

Look, question and learn: a cultured view of spoken English learning

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Introduction

Cultural awareness is often perceived as an attitude acquired through experience or information learnt about other cultural groups. While attitude and information are important in learning and teaching culture there is a vital place for challenges where learners and teachers are extended to examine and question the purposes of interactions. This paper will provide a context and awareness raising questions for developing cultural sensitivity through spoken English training and classroom interaction.

Defining culture

Culture can be perceived as the big C of material culture and the smaller c of shared behaviours. The outer world of material culture includes the artifacts or products of a particular group; dress, cuisine, buildings, art and all those things that lure people to travel. The behavioural aspects are equally interesting and in many ways far more challenging. Culture in this sense can then be defined as “the way in which a group of people solves problems and reconciles dilemmas” (Trompenaars 1998:6). When applying this aspect we work closely with language in the broadest sense as evident in numerous classroom approaches which are already active (Kramsch, 1993; Tomalin B. and Stempleski S.1993; Moran, 2001). In defining culture for the purposes of this paper, I will focus on culture as defined in the behavioural aspect. The definition will be applied in terms of group and classroom culture rather than individualist aspects.

In defining culture in greater detail there is an abundance of three part models which are relevant to classrooms. Models of a trinitarian bent, all include the material aspects, behaviours and the difficult to access inner world. These include:

- Products, practices & perspectives (NLSFE)
- Products, behaviours and ideas (Tomalin et al)
- Artifacts, behaviours & knowledge (Spradley)
- Artifacts, sociofacts & mentifacts (Klopf)
- Form, distribution & meaning (Lado)
- Form, use & meaning (Larsen-Freeman)

While one acknowledges certain universals in culture as described in the work of evolutionary psychology (Brown, 1991) it is the differences in behaviours and meaning that often provide learning challenges. The differences in behaviours and ways of making meaning can create real and costly communication difficulties outside a classroom (Komrin, 1990,1995, Kameda, 1997) and opportunities for meaningful learning within educational communication.

Communication involves the creation of meaning and often this is done through socializing. In meeting and talking cultural mores are evolved (Geertz,1973). Usually the mores relate to specific situations and it is in this area where we can see culture as construction of meaning and can begin to work with cultural factors and language in action. As language learning involves

talking, listening exchanging and functioning in specific frameworks there will clearly be cultural practices and work to engage learners and facilitators in linking behaviours, meaning and ones own values.

Working with cultural factors

Cultural factors are evident in classroom exchanges. As soon as a teacher walks into the learning environment she brings her experiences and values to the learning. Equally learners have their world views which may be vastly different from the teachers or from the mores of learning institutions (Hall and Yuliasri, 1995). It is worthwhile to ask how do we deal these givens. Working with some principles is useful:

- Intercultural awareness can be developed by understanding shared values

A useful basic premise to notice when looking at all the differences is the concept of shared universals, as researched in evolutionary psychology (Brown, 1991). However the new age type assertion that ` we are all one and same' is clearly a fallacy as the growth of micro-nationalism and ethnic conflict shows.

- Developing sensitivity does not come naturally

As we all come from groups with differing material Culture and behavioural culture we often stay in our zones of safety and the familiar. On an anecdotal level, the numerous travelers' ghettos in major tourist areas attest to the lure of the safe and the known. The research in relocation of expatriates makes it clear that sensitivity to others of a differing cultural group is not a natural process (Hofstede, 1997). Further evidence of this can be seen in the prolific sales of does and don't' type guides to differing cultures (Axtell, 1988, 1993 and the 50 volume Cultural Shock series published by Times in Singapore (1994 - 1998).

- Behaviours will manifest values that may come from an inner voice which may differ in different cultural groups.

On both non- verbal and verbal levels behaviours differ from cultural group to group. The inner reasoning, the `mentifacts' or perspectives are often sourced in very different value structures (Klopff,1998; Hofstede, 1991). Examining the reasoning behind differing behaviors can be a rich source of learning. However at less abstract levels, the process of learning the functions and purposes of new language items can be a valued format for developing awareness and skills in cross cultural communication.

- Conflicts and contrasts will provide learning

As soon as one learns another language we will encounter differences and challenges. These drive learning, if the environment is one where language learning is seen as more than gathering information. The contrasts and reasons behind purposes, appropriacy and different language functions are the area to which we next turn.

Applying Cultural awareness to classroom learning

A useful starting point to applying cultural awareness to language learning is to recognize that we carry our own cultural values to any learning. Our encounters will be based on our `shared

set of practices associated with a shared set of products, based upon a shared set of perspectives on the world and set within specific social contexts ' (Moran,2001:24) . When we learn new language we will find language items which function differently in social contexts. The contexts and contrasts between our own and others perspectives can be challenging and lead to questioning which fosters learning. We will look at concepts and classroom questions for comparison of cultural differences. The focus for these questions is on spoken English language learning.

Interacting or transacting

One growing area for international English language learning and mass media communication is spoken language. Much of this starts with greetings, a function in which one needs to ask if greetings or exchanges are social (interaction) or information-seeking (transaction.) For example the question which Indonesian speakers of English use 'Where are you going?' is actually social or interactional language and the questioner does not care about your destination. This area of greeting, introducing and meeting includes the all important first impressions, when there are varied cultural approaches to questioning. It is worthwhile to explicitly highlight which language items are social and which are information gathering. The area of private question areas is a rich lode for explicit teaching, as such things as a persons income, marital status and price they may have paid for a watch have varied levels of acceptability.

Questions:

What are the common greetings we use in our own language?

What are the topics which we then ask about in our own language?

What greetings are common for English language speakers that we meet?

What questions are common for English language speakers to ask about?

How is the first part of a meeting concluded?

Registering politeness

Linked to the concept of language purposes is the role of differing registers, particularly in spoken exchanges where there may be many choices of responses. Often we fail to provide a range of language choices with which to perform differing functions, yet in the service industry where language accuracy and customer satisfaction are critical it is useful to recognize differing levels of politeness in exchanges (Hall and Blappert, 2002). The author has collected numerous examples of English language use in the service industry where the grammar was correct but the level of informality is inappropriate. As training often focuses on survival transaction of information the added value of interaction and social talk may be missed. Often the appropriacy of direct transactional response creates communication difficulties as many cultural groups are status oriented (Hofstede, 1980, 1997).

Given that most are aware of the role of status and politeness in effective communication there are many ways in which role plays and simulations can be employed. It is useful to compare differing ways of greeting, questioning and offering suggestions according to perceptions of the person being met. This applies not only to second language learners but also to those moving into new cultures which use English in their own local way. A valuable tool in airport staff training, which the author used for 1000 trainees in Singapore, was guided role plays in set situations involving differing levels of power. Language use strategies will develop when the setting is clear, a conflict evident and the cultural group of one speaker specified.

Questions:

How can we say this in a more polite way while still getting the information we want?
If the listener does not understand the polite way of asking, how can we be more direct?
What have I learnt from this discussion?
What did I learn about the others use of names?
How many ways can I think of to get the same message across?
Can I use re-statement to reinforce what need to say?

Timing and listening

Integral to cultural differences are varied ideas of the importance of time and timing. Chronemics(Hall, 1977) or varied cultural approaches to time go beyond everyday operations where German timetables clash with flexible South Pacific approaches. Timing and the importance of speed also impact on spoken language learning. It is useful to consider how quickly a point has to be made, how long one listens before seeking clarification and the role of interruptions. The latter is especially significant in that a learner may come of a language background such as Cantonese where overlapping discourse is a norm, outside the realm of Anglo- Saxon approaches. There is clearly a role for developing listening as a skill and asking learners to examine their own approaches to time and timeframes for arriving at the communicative outcome.

Questions

How much time do I give someone to say what they want?
When do I want to interrupt?
What phrases are appropriate for effective interruption?
How do I react when I am interrupted?
How do I recover the topic to continue what I wish to say?

Looking and learning

Language classes often underplay the role of non-verbal communication, given that time is often limited and the area of non-verbal communication is not seen as critical to language learning. Yet numerous studies and texts for cross - cultural training explicitly include this area (Bryam,1997, 1982; Geertz 1973;). The `extra- linguistic factors are recognized as significant in modern approaches to foreign language learning (Fantini, 1997) and popular texts sales attest to widespread interest in the role of non-verbals (Axtell,1988). In considering the context of spoken English one may select three areas in which there are many recorded differences which impact on the effectiveness of spoken English. Under each of these headings are classroom – based questions.

1 Kinesics:

How expressive are my/their facial signals?
What gestures am I used to/react to?
How do I greet others non-verbally?

2 Oculesics:

What eye contact do I use?
How do I vary my eye contact depending on whom I am talking to?
What eye contact do I feel uncomfortable with?

When I can use direct eye contact to reinforce a communication point?

3 Proxemics

What space am I used to when I am talking to others?

How do I react to others differing ways of using space?

4 Haptics

What touching is involved when greeting others?

Conclusion

While recognising the universals that all peoples share common concerns, one can not deny the diverse ways of expressing human needs, concerns and desires. Many of these differences are heard and seen in the verbals and non-verbals of spoken English language communication. When working with the language one may interweave questions and explicit teaching about differences into classroom learning. It is equally importance to ask learners to reflect on their own reactions. The inner voice is often very active in such times of learning, when that little voice inside starts commenting and questioning. To pause, think quickly and remember the inner comment can provide a stepping stone beyond stereotyping to greater awareness of cultural difference. It is in questioning and accepting difference that one builds understanding. Through understanding the complexity of cross cultural communication, there is hope beyond the ignorance which plagues much international decision making.

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Biodata

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