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Cultural Pluralism: Language Proficiency

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Cultural Pluralism: Language Proficiency in the Basic Course

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We live in an increasingly diverse and interdependent world. The United States is at the hub of global diversity. Gutek (1992) has rightly pointed out that "While Americans have a cultural identity that is particular to the social, political, and economic context in which they live, they are members of a racially, linguistically, religiously, and culturally diverse society" (p. 219). Further, the United States continues to be a nation of immigrants. Considering the influx of people from Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean, the number of ethnic minority children is expected to exceed one-third of the school-age population by the year 2000 (Bennett, 1990). Another source of cultural diversity is the increasing number of international students enrolling in American universities and colleges. The number of international students rose form 34,232 in the 1954/55 academic year to 356,187 in the 1987/88 academic year (Gibson & Hanna, 1992). These numbers continue to rise as colleges and universities throughout the United States actively recruit students from foreign countries.

In response to the growing diversity of the U. S. society, many institutions of higher learning are making some adjustments in their programs. For instance, Levine and Cureton (1992) claim that "54% of all colleges and universities have introduced multiculturalism into their departmental course offerings" (p. 26). They specifically identify English and

history as leaders in this endeavor. As communication educators, we cannot afford to ignore the challenges of cultural pluralism in the basic course.

The basic communication course is a component of the general educational curriculum in many colleges and universities in the United States. It introduces students to the fundamentals of the communication process and offers the opportunity to learn communication theories of and/or practice the skills necessary for the effective use of that process. Its design has reflected the original perception of the United States as a melting pot — a perception which assumed that cultural differences in communication styles, language usage, attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors could be fused into one American culture. It is what Chen (1993) has described as "an 'Americanization' model which believes that achieving certain White Anglo-Saxon Protestant values is inherent to educational success" (p. 3). Taylor, Rosegrant, and Samples (1992) call the assumption that underlies such a model a myth, and current trends in multicultural education pose challenges to the melting pot theory.

One challenge that is pertinent to the basic speech course is that of language. Our position with regard to this challenge is that instructors of the basic course and authors of the basic course textbooks need to be sensitive to the difficulties that culturally diverse students have with the English language. We advocate this position not as a political ideology, but rather, to promote intercultural understanding as a worthy goal of effective communication.

Our objective is two-fold. First, we examine some of the difficulties that culturally diverse students (especially international students) have with language usage in the basic course. Second, we offer some suggestions that could help increase understanding between native and non-native speakers of the English language.

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AWARENESS OF THE PROBLEM

Our interest in this endeavor grew out of some comments that international students in the basic communication course made in response to exercises on language. When dealing with a chapter on language, we discussed cultural influences and how the English language can be confusing to many non-native speakers and some minority students. The following aspects were discovered to be common sources of confusion.

Homonyms

Homonyms are words with the same pronunciation, are usually spelled differently, and have different meanings. All the students are asked to come up with as many meanings as they can for the word "meat/meet." Usually, the students come up with about five different meanings. Next, they are asked to generate as many meanings as they can for the word "horse/hoarse." The class then discusses some other words that might cause problems and that could result in misunderstandings. Other common homonyms causing problems are "their/there/they're."

Homographs

Another area that the class is asked to consider is the confusion that improper syllable stressing could cause in word meaning. There are several words that if the stress is put on the first syllable, they become nouns; if the stress is put on the second syllable, they become verbs. For example:

Per'mit — a license or an official document.

Permit' — to give consent.

Con'duct — type of behavior.

Conduct' — to direct or lead.

Dialects

The discussion of dialects is intended to help all students, but especially international students realize that there are regional variations, even in the use of the English language. Here are a few examples:

Gumband — another term for rubber band (east coast)

Schlep — to saunter (New York)

Uff-da — if someone bumps you or you are extremely tired, you may exclaim "uff-da!" (Northern Iowa, Minnesota)

Gasin — meaningless talk (midwestern)

Boondocks — a remote, rural place

Lively discussions often ensue over proper word usage and pronunciation. For example:

Do you drink *pop* or *soda?*

Do you *wash* or *wa/r/sh?*

Do you use a *sack* or a *bag?*

Is it *Ioway* or *Iowa?*

The following statements which were taken from students' response papers on these in-class activities and exercises illustrate how some international students perceive the difficulties they have with the English language.

1. A female student from Mexico said:

    In the speech class, the instructor and students are more likely to have conversations back and forth. Americans using slang in their dialogue is inevitable. Frankly, sometimes, I feel left when I see everybody

laughing except me. I am not saying using slang is inappropriate; in contrast, I really wish someone can tell me what is going on.

2. A similar concern was expressed with additional details by a male student from Japan:

I really don't understand many funny words, and I wish someone would tell me what they mean. I am sure you realize that, but it will not be a wise choice if instructors stop and ask me whether I understand or not. I will feel bad[ly], unless you have set everything clear[ly] at the beginning of the semester. For example, you mention that the class may use a lot of slangs in conversations, so for those who do not understand the slangs, they are welcome to ask. Let us know that you are sincerely trying to help us and also understand our situation...what I am concerned [about] here is our feelings.

The comments by these students from Mexico and Japan indicate that international students desire to be fully involved in what goes on in our basic course classes. However, because of language barriers, they do not seem to realize their desire. As an alternative, the students pore over the textbook without necessarily making much headway.

3. Here is how another student from Malaysia expressed her concern over this:

In my perspective, oriental students are more sensitive and vulnerable than American students. In fact, we all wish to solve our academic problems in class as the instructor lectures instead of going home and studying the whole chapter. However, due to our language problems, we tend to keep our mouth shut

and not ask questions if we don't understand words or phrases.

Even when the students go over the textbook and/or turn to their dictionary for help, they still find that a number of expressions are beyond them.

4. Such was the experience of a female student from Japan who wrote:

    It is true that slang is not easy to understand for international students. For example, my dictionary has 'What's up?" as meaning of "What's the matter?" People here use it for "How are you doing?"

In addition to the problem of language, some international students struggle with instructors' attitudes toward them (students) and their language difficulty.

5. This added dimension was included in the comment made by a male student from Zimbabwe:

    As an international student, I am extremely sensitive about the attitude of the instructors as well as every single word they use. If their words or attitudes make me feel like they discriminate [against] certain races, then I will try my very best not to ask them questions. We are human beings and we believe what we see and what we hear and, of course, what we feel. What I am trying to say here is that instructors should be careful in choosing words in their lectures.

From all of the above excerpts it is clear that instructors need to develop an awareness of the common sources of frustration for international students in the basic course.

THE INFLUENCE OF CULTURE ON LANGUAGE

Argyle (1982) reminds us that language "is one of the most important differences between many cultures, and one of the greatest barriers" (p. 63). Language abilities are central to the determination of human intelligence. Before a student is able to reach his/her optimal capability in cognitive learning within a subject, proficiency in that language must be reached. Students must acquire a flexibility with their capacity to understand and use various abstract language relationships. Therefore, learning a language "can never be a matter of learning one interpretation for any given language item" (Edelsky, 1989, p. 98).

When looking at language ability, proficiency is commonly divided into five components: pragmatics, phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics. Our concern is with the area of semantics, particularly the lexical representations (Swinney & Cutler, 1979) with which culturally diverse students seem to have difficulty.

Since the way we use language follows culturally determined patterns which influence the way we put words together and the way we think (Samovar & Porter, 1991), bilingualism inevitably has an impact on the cognitive skills of people learning a second language. A common problem we encounter in this area concerns the inter-translatability of semantic and syntactic representations. As Neeman (1993) put it: "Even when international students study our language carefully, nothing can prepare them for the plethora of dialects, idioms, and new vocabulary that they face" (p. 4). Many English words have no direct equivalents in other languages. Besides, "even if a word is directly translatable, its underlying concept doesn't necessarily manifest itself in the same way from one culture to another" (Morical & Tsai, 1992, p. 65).

One of our tasks in the basic course is to facilitate the development of communicative competence, particularly in speaking and listening, and also in the comprehension of material presented within our texts. Since we use language to construct and communicate about reality (Spradley, 1979), it follows that a different language becomes a different version of reality. Failure to realize this point may lead us to assume that the international students who are not catching on in the basic course lack the ability to succeed in college. Instead of latching on to such an assumption we need to consider the effect of culturally diverse languages on the process of education and adjust our teaching strategies accordingly.

Because it is challenging if not overwhelming to respond effectively to basic communication course students according to their cultural backgrounds, many instructors find it easier to require culturally diverse students to adapt to the majority culture on their own. It is much easier for instructors to assume that the students in the basic course have had comparable exposure to the English language; and if they have not, then they ought not to be in the course. But since the decision about who enrolls in the basic course does not always rest with the instructors, we believe that they should encourage non-native speakers of English once those students show up in the class.

SOME WAYS THAT INSTRUCTORS CAN HELP

Extending help to non-native speakers of English inevitably raises questions. In asking speech instructors to be sensitive to language problems, are we not putting additional burdens on the basic course instructors that rightfully belong to English instructors? How does the instructor help non-native speakers without calling undue attention to the fact

that they are different? And how does the instructor evaluate their performance without compromising standards?

We are not suggesting a multilingual approach to the basic course or a lowering of standards. We strongly believe that international students who enroll in the basic oral communication course are aware of the challenges that language poses for them and they are prepared to confront those challenges. What we advocate is encouraging students to face the challenges as best they can. We offer the following recommendations:

First, instructors need to create a non-threatening classroom and office climate for all students. We suggest that the basic course class be viewed as a **community** of seekers. The notion of community implies that there is a network of cooperative, competitive, and even conflictual interaction among individuals and groups (Anderson, 1993). This network does not just happen; it is cultivated. One of the main tasks of the instructor is to cultivate a cooperative network of interaction that leaves room for healthy competition and conflict. The classroom atmosphere should encourage *all* students to ask and/or respond to honest questions. In order to achieve this sense of community, instructors should help students be aware of and show interest in common goals that can be used to regulate each member's activity (Kruckeberg & Starck, 1988).

Second, instructors should listen *patiently,* fighting the temptation to be sidetracked or frustrated by a student's accent or pronunciation, and listening with their ears, their eyes, and their hearts. They should listen carefully to the words while remembering that some languages do not have the intonation and stress patterns that English has (Oludaja, 1992; Thomlison, 1991)

Third, instructors should familiarize themselves with different modes of verbal behavior. Gudykunst and Kim (1984) have pointed out some differences that exist in African, Asian, Middle Eastern, and North American verbal styles.

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Asian style is typified more by harmony and ambiguity than by arguments and persuasion. Instructors need to be especially careful not to equate silence with ignorance. The Japanese culture, for instance, believes that "He who speaks has no knowledge and he who has knowledge does not speak" (Samovar and Porter, 1991, p. 113). Knowledge of such differences can help instructors listen better and know how to interpret what they hear or don't hear.

Fourth, instructors need to realize that many students can write English better than they can speak it. If verbal participation is part of course assessment, instructors may consider asking questions and giving all students about a minute to jot down their responses. Then they may call on native and non-native speakers of English to share or read their responses. This approach may make it easier for international students to share without feeling like they have been singled out for help.

Fifth, instructors need to be considerate in their use of idiomatic expressions and technical jargons. We noticed this problem as a result of working closely with some international students in our basic course. We requested international students to go through just *five* of the sixteen chapters in our basic course textbook and jot down the phrases or expressions with which they had difficulties. Included in their responses were expressions such as "a star player," "she really lit up," "having a down day," "let's split," "this party is played," "he's really hot," "a bit peeved," "give Tom the plums and leave me the garbage," and "it's a lemon." Of course, we are not at all suggesting that native speakers refrain from using such expressions. In fact, non-native speakers need to learn them. However, since "language is the tool by which we are able to apprehend specific areas of semantic space" (Borden, 1991, p. 160), instructors can make sure that when they are used, their meanings are made clear for the sake of students who might be using their first culture's semantic space to search for the intended meanings.

Sixth, whenever possible, instructors should use examples that have universal applications. Since we associate words with something in our experience, lack of experiential background further complicates the search for meaning. When examples are limited to the local culture, instructors may take a few minutes to provide the background necessary for understanding those examples. When instructors do so, they refresh the knowledge of the native speakers as well as broaden that of the nonnative speakers.

Seventh, since some of the basic course textbooks now give some attention to the effect of culture on language usage, instructors can use that as a springboard for a broader consideration of the issue of language proficiency in a culturally pluralistic setting. They can also encourage authors who have started small to improve on the good start and hopefully more authors will catch the vision.

Eighth and last, instructors who are committed to managing cultural diversity within the basic course should resist the temptation to impose solutions on the students concerned. Instead, they should seek meaningful dialogue with the students and allow them to express how they would like to be helped.

CONCLUSION

Although our focus in this paper has been mainly on international students, much of what we have suggested can be adapted to African Americans, Asian-Americans, Hispanics, and Native-Americans as well.

If the current trends in international students' enrollment continue, we can expect more cultural diversity among the students in the basic course. Since speech communities vary in regard to their sounds, vocabulary, syntax, and patterns of thought (Edelsky, 1989), such diversity will continue to pose a challenge to instructors. The challenge requires us to respond

with a sensitivity that helps create a learning environment in which every student can perform to his or her best ability. In rising to the challenge, students and instructors need to be sensitive to the fact that "when people learn a second language, they are learning more than a language; they are learning how to join a speech community" (Edelsky, 1988, p. 98).

If business corporations are giving greater attention to "developing international cross-cultural sensitivity in their employees" (Gutek, 1992, p. 227), it is important that educators also give attention to such sensitivity. It is even more important that those of us in the field of communication model the development of such sensitivity.

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