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Stereotyping in foreign language education

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Abstract

I was discouraged in my return to the foreign language classroom as an adult, and even more so when I began to teach English as a foreign language. The same type of materials and teaching methods were routine procedure, and in my determination to improve the situation I undertook classroom-based research using as the ‘medium’ a teaching process I had developed. Many interesting themes arose in the data collected, an outstanding one being the stereotyping resulting from globalized materials and methods. In this paper I discuss my own and others’ research into this problem and how it might be improved.

Keywords: Stereotyping, globalized language education, adult education, intercultural approach

1. Introduction

In my experiences as both an adult foreign language learner and as an English as a foreign language (EFL) teacher I have observed that foreign language education is handicapped by stereotyping. This is apparent in various aspects of the field, and here I will take up that of the employment of generic, globalized teaching materials and methods. I will talk about how I feel this affects the learner, and about classroom-based research I did in which I experimented with ideas I had gathered from experience for change in foreign language education.

2. My discomfort

The discomfort and frustration I felt as a foreign language learner when I returned to the university to learn Spanish as a mature adult incited the research. This had been a confusing, disheartening, unrewarding experience, but my discomfort became even stronger when I began to teach EFL in Mexico because I found an identical type of materials were to be used, and I was expected to employ the same type of teaching methods.

The first thing that bothered me as a learner was that the teachers only spoke the language I was there to learn, and worse yet, expected me to answer in kind. As a teacher I was faced with the hard and fast rule of ‘English Only in the classroom’. I challenged the system and welcomed the learners’ first language into the classroom, with me speaking it, allowing the learners to do so if they wished, and constantly comparing and contrasting English and Spanish. (If you are interested in knowing more about this aspect of the research, I discuss it in depth in Brooks-Lewis 2009 listed in the references here.)

The materials also made me uncomfortable, because they concentrated on being colorful, with lots of pictures and drawings. This seemed childish to me, and I have since noted that the actual subject matter included is minimal. Cultural tidbits are scattered through the materials, but these are so rudimentary that they can only be interpreted as a manner of alluding to grammar, making any cultural reference seem accidental rather than purposeful. Snippets of isolated conversations on a recording are played periodically, despite this being the most difficult of all challenges to listening comprehension. I felt that the materials for teaching EFL were actually worse for the Spanish-speaking students I was working with, because everything was in English. At least in the Spanish teaching texts I had been
exposed to as a learner the instructions and what little explanation there was were in English, the learners’ first language. Furthermore, I was mortified by the popular teaching didactics called ‘activities’, such as playing games or putting the students into pairs or groups to somehow ‘interact’ with each other in an unknown language. As a learner I could never figure out how we were supposed to help each other, and I wondered what the teacher was there for. I thought the games were silly, and playing them made me feel ridiculous. I imagined that I was probably supposed to be making the connection between all of these ‘activities’ and what I was somehow expected to be ‘discovering’ in the materials but all I discovered was a waste of time. Nothing, not even grammar or pronunciation, was actually taught, and conscious reflection was not allowed for with all the action going on. I began to doubt my capacity to learn the language and felt like I was a failure. When I began to teach I decided that while the ‘action’ and ‘discovery’ methods might be appropriate for children, I would not subject the adults I was working with to them. When I began to analyze my discomfort it seemed that logic would dictate that the same curriculum, methodology and teaching style could not be used indiscriminately with all learners, with no regard to their age, first language, culture, location, or anything else. I thought that all of this must surely be taken into consideration in order to meet the learners’ needs in an allegedly ‘learner-centered’ framework. I saw positive responses to the ideas I was using in the classrooms and designed an introductory EFL course in which I included them, and specifically kept the learners I was working with in mind. I then presented the course in several classrooms at two universities and asked the learner-participants to write about their perceptions of this experience. This was the data I collected in the research. My goal was not to come up with more theory but to learn about the results of it, and most importantly, from the learners’ point of view.

3. Theory and practice

Generic teaching materials and methods are an extraordinary example of stereotypical thinking in education, and sadly, this includes stereotyping of the learner. As Pennycook (1994:293) described it, this stereotyped vision of the learner is that he or she is “a one-dimensional acquisition device, a sort of language learning machine”. This attitude towards the learner is traditional, and continues in spite of the advent of the ‘communicative approach’ to language teaching, with its insistence on ‘learner-centering’. A sincere transition in the ideology of foreign language teaching is due, particularly with EFL, moving to one in which the concern should be, as Widdowson (2003:41-42) explains, “with English which is global in its use, and local in its learning. He goes on to say, however, that “The established or official position, the orthodox view, is diametrically the opposite to this, for it sees English as local in its use and global in its learning: and its monolingual teaching is assumed to be exportable as a global commodity, universally applicable, whatever the local circumstances of the learners”. Global marketing necessarily requires standardization of the product, which in this case is teaching materials, courses for prospective EFL teachers, and even of the language itself. The end result is a standardized, stereotyped view of the end-users – the teachers and the learners. The recognition of stereotyping in EFL education is not new, and many authors suggest that foreign language teaching methods and materials should not be generic but should be adapted for the learner. As to revision of generic materials, in some countries such as Spain, Italy and Chile, steps have been taken to ‘localize’ materials by having EFL courses written specifically for them, and in other countries, individualized supplementary materials been have produced. The British Council worked in Romania with local teachers on large-scale textbook projects to produce localized EFL teaching materials. In his report on this project Rod Bolitho (2002) noted that “Evidence from piloting questionnaires and from contact with individual learners and teachers has indicated gains in a number of areas”, from improvement in all the language skills to development of thinking, social and interpersonal skills, and even in enhancing independent study skills. For my research I had designed an introductory EFL course specifically for the learners I was working with and after using it in the classroom I found the same results. There are some publishers and editors who agree with the idea, and Gray (2002:165) says that “the future would involve even greater localization of materials. This is also the view taken by some global coursebook writers.” But I wonder when the future they are thinking of might be, because Gray (ibid.) also makes it clear that “while sales of the ‘one size
fits all’ materials remain healthy, an attitude of ‘if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it’ will prevail.” To my way of thinking, that adage should never be applied to education.

Some of the outcomes of globalized EFL education are that it augments learners’ stereotyped idea of the language itself, gives the idea that culture is unrelated to language and communication, and worst of all, implies that the learner’s prior knowledge, language and culture are unimportant. Corbett explains that: “Over the past few decades there rightly has been a suspicion of ‘one size fits all’ approaches to second language education”. (Corbett 2003:4; Yazdanpanah, Sahragard & Rahimi, 2010), and asserts that in an intercultural approach in language education: “Learning materials have to incorporate aspects of the home culture.” (ibid.), and I would insist that the learners’ L1 must also be incorporated. One result of not doing so is that learners are unable to relate the reality of the target language to their own. An instance of this can be seen in that learners I work with have told me that they consider English to be a language used only to speak of business. This singular view of the language stood out for me, because in really learning something one becomes involved with and/or attached to it, and as Pennycook (1994:338) asked, “How can one develop an attachment towards a language which is linked only to economic success?” I thought there should be a way to help a learner feel the warmth, the roundness, the life of the language they were learning. Some of the ways I considered doing this were to overtly discuss the culture of a place where the language is spoken, relating the language not only to real live people who speak it but to the learners themselves. Significantly, rather than focusing on difference, I focused on similarities of the target culture and language and the learners’ own.

4. The course and results

The course that I designed and used as the ‘medium’ in various classrooms in the research was meant to have a duration of about 30 classroom hours, depending on discussion times. I view the course itself as being a process, a sequence of stages of introducing not only the language but another culture, and imperatively, language and culture learning themselves. It is important to keep in mind that the course was written for adult, university level learners. I would suggest, however, that the principal ideas could be adapted for other learners. The first thing I considered in developing the course was my feeling of there being no beginning for adult foreign language learners in traditional language education. Along with using the learners’ first language, I decided that a good beginning might be to provoke learning awareness, beginning with learning awareness in discussing such things as how important conscious ‘noticing’ is, the fact that learning another language is neither fast nor easy, of realizing that no one is ‘perfect’ in any language, and so on. Promoting awareness was seen to be decisive, as a learner said: “I have learned a lot about myself, and I can see that I am capable of learning English.” (Data Q- 68) (Further insight into this aspect of the research can be gained from the article of Brooks-Lewis 2009 listed in the references.)

One of the stages of the process was to introduce the learner-participants to the English language, just as you would a person. As when introducing a person, it is usual to say something of their history, and I talked about the history of English. One learner-participant noted: “I have started to like English because now I understand a little more about its origins and its culture...Now I know the “why” of many things in English.” (Data E-118) I placed particular stress on the influence of Latin on English because of its similar influence on Spanish, and frequently referred to this when speaking of vocabulary and grammar. As mentioned earlier, comparison and contrast of the two languages and cultures were fundamental factors of the course, as was pointing out the ‘transparency’ of the two languages and similarities of the cultures. A learner-participant’s response to this was: “Comparing Spanish and English makes me see that the two languages have things in common, which makes the learning and understanding of English easier.”(Data Q- 36)Many times I found the responses emotional, and about the inclusion of the learners’ L1, one participant said: ”I didn’t just like having Spanish in the class, I loved it. I mean it’s a part of my being and because of that the teacher touched my heart.”(Data Q- 94)(Details of these aspects of the research can be found in Brooks-Lewis 2010 and 2011 listed in the references.)

From this I told a brief history of the beginning of the United States, because this would be the form of target language and culture we would work with. I explained that while there is no one culture of anywhere, this is especially true of the US, so what we would look at would be ‘core concepts’ of the culture in general. This was where in the course the concept of personal stereotyping was taken up, and participants’ writing about how they had
internalized this understanding was remarkably insightful, such as the following statement that “…learning as much as we can about each other’s culture prepares us to develop better relationships and to get rid of misconceptions and stereotypes created by the lack of realistic information about each other. (Data E-29) I think this is a wonderful recommendation for particularizing education, and what another learner-participant added special emphasis, articulating the intercultural learning concept that: “If we learn to respect other cultures different from ours, we would not have wars.” (Data E-146)

5. Conclusion

In this paper I have introduced the idea of stereotyping of teaching methods and materials in the globalization of foreign language education and how this results in the stereotyping of the ultimate end-user – the learner. I have shared ideas I have from my own and others’ research into how this problem of globalizing education might be improved by adapting teaching methods and materials for the specific learner in the hope that this will inspire you to undertake your own classroom-based research in the development of truly learner-centered foreign language education.

References


