



Teaching sociolinguistic competence in an EFL classroom.

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Abstract

In order to be considered fully proficient in the target language, an EFL learner needs to acquire the cultural aspect of the language as well, that is sociolinguistic competence. Otherwise, learners will be able to produce sentences that are grammatically correct but sound awkward, unnatural and inappropriate. Sociolinguistic competence is one of the main components of the broader concept of communicative competence and is directly relevant to foreign language teaching. This paper overviews some of the methods for teaching it to EFL learners.

Key words: communicative competence, sociolinguistic competence, EFL

Introduction

Most of the time EFL learners complete their studies with relatively good knowledge of grammar and form but lack the knowledge of the so-called “appropriateness”, which is the intuitive knowledge of how to speak, when to speak, and when to remain silent (Hymes, 1972). This is particularly important in EFL situations where the students’ exposure to the target language is usually limited to the language classroom, and the teachers are not native speakers of the language themselves. This paper suggests some of the techniques that might be employed for teaching the sociolinguistic competence.

The key to sociolinguistic competence is understanding the context of any social situation and responding appropriately within that context, using the correct language forms i.e. grammar. Because this is intrinsic to language communication it has a direct relevance in foreign language-teaching (Council of Europe, 2001).

A successfully completed L2 language program should mean that the learner has acquired more than just a competence in grammar but can marry language form with ability to handle social situations and within that context be able to make socially and contextually meaningful utterances. This ability should also extend to written texts as well as non-verbal communication such as appropriate gestures and facial expressions that are also part of the target language. These required outcomes are clearly stated in the Common European Framework (CEFR, 2001) for learners at B2 level.

According to the CEFR (2001) a B2 language learner should be able to:

- express him/herself with confidence in either formal or informal register and do so clearly within the social context of the event.
- Keep up with and contribute to any group discussion even when speech is colloquial and fast, although difficulty in doing so is to be expected.
- sustain a continuous communication with native speakers in the same way as native speakers do without unintentionally offending or irritating them or forcing them to react in a way not usual between native speakers.
- Express him/herself appropriately in various contexts avoiding gross errors in form or appropriateness. (p.122).

The importance of appropriateness in language communication is acknowledged worldwide, however it is an aspect of language teaching/learning that has been greatly neglected, as can be seen from these excerpts from the CEFR document.

Sociolinguistic competence in language acquisition is a vital part of acquiring L2 language competence as a whole and is considered to be linked to the cultural aspect of any language



group. (Savignon, 1983: p.37). Since most EFL teachers are not native speakers and receive their training outside the target language community, this aspect of language teaching is often overlooked as the teachers themselves are not fully aware or not competent in this aspect of language acquisition. Other reasons for sociolinguistic competence neglect may also be related to lack of classroom time, resources, curriculum overload or even the teacher's own lack of confidence in their ability to successfully teach this aspect of language competence. It could also be that student attitude could affect the teacher's ability to provide the learner motivation necessary for success in this area. (Omaggio, 2001)

Much of what is stated in the CEFR document is corroborated by Littlewood (1981) who states that the choice of appropriate language in any utterance depends on two things: overall knowledge of the language form and overall knowledge/understanding of context i.e. the social setting within which the communication takes place, which together make for knowledge of appropriateness.

If a speaker understands or has overall knowledge of the social setting in which he/she finds themselves he/she can then decide the appropriate register; either formal or informal and accordingly, which form of address would be appropriate. Choosing incorrectly sends the wrong signals and a breakdown in communication will occur. Therefore, any language course/program should include sociolinguistic competence as its objective/primary goal. So, the classroom should provide a social context for appropriate communication i.e. teaching/learning sociolinguistic competence. Littlewood proposes that the L2 language class should therefore use only the target language as the medium for classroom activities in order to expose the L2 learner to context, form and appropriateness (Littlewood, 1981).

By using group discussion activities the L2 teacher can combine sociolinguistic competence with pragmatic competences such as turn-taking, ways of agreeing/disagreeing, expressing opinions etc. and in so doing stimulate and motivate learners to communicate in the target language.

Materials which provide L2 learners with a variety of social situations would allow them not only to choose the correct language forms (sociolinguistic/pragmatic/grammar) but would mean that their behaviour in each different setting would be appropriate overall.

Language appropriateness must be understood to encompass spoken, written and non-verbal communication but it is often the case that non-verbal communication is not included as part of sociolinguistic competence. To overcome this, a competent teacher should introduce video materials which feature native speakers in authentic situations. These materials would provide examples of appropriate gestures, body language, and intonation, combined with all other aspects of authentic language use. These materials would also provide interest and motivation for L2 learners thus extending their attention span and ability to learn. Brown and Yule, (1983) support this view by advising teachers to provide dialogues and conversations that demonstrate appropriate language use in video clips.

Other useful tools would be the introduction of Proverbs, quotations and idioms as these are also part of sociolinguistic appropriateness although quotations are used more in terms of providing L2 learners with a basis for appropriate language choices before a speaking or writing activity.

Speech Acts, another linguistic area of competence relevant to both sociolinguistic competence and pragmatic competence and necessary in any successfully sustained conversation in a target language should also be incorporated into classroom activities.

Even when the teachers are aware of the importance of teaching sociolinguistic competence, they might not have sufficient information as to how to teach the competence and what activities to follow. This paper suggested some methods and procedures which might be useful in developing language learners' sociolinguistic competence.



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