A Study of Language Teaching from a Sociolinguistic Perspective of Communicative Competence

UNE ÉTUDE DE LA LANGUE D'ENSEIGNEMENT À PARTIR D'UNE PERSPECTIVE SOCIOLINGUISTIQUE DE LA COMPÉTENCE COMMUNICATIVE

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Abstract: The paper is on communicative competence from sociolinguistic perspective. Firstly the author introduces the concept of competence by Chomsky and communicative competence by Hymes and further analysis of communicative competence by Canale and Swain. To succeed in cross culture communication, the interlocutors should be equipped with social culture and sociolinguistic abilities. At the same time, the problems with cross-culture communication are also identified. Lack of real communicative environment and most of foreign language learning is in the classroom. It's important for instructors to remedy the situation. Practical solutions to those problems are also proposed, Role-play is particularly effective in drawing learner's attention to sociolinguistic aspects and making parallel comparison between mother tongue and foreign language. In doing role-play, special attention should be drawn to the persons, the place, the time, etc. to sum up, who says what in which situation.
Key words: competence communicative, competence sociolinguistic, role-play

Résumé: Le document est sur la compétence communicative de la perspective sociolinguistique. Tout d'abord, l'auteur présente le concept de compétence par Chomsky et la compétence communicative par Hymes et une analyse plus approfondie de la compétence communicative par Canale et Swain. A réussir dans la communication interculturelle, les interlocuteurs devraient être équipés de la culture sociale et de la capacités sociolinguistique. En même temps, les problèmes de la communication interculturelle sont également identifiés. Faut de l'environnement communicatif réel et la plupart de l'apprentissage des langues étrangères est dans la classe. Il est important pour les enseignants à remédier à la situation. Des solutions pratiques à ces problèmes sont également proposées, Jouer un rôle est particulièrement efficace à attirer l'attention des apprenants sur les aspects sociolinguistiques et de faire des comparaisons parallèles entre la langue maternelle et la langue étrangère. En jouant le rôle, une attention particulière devrait être attirée sur

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les personnes, le lieu, l'heure, etc. En fin de compte, qui dit ce que dans laquelle situation.

Mots-Clés: compétence communicative, compétence sociolinguistique, jouer un rôle

1. COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

Communicative competence was a term coined by D.H. Hymes to contrast Chomsky's theory of competence. Chomsky held that linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-listener in a completely homogeneous speech community, who knows its language perfectly and is unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitation, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, and errors (random or characteristic) in applying his knowledge of the language in actual performance. (Chomsky 1965).

For Chomsky, the focus of linguistic theory was to characterize the abstract abilities the speakers possess that enable them to produce grammatically correct *sentences* in a language. Hymes held that such a view was sterile and snapped at it as "innately- derived power from the garden of Eden". While in real communication, it is "eating the apple, thrusting the perfect speaker-hearer in the fallen world". Hymes' theory of communicative competence was a definition of what a speaker needs to know in order to be communicatively competent in a speech community. In Hymes's view, a person who acquires communicative competence acquires both knowledge and ability for language use with respect to

1st. POSSIBILITY—whether (and to what degree) something is formally possible

It refers to the ability to produce grammatical sentences, which needs knowledge of the grammar and vocabulary of the language. When systemic possibility is a matter of language, the corresponding term is of course grammaticality.

2nd. FEASIBILITY--- Whether (and to what degree) something is feasible in virtue of the means of implementation available

The predominant concern here has been psycholinguistic factors such as memory limitation, perceptual device, and effects of properties. There are also considerations of culture; one would take into account other features of the body and features of the material environment as well.

The knowledge of *the* rules of speaking are also important. For example, knowing how to begin and end conversations, knowing what topics may be talked about in different types of speech events, knowing which address forms should be used with different persons one speaks to and in various situations.

3rd. APPROPRIATENESS-- Whether (and to what degree) something is appropriate (adequate, happy, successful) in relation to a context in which it is used and evaluated

One might think of appropriateness with regard to grammar as the context rules of sub-categorization and selection to which the base component is subject; there would still be intersection with the cultural. Judgment of appropriateness needs a tacit knowledge. An adequate approach to the relation between sentences and situations must be mentalistic, entailing a tacit knowledge and competence.

4th. PERFORMANCE--- Whether (and to what degree) something is in fact done, actually performed, and what it is doing entails

A more recent analysis of communicative competence is found in Canale and Swain (1980), in which four dimensions of communicative competence are identified: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence. Grammatical competence refers to what Chomsky calls linguistic competence and what Hymes intended by what is "formally possible". It includes language code (grammatical rules, vocabulary, pronunciation, spelling, syntax, etc). It is the

domain of grammatical and lexical capacity. Sociolinguistic competence refers to an understanding of the social context in which communication takes place, including role relationships, the shared information of the participants, and the communicative purpose for their interaction. It involves the mastery of social-culture code of language use: *to* appropriately apply vocabulary, register, style, etc. in a given situation. Discourse competence refers to the interpretation of individual message elements in terms of their interconnectedness and of how meaning is represented in relationship to the entire discourse or text. To put it simply, it indicates the ability to combine language structures into different types of cohesive and coherent text (political speech, advertisement). Strategic competence refers to the coping strategies that communicators employ to initiate, terminate, maintain, repair and redirect communication. It also includes the knowledge of verbal and non-verbal communication strategies which enable us to overcome difficulties when communication breaks down and enhance the efficiency of communication.

2. PROBLEMS WITH SOCIOLINGUISTIC COMPETENCE

Many speakers of English as a second or foreign language, though they may speak it fluently and even idiomatically have difficulty with sociolinguistic aspects of language.

Sources of problems with second language sociolinguistic competence are also identified. They are:

2.1 Transfer

A source of intercultural miscommunication highlighted by the finding of cross-culture studies is sociolinguistic transfer. Sociolinguistic transfer refers to the use of the rules of speaking of one's own speech community or culture group when interaction with members of another community group. This occurs in interactions in which one or more of the interlocutors is using a foreign or second language but employing the rules of speaking of his or her native language. That is, they tend to transfer socioculture patterns from native language to English, often lacking knowledge on what they would do in *the* target language. This may be partly *an* unconscious process—sociolinguistic appropriateness sometimes seems so natural that it is easy to assume that it is universal. If the sociolinguistic expectations are similar, this is a useful strategy. But of course there are many situations in which they are not.

Richards and Sukwiwat (1985) identified four aspects of noncorrespondence between L1 and L2 that might result in problems with transfer. They were:

1st. Differences in social situations. There may be social situations in one culture that do not exist or are very rare in the other culture. For example, Chinese people rarely if ever entertain guests other than relatives in their homes, while Americans commonly do. Chinese may have difficulties because they are not familiar with the situation.

2nd. Same situation, different routine. Chinese will answer a negative tag question with yes which might mean no in English. For example: you don't know him, do you? Chinese ESL learners might give a brief answer like yes which is equivalent to " no, I don't know him in English , but actually which is a direct translation from the customized answer in the mother tongue.(Dui, wo bu ren shi ta.)

3rd. Same routine, different function. In Chinese, sometimes appreciation is expressed with the equivalent of "not at all", which is not used to express appreciation in English.

4th. Correct routine, wrong situation. A speaker might generalize an expression to a situation that it is not intended to be used in. for example; "nice to meet you" is used only for a first meeting, not at subsequent meetings.

2.2 Lack of linguistic control

A second source of problems is a lack of linguistic control (Tanaka, 1988). This seems to be particularly true for the less direct expressions which are important to politeness in English (Tanaka, 1988), such as , " I was wondering if you would..." as a request . If Chinese speakers of English are too direct in English, it is at least partly because they do not control the expressions that they need to be able to use rather than that they are not aware of difference in the politeness requirements of different situations. Even if they are aware of these expressions, they have probably not had enough opportunity to practice their use in conversation.

2.3 Stereotypes about English speaker's directness

A third problem is the stereotype that many Chinese people have about English speakers as being direct and egalitarian. Compared to Chinese speakers, English speakers are comparatively straightforward, and the politeness system in English is not as structured grammatically as the Chinese one. This may lead to the misconception that politeness and indirectness are not necessary and that Americans are direct in every situation (Ellis 1991). Therefore, Chinese speakers of English may not recognize the ways in which politeness is encoded in English.

These problems could all contribute to certain social culture and sociolinguistic abilities. Social culture ability refers to the respondents' skill at selecting speech act strategies which are appropriate given (1) the culture involved, (2) the age and sex of the speakers, (3) their social class and their occupation and (4) their roles and status in the interaction.

Sociolinguistic ability refers to the respondents' skill at selecting appropriate linguistic forms in order to express the particular strategy used to realize the speech act. Sociolinguistic ability constitutes the speakers' control over the actual language forms used to realize the speech act as well as their control over the formality of utterance, from most intimate to most formal.

If second language learners have access to a native-speaking informant , they could elicit samples from native speakers , but in a foreign language environment, given that students don't have much access to native speakers and they can't engage themselves in real communicative acts, it is important for second language teachers to make learners become aware of the sociolinguistic form. Here is how:

2.4 Teaching about functions in the language classroom

The most basic issue that students need to understand is that form does not always equal function (Ervin Tripp,1976). For example, without understanding this, students cannot use expressions for function appropriately. It is useful therefore to introduce the students *to* the idea that form and function are not always the same. For example, by showing them dialogues using the same form for different functions and using the same function with different forms.

2.5 Making use of students' first language

There is some disagreement on whether the use of students' knowledge of the sociolinguistic systems of their first language is helpful to students in becoming sociolinguistically competent in the second language.

As Holmes and Brown (1976) wrote, the adolescent or adult second language learner is by no means sociolinguistically naive since he has already acquired the complex sociolinguistic systems used in his native speech community. In learning how to use and interpret the sociolinguistic rules of English, he must develop an awareness of areas where the sociolinguistic system of his native language differs form that of English and where the "misinterpretation and misanalysis" is most likely to occur... Adult students bring to second language learning an ability to introspect which can be extremely valuable... the learners' sociolinguistic competence in his native language can be regarded as an asset rather than a

liability in that it facilitates the contrastive analysis of different sociolinguistic systems in the classroom(Holmes and Brown, 1976)   *IS THIS A "QUOTE?"*

It is *useful* to help students find parallels between Chinese and English. This process seems to help students recognize the similarities between what they do in Chinese and what they should be doing in English. For example, in deciding how polite to make a request, three factors, in both English and Chinese, are the size of the request (that is, the amount of money, time or effort it would involve on the part of the hearer), the relative status of the speaker and the hearer, and the familiarity of the speaker and the hearer (Minami, 1987). If students think about how they make requests in Chinese, perhaps with some questions to guide them (are you more polite in making a request of your teacher or of your friends? Why?). It helps them understand this concept.

Using students' knowledge of their own sociolinguistic system is also helpful to point out the limitations of drawing parallels between the two languages. For example, Americans put more emphasis on the size of the request in deciding how polite to make the request, but Chinese put more emphasis on the status of the hearer.

2.6 Contrasting expressions and dialogues

Ellis (1991) advocates that, at minimum, students should have their consciousness raised about sociolinguistic factors in communication in English. This should include knowledge of some basic formulas used in functions in English and some awareness of issues related *to* appropriateness. Because the situation in which many Chinese students learn English, extensive practice is rare, *so* sometimes the best a teacher *can* do is to make students aware of the issues involved. Ellis gives 2 examples of this; an exercise where students are asked to supply a refusal of an invitation and then compare their responses and how they make inappropriate refusals (with examples supplied by the teacher) in dialogues more polite.

I have also found it useful to have students contrast different realizations of the same function. For example, students might be asked to compare expressions like "you're careless about details sometimes," and "I am afraid we're all careless about details sometimes." used in conversation between a supervisor and an employee when the employee has made a mistake. The first expression is a direct complaint about the employee's performance. The second is a generalization. But in this context the employee would understand it as a complaint about his/her performance. Being able to see the contrast between these two expressions makes this point about realization of complaints clearly. The teacher can use this example to point out that in English, complaints are sometimes *made* through generalizations. It is a way of making the complaint more polite and less offensive, since it does not refer directly to the person being complained *about*. Recognizing this will help students both realize complaints that are directed at them and help them complain without being unnecessarily offensive.

In addition to comparing isolated utterances, it is also useful to compare dialogues in order to point out sociolinguistic problems in communications.

2.7 Role-plays

Role-playing is often recommended to allow students to practice what they have learned and to help them move from having knowledge of sociolinguistic appropriateness to being able to use what they know in a conversation. However, sometimes students may lack the proficiency to improvise role-plays or simulations on the spot: especially when they are performing in front of the class. One helpful idea is to have students in pairs or groups, planning or writing out dialogues together before they 'perform'. In addition to giving students time to prepare, this gives the teacher an opportunity to help the groups or pairs of students individually before the dialogues are performed in front of the class. The teacher can also make note of types of problems with usage that occur frequently and discuss them with the class as a whole during a feedback session after the performances.

For more proficient classes, one group or pair of students might be assigned a role in a dialogue, with another pair or group assigned another role. For example, one group would have the role of inviting a professor to a party while another group would have the role of the professor who already has other plans for the night of the party. In preparation, the group members discuss what expressions are necessary and appropriate and then a representative of each group participates in the role-play. They could consult their group when necessary. To help students see how different expressions would be appropriate in different situations, another pair of groups could be assigned a similar situation. For example, inviting a friend to a party. This helps students to develop and use a broader repertoire of expressions and to see how they are appropriate in different situations.

Because of the strong influence of context on the expressions chosen to perform functions, it is important to present functions and expressions in context (Finocchiaro and Brumfit 1983). Finocchiaro and Brumfit discussed the relationship between functions and the way that the speaker realizes the function, that is, the expression s/he chooses to carry out the function. For example, if a speaker wants to make a request in English, s/he has to choose among the expressions, "Do this," "Please do this" "I want you to do this," "I'd like you to do this," "Can you do this," "Could you do this" "I'd appreciate it if you would do this" "I wonder if you would mind doing this" etc. Finocchiaro and Brumfit (1983) proposed four factors in the situation that influence the choice of the expression that the speaker uses to realize a function. The 4 factors are:

Persons: this factor includes the relationship between the speaker and hearer, their relative ages and statuses, their social roles and so on

The place: this factor is the setting of the communication, where does it take place: for example, an office, a classroom, or a home

The time: this includes such elements as whether the functions occur frequently or rarely and how long the communication is.

The topic or activity: this includes not only the function but also the purpose. An invitation to dinner from a friend, for instance, is different from an invitation to the boss's office to discuss problems at work.

In presenting functions, organizing role plays, etc, these needs to be taken into account.

3. CONCLUSION

It is obvious that development of grammatical competence is inadequate for communication in second language. It is also necessary to develop sociolinguistic competence; that is to learn what expressions are appropriate in what situation. As foreign language learner don't have the appropriate access to native informant, and they can't constantly check whether what they say is sociolinguistically appropriate, foreign language teacher plays an important role in setting up communicative situations and teach not only the form but the function of language. During which teacher could make use of the first language, because foreign language learning does not develop in a vacuum, students have already had a repertoire of communicative acts in the first language. Teacher could fully make use of the first language, make parallels between first and foreign language, so the students attention could be drawn to social linguistic aspects of foreign language.

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