society with a different language, they clearly need both linguistic competence and intercultural competence”.

He adds that intercultural competence is necessary whether a different language is present or not.

From description to modelling

Being an intercultural speaker implies developing a solid intercultural awareness, and the practice described above indicates a shift from description to modelling, in order to design a process of competence building.

Descriptions cannot be taught, they can be memorized and are useful only when the right situation appears, while models can be taught and competences, based on models, can be developed and adapted to many different situations (Balboni 2007).

Balboni states that a model is a generative framework, i. e. a pattern or a structure which can include all possible occurrences, it is able to generate behaviour and it is often internally structured in a hierarchical manner. He also states that the higher the level of a model, the greater its complexity, which does not necessarily lead to complexity *in extensio*, but rather *in profundis*, exactly like a website homepage. and finally he affirms that models are forms of declarative knowledge which must generate procedural knowledge. A model becomes a competence when it is able to generate behaviour, this occurs when the model is applied to a context of performance. Competence cannot be taught, but must be constructed, filling in the elements of the model with the information, declarations and procedures to be used in the performance phase. Balboni concludes that, since intercultural communication competence is a competence, it cannot be taught, nonetheless once a reliable model of it has been provided, it can be built up.

Respect for cultural models is central to developing cultural awareness, a knowledge sometimes taken for granted. However it is often difficult to understand one's own models because we tend to assume our behaviour is natural and do not realise it is conditioned by our culture(s).

Balboni's (2007) explanation leads to performance, and to intercultural awareness, which is the foundation of communication and involves the ability to stand back from ourselves and become aware of our cultural values, beliefs and perceptions, crucial knowledge we must have when interacting with people from other cultures.

As the Council of Europe (2001) states, intercultural awareness is the knowledge, awareness and understanding of the relation (similarities and distinctive differences) between the 'world of origin' and the 'world of the target community.'

The model of intercultural communication competence proposed in Balboni (2007) has already been described above, these are the three components that are crucial to a model of intercultural communication competence.

Adopting Hofstede's (1991) metaphor, they are:

- *software of the mind*, which refers to the cultural factors which affect communication;
- *communication software*, which refers to the codes used, both verbal and nonverbal;
- *context software*, which refers to the socio-pragmatic software that governs the beginning, the course and the conclusion of an interaction, of a communicative event as described by Hymes (1972).

The first two elements, cultural and communicative, constitute the competence, the ability to do something, while the third, the 'context software' makes it possible to move from competence to performance, the setting where 'real' communication occurs.

Conclusion

In a world of change, where people are more and more mobile, where travel and communication are available at low prices to increasing numbers of travellers, the marketplace is global and the presence of non-native (foreign) students is a solid reality in the classroom, foreign language education must become intercultural.

Foreign language education is, by definition, intercultural, since introducing a foreign language in a classroom implies connecting the students to a new world. Furthermore the primary goal of foreign language education should be real-life communication and the developing of critical-thinking skills in a variety of situations.

Thus the challenge is that of promoting the teaching of foreign languages and the acquisition of intercultural competencies within a framework where the issue should be, as far as possible, learning by doing.

If valid communication and co-operation are to exist, language teaching should also contribute to an active, critical understanding of each person's own culture and of the others' cultures too.

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*1st International Conference on Foreign Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics
May 5-7 2011 Sarajevo*

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