

Successful Communication and Communicative Competence in Language Teaching / Learning

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Abstract: This article discusses the importance of successful communication between people in the use of language, especially those learning a given foreign language. As a language teaching professional, I believe that a good usage of the language is what leads to successful communication. By “good usage”, here we mean some degree of communicative competence in the practice of a foreign language, with some coherence in order to be understood by your interlocutor, i.e. your hearer or reader.

Foreign language learners, who practice the language through different interactions, as encouraged by good models from teachers / facilitators, are the ones that are likely to achieve successful communication, which implies communicative competence through communicative approach in the learning process. Good interaction between the two parties in communication, i.e. the speaker and the hearer, the writer and the reader, or between those using sign language, implies successful communication as long as the message passes from the source to the receiver, despite some language errors that may occur therein.

Keywords: Language, communication, communicative competence, communicative approach, interaction, teacher, learners.

Résumé: Cet article traite de l'importance d'une communication réussie entre les personnes dans l'utilisation de la langue, en particulier celles qui apprennent une langue étrangère donnée. En tant que professionnel de l'enseignement des langues, je crois qu'une bonne utilisation de la langue est ce qui conduit à une communication réussie. Par « bon usage », nous entendons ici un certain degré de compétence communicative dans la pratique d'une langue étrangère, avec une certaine cohérence pour être compris par votre interlocuteur, c'est-à-dire votre auditeur ou votre lecteur.

Les apprenants de langues étrangères qui pratiquent la langue à travers différentes interactions, encouragés par les bons modèles des enseignants / facilitateurs, sont ceux qui sont susceptibles de réussir la communication, ce qui implique une compétence communicative par une approche communicative dans le processus d'apprentissage. Une bonne interaction entre les deux parties dans la communication, c'est-à-dire l'orateur et l'auditeur, l'auteur et le lecteur, ou entre ceux qui utilisent la langue des signes, implique une communication réussie tant que le message passe de la source au destinataire, malgré certaines erreurs linguistiques qui peuvent s'y produire.

Mots-clés: Langue, communication, compétence communicative, approche communicative, interaction, enseignant, apprenants.

1. Introduction

Communicative competence and communicative approach are two paramount elements which are connected to successful language teaching/learning process. These are also connected to educational linguistics on the issue of the ultimate attempt of language teaching which must enable learners to communicate successfully in the target language they are learning, since “*Speaking without communicating is a tale told by an idiot.*” (Savignon, 1973).

In order to achieve this, it is not sufficient to have a wide-ranging understanding of language forms and functions; what is additionally needed is exchange of meanings in actual interaction.

2. Sociolinguistics and language variation

Sociolinguistics covers a wide range of studies of how language is used in its social context, but all the studies have one thing in common: they deal with language variation. They emphasize how malleable language is and how its form and function change across different cultures and across different social situations within one culture.

Various social factors determine the individual speaker's use of language. All speakers, in this context, adapt their style of speaking to suit the social situation in which they find themselves. Such a style-shifting demands constant judgements, yet speakers are not normally conscious of making such judgements until they find themselves in a problematic situation for which they do not know the conventions, or for which the criteria for speaking in a certain way clash.

On the other hand, it is intuitively clear that a teacher, for example, does not speak in the same way to his wife, his mother-in-law, his colleagues in the staffroom, his pupils, his headmaster, etc. His way of talking to them will change according to the context, social considerations (formal or informal), and relationships.

People therefore adapt their speech according to the person they are talking to and the point behind the talk. These are social rather than linguistic constraints.

3. Interactionist Theory

Stubb (1983), quoted by Kambale, M. B. (1996), gives the following ideas about the importance of language interaction (interactionist theory) toward the emphasis of successful communication:

In parallel with communicative approach, the interactionist theory also puts emphasis on the effect of social environment in which linguistic competence can be turned out to be communicative competence through interaction and by the help of non-verbal components; much more meaningful language learning can be achieved, as proposed by educational linguists. It is worth noting that "classroom interaction" is the core of educational linguistics research...it is obvious that communicative language teaching, silent way, suggestopedia, TPR and other methods such as task-based and competency-based language teaching can also be linked to educational linguistics.

4. Language functions

One way of analyzing such variations in language behaviour is to isolate various factors in the social situations which influence or interact with the kind of language used, and to discuss associated functions which language fills in different situations. Language does not play a constant role across different social situations, yet many people still assume that language mainly has two general functions as it refers to the external world and interactive clear messages (a referential-cognitive function), and of expressing feelings (an emotive function).

This distinction may hold as an initial classification, but it is quite inadequate as a detailed analysis. It is not something ordinary in sociolinguistics to say that language can have many functions. Language may have as its primary function the task of getting a message across and of persuading the addressee to a certain point of view. However, greetings for example may have the primary function of establishing or maintaining social relationships and solidarity: very little new propositional information may be communicated. Other functions of language simply serve to fill embarrassing silence.

In the same way, short statements in lengthier speeches may also not have the same key functions. It is significant to understand that the function of a statement may be relatively different than its traditional grammatical description. For instance, a teacher may say: *John, come down to the front*. This is a clear imperative, but he may also say: *John, I don't think it is a good idea for you to sit at the back of the class*.

Although this does not have imperative syntax, it the clear function of getting the student to move: surface syntactic forms must be distinguished from speech act functions, such as request or order. The type of functional approach to language which is proposed here derives largely from Hymes' work on the ethnography of communication. Hymes (1962), following Jacobson (1960), paraphrased by Kambale (1996), propose the following seven broad types of function which language in use serves:

- (1) Expressive/emotive
- (2) Directive/persuasive
- (3) Poetic
- (4) Contact (physical or psychological)
- (5) Metalinguistic (focusing on meaning)
- (6) Referential
- (7) Contextual/situational.

According to the same above mentioned linguists, in a speech situation, appropriate language may depend on different combinations of:

- (a) Sender
- (b) Receiver
- (c) Message form
- (d) Channel (e.g. speech versus writing)
- (e) Code (e.g. dialect, language or jargon)
- (f) Topic
- (g) Setting or situation.

Some of Hymes' ideas on the ethnography of communication are used in classroom contexts. The speech functions that Hymes calls metalinguistic, contact and poetic are predominantly pertinent to an instructor's communicative anxiety in the classroom.

Hymes shows that among the several functions that language may have through various contexts; it may do the work of concentrating on language itself, on its forms, or on some aspects of the communicational situation. According to Hymes' analysis, language with a metalinguistic function focuses on the underlying look. So, an utterer may concentrate on the meaning of the language used by saying for instance the following statement: *Go and look it up in the dictionary!* Language with a contact function focuses on the channels of communication, as when we say: Can you hear me? And language with a poetic function focuses on the message form.

5. Semantics and pragmatics

Semantics and pragmatics are branches of linguistics concerned with meaning. These subfields have traditionally been divided according to aspects of meaning thought to arise from the grammar versus linguistic and social context. Semantics in this conception is concerned with grammatical and lexical meanings and pragmatics concerned with meaning in context.

Lyons (1977) suggests the meaning of "meaning" as:

That which something signifies and the value or significance of what is signified. But he acknowledged the weakness of his definition and said a little later: but the fact remains that the meaning of words and sentences is learnt and maintained by the use to which language is put in communicative situations. There is therefore meaning in the abstract and meaning in use; the former being only a subset or part of the latter.

The study of meaning in use; known as **pragmatics**, and the study of meaning in abstraction; known as **semantics**, are two of the branches of Semiotics or the study of signs.

By definition, semantics is the study of meaning in its entirety. For this reason, one may find it hard to establish a clear-cut boundary between semantics and pragmatics as these two disciplines are complementary (they work hand in hand) in the modern analysis of language meaning. However, for the sake of clarity, some details about each discipline may be necessary.

As far as pragmatics is concerned, it is the study of signs to interpreters or the study of language usage. Pragmatists study meaning at concrete level; they see language as means to convey meaning in use rather than in the abstract.

Leech, G. (1983:6) states the difference between pragmatics and semantics in the following terms:

Meaning in pragmatics is defined as relative to speaker or user of the language, whereas meaning in semantics is defined purely as a property of expression in a given language in abstraction from particular situations, speakers or hearers.

In fact, it has been said that meaning is not only a matter of intention to state something, but it is also a matter of convention. Implicit in the world, convention is the idea that there is an active participation of both the speaker and the hearer in the use of language to mean; i.e. in the negotiation of meaning.

Since pragmatics deals with language user's meaning, it is in relationship with sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, semantics (in its narrow sense) and other mechanisms of human communication (for example, gestures, facial expressions, sign language, etc.). As a way of illustration, let's examine the understanding of the following utterances:

Husband: I ate up all the food.

Wife: Oh, thanks.

Semantic approach: The food is completely finished. The food is all in my stomach. Pragmatically: There is a compliment being made at on the food: The food was so nice/delicious that I couldn't help putting it all in my stomach. In other words, this is a compliment to the person who cooked or bought the food.

Pragmatics accounts for mechanisms by which language users communicate beyond the mere use of linguistic devices. We now know that much of the information people convey or transmit in everyday interactions is implied rather than asserted.

Semantics deals with the relations of signs with the objects to which the signs are applicable. When we teach meaning, we teach the following three things: **the concept** (thought), **the symbol** (sign, spelling, phonetic symbols), and the **referent** (signified). Here, we also study the way in which the signs are related to one another

and deal with the changes of the meanings of words. It is worth acknowledging however that the following are some issues semanticists are concerned with: ambiguity, hyponymy, contradiction, implication.

The three elements we teach through meaning indicate that the 3 terms are different in meanings and that there is no direct relationship between them. Sometimes you may have a relationship between the *symbol* and the *referent*, but this case is not a universal one. Then between *thought* and *referent* there is a direct relationship. A word has 2 parts: form and content. The form relates to the symbolic function of the word. Example: Good /g d/ (spelling and pronunciation). The content relates to the thought or reference which is printed in mind.

Pragmatics is known as the area of language study to which any logical approach in linguistics involving contextual considerations belongs. Here, context is understood as the environment or circumstance in which language is used. Pragmatics experts and discourse analysts are the ones who carry out professional investigations on how a language is used in a certain context, the connection between the speaker and his/her statement, rather than investigating on the specific time of use and the potential connection between a statement and another. This means that in using terms like reference, assumption, implicature, implication, pragmatics experts and discourse analysts have described what speakers and hearers do in the actual sense, and not the relationship which exists between one statement and another, one word and another, etc.

6. Reference

According to Lyons (1977), reference is like the orientation or the connection that grips between utterances and things: words refer to things, between language and the world, in the absence of language users. In another statement, the same writer explains the nature of reference by declaring that it is the speaker who refers (by using some appropriate expression) to the act, he invests the expression with reference by the act of referring. Referring is not something an expression does; it is something that someone can use an expression to do.

7. Presupposition

Presupposition is the concept of practical and realistic assumption. It is defined in terms of expectations the speaker makes about what the listener/ hearer will possibly agree on without contest or resistance. Linguistics professionals consider presupposition as what is taken by the speaker to be common ground of the conversation members/ participants.

8. Implicatures

The term 'implicature' is used to explain what the speaker implies, suggests, or means, as distinct from what he/she exactly says. There are conventional implicatures; which are determined by the conventional meaning of the words used. Of much greater interest is the notion of conversational implicature; resulting from an overall belief of conversation plus a number of popular sayings, adages or proverbs that speakers will normally conform to.

The general principle is called the Cooperative Principle; as presented by Grice, H.P (1975), in the following terms:

Make your conversational contribution the way it is required, from the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged.

The following are conversational conventions or maxims that support Grice's Cooperative principle:

Maxim of Quantity: Make your support or contribution as instructive as is required (for the actual purpose of the exchange), and do not give more contribution than needed.

Maxim of Quality: Only say what you believe is true, and avoid saying what you know is false or something for which you do not have adequate evidence.

Maxim of Relation: Be pertinent; i.e. relevant.

Maxim of Manner: Be perspicuous and clear enough, avoid obscurity of expression, avoid ambiguity, be brief, (avoid unnecessary prolixity), and be orderly.

Grice makes it possible to describe what types of meaning a speaker can convey by 'flouting' one of these maxims. This 'flouting' of a maxim results in the speaker conveying, in addition to the literal meaning of this utterance, an additional meaning; which is a conversational implicature.

Let us consider the following exchange as an example:

A: I am out of fuel.

B. There is a garage round the corner.

In this exchange, the implicature, derived from the assumption that speaker B is adhering to the Cooperative Principle is that the garage is not only round the corner, but also will be open and selling petrol. We might also note that, in order to arrive at the implicature, we have to know certain facts about the world, that garages sell petrol, and that 'round the corner' is not a long distance away. We also have to interpret A's remark not only as a description of a particular state of affairs, but also as a request for help. When the study of the intended meaning goes beyond the exact meaning of the "sentence-on-the-page", a vast number of related issues have to be considered.

Implicatures are partially derived from the conventional or literal meaning of an utterance, produced in a specific context which is shared by the speaker and the hearer, and depends on an acknowledgment by the speaker and the hearer of the Cooperative Principle and its maxims. Implicatures have to be considered as integrally indefinite because since they originate from a supposition that the speaker has the intention of conveying the meaning and conforming to the Cooperative Principle. Since the hearer has only limited access to what the speaker intended, or how sincerely he was behaving in the production of a discourse fragment, any claims regarding the implicatures identified will have the status of interpretation.

9. Inference

Since the hearer has no direct access to a speaker's intended meaning in producing an utterance, he/she often has to rely on a process of inference to arrive at an interpretation of utterances or of the connection between utterances. It may be the case that we are capable of deriving a specific conclusion from specific premises via deductive inference:

- (a) if it is sunny, it is warm
- (b) It is sunny
- (c) So, it is warm.

Let us consider the following statement: *In the kitchen there was a huge dresser and when anyone went in you would see the hats and coats were all dumped on this dresser.* We are more probably operating with a rather loose form of inference; which leads us to believe that the hats and coats mentioned in the above statement belong to visitors to the house which has the dresser in its kitchen!

The main task is to determine what we can know about the meaning and the context of an utterance given only the knowledge that the utterance has occurred. Whenever we find some sentence in context, we should ask ourselves what the effect would have been if the context had been slightly different.

Conclusion

A retrospective glance through the content of this article, shows that a good usage of the language is what leads to successful communication. By "good usage", here we mean the communicative practice of a language with logical coherence of words in order to be understood by our interlocutor, i.e. the hearer, or the reader.

Foreign language learners need to be encouraged by getting good models and encouragements from teachers/ facilitators, toward language practice through interactions between the two parties in communication, that is, the speaker and the hearer, the writer and the reader, or between those using sign language. This is what we understand by "communicative approach" that leads to "communicative competence". When we achieve these two, we achieve successful communication.

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