

The English classroom as a social site for negotiating cultural identity

A pinch of Oman

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Abstract - The present paper reveals the findings of the author's ethnographic research she conducted into intercultural communication in the circle of her own students in the duration of her two-year-long teaching period in Oman. The study is aimed at understanding orientations to interculturalism focusing on mediating culture-specific features, communicative intent and emotional stances in the English classroom settings at an Omani university where the teacher is Hungarian and the students are Omani. The first languages (L1) of the participants are Hungarian (teacher) and Arabic (students), English, a second language (L2) for all of them is used as a tool of communication. The discourse-analytic approach to documentation and analysis of language-related episodes reveal the evolution of the participants' acceptance of the shared interpretation of crosscultural awareness and sensitivity. Free and spontaneous interactional exchanges exemplify how the students organize, regulate and negotiate their own and their teacher's conduct and language use. When analysing the participants' cultural behaviour, patterns are identified pertaining to cultural identity as reflected in various transformations, preferences, motivations and group affiliations.

I. Introduction

The longitudinal participant observation conducted in my English classroom provided a close insight and a better understanding of the process of interculturalism. I investigate the phenomenon in terms of shared attitudes and values. The classroom

itself provided a fruitful arena for investigating the group members' attitudes, norms, beliefs, values as expressed by the accepted behaviour of the members, including, of course, their language behaviour.

II. Discussion -- Cultures in contact

Analysing my dataset I witnessed how socially and culturally determined features are reflected and communicated in the way members of the classroom use language, for example, what they choose to say and how they say it. Also, I learned that some words, acts and behaviours may be used in certain circumstances and not in others, that certain topics, behaviours which have cultural connotations are considered profane if used outside the respective culture.(Al-Husseini, 2007) Below I give an overview of how culture is communicated and negotiated in interactions in terms of the participants' communicative intent by grouping the data according to certain categories.

1. Communicating shared values

When negotiating culture-specific features and cultural identity it was amazing for me to perceive that classroom discussions created a solid foundation for approximating cultures, and gave an opportunity to consider so far unknown aspects of interculturalism. (Gafaranga,2012) Similarly, the

classroom was the place where I could witness manifestations of a certain acculturation process and that of the assimilating efforts in both of us. Our talk-in-interactions gave evidence that the teacher and the students representing two distant cultures exhibited shared understanding and interpretations of general higher-order human values and are equally committed to approximating and accommodating to the locally established norms. I interpreted manifestations of alignment efforts and alliance formulation with the respective foreign community as the sign of a strong and conscious group affiliation effort. (Baker, 2006; Pavlenko, 2006) The examples below are to illustrate my conclusion.

'Teacher put on those clothes with the colours of Hungary, you know, the Omani colours are the same.'

'I bought the petticoat because I want to look like you. You put on an abaya, why can't I look like a European?'

'Eid in Oman is something like your fir tree decoration celebration'

'At home we wear clothes like you. Nefszusej, teacher.'

'For our national holiday you need henna. On this occasion Omani women must wear it. Then you look real Omani'

'Do you cook pig?' But eats rubbish. Ok, no worries, teacher, we love you anyway.'

'Do you go to school when it snows?' 'Do you go out in winter?'

For them rarely experienced heavy rains mean severe weather conditions when schools are closed and people stay at home having roads blocked by floods. As a consequence, being determined by

their cultural experience they assume, we have the same experience in our culture.

'Miss, His Majesty Sultan Qaboos gave happiness to Omani people. What's the name of your leader who did so much good to the people in your country?'

Discussions of political and economic issues were rare in the classroom and generally in the circle of local people for the simple reason that they are not interested in topics of such nature. However, once such topics emerged they expected a straightforward and shortcut answer.

My answer emphasizing that the leader of a country either elected or inherited should be committed to their nation's progress fully satisfied their expectations and was totally approved, at the same time it elicited my students' remark as follows:

'Then teacher, you think like an Omani.'

In the beginning I interpreted their directness and straightforwardness as a rude and impolite attitude, which greatly contributed to the cultural shock I overcame, later, however, with immersing in the new culture, I realized, it was a culture-specific phenomenon, which was primarily attributed to their insufficient language competence. Nevertheless, I was expected to answer all their questions even though some of them were utterly challenging and embarrassing. The utterance below exemplifies such a case.

'Teacher, would you like to live in Oman for the rest of your life?'

The utterances above give evidence that when talking about cultural specificities, they made definite attempts to shorten the distance and soften the differences between our two cultures by

emphasizing similarities simply to show their emotional attachment.

2. Constituting locally valued competences and identities – Socializing into local norms of conduct (Cekaite & Björk-Willén, 2012)

Language related episodes and spontaneous comments highlighted the normative preference for correct and relevant language use and emphasize the appropriateness of the relevant behaviour. The utterances below show how my students discipline me.

'Teacher, don't hurry, we always walk slowly.'

'Teacher, collect the prayer rug from your chair to make sure no one sits on it'

'Teacher, you mustn't mark him absent, he went to pray.'

The English classroom revealed manifestations of my students' dynamic and transforming identity, illustrations of how they regulate, identify and redefine themselves in the cultural group depending on their and their teacher's personal needs and interests. (Dörnyei, 2005) The English language served as a strategic tool to liberate their thoughts and to lower inhibitions.

While analysing the data I collected during my immersion teaching practice I identified a couple of examples that spontaneous classroom reactions between me and my students reflect the reciprocal character of communication where the interlocutors share and exchange values and ideas, organize, regulate, control and discuss the appropriateness of each other's behaviour and language use.

'Sorry teacher, I am late, because...'

'Don't touch her hair, it's rude in her country.'

'Give it a personal touch. Be confident'

The utterances above give evidence of my students' accommodation to my cultural expectations.

3. Accommodating to the established language use rules

1. Regulations in terms of the appropriate language use in the English classroom was a recurring element. We stated that using Arabic, a language that is not shared by each member of the group can have a bad impression of intentional exclusion of someone even though it is originally meant to signal privacy and alliance.

Their recurrent switch to Arabic needed constant regulation and disciplining in the classroom. To make them feel how rude, insulting and offensive their use of Arabic might be, all of a sudden, with no transition, I started to speak Hungarian as a response to their inappropriateness, which had a real chilling effect. Having perceived the intentionality behind my speaking in Hungarian, they stopped talking in their own language. At the same time, such embarrassing cases gave a good opportunity for me to allocate a couple of minutes to discuss culture-related issues. We grounded the rules to be obeyed in our culturally diverse environment and stated the importance of mutual crosscultural respect. Such discussions proved to be very effective and changed their attitude. We stated that the relevance of appropriate language is part of the local norms and it was a recurring topic of discussions.

4. Easing tension - Injecting humour

'Injecting humour' termed by Baker (2006) was used not simply for self-serving entertainment, my students usually operated it as an effective communication strategy. Switches to Arabic were frequently utilized tools to control power relationships in a discourse event and generate the

expected discourse behaviour, laughter, amazement, embarrassment in the interlocutor.

'Bidun warqa, teacher' (Without paper)

'You want to learn Arabic? Why don't you take notes? You will forget it.'

'She is taking a photo of it, teacher. Do you remember how it is in Arabic?'

Their emphatic and provocative repairs and requests are indexical of their authoritative position and of their entitlement to know and teach the correct use as persons who are more skilled in Arabic. Their remarks above appeared to be an effective tool to develop a counter-discourse with the aim to counterbalance their inequitable subject position in an embarrassing situation, e.g. when they failed to submit their homework. (Norton, 2000) The comments with reference to my Arabic knowledge and learning style released them and put them in the 'in-know' position. In addition, it also gave them an opportunity to abandon an embarrassing topic, win time and also divert my thoughts from the original curriculum. Provoking me for my mistakes and making it instances of a humorous moment was frequently operated by them.

They knew that I was eager to learn Arabic, thus they regularly checked out and monitored my progress. Several times when I failed to translate an English expression asked by them into Arabic, they echoed my comments I made in case of their failure and reproached me for using notes as cheating attempts with reference to my words that the curriculum should be reproduced by heart without using notes.

Inserting humour and bringing about humorous effects proved to be an effective strategic tool to defend themselves and to win attention. My

reactions, my relevant discourse behaviour, for example, laughter, smile on my face signalled for them that their humorous act hit the target. From the way I responded they concluded that they can redefine their position in the classroom, which gave them the opportunity to control the situation and also enhanced the stylistic effectiveness and intensity of their messages, as a consequence, they took advantage of such situations.

The switch to Arabic in the utterance below was meant to ease tension and embarrassment felt over not fulfilling responsibilities and expectations, also was well-placed to conciliate and soften me.

The utterance *'Szubri teacher, szubri!'* (*'Wait, teacher'*) with the relevant hand movement as a referential sign: shaking one fist in an upright position holding the tips of their three fingers (thumb, index and middle) together tight.

When talking about cultural specificities, they made definite attempts to shorten and even eliminate the distance between our cultures by overemphasizing certain features and disguise differences.

5. Directness in communicating cultural features

I perceived the directness in their behaviour and language use as weird, insulting and inappropriate at the start, though with the time proceeding I realized that was simply a manifestation of their cultural identity, which must not be considered as an untoward attitude, for the simple reason that they were attributed to their insufficient language competence. Still such manifestations of cultural identity evoked commentary and became the subject of discussions frequently because some of their movements and body postures made me feel uncomfortable. After a while I did not handle those attitudes as a trouble source and I did not interpret them as hostile and disregarding behaviour.

'Come, teacher!', *Szubri, {wait} teacher!*, *Cold, AC, teacher*' with the accompanying handwave first interpreted by me as disregarding and offensive, which often placed me in an inequitable subject position. Feeling discomfort, from time to time, I signalled them the inappropriateness of the move stating that in my cultural view and understanding such moves make a bad impression and have a negative connotation.

Similarly, emphasizing certain elements of verbal and non-verbal communication as prerequisites and key factors of successful communication astonished and scared them being constituting distinctions between our two cultures. Facing the problematicity of cultural differences was a frequently experienced phenomenon. When discussing presentation techniques and the requirements of oral performance I talked about the importance of an impressive and confident presentation in public and demonstrated what I meant in front of the class, their facial expression reflected enthusiasm and approval. However, when I asked them to do it in practice, rehearse those techniques and demonstrate what was discussed, they only giggled and refused to stand up and act out in front of the class. It took a while to persuade them to follow my instructions and exhibit the proper body and verbal language. In the beginning I instructed them how to deliver a talk in order to advance communication with reference to the tiniest details, such as: chin up, open lips, speak articulated and in high-voice, let your personality shine through the performance, give the presentation a personal touch, keep eye-contact and inject humour. First, they, especially the girls, found such a behaviour bizarre and profane. However, after a while, when they realized, they won attention and appreciation by displaying self-confidence, they started to accommodate. They were able to act impressively on the stage, in addition, they took upright pride of

their success and during peer assessment sessions they were eager to evaluate and criticize each other's performance.

Although I experienced high-level of cooperation and tolerance in their attitude, their rule and deadline ignorance and negligence were frequent trouble sources. Lateness, absenteeism were recurrent phenomena. To avoid conflicts and make repair without insulting them, in a respective way, I decided to ground classroom rules recurrently at the beginning of each classroom session. We started every class with listing the rules. I invited my students to name the rules to be obeyed one by one. As a response to my request they echoed all our classroom rules, such as: Phones are off, Don't be late, once you are, say why, Respect: I listen to you, you listen to me, Be confident, Speak clearly, Don't be angry, Be honest.

Establishing our own inner local rules, framing our social interactions and local norms, verbalizing our preference of the appropriate conduct and language use have greatly contributed to strong group affiliation. Also we established our vernacular style and manner, and forged a sense of belonging between us, which we experienced as a kind of alliance and privacy.

III. Conclusion

Undoubtedly, English served as a bridge to reveal cultural norms and shade meanings, the English classroom created a social site for intercultural communication to facilitate our knowing more about each other. Interpersonal interactions, long-term coexistence, loose conversations greatly contributed to handle taboos, to feel comfortable enough to discuss things without limitations and restrictions. The English classroom created favourable conditions for intercultural understanding for the simple reason that utterances, meanings conveyed in English were perceived as

less offensive and troubling for the cospeakers. In addition, long-term coexistence created a high-level of confidence, friendly rapport, loose conversations, which established a solid foundation for exchanging ideas, views and values. Nevertheless, we experienced that norms of the indigenous culture will always shine through.

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