TEACHING (ENGLISH) IN MULTICULTURAL CLASSES

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Abstract

In this essay I intend to present how I got interested in the topic of cross-cultural studies related to language teaching. I would like to share my experience in this field and some of my thoughts and ideas I developed during my ten years' teaching multilingual classes.

As I faced an entirely different classroom situation, I started to read about the topic of learning styles in different cultures and investigated how they related to my students' performance.

The more I dealt with the topic, the more aware I became of the necessity that if we wanted to fulfil our task – to bring about good results in a relatively short time – we should build into our in-service teacher development programme this – for us new – aspect of language teaching.

With the appearance of genuine multilingual/multicultural classes, the need for teacher developed materials to be used in such groups and for further studies in this field became more and more demanding.

I strongly believe that teachers involved in this work have to know how culture and language relate to each other, what are the implications of the interference of the native language with the language being studied for the teaching/learning process. The nature of the culture shock our students experience must be understood by the teachers in order to help the students overcome it and thus bring about better results. To overcome the obstacles caused by the culture shock, it is essential to deal with the topic of cultural awareness, to find ways how the teachers can assist the students in this struggle.

To achieve our educational goals, it is necessary to investigate the nature and components of intercultural communication, to develop intercultural communication strategies to help our students live and study in the multicultural environment of TUB.

I feel it is indispensable to explore the issues mentioned above and many others not touched upon here if we want to help our students to the best of our abilities. I also believe that such studies go beyond the job as they can promote better and mutual understanding between nations.

Keywords: different traditions and educational systems, learning (cognitive) styles, different cultures, culture shock, cultural awareness, verbal and non-verbal aspects of communication.

The Technical University of Budapest introduced the whole range of its engineering courses in English in 1984, a few years later courses in French,

German and Russian. In 1993 the university founded an English language medium secondary school, the International Secondary Grammar School.

Our (language) teachers found themselves in a situation which was entirely different from what they were used to. In spite of the long preparation and the hard work we did to receive them, the encounter with the first groups was rather discouraging: the textbooks in use did not seem to work, successful teaching methods did not bring about results. In these basically multicultural classes the students performed weakly on tests and in social context.

There came students from many different countries. It was essential to learn more about culture, culture similarities and differences, different traditions and educational systems with special regard to the process of learning.

Some societies are orate societies (e.g. Arab), very different from literate (e.g. British) societies. KAPLAN (1967) sums up the differences: 'These differences have to do with attitude toward fact and truth, with the existence of science and coincidentally of scientific method. These differences also have to do with the existence of commentary on form as well as content, with the bridging of time and space, with the ease of dissemination, and with actual changes in the structure of language resulting from these capabilities.'

Orate educational systems emphasise imitation and memorisation rather than learning research skills. There is also an emphasis on economic, technological and practical subjects rather than on cultural and humanistic areas.

We began to study the field of their learning or cognitive styles. BRISLIN (1981) defines 'learning styles' as 'the various ways people acquire new information and attitudes, and the effects of the context in which the learning takes place'. The best known cognitive styles according to WITKIN (1978) are field dependence and field independence. Field dependence means that the individual uses the environment to make decisions. Field independence means that the individual relies on his or her observation. The following table summarises some characteristics and types:

> *Field dependent*: interpersonal orientation – physical and emotional, sociable, interested in people, considerate, warm, friendly, tactful, good at achieving conflict resolution.
> *Field independent*: interpersonal orientation – 'arm's length', insensitive, individualistic, demanding, inconsiderate, manipulative, less willing to accommodate their view to others.

Most Arab students for example fall into the first category. Consequently, they have difficulties in many areas. One of these areas is reading. For them a text is not to be criticised. The idea of the sanctity of the text comes in here with the Koran as the example. They do not distinguish between important and unimportant information, and it is difficult to write something based

on the text. Because of the different structure of the language, many Arab students do not have dictionary skills in their own language.

The most common grammatical errors are the misuse of prepositions, verbs, articles and relative clauses.

Paragraph development is very difficult to be taught in such classes as they are not familiar with it. (The Koran is not paragraphed.) Paragraph unity and coherence is also a problematic area. Many students have problems with handwriting and spelling due to the different direction they have to follow when writing and the different graphic system.

Enjoyment of rhetoric can always be experienced with them. They want to be eloquent when speaking but accuracy is a weak point.

Arabs love their language as it is closely connected with Islam. There are at least three languages in every Arab country: Classical Arabic, Literary or Modern Standard Arabic and Colloquial Arabic. Colloquial Arabic in its many regional varieties is the first language for all Arabs. It is learned without formal instruction and, until very recently, it was never written or read.

Teachers can help their students to identify their learning styles, to become aware of the strengths and weaknesses, to develop the existing ones more fully while developing new ones necessary for their studies. Teaching methods should be adequate to the students learning styles, in multicultural groups. It is even more important for the teachers to vary their teaching methods to respond to the students' needs.

Another consideration on the teachers' part is that they should know something about the students' culture, and should show respect for it. Foreign students are grateful if they experience knowledge on the teachers' part about their traditions, life, culture, religion. It is true for any student coming from a different country who finds himself/herself in a totally alien environment. Teachers should study the ethnography of the community their students come from which seeks to describe the set of understandings and knowledge its members share and which guide their behaviour in specific contexts. Ethnocentrism on the teachers' part affects the teaching strategies and consequently the learning process, too.

Teachers dealing with multilingual groups face the problem of not only how but what. They spend a lot of time searching for a class text because they believe that students need and want a textbook. They usually find that the chosen textbook does not cover what their students need and supplementary materials must be found. They usually select a reading exercise from one book and a communicative activity from an other.

To develop their own materials based on authentic texts for a specific teaching purpose for a specific group of students meets the demand of this teaching situation. They have students with skills developed differently to different extent. In addition, teacher-developed materials can provide content that is relevant, interesting and linguistically rich serving the aim better. It is very important that the EFL/ESL classroom is linked with the

real world by the teaching material.

The advantages of teacher-developed materials are clear: they are interesting and valuable for the students, they allow teachers to evaluate their students, and they allow more creative work in class. The disadvantage of this work is that it is very time-consuming and time is what teachers usually lack. A text must be found and activities must be designed.

Another argument against it that as they have been developed for a specific group, they cannot be used again. This second argument is not true as it is. Sometimes the level of the material should be adjusted, content has to be added or deleted. A set of materials can be modified and used again.

To support the above-mentioned issues, we should consider the pressure of time our students face. As CUMMINS (1980) and COLLIER (1989) have shown, most English language learners require 4–7 years of language instruction before they achieve the level in academic English of that of a native- English-speaking student.

Our students enrolling in the English medium engineering courses are mostly on intermediate level. After the one year preparatory course they conduct their studies in English in a non-English environment. At the same time, they need to learn Hungarian on at least survival level. For them English is a foreign language but to some extent a second language, too, as this is the language of their studies, work, their daily performances.

When language educators integrate language and content, it is referred to as content-based language instruction. They have a primary focus on language skills development but have a subsidiary goal of preparing their students for the mainstream classroom. Many studies and teacher development sessions have been devoted to the field of content-based language teaching at our department.

An area to be further explored is the relationship between culture and language. Discourse patterns of L1 do not carry over entirely into L2. As SMITH (1985) states 'discourse strategies may not be shared'.

There are differences in rhetoric traditions; we must consider the interference of the native language rhetoric traditions (LEKI, 1991). The differences in the organisation of compositions and in the delivery of the message are also important to bear in mind.

An article written by JENKINS and HINDS (1987) gives a very interesting description of the different cultures relating to language behaviour. According to them, from the point of view of message delivery cultures fall into two categories: low-context cultures in which message is explicitly coded and high-context cultures in which implicitly. The USA belongs to the first while for instance Japan to the second.

After the linguistic issues we must consider the social and psychological implications of the situation our students find themselves in. They experience culture shock after arriving in a foreign country, culturally different from theirs. Actually, our students face double culture shock; the language of their studies and the environment they will be living in.

The anthropologist, George M. FOSTER (1962) described culture shock in extreme terms: 'Culture shock is a mental illness, and as is true of much mental illness, the victim usually does not know he is afflicted. He finds that he is irritable, depressed, and probably annoyed by the lack of attention shown him.'

When a person brought up in one culture finds himself in another and different one, his reaction may be anger, frustration, fright, confusion. When at the same time he has to learn a foreign language and conduct his academic studies in this language, the reaction may be stronger because he/she is faced with many unknowns simultaneously. Until the threat is removed, the learning process is blocked.

Teachers can help the negative cultural shock to become cultural and self-awareness of the learner. This way he can bridge the gap – the distance as perceived which is never the actual distance. It is easier with children who are never strongly culture bound having fewer worldviews and set norms.

Every community has its own distinctive culture, set of norms and understandings which determine their attitude and behaviour. However, the individuals of a given community are often not, or not explicitly aware of their own culture.

MOERMAN (1988) says: 'All natives take their native knowledge for granted, take it to be nothing other than the nature of the world.' It is so natural for them in that they do not analyse it. Most people see themselves not as a culture but as 'standard' or 'right' and the rest of the world as cultures with strange behaviour. It is interesting that individuals who normally recognise subgroups in their own culture think that another culture he came into contact with is uniform.

The individual must first be made aware of himself as a cultural being, the product of one of the different cultures in the world. Only then he can perceive other cultures as interesting, different but not hostile and can try to conform to it as he wants to perform well and enjoy himself/herself.

Language is only one aspect. Other symbols, gestures, facial expressions, body language must be studied to be interpreted the way it is expected in the given culture.

G. MORAIN (1986) describes the non-verbal aspects of communication in three categories:

1. Body language: comprising movement, gesture, posture, facial expression, gaze, touch and distancing;

2. Object language: signs, designs realia artifacts, clothing, personal adornment to communicate with others;

3. Environmental language: colour lighting, architecture, space, direction, natural surroundings.

Our students should learn all the verbal and non-verbal aspects of the culture they intend to live in to perform well and to fulfil the task for which they have come here. Language teachers can assist their students to make

the culture – native and new alike – an aid to language learning, to overcome the difficulties, and to be able to take part in the 'intercultural communication ... the communication process (in its fullest sense) between people of different cultural backgrounds. It may take place among individuals or between social, political, or economic entities in different cultures, such as government agencies, businesses, educational institutions or the media. This includes non-verbal as well as verbal communication and the use of differing codes. linguistic or non-linguistic. Culture is viewed as having a major influence on the communication process.' (HOOPES and PUSCH, 1979).

Teacher training programmes recognise the need to provide future teachers with background knowledge in culture and international communication as it affects the curriculum, the teaching-learning process. I feel it essential to build it into teacher development programmes as well as to update our knowledge and keep track with the latest development in this field.

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