TOWARDS COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE IN THE CLASSROOM

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Current trends in language teaching are moving beyond the goal of developing purely linguistic competence, to include that of developing the communicative competence of the learner. This revision of aims derives, principally, from the fact that the term 'competence' has undergone several changes in the last few years. The first radical innovation in the field of linguistics was the introduction of the dichotomy between 'competence' and 'performance'. Noam Chomsky set a difference between these two terms when he defined 'competence' as "the speaker-hearer's knowledge of his language" and 'performance' as "the actual use of the language in concrete situations" [1]. Furthermore, he concentrated on accounting for the speaker's linguistic competence, that is, the intrinsic knowledge of the language that provides the basis for the actual use of the language.

Therefore, this mentalistic approach stresses the fact that we cannot explain the facts of linguistic performance without making reference to the mental processes and innate capacities of the speaker. This emphasis on the creative aspect of language, which rejects the behaviouristic view that claims that language is a condition produced by habitual contact, had its effects in the classroom.

Methodologists and teachers have strived to apply this new linguistic analysis to teaching, and have developed materials that can provide the learner with the necessary information that he can process in order to internalize the rules of the language; thus, they are more concerned with the acquisition of rules than with the acquisition of habits.

However, sociolinguists added another important dimension to the concept of competence when they criticized previous linguistic models. They consider that the linguistic competence stressed by Chomsky is not enough; consequently, they think that it is not sufficient to be able to understand and produce an infinite number of sentences. So far, the emphasis has been put on providing rules for gramatically correct and well-formed sentences but it has failed to provide rules that can govern the use of language in communicative situations.

Sociolinguists consider that communication takes place in a definite sociolinguistic situation; accordingly, it is of the utmost importance to know to whom we speak, how, where, when, and for what purpose. As Halliday puts it "the interest is focussed not on what the native speaker knows of his language but rather on what he does with it" [2].

Among the functions of language that Hal-

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[1] Chomsky, N. (1965), p. 3.

[2] Halliday, in *Readings for Applied Linguistics*, p. 245.

liday distinguishes he stresses the interpersonal function which serves to establish and maintain social relations for the expression of social roles, thus, enabling man to interact with other people. This macro-function that marks interpersonal relationships of all kinds [8] will differ depending on the role of the speaker-hearer, on the social context, on the attitudes and intentions, and on the form of the message; therefore, every communication act will be characteristic, as different groups of people use language in varied ways to achieve different purposes.

In spite of the complexity of real communication it is obvious that people in every place want or need to express the same notions. Is is also true that some of these notions, considered as universals of communication, are more often performed than others, but on the whole we all need to display emotions such as surprise, pleasure, anger, hope; we all need to react emotionally to others by expressing **sympathy, admiration,** trust, dislike, etc.; everybody needs to assume attitudes and obligations, such as praise, apologies, regret, promises, prohibitions, permission or obligation; we all need to show modalities and dialectics, **such as degrees** of possibility, probability, likelihood, doubt, agreement and disagreement, **suggestions, orders,** warnings, acceptance, refusal, emphasis, frankness, etc. [4].

Language functions or notions are never expressed in isolation; this means, for example, that we never simply order; on the contrary, we always order someone to do something we want. The same is valid for any of the other notions we want to express. Thus, the conceptual meaning expressed through those notions is what is of the utmost importance.

Consequently, any language teacher who bears in mind the latest sociolinguistic researches should take into account the social purpose of any utterance and, accordingly, should try to develop the learner's ability to express those notions, that is, to interact verbally. Verbal interaction implies not only listening and speaking but also to be able to react verbally to a given stimulus. The messages will be determined not only by the meaning but also by some extra linguistic factors, such as the social role of the participants, the place and time in which the communication takes place, etc.

In brief, the notional approach forces the teacher to consider the communicative value of what he is teaching; accordingly, the materials he uses should help to expand the communicative competence of the learner and contribute to the expression and development of his own personality. As a conclusion, teachers should put greater emphasis on teaching the learner rules of communication as well as rules of grammar [5].

What follows is the description of an activity which is just the **beginning** of an attempt to reconsider the place of communicative competence in our **classrooms.**

ROLE-PLAYING CARDS AND ROLES FOR DISCUSSION

As communicative competence is a goal rather difficult to achieve, teachers have always tried to create opportunities for the students to use the language freely and spontaneously. Unfortunately, very often when we resort to 'free conversation exercises' these experiments end in complete chaos, with few of the students participating and with the teacher doing most of the talking.

Thus, with the aim in mind of developing communicative competence, we have been trying out new ideas to make our classes not only more profitable for the students but also more enjoyable. One of the techniques that we have used for about two semes-

[8] Halliday, in *New Horizons in Linguistics*, p. 143.
[4] Wilkins, D. A. (1972), p. 148.
[5] Wilkins, D. A. (1976), p. 11.

ters is that of ROLE-PLAYING CARDS which we have employed in connection with the teaching of Catenized Vocabulary Units.

These Units have been taught at our Department since 1957. The concept of Catenized Vocabulary, as introduced by Professor Jack R. Ewer (Modern Languages Dept., English Section, University of Chile) implies the teaching of small language registers in units which consist of four sections: "the word matrix", questions, test passage(s) and projects [6]. The presentation of these topic-based units is built upon the word matrix where the words are grouped and sequenced according to idea-association and collocations; the other three sections are devoted to practical activities that serve as a context for language learning.

It should be made clear that the aim of these units is not to get the learner to memorize and produce single, isolated words but to stimulate, at all instances, the active use of these lexical items in meaningful situations. With this purpose in mind, teachers have devised and created different and varied activities (role-playing, games, group discussions, etc.) that could foster and develop such an ability. Although we consider that this approach has successfully worked with our students, we felt the need to exploit new ways in order to encourage the communicative competence of our students.

This was our main aim when we took the first step in the preparation of role-playing cards so as to stimulate free and natural interaction in the classroom. This technique, used at the ELTI (English Language Teaching Institute) in London, was examined in detail when visiting this Institute last March 1977 [7]; we were impressed with the many possibilities that the procedure implied, so we decided to adopt it, but adapting it to the needs and interests of our learners.

The content of these role-playing cards provides guidelines and hints for the students as to what their verbal interactions should be, but as we think that they should enjoy this communicative practice there is no lexical or structural constraint as to the content of their messages, so that they can respond as spontaneously as they wish. The content of the cards involves a sort of feedback mechanism by means of which the speaker evaluates all incoming information and then answers in accordance with it. J. R. Firth says that 'the moment a conversation is started whatever is said is a determining condition for what in any reasonable expectation may follow [8].

Summing up, the cards are used to assign the students their roles, the interaction between speaker and listener, and the communicative notions they will have to express. We have tried to present all the information required by the participants to play their roles adequately in the clearest and simplest form. Perhaps the time has come to show a graphic representation of two of the cards that we actually use in our classes: See page 80.

Let us now turn to the way we have conducted our communication practice so far.

After a C. V. Unit, in this case one on Theatre, has been thoroughly covered in class, we assign the vocabulary to be reviewed by the students prior to the role-playing activity, so that everybody will be prepared to participate in the exercise. Thus, we ensure that the students will be able to interact naturally and freely without being hindered by lack of vocabulary, or by hesitations when they do not remember the right words to use. We also consider that it is essential to teach the students in advance some of the linguistic forms that they will use to express certain notions —agreement, suggestions, anger,

[6] Forum, Vol. XI, N° 5 (1973), p. 22.

[7] Miss Rosa Rodríguez was invited by the British Council to visit academic institutions in Great Britain, March 1977.

[8] Firth, J. R., in English Studies Series, p. 235.

admiration, regret, etc.— which will allow them to communicate in a meaningful way.

When we meet again, we divide the class of about 24 students into three groups of 8 students each. One group participates at a time. We ask the students to imagine that they are members of a panel discussion on T.V. who are going to discuss, in this particular instance, Theatre in Chile; then, they are presented with the role-playing cards for the first time. Time is alloted to examine the cards, get involved in the roles, and to think about the course of action they are going to take. In the meantime, the students of those groups not involved in the activity at the moment are asked to write down questions on the topic under discussion to be put to the members of the panel at the end of the discussion.

When everybody is ready, the members of the panel sit facing the class and one of

them, who acts as moderator, introduces them. We always try to assign this role of moderator to a student who has a fair command of the language and the kind of personality that will keep this activity as lively as possible, and who will encourage weaker or inhibited students to speak.

Obviously, in these panel discussions students talk to each other unconstrained because they are saying the things *they* have decided to say, depending on their roles, and responding to a high degree to what has been said before. Thus language, this rich and adaptable instrument permits them the realization of their intentions[9].

Each panel discussion, including the questions from the audience, lasts for about 25 minutes, but if the response of the class is

[9] Halliday, M. A. K., in *Readings for Applied Linguistics*, p. 58.

overenthusiastic, which often happens, we let them go on. The role of the teacher during the discussion is to be an observer and should not interfere with the natural flow of the conversation, unless the mistakes hinder or interfere meaning. Even though the teacher makes no corrections he writes down repetitive errors in pronunciation, structure or usage, and discusses them with individual students once the process is over.

So far we have been using these role-playing cards with students of the Third and Fourth Semesters of Language, in an attempt to 'come to terms with the complexities of real communication at the earliest possible level.

In order to prepare them for a more advanced stage we are now working on a new procedure, that of ROLES FOR DISCUSSION, which also emphasizes communication needs. In this new type of exercise the student is also presented with a card which assigns him a role, but this time he only finds a point of view stated there and there is no outline as to what his interactions should be. He is completely free to express whatever notion he wants in order to defend the point of view quoted in the card. The only restriction is that he must speak "in character", no matter what he personally feels or thinks about the problem under discussion.

Before introducing the speakers we inform the class as to the content of the cards and the roles assigned, so that they can prepare questions to be asked at the end of the discussion. Once the exercise is over the speakers are given the opportunity to express their real points of view and to state how they really feel or what their opinion is on the topic under discussion.

As an example of this kind of activity we would like to introduce you to a set of cards used for discussion in connection with a C. V. Unit on Police and Crime.

TOPIC: SHOPLIFTING

CARD N⁰ 1: *ROLE:* You are a SUPERMARKET OWNER.
POINT OF VIEW: "Shoplifters should have their hands cut off".

CARD N⁰ 2: *ROLE:* You are a SHOPLIFTER.
POINT OF VIEW: "I lift things from shops because I feel the compulsion to do so".

CARD N⁰ 3: *ROLE:* You are an OLD LADY.
POINT OF VIEW: "I think shoplifting is lots of fun".

CARD N⁰ 4: *ROLE:* You are a LAWYER.
POINT OF VIEW: "It is very difficult to decide what to do in a shoplifting case".

CARD N⁰ 5: *ROLE:* You are a CUSTOMER.
POINT OF VIEW: "Shoplifters should be prosecuted".

The results of the two exercises mentioned, ROLE-PLAYING CARDS and ROLES FOR DISCUSSION have been quite rewarding. First of all, the level of participation has been very high, with even the weakest students trying to communicate what they thought might be of interest to the rest of the group. Secondly, the student's self confidence was increased, as all the other members of the group reacted and showed their interest in what was being said. From the student's point of view the experiences have proved to be intrinsically attractive, since they have given them an opportunity to interact in a meaningful, lively and interesting way and have let them show their originality and creativity.

As a conclusion, if we hope to achieve genuine communication in our classrooms, we must create the need to talk and the need to listen. True interaction must be the ultimate goal of our teaching. In order to achieve it

we will continue working out situations and activities where the student is on his own, trying to use the language for the normal purpose of language: establishing social relationships, seeking or giving information, agreeing or disagreeing, persuading or discouraging others, etc.

The students' attitudes have encouraged us to keep on preparing activities that permit them to engage their imaginative and verbal abilities. It is our intention to make them even more motivating for the students by stressing their realistic communicative force. If the two techniques described were successful it is only because the students used the language for the real thing-communication!

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