

Cross-cultural Communication – problems and solutions

Since communication is an integrated process, there are many factors involved in its success in getting the message through to the receiver. This is true when two are native speakers of the same language (L1). The advantage in this situation is that both the speaker and the hearer usually share a common background to some extent. This helps them to comprehend more easily. The ability to comprehend information in the cross-cultural context is far more complex.

Language teachers utilize many resources, many of them personal, in order to get the message across to the student so that he may be able to apply the information in a real communicative situation. Experience in teaching language should allow the teacher to draw examples and insights into the classroom to facilitate learning. When we attempt to facilitate cross-cultural communication, we need to focus on Listening Comprehension as a skill area and employ many other facets of language learning. Some of the strategies which help are drawn from research and experience in teaching Reading skills. Other strategies reflect additional language teaching experience in the area dealing with the sound system (Phonology)

of the target language (L2). The Phonology directly relates to Listening skills. Communication through Listening Comprehension can be further expanded through an understanding of Non-verbal Communication such as proxemics and gestures which accompany the message. Further, semantic baggage, meanings couched within the words and understood by native speakers can give contextual clues to the appropriate interpretation of an otherwise ambiguous statement. The correct interpretation results when both speaker and hearer share the same Schema through a shared culture (C1). The role of Grammar in Listening Comprehension cannot be overlooked. All of these elements of language have a bearing on the meanings of utterances and how accurately they are interpreted by those from another culture. The native speaker takes the information received and interprets it according to his knowledge and understanding of these elements, both verbal and non-verbal. It is worthwhile to examine these factors as determinants of successful comprehension.

The relationship between comprehension in Reading and in Listening should be addressed. Each of these skills requires certain shared elements for success. There are also other elements which they do not share. Both Listening and Reading are receptive skills. They do not require the student

to produce new utterances. They are passive skills, passive not in the sense of no challenging neurological activity since surely there is an abundance of brain activity in receiving a message and interpreting it. Here, passive means receptive as opposed to active skills which relate to production, ie. producing new utterances as in Speaking or Writing where the one doing the Speaking or Writing must produce the vocabulary and grammar. In the case of Speaking, the speaker must be able to produce the phonetic elements of the language; in the case of the Writing, the writer must be familiar with the orthography and mechanics of the language. In Reading, the reader is provided input from someone else who produced the material. However, comprehension rests not solely in knowing the Vocabulary and Grammar involved but in understanding the context in which the material is written. This goes beyond the sequential elements on the printed page. The context includes material related to the culture to which the passage was addressed. If the reader or listener does not share pertinent elements of that culture, the meaning might be lost. Patricia Carrell's early work on Schema Theory (Carrell 1983:4) is important also to an understanding of the challenges of Listening Comprehension as well. Material presented in spoken form can be difficult from the point of view of cultural content as can that presented in written form. For example, if a hearer never saw an

elevator and knows nothing about it, he would be hard pressed to follow the train of thought dealing with an experience in an elevator unless the term “elevator” were defined. This definition would be given in a class on Reading skills in a second language setting, but it would hardly be defined in a conversation among native speakers. Add to that mix, a non-native speaker (NNS) unfamiliar with the concept of elevator let alone with the experience of seeing one or riding on one, and comprehension is lost.

All too often, the NNS is uncomfortable or embarrassed to let others in the group know that he does not understand the expression. All language teachers know that this is especially true when idioms are involved.

Interpreting the meanings of words across cultures depends on whether or not the words have semantic baggage attached which might allow for ambiguity or misunderstanding if the context is not clear. Out of context, the word “bark” could conjure up the bark of a tree to one individual, while to another it might conjure up the bark of a dog. Contextual cues would clarify immediately which is the appropriate interpretation, but without any

context there is no single sure meaning implied.

Listening comprehension depends greatly on knowledge of the sound system or Phonological System of the language being spoken. This does not simply mean that knowing the phonetic makeup of individual words is enough for communication. The greatest challenge to comprehending spoken American English is to understand the words as strings of utterances in phrases or sentences in which the phonetic characteristics of the individual items can change when placed adjacent to another word. The sounds at word boundaries, that is at the beginning or at the end of an individual word, may change depending on the surrounding sounds across those boundaries. This External Sandhi, as it is described, accounts for the fluency of spoken American English and for a large amount of its incomprehensibility to the NNS. The common expression, “Did you see that?” is more easily understood by learners, for example, in written form where the words are isolated from each other. In the spoken form, they translate into, “Dijuw see that?” This is typical and accurate implementation of the Phonological Rules of American English as in the Internal Sandhi Rule applied to “education” as in “ejuwkeyshun”. See Cargill (1994:43) for more accurate and detailed transcription. The phenomenon can occur in other forms of English, such as British and Canadian. Helping the NNS overcome this handicap requires

skill on the part of the teacher. Exposing the learner to “natural language”, with the slur patterns or palatalizations which go along with fluent language production is essential in developing Listening Comprehension. Providing the learner with facility in dealing with the stress and intonation components of the phonology of the language adds greatly to the development of comprehension. Ambiguities of the sort: con'tract or con tract' or blackbird vs. black bird are avoided when this aspect of the sound system of the language is addressed.

The role of Grammar, that is, the Morphology and Syntax, is immensely important in cross-cultural communication. Knowledge of the words alone, even idioms, cannot assure understanding of them when they are strung together to make sentences. The Grammar teacher participates in the development of the overall comprehension skill of the learner. The relevance of Grammar in connecting words into meaningful expressions cannot be diminished. Grammar, disliked by many students and underestimated as to value, is one of the greatest helpmates to the learning process. Understanding the tense system alone is invaluable in setting a time frame for activities described in a situation. Understanding the laws of subordination and structures of modification can help the learner to grasp the

meanings of complex sentences produced by his English speaking friends.

Among native speakers of the same language, communication lapses and misinterpretations occur frequently. The tone of voice of the speaker often gives additional input to the message. The NNS has an enormous challenge to overcome all of the obstacles such as interference from his native language in intonation, stress, combinations of vowels and consonants, concepts, attitudes, false cognates, etc. He needs all the help he can get from the skills taught in Reading class, Pronunciation class, and Grammar class in order to put it all together to produce comprehension of spoken the language. Each skill contributes toward the goal of successful interaction between and among cultures.

References:

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