Refereed Articles

Issues of Culture in the Adult English as a Second Language Classroom

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Abstract

Developing an awareness of the role that culture plays in the context of the adult English as a second language (ESL) classroom is essential for a successful class-room-based language learning agenda. It not only contributes to the adult learner's success in the context of the ESL classroom, but it also contributes to the realization of the learner's overall goal of learning to use appropriately the English language in any number of contexts. This article looks at two culturally-related phenomena that affect the second language learning classroom: communicative competence and participant structure rules.

Introduction

Language learning does not take place in a linguistic vacuum. The cultural associations that are part of the language, as well as the sociocultural backgrounds of the participants in the teaching and learning environment, ultimately affect how and how well the language is learned. Since one part of second language learning, then, is rooted in the culturally-influenced use of language and the sociolinguistic rules that underlie this use, Albertini (1993) suggests that "an examination of assumptions is especially important for teachers of students from nondominant cultures—that is students from non-Eurocentric, non-English . . . backgrounds—because their school achievement [in their new Eurocentric, English speaking environment] typically falls below that of dominant culture students" (p. 60). In fact, when speaking about nondominant culture students, Podeschi (1990) asserts that "besides language barriers, the students found it difficult to adjust to the Americanized teaching methods that ignored their cultural learning patterns" (p. 59).

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Oftentimes, however, dominant culture teachers of nondominant culture students are unaware of the academic and cultural implications of infusing their teaching environments with monocultural methods, participation expectations, and evaluations. As a result, according to Crago (1992), for most second language learners "the acquisition of a second language implies the acquisition of a second culture. . . . School becomes a form of secondary socialization where the pragmatics of the first language interfere with the learning of the second language" (p. 488). Furthermore, as Brown (1994) points out, "adults, [who are generally] more cognitively secure, appear to operate [more readily than children] from the solid foundation of the first language and thus manifest more interference [from the first language]" (p. 66). Thus, adult learners from nondominant cultures are disadvantaged in the classroom because their reliance on the first language and its underlying sociolinguistic and participation rules are different from those on which dominant culture teachers instruct and ultimately evaluate their learners. Crago (1992) asserts that this is due to the instructor's reliance on his/her own culturally-influenced uses of language and teaching styles without deference to the language uses and styles of their learners. She adds:

Teaching strategies for second language acquisition . . . need to be grounded in the knowledge of what comprises cultural membership. . . . Patterns of communicative interaction are central to cultural identity. Hence language teaching and learning are intertwined in a fundamental manner with culturally integral ways of communicating. (p. 500)

Poole (1992) believes that more attention must be paid to the affect of culture not only on the second language itself but also on the classroom environment in which the second language is taught and learned. She maintains that the assumptions of one's culture affect both the learning of the second language by students as well as the teaching of the second language, and she cautions that "these cultural aspects of setting and interaction do not represent peripheral details but are the primary vehicles through which message content is conveyed" (p. 610). Brown (1994) adds:

Culture is a deeply ingrained part of the very fiber of our being, but language—the means for communication among members of a cul-

> ture—is the most visible and available expression of that culture. And so a person's world view, self-identity, and systems of thinking, acting, feeling, and communicating can be disrupted by a change from one culture to another. (p. 170)

Scollon and Scollon caution, therefore, that "if we suggest change we have to be very aware that we are not only suggesting change in discourse patterns or linguistic structures. We are suggesting change in a person's identity" (as cited in Poole, 1992, p. 611). Thus, according to Poole (1992), in second language classrooms where only dominant culture styles of teaching, learning, and participating are accepted, second language learners from nondominant cultures will not only have a greater struggle to acquire competence in communicating in the new language but will also receive implicit messages that their cultures are somehow inferior to the culture which is dominant in the classroom.

Consequently, instructors must recognize that the interactions between them and the adult learners in their classrooms do not take place in a linguistic vacuum in which linguistic structures and contexts are simply conveyed in an atmosphere of neutrality. Instructors must endeavor to make the interaction between culture and learning in their classrooms explicit so that adult second language learners can participate fully in the learning of the second language in the classroom context. Paulston (1990) cautions the adult instructor, however:

> The important thing to remember is not to imply any inherent moral superiority of one rule over another, to remember the difference between adding rules and substituting rules. In the latter case, one obviously rejects the value of the first set of rules, rejects the very culture of the student. (p. 292)

In essence, instructors of adult English as a second language (ESL) learners need to be aware of those differences that are attributable to differences in their learners' sociocultural backgrounds and to use these differences as a way to enhance the language learning of the adult learners in their ESL classroom. ESL instructors must begin to recognize and teach the sociolinguistic conventions of the English language as well as the contextual participation rules of the ESL classroom to help insure their learners' success in acquiring the linguistic and communicative skills in the classroom that are necessary for success in the society at large.

Communicative Competence

Language is a social tool that can be used both appropriately and inappropriately depending upon the context of the conversation regardless of the correctness of the linguistic structure rules one employs. Chaika (1989) maintains that the language style one chooses for a particular interaction is "so integral a part of social functioning that interaction cannot go ahead if one party to it does not speak with the right style for the occasion" (p. 46). Swain and Lapkin (1990) add that "specific utterances are appropriate given the topic, the status of the participants, the purpose of the interaction, and other aspects of the sociolinguistic context" (pp. 40-41). Choosing the right style of language for a particular context, therefore, in conjunction with the correct linguistic structures, enables one to meet the requirements of being both proficient in a language and competent in using the language socially (Chaika, 1989). One who has a reasonable grasp of a language's linguistic structure and who can use these structures in contextually appropriate ways is said to possess communicative competence. As Gumperz and Hymes (1972) explain:

> Whereas linguistic competence covers the speaker's ability to produce grammatically correct sentences, communicative competence describes . . . [his/her] ability to select . . . forms which appropriately reflect the social norms governing behavior in specific encounters. (p. 205)

From Gumperz and Hymes's definition, one can infer the importance of register, style, situation, and so forth, in the acquisition of communicative competence.

The sociocultural backgrounds of both speaker and listener are also crucial ingredients for understanding communicative competence. As Newark and Asante suggest, "Culture provides the individual with a frame of reference in which to function [sic] and has a strong role in the formation of values, attitudes, and communication styles" (as cited in Borden, 1991) and is, therefore, essential to understanding how one achieves communicative competence in a second language. Indeed, "the acquisition of linguistic knowledge and sociocultural knowledge are integral to one another" (Poole, 1992, p. 594), and without understanding the role of culture in language learning, no study of language learning is complete.

Communicative competence is a learned part of one's language repertoire; one would not know to speak differently to an employer in com-

parison to the way one would speak to a best friend unless he/she has first learned what the sociolinguistic conventions are for each encounter. More than the traditionally-taught linguistic skills of listening, speaking, reading, writing, and pronunciation, then, communicative competence requires learners to use those linguistic skills in contextually appropriate ways. "Effective communication," submits Gumperz (1971), "requires that speakers and audiences agree both on the meaning of words, [sic] and on the social import or values attached to choice of expression" (p. 285). As Wolfson (1989) points out, however, "People coming from different sociocultural backgrounds tend to have very different value systems, and these are manifested in speech as well as in other sorts of social behavior" (p. 14). Moreover, as Nelson (1995) asserts, since the sociolinguistic rules are "a result of our cultural programming" (p. 15), the "rules of speaking and, more generally, norms of interaction are . . . both culture-specific and largely unconscious" (Wolfson, 1989, p. 35). O'Brien (1985) adds that while the sociolinguistic conventions for appropriate communicative interaction "are very likely to be unconscious, [they are] . . . strongly influential on the success of the encounter" (p. 70). They are, suggests Nelson (1995), "a result of our cultural programming" (p. 15). Thus, the culture in which the language operates dictates which types of linguistic styles are appropriate for which context (O'Brien, 1985).

People who manifest differences in their sociocultural backgrounds, therefore, are often in danger of intercultural miscommunication in their communicative encounters (Chaika, 1989) since, as Wolfson (1989) maintains, "sociolinguistic variability provides fertile ground for miscommunication" (p. 140). Brown (1994) illustrates the potential for intercultural miscommunication by explaining:

> A second language learner not familiar with the contextual discourse constraints of English might utter . . . a sentence . . . with perfect pronunciation and perfect grammar, but fail to achieve the communicative purpose of, say, apologizing to a dinner host or hostess, and instead appear to be impolitely critical or complaining. (p. 235)

Unsuccessful communicative encounters, moreover, are more keenly felt by members of linguistic and social minority groups. Gumperz (1990) explains that "minority group members unaware of the relevant differences regularly find themselves misunderstood; they see their intentions misread, find it difficult to predict the reactions of others, and feel an increasing sense of powerlessness to manage their own lives" (p. 225).

Second language learners are, therefore, in a position in which communicative misunderstandings are abundant precisely because neither they nor the other-culture communicative participants are fully aware of their underlying assumptions as well as the particular sociolinguistic conventions that guide their interactions. Thus, in cross-cultural interactions, "one of the most serious difficulties for speakers . . . is that they are not only prone to misinterpret the intentions of those from other backgrounds with whom they interact, but . . . their own behavior is also open to serious misinterpretation" (Wolfson, 1989, p. 25). Second language learners, however, will be judged as the communicatively incompetent ones in the communicative exchange since "nonnative speakers who do not know the codes or rituals of a group, or who use them inappropriately, will be judged, consciously or unconsciously, as inefficient in the communicative task" (O'Brien, 1985, p. 69). Communicative competence, therefore, implies that one not only understands and can competently use the linguistic structures of the language but also understands and can competently perform in the culture (Crago, 1992; Poole, 1992).

Brown (1994) maintains that the teaching of the sociolinguistic rules must become part of the learning agenda that guides the teaching and learning of the second language classroom. He emphasizes, moreover, that "teaching is guiding and facilitating learning, enabling the learner to learn, setting the conditions for learning" (p. 7). One of the conditions for equitable and efficient second language learning is recognizing and understanding the influence of culture on the teaching-learning environment. Communicative competence requires, therefore, that the learner be competent in using the underlying sociolinguistic rules of the second language. This requires that the instructor recognize and make explicit the sociolinguistic rules. Brown (1994) adds, however:

> Communicative competence is such an intricate web of psychological, sociocultural, physical, and linguistic features that it is easy to get entangled in but one part of that web. And it is probably impossible in the near future to describe the whole of human discourse in such a way that language teachers are provided with ready solutions to the teaching of a . . . language. (p. 246)

The teaching of communicative competence, therefore, takes deep reflection on the instructor's part, a strong commitment to a more communicative teaching formula, and the ability to make adjustments on an ongoing basis within the communicative framework.

The Rules for Successful Participation in the Classroom

The communication process and its structure are characterized by a set of intricately designed—albeit implicit—rules for interaction that are devised by the participants who are engaged in the interaction. These rules are known as participant structures. Participant structures are the rules of verbal interaction in any social situation. They are, in fact, the situation-specific rules for choosing not only which language style or discourse system to use but also which nonverbal behaviors to use since "talk is more than words: [sic] it is a social activity that includes our gestures, facial expressions, and movements in social space" (Lemke, 1989, p. 5). The rules for participation are influenced by a multitude of factors including one's culture, gender, age, learning style, and apprenticeship of observation. As Walter (1994) points out:

> Distinctive cultural and personal traditions and experiences shape the way in which minority [culture] adults learn, communicate, and interact with the educational system, in much the same ways as they do for majority [culture] adults. However, programs of adult education have often failed to accommodate any but the experiences and culture of the majority [culture] adults. (p. 35)

Because schools or educational programs, as Lemke (1989) points out, are "social institutions in which people affect each other's lives" (p. 1), participant structures are very much part of the ebb and flow of communicative interaction in the classroom. In fact, participant structures are "the routines of classroom interaction (including getting started, introducing topics, asking and answering questions, interrupting, keeping control, confirming answers, summarising, etc.)" (Lemke, 1989, p. 10). Poole (1992) adds, moreover, that a classroom's participant structures are part of the "cultural knowledge [which] is *implicitly* conveyed to novices" (p. 595). Mehan (1991) adds that "because the rules . . . are often tacit, students must infer from the ongoing flow of discourse the appropriate way to engage in classroom interaction" (p. 3). Thus, "the second language classroom . . . constitutes a powerful context of secondary socialization, particularly when it exists outside the learner's culture of origin" (Crago, 1992, p. 594).

The rules of communicative interaction in the classroom are traditionally designed by the teacher who controls when and which students will speak in the classroom. These rules are often expected by

the teacher; however, the teacher rarely explains these rules of interaction explicitly. Since "teachers and their students differ in many ways . . . , [the] differences can lead to miscommunication because every social group has subtly different styles of speaking, writing, and personal contact behaviour" (Lemke, 1989, p. 8). Thus, the implicit rules of interaction act to restrict full classroom participation to a few students whose primary socialization includes similar rules for engagement. As Mehan (1991) points out:

> Students who enter school from linguistic and ethnic minority backgrounds are presented with a special challenge. They may not have had experience at home with the special features of classroom discourse. They need to acquire and use this special code; their academic success depends on it. (p. 8)

In other words, those students who are familiar with the type of interaction outside the classroom will fair better than those who are not as familiar; thus, the differences in how students are socialized to interact outside the classroom may account for the achievement differences in the classroom. As already cited, these differences tend to break down along cultural, ethnic, age, and gender lines as well as according to cognitive processing style preferences.

Those who study interactions within the classroom contend that the formulation and insistence upon these participation rules "is probably outside the conscious recognition of teachers or students as it happens" (Lemke, 1989, p. 21). According to Walter (1994), "Distinctive cultural and personal traditions and experiences shape the way in which . . . adults learn, communicate, and interact with the educational system" (p. 35). In fact, as Brown (1994) points out, learners and instructors "bring with them the cultural mores and patterns of 'good' behavior learned in their home culture, [sic] and tend to apply those expectations to their new situation" (p. 174); participant structure rules are the manifestation of these patterns.

Oftentimes, however, these patterns come in conflict when what is expected as good behavior in one culture is not the same as what is expected in another. Thus, in an ESL classroom in which the learners and the instructor are products of a variety of cultural and personal traditions and experiences" (Walter, 1994, p. 35), there are bound to be conflicts between the learners' and the instructor's reliance on and expectation of

particular participant structure rules. Moreover, participant structure rules generally remain implicit in the classroom context since they are "outside the conscious recognition of teachers and students" (Lemke, 1989, p. 21). It is clear, therefore, that ESL instructors must work to recognize which participant structure rules they expect from the learners and to provide explicit instruction to the learners on the ways in which they are to cast their academic knowledge.

The instructor is, therefore, responsible for teaching the learners how to participate or, more specifically, how to learn. Stouch (1993) maintains that "instructors need to consciously incorporate learning how to learn in all teaching plans. . . . Each increment of learning strategy offered to students increases their ability to learn wherever they are" (p. 66). Thus, Stouch (1993) makes the important leap from understanding one's own and one's students' participant structure rules to helping one's students understand their own rules and how they relate to the participant structure rules of the classroom context.

It is essential, however, that instructors of nondominant culture learners recognize that the emphasis should be on adding classroom-based participant structure rules rather than on correcting the learners' existing ones. By correcting and/or replacing the participant structure rules with which the learners are to participate in their home environments, the adult instructor is threatening the learners' membership in their home groups (Scollon & Scollon, 1981). Crago (1992) quotes an Inuit woman who recognizes the disjuncture between how she expects her children to interact at home and how they are taught to interact in the American ESL classroom as an illustration of this phenomenon. The woman explains that "the language and the behaviour . . . those ways of talking and being with people that we Inuit don't have and don't want our children to have" are forced upon the students who wish to succeed in the second language classroom (p. 497). Garcia and Ortiz (1988), therefore, caution:

> While some behaviors do not conform to the desired or expected behaviors of the majority society, they may, nonetheless, be normal given a student's ethnic or cultural group. Such behaviors are best characterized as differences rather than handicapping conditions. Educators must learn as much as possible about diversity within cultures, and about the contemporary culture of students, so they can create learning environments and curricula which are uniquely compatible with students' characteristics. (p. 6)

In order to create compatible learning environments, instructors must become aware of the participant structure rules which they expect learners to use and on which they evaluate learners and endeavor to make them explicit to the learners.

Conclusion

In the second language classroom—as in most classrooms—there are assumptions made by teachers and administrators that are based on a limited knowledge of learners' learning differences, learning differences which are often attributable to cultural differences. These assumptions are born of the fact that few policy makers, or ABE educators, recognize that their dominant culture assumptions permeate the learning exchanges in which the majority of learners are from nondominant-culture groups. In fact, "Many of the barriers faced by . . . linguistic, cultural and racial minority peoples . . . are a result of the fact that educational policy and practice are often oriented to meet the needs of the dominant Anglo-European majority in American society" (Walter, 1994, p. 37).

The teaching of communicative competence and the recognition and teaching of participant structure rules are essential components for the successful acquisition of the second language. However, these things are part of culture and are, therefore, often different from the learner's own experiences and practices. Thus, as educators, we must endeavor not to offend learners by rejecting their own sociolinguistic rules and patterns of classroom participation; we must concentrate on an additive model of language learning rather than on one of replacing existing structures and practices. Pai (1990) asserts that "to reject or demean a person's . . . heritage [by not recognizing it, for instance,] is to do psychological and moral violence to the dignity and worth of that individual" (p. 17). Not recognizing and respecting learner differences or viewing learner differences as deficits in the second language classroom will undoubtedly inhibit the learner's progress towards the acquisition of the second language.

Becoming aware of the cultural differences that affect language learning, therefore, is essential if adult educators are to alleviate the potential barriers to acquiring the second language caused by the interaction of culture and learning in the classroom context. Adult instructors of ESL must recognize the subtle meaning differences associated with the sociolinguistic conventions that underlie the use of American English

and work to build communicative as well as linguistic competence in American English. They must also recognize their established, albeit implicit, rules for participation in the classroom and make them explicit for the learners in their classrooms. If instructors fail to recognize, accept, and respect sociocultural learning differences, "culturally . . . diverse students . . . may respond with low self-concepts and low academic achievement to a school climate they perceive as hostile" (Taylor, 1990, p. 1).

In a society—such as the American one—that is predicated upon the acquisition and display of English literacy skills, the failure to recognize sociocultural learning differences in the adult second language classroom is tantamount to refusing the nondominant second language learner access to the political, economic, and social processes of the American society by denying them access to the skills they need (Macias, 1988). It is entirely possible, therefore, for well-meaning ESL instructors in America to bring about more psychological and/or social damage to adult learners who are engaged in the study of a second language than they realize by their inability to recognize learning differences that are manifested by differences in culture. It is essential, therefore, that the instructors of adult ESL recognize the influence that the teaching and learning of the sociolinguistic rules have on the learning of the second language. They must also recognize the role that the learners' home participant structure rules have on their abilities to fully participate in the second language learning environment.

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