Self-Confrontation: Video in the Language Classroom

Emphasizing oral performance (communicative competence) at the expense of objective evaluation and correction can encourage students to communicate at rudimentary levels, thereby undermining more fully developed and complex target language communication.

Using her French For Business course as a case in point, the author—through a contrastive/comparative analysis of videotaped classroom exercises—put to use the self-confrontational and objective nature of video and observed the following: 1) teachers can, by their manner of eliciting responses, allow students to remain in rudimentary target language competency; 2) through reassuring non-verbal signals and instant reformulation of difficult questions into simpler ones, teachers can reduce, albeit unconsciously, the margin of student communication errors and lose the criteria for objective evaluation of student performance; and, 3) the objective visual record of the videotape is an effective impetus to jar students into higher levels of communicative competence.

Modern language classroom teachers are often torn between provoking/encouraging student participation and evaluating/correcting communicative responses objectively. This conflict is exacerbated by the current stress on students' acquisition of aural-oral skills and the emphasis on communicative competence.

Communicative competence strategies encourage teachers to promote interaction with a minimum amount of tension, demand that teachers prevent starts and stops in the communication process, and, above all, require teachers to keep students communicatively involved.

In the meantime, what happens to correction, reinforcement of corrected grammar items, and accurate assessment of progress?

Many teachers simply avoid correcting grammatical errors at all. As a result, students may conclude that all they have to do is communicate meaning any way they can; more importantly, perhaps, students with good course work achievement records often assume that they speak the target language well.

We all know that students' impressions of their listening and speaking abilities are often wildly inaccurate, but what of teachers' notions about what is taught and reinforced in the classroom? Could teachers, too, be operating under false assumptions, namely, that they are preparing students for effective use of the target language when, in fact, they are reinforcing the consequences of poor target language acquisition habits?

What exactly are the consequences of poor language learning habits?

For the purposes of this discussion, let us consider the following obvious ones: the making of elementary errors in language usage even by the very best students; the dependency on basic-level grammatical structures which permit only awkward and superficial integration of new, more complex materials; the responding to questions with little ingenuity, varying vocabulary items hardly at all; and, the obvious contentment with broken, syntactically and grammatically incorrect communicative phrases, sentences, and discussion.

Although, for the most part, such consequences are difficult to detect in basic-level

courses, they are all too readily apparent in intermediate and advanced courses.

The issue of whether or not teachers reinforce any or all the consequences of poor language learning habits is an important one for two reasons: 1) it is difficult to believe that students who consistently make elementary language errors, students who depend solely on basic grammatical structures for their communication, and students who are content to communicate with broken, syntactically incorrect phrases and sentences will somehow magically achieve high levels of competence in any language; and, 2) if teachers play a role in reinforcing the results of poor language learning habits, then teachers are part of the problem of communicative incompetence exhibited most obviously by advanced foreign and second language learners.

For the sake of argument, let us assume that teachers are part of the problem of communicative incompetence, that is, let us assume that teachers do reinforce—albeit unconsciously—student dependency on inappropriate grammar and unimaginative uses of the target language. How could we prove or disprove such an assertion?

To begin with, what we need is an objective reality of how students and teachers interact in the process of learning a target language—a communicative specimen, as it were, that we could dissect and analyze. In short, we need to capture and confront the realities of what goes on in the language classroom.

Although capturing an objective picture of what goes on in the language classroom is never an easy task, today's language teacher can turn to an effective medium for help, namely, video—a tool of the trade that is user-friendly and objective.

What makes video an effective medium is its distinctive ability to capture a visual record of the interaction between teacher and students; it provides a unique opportunity for analyzing an objective reality: students can examine their performance as listeners and speakers; the teacher can ascertain what his or her role is in the production of classroom communication.

As an objective medium, video enables teacher and students to actually see what happens—intention, imagined performance, and corrective afterthought are absent; instead, both teacher and students "see it as it is."

Students, for example, may learn that frequent pauses in the formulation of sentences result in dull, lifeless communication. In turn, the teacher may learn that the form in which he or she solicited a response actually gave the student the predigested comeback. In addition, teacher and students can analyze non-verbal signals and their effect on the process of communication. All in all, the self-confrontational nature of video gives teachers and students an opportunity to analyze the formation of communicative competence in the language classroom.

Such being the nature of video, I decided to use it to investigate the communicative dynamics of my classroom.

My reason for doing so was two-tiered: 1) I wanted my students to analyze and learn from their communicative classroom exercises; and, 2) I wanted to analyze my role in the language production process of my students —perhaps, I was unconsciously reinforcing poor target language habits.

Setting

The particular teaching situation in which I introduced video was a French For Business course, a sixth or seventh quarter option available to French language majors and minors at my university.

The overriding goal of the course is an active acquisition of vocabulary and communicative structures ranging from the formation of responses to interview questions to the stylistic demands of business correspondence. Supporting objectives designed to achieve the overriding goal of the course include the refinement of listening skills—to handle phone calls in French and information

communicated by phone recorders and operators—and improving the ability to understand and summarize oral presentations on diverse subjects such as French banks, governmental institutions, demographics, marketing techniques, and the history of oil and its worldwide economic impact.

Class time is divided between presentations by the teacher and class activities rooted in the specialized business vocabularies and the grammar reviews. The class meets five times per week, with each session lasting 50 minutes and conducted entirely in French.

Students

Twelve students (nine women, three men), ranging in ability from French majors—recently returned from France—to business and marketing majors with as little as six quarters of French language instruction comprised the class. Ranging in age from 20 to 28, all had elected to take the course for reasons as diverse as avoiding a literature course to improving job marketability. Without exception, each student had a benign or positive attitude toward improving communicative competence in French.

The impetus for my introducing video in the classroom was the fact that students were repeatedly miscomprehending verbally-relayed materials. Furthermore, when students were required to speak, they responded unimaginatively, varying their vocabulary hardly at all, and contenting themselves with broken, syntactically and grammatically incorrect sentences. I wondered if my students simply lacked experience with extended, complex responses or if my manner of provoking and judging responses was inadequate to elicit natural-sounding, complex answers.

Procedure

At midpoint in the term, my syllabus called for simulated employment interviews. I decided to have two sets of interviews: practice interviews where I would role-play the interviewer, and "real" interviews where a native French speaker unknown to the students would role-play the interviewer. Both the na-

tive speaker and I would be basing the interviews on a set of questions with which the class would be familiar.

I made arrangements with the language laboratory staff to have both sets of interviews videotaped in the same setting; all variables—as much as possible—remained the same with the exception of the interviewer.

The use of video in the language classroom requires thought and preparation. With one week of the course devoted to job interviews, I reserved three days for preparation prior to the actual taping. All students prepared résumés and cover letters as part of a job search for the position of assistant sales manager of an American moccasin manufacturing company with branch offices in France. In addition to familiarization with vocabulary pertinent to the interview, students practiced interviewing each other. Keeping the job announcement in mind, I listened, made corrections, and suggested ways in which students could "sell" their skills more forcefully.

On the fourth day, the 12 practice interviews were videotaped in a studio set up to simulate an office. Even though these were only practice interviews—to be viewed and critiqued afterward in preparation for the "real" interviews—students and I "walked through" them just as they would reproduce them on the final day of the project.

On the day of the "real" interviews with the native speaker, students—résumés in hand and appropriately attired in business garb—interviewed for the job of assistant sales manager in interviews lasting from four to six minutes. All students showed obvious signs of nervousness and giddiness as each waited for his or her turn.

Results

Upon completing the interviews, students expressed relief, and all felt they had generally managed well. I asked if they had understood all of the interviewer's questions. Those who expressed doubts felt that at most they had misunderstood only one question; no one, however, could remember a question he or

she may have misunderstood. All students were convinced that they had responded to the questions with a resourceful and dynamic vocabulary.

When the class viewed the videotaped interviews, students were confronted with their communicative competence—or lack of it—as it actually occurred during the interviews with the native speaker.

Watching themselves, students identified dozens of errors and problems in their communicative responses to the interviewer's questions.

Their own body language baffled them. They expressed horror, for example, at how their mouths hung open while listening to a question or how their American gestures contradicted the verbal message of their French communication.

Most importantly, they could see how some of their answers indicated complete misunderstanding of the question. For example, Question: "Quand est-ce que vous quittez votre travail actuel?" Answer: "Je n'ai pas quitté mon travail."

Rather than the resourceful vocabularies they thought they had employed in their responses, they heard and saw themselves repeating "Bien," "Bon," "Difficile," and "Intéressant." Vocabulary items from class preparation such as "fructueux," "créateur," and "dynamique" were completely absent.

Except for passive recognition of new vocabulary in the interviewer's questions, they relied almost exclusively on their basic, 1st year French competency for all their replies.

Seeing the disparity between what they thought they had done and what they actually did was the beginning step on the road to improving communicative competence in French for most of the students.

Although the confrontational "slice of life" nature of video "showed" my students what my words could never communicate as well, what about my role in their language production? What did video show me about my teaching method and techniques?

By comparing the practice interviews where I role played the interviewer and the "real" interviews with the native French speaker, I had at my disposal two ideal visual documents for contrast and comparison.

I decided to concentrate my analysis on a contrast/comparison of the formulation and expression of interview questions. In short, I wanted to see how I differed from the native French speaker in expressing questions, and how such differences may have been reflected in the responses of my students.

The results of my analysis were both revealing and curious. As the videotape showed, I as interviewer spoke at classroom speed or a little faster, depending upon the specific student's capabilities. The native speaker, on the other hand, had a slightly different rhythm and speed; more importantly, she spoke without emphasis on vocabulary items or grammatical structures, whereas I stressed vocabulary unintentionally and frequently emphasized new materials.

In addition, unlike the native speaker, I manifested the non-verbal language of encouragement and comprehension, that is, I saw myself nodding expectantly and offering reinforcement via positive body language. The native speaker, having an objective relationship with the interviewees, offered very little non-verbal encouragement; her expression was mostly unchanged—at most, she nodded briefly after each response. She never repeated a student's response; instead, she reacted to the student's response with a flat "d'accord," even when the response was unintelligible.

My response to a student's answer was totally different. Upon hearing a grammatically incorrect response, I unconsciously repeated all or part of it, correcting the grammar as I did so. The effect of my repetition was to offer a correct response—my own—in place of the fumbled one I had received. The native speaker rarely supplied even one word the student was grasping for, whereas I, knowing their vocabulary, always supplied it after a pause.

Where the native speaker and I differed dramatically was in response to a student who, not understanding the question, asked for repetition. The native speaker repeated the question, then varied it with vocabulary items of roughly equal difficulty. For example, if the question was "Quels sont vos projets d'avenir?", the native speaker would rephrase it and say, "Que visez-vous comme carrière professionelle?"

I, on the other hand, often neglected to repeat the question, offering instead immediate simplification. In so doing, I consistently, albeit unconsciously, offered the vocabulary and structures easily within the student's grasp. The student needed only to seize them and reproduce the setup, as it were, without ever going back to the difficult question or attempting to integrate the more complex vocabulary items.

Discussion

As contrastive/comparative analysis of videotaped classroom learning exercises revealed to me, language teachers can, by their manner of eliciting communicative responses, allow their students to remain safely within their basic-level French competency without ever breaking through to new language acquisition levels. Through reassuring non-verbal signals and instant reformulation of difficult questions into simpler ones, teachers can reduce or minimize the margin of student communication errors and lose the criteria for objective evaluation of student performance.

Teachers who unconsciously reinforce minimal communicative competence may have active, indeed even highly participatory classes; however, unless teachers jar students out of minimal competence, students may move contentedly through the curriculum, communicating meaning in the target language any way they can.

The results of this video project clearly suggest the possibility that a language classroom in which all students actively participate at a mediocre level may be the result of the teacher unconsciously reinforcing safe, limited, and basic-level communicative competence.

For students involved in this case in point, the self-confrontational nature of video provided the needed impetus to jar them into taking the important first steps on the road to improving their language competency.

As a modern language classroom teacher, the self-confrontational nature of video made me aware of what may be a universal teacher tendency, namely, the unconscious desire to help students master the difficult and often painful process of learning. Having been made aware that teachers such as myself can unknowingly reinforce poor language learning habits in students, I have since launched a wide-ranging revision of my teaching methods and priorities.

If, as the results of this video project seem to suggest, language teachers can be a part of the problem of communicative incompetence, namely, teachers do reinforce—albeit unconsciously—student dependency on inappropriate grammar and unimaginative use of the target language, then the language student's potential for progress and advancement in the use of the target language may be seriously undermined, perhaps, even damaged to the extent that he or she may be locked in forever at a poor or mediocre target language competence level. If clear correction of grammar and objective evaluation of target language communicative performance are allowed to dissolve, if students are positively reinforced and encouraged to communicate meaning any way they can, will they ever have the desire or the tools with which to learn any target language beyond the careless grammar, "show-and-fumble" level?

It is a question that deserves study under tightly-controlled, experimental designs.

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