A PSYCHOLINGUISTIC APPROACH TO COMMUNICATION IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

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Abstract

This paper is based on the psycholinguistic research on communication and discusses the role played by communication in the process of English language learning and teaching.

For the last ten years, we have been studying the role of communication particularly in learning/teaching maritime, legal and business English, from a psycholinguistic perspective. Using questionnaires and experiments accompanied by observations and discussions (for a correct interpretation of the data) we have been able to draw some general conclusions which can be applied to learning/teaching English as a foreign language, even in situations different from the ones in which we carried out our study.

Keywords

Psycholinguistic approach, communication, English language teaching

1. Introduction

Communication has been analyzed for centuries. The process of communication has been a constant subject of study and many sciences and disciplines have been attempting to improve it. Different definitions have been provided by specialists from very different areas of study.

Each definition, being more or less theoretical, focuses on certain aspects, elements and factors and it is accompanied by models (Shannon and Weaver, 1949; Lasswell, 1948; Newcomb, 1953; Gerbner, 1956; Jakobson, 1960). Therefore, communication is the ‘social interaction through messages’, conversations, negotiations (Fiske 1990: 2), or ‘the martial art of communication: graceful, enjoyable and very effective’ (O’Connor, Seymour 1990: 41), etc. However, when talking about communication, we should keep in mind the process of sending and receiving information through the form of messages, considering both the verbal and nonverbal components of communication.

2. Romanian psycholinguistics and communication

One of the most important psycholinguistic works in the world on the role of communication during working processes and the influence of work on communication was written by Tatiana Slama-Cazacu (1964). It was for the first time in the Romanian linguistics and psycholinguistics that communication was defined as a psychic process involving the following elements: the language or code used, the process of sending and receiving messages in normal physiological and
psychological conditions, the role of context, the role of language (to train, plan and coordinate work, to stimulate and synchronize movements), the influence of work on the selection of a way of communication and a channel of message distribution, the articulated and non-articulated speech, the acoustical and visual signs used to convey useful, and sometimes vital information, etc.

Romanian psycholinguistics, especially through its founder, professor Tatiana Slama-Cazacu, has been, from the very beginning, an interdisciplinary study, very careful about the complex phenomenon of human communication: the two-sided relationship between partners, the linguistic and nonlinguistic code, the social circumstances, the organization of the sign system, of the message and the context in which messages are conveyed, the human beings as partners, etc. According to T. Slama-Cazacu, language must be analyzed especially in dialogues taking place in social-historic contexts, which definitely influence communication throughout. By studying communication as a real process, with changes in messages as a result of the communication situation, psycholinguistics implies a complex study of messages not only as results of a linguistic code but also as a result of mimics, gestures, other nonverbal elements of communication, and different situations which accompany speech and dialogue. The dynamic-contextual methodology proposed by T. Slama-Cazacu and used by some other Romanian linguists and psycholinguists relies on the collection of data in their dynamics, process, development, i.e. during communication in the context in which they occur.

Romanian psycholinguistics has also studied and defined the notions of context, “contextual levels”, the influence of the social context, the “limits” of this influence (see T. Slama-Cazacu, 1978, 1987). The research on communication must always take into consideration the “contextual levels”, the “explicit context” (linguistic or verbal and extra-linguistic) and the “implicit context” (i.e. the linguistic system of the emitter, known by the receiver and the situational context, the socio-historic context. The social context implies the relationship between emitter and receiver, the idiosyncratic linguistic system, the influence of the message on the psycho-social components of the partners, the social community, the socio-historic moment and the society in general.

Romanian psycholinguists have also focused their attention on the visual, acoustic and kinesthetic means of communication that are commonly used along with the verbal message. Their role is to complete or substitute the verbal elements of communication. In 1976, T. Slama-Cazacu introduced the term “mixed syntax”, i.e. the inclusion of nonverbal elements among verbal elements in the same syntactic unit. Verbal elements interweave with kinesthetic, facial expressions which are purposefully used with gestures and which form the complex, integral act of communication. Gestures, mimics, gaze, and even the objects used as communication markers, the actions with objects, posture, and distance are very useful during working activities. When there is noise, gestures may become the only means of communication. Noise, darkness, reduced visibility influence the choice of signal systems and communication network. Under certain circumstances, especially vital ones, “necessary” redundant elements are being used. Some elements are repeated, communication is complete or completed, gestures and intonation become extremely useful.

In short, psycholinguistics studies “the changes in message during the concrete act of communication due to the relationships established between emitter and receiver, along with their psychological mobility, mutual influences, the impact of the general context in which they are placed, etc. (T. Slama-Cazacu, 1968, pp. 42-43). A dialogue is a form of communication signaled by the real and active presence of at least two
partners who have the role of the emitter and the receiver, and who, through their speech, make the amount of information to progress. A dialogue also involves certain rules: adaptation to the partner and the known common context, the intention to communicate, listening to the receiver’s reply, inhibition of the own reply, controlling emotions, promptness of reply, short-term memory, etc. (1982, p. 218).

3. Romanian psycholinguistics and English language teaching

Romanian psycholinguistics has taken a particular interest in studying the process of learning and teaching foreign languages, especially nowadays, when the role of the teacher (in the communicative method) is different from the traditional role of the teacher in many ways.

The studies that we have been carrying out show the “never ending role” of the teacher. He/She must take into account a lot of factors which may have an impact on teaching/learning English. From the whole range of sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic variables which influence the process of teaching/learning a foreign language, maybe age is an extremely important factor. It is closely related to motivation, abilities and the methods of teaching/learning a foreign language.

The teacher provides stimulus and opportunities for the student to experience the language, but the learning occurs inside of the student. The teacher does not have direct control over this. Consequently, the more the student feels that the material presented is of relevance to him/her, the more he/she will internalize and the faster he/she will do so. The teacher plans and organizes the activities and groups them into lessons (see C.M. Stănișoară, 2003). The teacher must coordinate classroom activities so that they form a smooth progression leading towards greater (communicative) abilities.

In many activities, the teacher will perform the regular role of language instructor. He/She will present new language, exercise direct control over the learner’s performance, evaluate and correct it, etc. While an activity is in progress, the teacher may be a consultant or an advisor. He/She may move around the class to check for the strengths and weaknesses of the students. The teacher can also be a participant in an activity, introducing challenges.

As a rule, the teacher sets up the activity and explains the procedure. The students are then free to take the activity in almost any direction they wish providing they stay within the given conditions. It may be necessary to move into one method or another slowly because the students are probably not used to all types of activities. The teacher must make sure that the students know what they are supposed to do in an activity. It would probably be wise to begin with activities that make relatively light demands on the students linguistically and from there move step by step to more complicated/demanding work. This will help build the students’ self-confidence. With a lot of encouragement and support from the teacher, creativity usually increases dramatically in the classroom. The teacher can hinder the development of creativity by intervening too much or at the wrong time. The mother tongue should not be used in the classroom unless absolutely necessary.

The teacher should be a psychological support for shy or slow students. Extra assistance and easier roles can be given to these students in the initial stages so that they have more time to build their self-confidence.

The teacher must be understanding, patient, tolerant, gently critical, very encouraging and helpful. Teachers must create a classroom atmosphere where the students feel comfortable experimenting with the language. Students should not feel intimidated or afraid to make a mistake.

The classroom atmosphere must give the students a feeling of security and value as individuals and must break down their
inhibitions, tensions and negative concept regarding their abilities.

In the beginning stages of language learning, students must be given a chance to play with the language. As a result of ‘fun’ activities, they gain confidence in their abilities and enjoy talking to each other.

Teachers should strive to make input comprehensible through the use of visuals and educational technology. The use of contextual visuals, for example, improves listening comprehension. Visuals serve as advance organizers, enhance students’ ability to formulate correct hypotheses and increase students’ interest. In the early stages of language learning, teachers should not ask students to produce language before they have absorbed enough language to make production possible. Teachers’ expectations, as expressed in the materials they choose for their students, should be consistent with the students’ capabilities at any particular point in the course. Language teachers should give their students practice samples that they can preview, view, review, and discuss. They should teach students to read/listen for ideas rather than language and to use context to make rational inferences. In other words, teachers should encourage students to guess. Students should have the opportunity to activate relevant schema and make predictions.

Teachers should seek continually to reduce the principal fears that students have: not being able to understand every word and not being able to correctly answer in class. They should make clear to the students that these fears are based on false premises, that with practice these fears will dissipate. Teachers seem to have certain characteristics which are connected to the social milieu in which learning is carrying on.

a) They are committed to the principle that all normal people can learn. He/She modifies curriculum content as he/she ascertains the strengths and weaknesses of learners, their needs and aspirations.

b) The teacher knows that for maximum learning, the student must feel respected, valuable (member of the group) and secure.

c) The teacher keeps the motivation of the students at a high level by using their interests, their lives and their communities as a starting point for the introduction of all material; by adapting his procedures; by using a variety of instructional materials.

d) The teacher provides for individual differences in class and in out-of-class tasks. He/She knows that individuals learn at different rates and in different ways.

e) The teacher organizes each learning experience carefully. He/She selects, grades, presents and practices language items for emphasis in a systematic, logical manner which will facilitate the students’ restructuring and subsequent acquisition of them.

f) The teacher provides, in each lesson, the practice necessary to lead to habit formation and to real-world use of the language.

g) The teacher recognizes that the correction of student errors is a matter requiring sensitivity and common sense.

h) The teacher prepares activities which allow the students to practice in pairs and groups.

i) The teacher supplements the basic text with dialogues, exercises, reading selections for variety or to reinforce items presented. He/She plans reading lessons which will foster discussion and thought, teaches the students to use contextual clues and cognates where possible and to use the dictionaries effectively.

j) The teacher uses guided writing activities which will lead gradually to more creative, free compositions. He/She stimulates students to think of ideas, to put them in a logical sequence and to find the most appropriate language to express them.

k) The teacher learns to select and use those audio-visual aids which will enable the student to learn a language or cultural point more efficiently. The teacher provides the students with cross-cultural insights and
makes sure that the students retain their sense of individual dignity and ethnic pride while learning to appreciate aspects of English language and culture.

  l) The teacher uses the native language of the students as little as possible.

  m) The teacher prepares frequent tests which will help gauge the achievement and proficiency of the students, diagnose individual learning problems, and judge the effectiveness of his/her own teaching techniques (see Widdowson, 1990).

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, it is the teacher who utilizes the strengths of the students while giving them the feeling that they are responsible human beings by having them help in classroom tasks, in preparation of materials and in conducting of certain activities in class.

On the other hand, it is obvious that the acquisition of communicative ability by the learners is a gradual process. It depends not only on educational organization and the nature of the foreign language learning materials, the teacher’s professional training and mastership, but on various other factors as well, including the learner’s age, nationality, motivation, etc. Communicative competence includes not only the mastery of grammar and vocabulary, but also the rules of speaking, for example what topics are appropriate to particular speech events, which forms of address are to be used to whom and in which situations. Learning to speak fluently does not always imply an uninterrupted flow of speech. The good speaker knows how to hesitate, how to interrupt, how to complete expressions or leave them unfinished, what to say in a particular context.

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