

## THE SOCIOLINGUISTIC DIMENSION OF LANGUAGE IN SECOND LANGUAGE TEACHING

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**ABSTRACT.** *It is my aim to point to the relevance of language as a social phenomenon to the domain of foreign language teaching. Communication is seen as a social act in sociolinguistics. Consequently, teachers and methodologists should also acknowledge this dimension of language as a social creation. In the classroom, the second language should not be treated as an artifact to be scrutinized and formally adhered to, but rather as an instrument to signal meaning. In fact, sociolinguistic research reveals that grammatical precision does not necessarily lead to successful communication. A real understanding of the nature of communicative competence should pervade the learning process. This implies that teaching should not be reduced to the mere acquisition of skills. Since all verbal behaviour is embedded in sociocultural and contextual frameworks, cross-cultural awareness of this complexity should be provided, as well as of the internal variation within language. My final conclusion points to the bicultural and bilingual teacher as the most effective model for the second language learner.*

**RESUMEN.** *En este artículo, se señala la relevancia de la lengua como fenómeno social en el ámbito de la enseñanza de una lengua extranjera. Desde la perspectiva de la sociolingüística, la comunicación se perfila como un hecho social. Así pues, es labor tanto de profesores como de metodólogos reflejar esta dimensión de la lengua como creación social. En la clase, la segunda lengua no se puede considerar exclusivamente como un sistema formal, sino también como un instrumento para crear significado. En este sentido, la investigación sociolingüística demuestra que la precisión gramatical no conduce necesariamente a la eficacia comunicativa. Un entendimiento certero de la naturaleza de la competencia comunicativa debe asistir al proceso de aprendizaje, lo cual conlleva que éste no se reduzca a la adquisición de las destrezas tradicionales. Debido a que la conducta verbal se halla inserta en unos marcos socioculturales y contextuales, la enseñanza debe proporcionar de forma explícita una concienciación transcultural de dicha complejidad, así como de la variación interna de la lengua. En la conclusión final, se argumenta que el modelo más efectivo para el estudiante de una segunda lengua es el profesor bilingüe y bicultural.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

I will begin by clarifying why I have chosen to entitle this paper with the terms *second language teaching*, when a common collocation would be second language acquisition or foreign language learning and teaching. The former, SLA, can be taken to refer to language acquisition in a native-speaking environment and the latter, FLL, in a non-native classroom environment. The fact remains, however, that there is no consensus on what these terms mean (see VanPatten & Lee, eds. 1990)<sup>1</sup>. As VanPatten and Lee (eds. 1990: ch. 17) explain, whether or not one feels the need to distinguish between SLA and FLL is largely based upon one's particular research pursuits and not only on the researchers' backgrounds. If I have purposely combined the terms in the title of this paper, it is because I would like FL learners to undergo SLA in the classroom<sup>2</sup> through the appropriate teaching. The foreign language profession can benefit from findings from second language acquisition research and theory and make adjustments in their teaching context to facilitate the process of learning another language. Some teachers, however, are reluctant to consider these insights as they see classroom learning too different from natural or non-instructed language acquisition. They should not shun theory, though, as I will argue in my paper, where I will focus, in particular, on the sociolinguistic dimension of language. I set myself in the line of other scholars, who are trying to promote language acquisition research and foreign language learning research with research paradigms in developmental psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, discourse interaction and general communication (VanPatten 1990). In essence, they view language in its total expressive and communicative thrust (Kramsch 1990).

## 2. COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING AND COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

After this introductory section, let us shift our attention to the much-in-vogue communicative language teaching (CLT), which started in the early 1970s. The concept of interlanguage by Selinker (1972) had a major impact on previous teaching methods and techniques. These were mainly based on the audiolingual drill and grammatical explanations, which aimed at a correct output by students imitating a native speaker's performance. The interlanguage assumption, that is, learners' temporary and developing language systems, in part paved the way for a new perspective on the learning process (Cook 1991: ch. 1), more dynamic and less focused on form. In the 1970s and 1980s there was a shift towards teaching methods that emphasized communication. Broadly speaking, linguistic competence was no longer the goal to achieve, but communicative competence, not knowledge of grammatical rules but rather the ability to use language appropriately.

The concept of communicative competence as a teaching goal, however, has not been fixed nor is easily defined. In fact, it is at the heart of later research into second language (L2) and foreign language (FL) learning (see VanPatten & Lee, eds. 1990). One essential question in second language teaching is what it means to command a language. In relation to this, I should bring back to memory the criticisms that Spolsky levelled about the preceding notion of interlanguage, precisely because of its arbitrary use of the concept of language, and its disregard for its psychological or sociolinguistic dimension as well as for its tendency to confuse a process and a competence model of language learning (Spolsky, 1989: 33). Spolsky considered that goals for a formal course of instruction need to distinguish between knowledge and use, as well as between various levels of automaticity and accuracy in use (Spolsky 1989: ch. 3). As Canale and Swain put it (1980) rules of grammar are meaningless without rules of use. In their own model of communicative competence, they establish a taxonomy of three distinct but related competences: grammatical competence (correctness), sociolinguistic competence (appropriacy) and strategic competence (effectiveness), which has led to a good deal of very interesting work (see Tarone & Yule 1989). Clearly, language can no longer be conceived as just a system of underlying grammatical structures. Hymes's notion of communicative competence and Firth before him have played a crucial role in second and foreign language education. J. R. Firth, representative of the British school of linguistics, began to be known in the United States in the early 1970s. He is now widely recognised as one of the earliest modern linguists to incorporate the essential principles of the communicative competence paradigm, the interrelationship of the linguistic parts of language with the context of situation, into a theory of language (Firth 1968: 177). Dell Hymes, building on Roman Jakobson's analysis of the functions of language, proposed the notion of communicative competence, whereby linguistics should encompass pragmatics, discourse, text, social variation (Hymes 1972, 1985). The idea is valuable in setting a wider goal for second language teaching, which parallels the communicative skills of a native speaker: his or her sociolinguistic and pragmatic competence besides the traditional grammatical competence. In other words, what a second language learner needs is not confined to linguistic competence, but includes performance where that knowledge is made use of in conjunction with other sets of language systems, such as pragmatics, discourse rules, rules of sociolinguistic appropriacy, rules for conversational strategies. A competent performance clearly integrates a sociocultural dimension of language in the process of speech comprehension and production (see Montes Granado 1995).

### 3. COMPETENCE AND PERFORMANCE IN GENERAL MODELS OF L2 LEARNING

One of the key issues is, therefore, the need to consider the relationship between competence and performance, that is to say, a real understanding of the nature of

communicative competence in connection with language teaching. Some general models of L2 learning have been proposed, although they rarely correspond neatly to teaching methods. Following the summary supplied by Cook (1991: ch. 8) I would like to include a reference to whether they emphasize language knowledge, language processing or both. The Universal Grammar (UG) Model, proposed by Chomsky in the 1980s (see Chomsky 1988), based on a complex form of linguistics known as Government-Binding Theory, sees L2 learning from a linguistic perspective. In this model, language is the knowledge in individual minds. The Competition Model and the Information Processing Model stand at the other extreme. They conceive language in terms of dynamic processing and of communication rather than as static knowledge. These are more interested in what happens in an actual language situation and in the real use of language than in knowledge in the mind<sup>3</sup>. Cook clearly establishes its relation to the behaviourist tradition, which claims that language is learnt by the practice of interacting with people in a situation for a purpose. For these two models, language learning is not connected with any language faculty in the mind, but is a complex skill built up from input from others, interaction and correction.

Secondly, the so-called Multi-Component models or mixed models, such as the Competence/ Control Model developed by Bialystock and Sharwood-Smith (1985) and the Monitor Model of Krashen (1981b) explain L2 learning as implying both skills and knowledge. They explore the relation between knowledge of rules and ability to use them, between structure and function, between a competence model of language and a processing model. The first one, the Competence/ Control Model is a conversion model in that it considers that the knowledge that makes up competence leads to the processing system for controlling that knowledge in actual performance. The interlanguage continuum relies on the degree of conscious attention to the L2 structures and rules. It goes from most-attended speech to least-attended (in the sense that the new elements of the L2 are first acquired in the language variety in which the speaker pays most attention, and then slowly transferred to the variety which is less attended). The conversion models are the justification for giving explicit rules of language to the students.

Contrasting with this is Krashen's model, which is a non-conversion model in which the two sides do not mix. According to this academic, linguistic knowledge can be of two types, acquired knowledge and learnt knowledge. The former is acquired by natural means in informal situations; this is a process not available to conscious attention, termed acquisition. The latter is the type of knowledge which is learnt by conscious understanding of rules; this process, found in many formal classroom situations, is termed learning. It is relevant in this paper to remember that Krashen emphasized the development of both sides and the fact that he saw communicative 'natural' activities as the way to foster acquisition, since, in his opinion, consciously learnt rules are never turned into acquired knowledge.

Finally, I shall mention the Social models: the Socio-Educational Model and the Acculturation Model, which don't neglect the social aspect of language. The former, developed by Gardner (1985) takes learning success as dependent upon aptitude and motivation, which depends on attitudes to the learning situation, to the teacher and the course, and towards the target culture. The Acculturation Model put forward by John Schumann (1986) sets the crucial aspect of language learning in the kind of relationship between the learner's group and the target group.

At the moment, there is no overall framework for all the models, since each of them focuses on different specific aspects of L2 learning (Cook 1991: ch. 8). Spolsky (1989) in his attempt to write a general theory of L2 learning, presented criteria for developing practices in an eclectic way. Although he was aware that no theory can be translated into a prescription for teaching, he set out to establish "a principled theoretical basis for an informed eclecticism in second language pedagogy". Teachers should be wise to choose to exploit the best teaching style or combine the most appropriate methods to suit the desired outcome of their teaching, which should also be precisely defined. In any case, they ought not to shun theory — be it linguistic, sociolinguistic, psycholinguistic — and appeal exclusively to logic and/ or experience, that is to say, to tradition. Teachers and curriculum designers have only to check their methodologies against the set of principles derived from research and theory.

#### 4. THE NEED FOR PERFORMANCE GRAMMARS

In this discussion, it is my intention to point out that teachers concerned about how best to present language in a classroom need to look towards theories of language use if their goal is not the repetition of structures but to get their students to manage the process of language performance. However grammar teaching, although not in the outdated audiolingual or prescriptivist tradition but in the abstract sense of language competence, still shapes classroom activity (Nattinger 1990). Even though the role of grammatical precision should not be downplayed, as has happened in some communicative approaches under the banner of communicative competence (in the encouragement of communication without strict 'error correction') (Savignon 1990), "knowing" the underlying system of language does not guarantee discourse aptitude. This is why teachers should seek descriptions and models of how language is actually used in social interaction. Performance grammars are needed now that the emphasis has been shifted from static grammatical patterns over to dynamic linguistic and communicative processes.

#### 5. SOCIOLINGUISTIC INSIGHTS

The insights provided by sociolinguistics are relevant to reflect the realities of sociocultural and interactional language use and to investigate the possibility of

crosslinguistic differences in performance (see Montes Granado 1996). Much has been written about the importance of this perspective in developing L2 teaching methods and materials. Nevertheless, after an early enthusiasm, and despite the understanding of the nature of language and of language behaviour coming from this research perspective, it later followed what seemed to be a general sense of disappointment with the types of teaching materials which became available (Tarone & Yule 1989; Savignon 1990). The reason was that, as Tarone and Yule noted, research on the communicative abilities of second language learners had in large part been limited to the study of learners' mastery of certain speech acts in the target language. Besides, this was not the best approach to develop the students' communicative competence because it is reduced to a list of speech acts, focusing on the linguistic forms used, with scarce information about their contexts of use. It has now become clear that the teaching approach has to be integrative in nature, with the global objective of sensitizing learners to the social and interactional functions of utterances within the communicative situations where they occur. Rather than furnishing them with long lists of situational language, teaching and research on the *communicative* competence of second language learners has to encompass sociolinguistic phenomena. Loveday (1982) pleaded for a better understanding of this concept of communicative competence<sup>4</sup>, which "has assumed a certain vacuousness" (1982: 122), and argued in favour of integrating sociolinguistic research and themes into L2 courses (see also Berns 1987; Preston 1989). Therefore, as a general goal throughout the learning process, we could heighten their awareness of language as a social phenomenon and of verbal behaviour as embedded in situational and sociocultural frameworks and as dependent on the interrelationship of factors such as the social status of the speaker and hearer, the topic of discourse, the setting, the purpose of the interaction, etc.

Among other sociolinguistic insights that could be brought to mind, I shall emphasize those that bear on the issue in hand, L2 teaching. In the first place, I would like to highlight the underestimated classroom implication of the interpenetration between language and culture, as the school of research founded by Hymes (1962), known as "the ethnography of communication" has made clear. The cultural relativity of language cannot be taken for granted nor can it be disregarded. Reducing communicative competence to the mere acquisition of skills is equal to being blind to the fact that learning a language should involve the construction and comprehension of appropriate sociocultural meaning. The problem is that the sociocultural determinants of language are, by no means, always explicit. Linguistic communication involves many "cognitive economies" that rely on the speaker's and listener's presuppositions. Being familiar with the underlying cultural presuppositions contributes to a heightened linguistic comprehension of the target community means of speaking. Consequently, one of the roles of teachers should be to free students from their ethnocentrism and work towards attaining a higher sensitivity for cross-cultural communicative contrasts and similarities. The teacher not only has to be aware of the

sociological and ethnographic parameters impinging on the speech of his/ her own and the target community. He or she also has to be skilled to stimulate their students to accept and be interested in another culture without damaging their self-image. There are grounds to argue that this is best done not by the native speaker but by a bicultural teacher, who has the necessary cross-cultural awareness to verbalise the relevant background knowledge, which, incidentally, cannot be made conscious by mere exposure in the natural setting of the language.

Cross-cultural sensitivity can also be useful to understand and consequently avoid the feeling of alienation that some teaching too insistent on a native-like command of a L2 can produce. From this perspective, it becomes clear that the aim is not to produce imitation native speakers, as much language teaching has tried to do. The point is to equip students to communicate adequately, to stand between two cultures, without losing their own identity. This is called “intercultural communicative competence” by Byram (1990) (see also Cook 1991: ch. 7; Preston 1989). From what I have said before, I postulate, as it is argued from several quarters, that the best model for language teaching is the fluent L2 user, not the native speaker.

Not only language learning but also teaching is dependent on the cultural milieu where it takes place<sup>5</sup>. A teaching method has to suit the beliefs of the society about what activities are proper for classrooms. It is difficult for the teacher to reform the deep seated social preconceptions of their students. Therefore, another issue that derives from this revelatory viewpoint is the need to evaluate the impact of culturally determined learning styles on the acquisition of foreign cultural forms of discourse. This is a proposal for research that I throw here, following the initiative of others (Kramsch 1990; Savignon 1990; Lambert 1987), concerned to build empirical evidence of foreign language teaching methodologies in search for what works and what does not work (Lambert 1987: 2). This should be a joint venture, requiring the participation of teachers, learners and researchers, and is inserted within the discipline called foreign language learning (FLL) (see VanPatten and Lee 1990).

Another sociolinguistic insight worthy of our attention here refers to linguistic variation, one of the central concerns in sociolinguistics. In the dynamic process of transmitting and decoding meaning, language has adapted in relation to the sociocultural system it serves and evolved into different speech styles, according to situations, relationships, intention, etc. I advocate to make learners sensitive to the range of variation that exists in native speaker performance. They should not be encouraged to believe that the native speaker competence is some ideal, perfect and uniform phenomenon, if we do not want an artificial, monolithic output as the outcome of our teaching. They would need an awareness of different varieties and, above all, of different registers, their lexical and grammatical features and the social contexts where they are appropriate.

Finally, fostering their sociolinguistic competence would imply developing in them a sense of the interactional aspects of language use, such as the norms associated

with turn-taking in conversational interaction, patterns of convergence, non convergence and divergence, as the Speech Accommodation Theory has analysed in communicative encounters, the signalling of social identity by verbal means or of the establishment of social relations based on power or on solidarity, the marking of belonging to a social group by the use of language variants, etc. This type of interactive discourse usually occurs in speech rather than writing. The emphasis here is not on non-interactive discourse but on what Halliday (1975) terms the “interpersonal” function of language. Part of language learning implies producing and fully comprehending social interactions, that is to say, the ability to engage in conversation and be a fluent and competent speaker as well as understanding that communication is a dynamic social process embedded in contextual and situational parameters. Meaningful communicative interaction is at the heart of communicative language teaching and of the Cognitive-Interactionist Model called the Nativization Model (Andersen 1983), which postulates that progress in the learners’ interlanguage is only achieved through verbal interaction<sup>6</sup>. This hypothesis underlies any teaching approach that attempts to provide an acquisition-rich environment within the classroom (Andersen 1990). This stance, though, risks possible cultural conflicts because the role of the teacher becomes secondary, and above all, does not cover other language components, which should never be ignored (Cook 1991: ch. 9). Profitable material for teaching the culture of the target community, its linguistic diversity and its negotiating and interactional dimension in an EFL setting can easily be imagined: printed materials such as advertisements, cartoons, newspapers, different types of texts and genres, and audiovisual like television, video recordings, films, or simply the radio or tapes, etc. etc. What is important, however, is not only the materials but mainly the role of the teacher in pointing to and clarifying the sociolinguistic knowledge I have tried to present here.

## 6. FINAL REMARKS

This broadening in the scope of classroom teaching goals and activities could well be a supplement to an academic style of language teaching, widespread in the teaching of advanced students in university systems around the world (Cook 1991: ch. 9). It is characterized by techniques of grammatical explanation and translation, and by its reliance on texts. Its objective is the creation of linguistic competence in the students’ minds. They acquire knowledge of language rather than communicative ability directly, since it relies on a conversion model of L2 learning that sees the learner progressing from controlled conscious understanding to automatic actual use of language outside the classroom. Cook considers that this style can suit analytic learners or individuals who treat language as an academic subject and only value language use as secondary. But, he adds, “the teacher has to recognize its narrow



base” (p. 134). He suggests changing its traditional description of language, too based on traditional grammar, for more recent or more comprehensive approaches, which reflect how language is described today. In other words, academic language teaching can be supplemented with other components of language knowledge and use<sup>7</sup>. My aim in this article has been precisely to put forward the *relevance of the sociolinguistic dimension of language in second language teaching*. I set myself within the research orientation of FLL, which unlike FL education (see Kramsch 1990), views the division of language into separate skills as detracting from the integral concern with communication and with the development of communicative competence through the various modalities of speech and writing. Since language is culturally relative, FLL must view communication between interlocutors of two different cultures as a negotiation of meanings within an interactional context.

## NOTES

1. Some authors, such as Ellis (1985) or Cook (1991), do not distinguish between second language acquisition and foreign language acquisition. Ellis states that SLA is a general term. For his part, Cook also establishes that he will use ‘L2 learning’ in the sense defined by UNESCO - “A language acquired by a person in addition to his mother tongue”, without creating a distinction between language ‘acquisition’ and language ‘learning’, as some authors do (e.g. Krashen, 1981a). Some other academics maintain, either explicitly or implicitly, that FLL is some type of SLA (Kramsch 1990; Gass 1990; Andersen 1990; Odlin 1990). Others argue for a more restricted view of SLA that does not completely encompass FLL (VanPatten 1990).
2. See the immersion-type classes proposed by Schinke-Llano, 1990, which provide input and acquisition - rich environments. This is also the opinion of, among others, Sandra Savignon (1990).
3. The Competition Model, developed by Brian MacWhinney and his associates (Bates and MacWhinney 1981; MacWhinney 1987) stems from a psychological theory of language, whose main key is communication.
4. Loveday pointed out that “the term (communicative competence) has been sadly taken to denote no more than its superficial meaning as the ability to communicate. He also added that “the cultural sterility of many discussions on L2 communicative competence may well be due to the fact that many of the L2 theorists involved are or were in the business of English teaching” (1982: 122-123).
5. Cook (1991: ch. 6) is expressively concerned about this issue. He refers to the failure of the communicative method in China, where its attempts to promote non-teacher-controlled activities were at first perceived as insults to the Confucian ethos of the classroom which emphasized the benefits of learning texts by heart (Sampson 1984).
6. A fruitful area of research is that of the current investigations of classroom interaction. Cummins (1981) argues that interactional tasks along two axes (context-embedded to context-reduced, and cognitively demanding to cognitively undemanding) are necessary to develop both basic interpersonal communicative skills and cognitive academic language proficiency. Long & Porter (1985) claim small-group work to be an effective alternative to teacher-led interactions and to one-to-one conversations with native speakers. Doughty & Pica (1986) demonstrate the benefits of tasks requiring an exchange of information in small groups and dyadic interactions.
7. Cook (1991: ch. 9) also criticizes the partial coverage of components of language of two other teaching styles, the social communicative style and the information communicative style.

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