Communicative Competence in Spanish-English Cross-cultural Language Education: Some Pedagogic Strategies Drawn from the National Arts

J. A. G. ARDILA

Universidad de Extremadura

Resumen

Las finiseculares aproximaciones pragmatistas a la enseñanza de las lenguas extranjeras exigen una particular atención a la intensionalidad de las lenguas y a las muchas aportaciones de la Etnolingüística. El presente artículo vindica la adquisición de la competencia comunicativa en el aula de lenguas extranjeras, y propone el empleo de una serie de ejercicios inéditos que se sirven de las artes, que son característica psicosocial de la cultura, a tal fin.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Competencia comunicativa, aproximación pragmatista, lenguas extranjeras.

Abstract

The growing contextualisation of foreign language teaching calls for a thorough emphasis on Ethnolinguistics as a means to understand and learn languages. This article vindicates communicative language acquisition, and further elaborates on the usage of a number of exercises — tailor-made to increase communicative competence in a foreign language and based on art as a psychosocial cultural feature.

KEY WORDS: Communicative competence, pragmatic approach, foreign languages.

Résumé

Les approches pragmatiques de la fin du siècle pour l'enseignement des langues étrangères exigent une attention particulière aux nombreuses contributions de l'Ethnolinguistique. Dans cet article on revindique l'acquisition de la compétence communicative dans la classe de langues étrangères et on propose l'emploi d'une série d'exercices inédits construits à partir du domaine des Arts, considerés comme éléments psychosociaux de la culture.

MOTS CLÉS: Compétence communicative, approches pragmatiques, langues étrangères.

The aim of this article is to suggest a number of pedagogic strategies that can effectively enhance communicative competence in foreign language teaching. I shall discuss the case of Spanish higher education on the grounds of those empirical experiences I have undergone in my classes of English language, and also of the ideas I fostered from designing the foreign language modules of the course of Anthropology at the University of Extremadura. Considering Dell Hymes's theories on communicative competence and the application of Anthropology and Ethnography to foreign language teaching, I found in my Faculty's newly-established course of Anthropology a prime opportunity to apply ethnolinguistic teaching to the field of Anthropology. Once the syllabi of two elective modules of English for Anthropology were designed, and included in the course curriculum by the university senate, the academic officials neglected the -to my understanding-- timely inclusion of these modules in the list of electives to be offered. Nonetheless, such ethnolinguistic spirit and didactic innovations I have profited from in my classes of English language at the Faculty of Teacher Education. Henceforth I shall give an account of my ethnolinguistic bias and also of the said activities, with which I have nurtured the class of language for general purposes.

Ethnolinguistics gained a momentum in the mid-20th century. At the time, whilst the great bulk of linguists endeavoured to analyse modern European languages, a number of linguists and anthropologists —namely Malinowsky, Sapir, and Boas— published their research on languages that lacked a written code. These linguists soon noticed the striking grammatical and idiomatic differences between their mother tongues and those languages they studied. Moreover, they soon realised linguistic disparities were chiefly imposed by cultural gaps, and that in seeking to study languages they were necessarily bound to study cultures.

Such research would subsequently second a number of new linguistic concepts that are imperative in both ethnolinguistics and foreign language teaching. The first of which was Malinowsky's situational context — i.e. the connotative power of context. Sapir's (1933) conclusions were the first step towards the concept of linguistic relativity, forged chiefly in the works of Whorf (1956)¹. A third contribution is Hymes's and Gumperz's ethnography of communication, which calls for an analysis of culture by way of language (Gumperz and Hymes, 1972).

Yet, to the aims of this article, a singular concept is that of *communicative* competence, which Hymes (1972) envisaged in deconstructing the ethnography of communication². Hymes conjectured that some particular situations where locutionary acts occur are fixed and can be regarded as communicative acts; in addition, he maintained that the nature of these situations differ substantially from one culture to another. Therefore, communicative competence is, Hymes concluded, the ability to communicate adequately in all social situations, intrinsically so amenable to culture.

In the same volume, Gumperz attempted to define communicative competence as «What a speaker needs to know in order to communicate effectively in cultural significant settings» (Gumperz, 1972: vii). Subsequent revisions of the term have attempted to deepen the ethnographic implications of the concept: Saville-Troike argued that communicative competence encompasses the knowledge of a great number of specific behavioural demeanours, and further elaborates:

Communicative competence extends to both knowledge and expectation of who may or may not speak in certain settings, when to speak and when to remain silent, whom one may speak to, how one may talk to per-

¹ One is to note, firstly, that Sapir's thought predominantly built upon the works of Boas, mainly *The Mind of Primitive Men* (1911) and *Anthropology and Modern Life* (1928). Whorf's arguments followed in the footsteps of his predecessors to elaborate the theory of linguistic relativity, of which Berlin and Kay (1969) and Lakoff (1974) were straightforwardly supportive. For a recent treatment of linguistic relativity applied to foreign language teaching vide my article «Linguistic Relativity in Foreign Language Teaching: A Didactic Proposal» (Ardila, 2000).

² Hymes reversed to Chomsky's (1965) theory of grammar competence, and concluded that grammar competence does not guaranty an optimal social outcome owing to the many different social settings of which a speaker must partake. Hymes also considered Bernstein's (1975) distinction between an elaborated code (learned at school) and a restricted code (learned in a vernacular setting). Bearing those antecedents in mind, Hymes concluded a speaker that only possesses a restricted code will not make do in an elaborated setting.

sons of different statuses and roles, what appropriate nonverbal behaviours are in various contexts, what the routines for turn—talking are in conversation, how to ask for and give information, how to request, how to offer or decline assistance or cooperation, how to give commands, how to enforce discipline, and the like—in short, everything involving the use of language and other communicative dimensions in particular social settings (1982: 21).

In an earlier publication (Hymes, 1967: 8-28), Hymes had proclaimed that any communicative act conveys eight components: situation, participants, ends, act sequences, key, instrumentalities, norms, and genre. Chronological and situational frames and psyco-social context make up situations; participants are classed according to their socio-cultural characteristics and also to the nature of their knowledge of one another; the ends are the particular and general psychological aims; the acts sequences are the organisation and structures of communication; key is the level of formality; the instruments are channel, language varieties, vocalisations, proxemics and kinesics; the norms may be interactional and interpretative; and the genre consists of the type of interaction and discourse sequences. In a particular language, communicative competence is achieved at the point where one is able to master all the eight components. Whilst nativespeakerhood confers communicative competence3, acquiring it in a foreign language is a rather iffy chapter in foreign language teaching -and most notably a tour de force for learners to learn and for teachers to teach. Communicative competence is, however, peremptory in foreign language learning. Broughton, Brumfit, Flavell, Hill and Picas even concede:

In fact, all our vast array of language use can be classified into many different categories related to the situation and purpose of communication. For a foreign learner, it might sometimes be more important to achieve this kind of communicative competence than to achieve formal linguistic correctness (1980: 30).

The want of communicative competence entails dramatic consequences, as Brein and David denounce⁴.

³ Native-speakerhood is, however, quite a vague concept. Linguists have been very much waffled by the controversy regarding native-speakerhood being acquired by birth. For a recent and most authoritative discussion on native-speakerhood vide Alan Davis (1997; 1991) and E. Bialystok (1994).

⁴ Brein and David suggest that failing to acquire a minimal level of communicative competence in a foreign language will result in culture shock: «The culture shock is precipitated by

Therefore, educationalists⁵ were soon eager to borrow the concept of communicative competence. Nevertheless, momentously as the partnership between Ethnolinguistics and foreign language teaching methodologies has grown, theoretical presumptions are far more prolific than the proposals for actual classroom activities to implement the communicative competence for which they call. Indeed, as mentioned above, such cultural reinforcement of foreign language teaching has become particularly relevant in the countries of the European Union. Not only are the many EU academic programmes, e.g. Socrates, Erasmus, Leonardo da Vinci, Interlingua, Oxymoron, etc., intent on providing linguistic competence in a foreign language, but they seek to endow the students' learning with the cultural and societal knowledge of a foreign country of EU membership. In designing the course of Anthropology and the syllabi of its course units I found a thrilling opportunity to undertake the teaching of English as a foreign language by way of the culture and society of English-speaking countries - with a especial emphasis on British culture, owing to the British membership of the EU. Where Casagrande (1954: 335) declared that «In effect, one does not translate LANGUAGES, one translates CULTURES», I forged the motto «We are not only learning a language, we are learning about its culture and society», originally conceived for the modules of English for Anthropology, which I now apply to those modules of language for general purposes of which I am the convenor.

The knowledge of culture is imperative to understand communicative competence and its implications⁶. Such is the point of José Luis Atienza (1993), who, in his «5 ideas para el debate sobre la enseñanza de las lenguas y de las culturas», suggests that culture is amenable to three ends: a psychosomatic end, i.e. both verbal and non-verbal performances; a psycho-cognitive end, i.e. what lies underneath the psychosomatic; and a psycho-social end, i.e. what is over the psychosomatic. Here, one is to bear in mind the difference between, in Ouellet's (1991)

the anxiety that results from losing one's cues to social interaction. The cues include the many ways in which one orients oneself to daily life: when to shake hands, when and how much to tip, when to accept invitations, when to take statements seriously, etc. The cues, which may be customs, gestures, facial expressions, or words, are primarily unconscious and are as much a part of one's culture as the language» (1971: 217).

⁵ Vide for instance, F. Erickson (1982), L. Van Lier (1988), D. Nunan (1989), J. Cots (1995). M. Canale (1983) further proposed the differenciation of four competences that make up communicative competence: linguistic competence, discoursive competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence.

⁶ For such a knowledge are *primus inter pares*: L. S. Vigotski (1962), A. Inkeles (1965: 66), M. Midgley (1980: 52-53), A. Giddens (1991: 36), and R. Linton (1982: 45).

terms⁷, culture *per se* and promotional culture — culture is acquired and shared by all members of a culture, and promotional culture is learned. The psychosocial end of culture, Atienza argues, is the source of which is characteristically learned. Art, therefore, belongs to the psycho-social end of culture, i.e. to civilisation. The corollary of all the above premises is that art, being a psycho-social feature of culture, is essential in order to understand culture; that is to say, mastering communicative competence necessarily implies understanding and appreciating art.

In designing the syllabi for the courses of English for Anthropology, I thought the vast majority of class time should be devoted to studying English for Social and Cultural Purposes and to sociolinguistics. By English for Social and Cultural Purposes I mean the study of texts of Anthropology that the future Anthropologists will need to read — and write⁸. The latest introductory surveys by Bernard Spolsky (1998) and Claire Kramsch (1998) offer a didactic-oriented approach to sociolinguistics and ethnolinguistics. Finally, attention may also be paid to culturally-imposed linguistic gaps. Furthermore, there are several pedagogic strategies based on cultural contextualisation which can introduce the students to the English-speaking cultures. Some activities may take up a whole module of cross-culturality, whereas they can also be jointly together conveniently inserted in a syllabus of general language teaching. In my lectures, I usually devote a number of introductory sessions to perform communicative competence activities.

Some —perhaps most— Spanish teachers of English as a foreign language would argue that the most representative examples of English culture are to be excerpted from the literature, e.g. Chaucer's analysis of Mediaeval society in his *Canterbury Tales*, Shakespeare's historic plays, and the like. Yet my on-going classroom observation suggests that the majority of young students fear foreign literature —inasmuch as they abhor the perusal of their own. I understand that a specimen of cultural identity is truly national when it is not likely to have been produced by any other people⁹. Examples of truly English art can be found, for

Vide also G. Zarate (1986), L. Porcher (1986). and R. Galisson (1991).

⁸ This is dramatic for the study of Spanish soci ty, since many authoritative essays on the issue are being published in English: in a number of top-referred journals and by English-speaking scholars, e.g. much of the research on the social role of the Spanish Church in the twentieth century is being done by British historians such as Frances Lannon (1987) and Audrey Brassloff (1998).

⁹ In his *Ensayos en torno al casticismo*, Miguel de Unamuno offers an intriguing analysis of the national arts (1998: 46): «Por natural instinto y por común sentido, comprende todo el

instance, in the Victorian era. In selecting artistic material (for the English for Anthropology lectures) I chose the works of two late-19th-and 20th-century British schools: the Pastoral school of music, and the Pre-raphaelite school of painting. My cross-cultural activities commonly follow these steps:

- 1) to show the learners samples of both Spanish and English national arts;
- 2) to help them to perceive those examples in their cultural setting and as the psycho-social offspring of that particular culture;
- 3) to get the learners to experience the foreign cultural setting by getting themselves embedded in national art —and to oppose it blatantly to their own culture.

I usually begin with music, a discipline out of which Spanish Flamenco and English Pastoral music were selected for a classroom audition. My students agree that Flamenco is, perhaps, a quintessential representation of southern Spanish culture—a fact must be allowed for: almost all my students are from Extremadura; the same activity may not produce the same effect in Northern provinces. I then inform them that Spain is the second noisiest country in the world—only second to Japan—, and point out that Flamenco music is very likely to be loud because Spain is a noisy culture (according to the concept of linguistic relativity¹⁰). Afterwards I play Vaughan Williams's *The Lark Ascending*, and ask the students to notice its soft quiet cadence and to consider it the corollary of the English penchant for calmness. Still bearing the Flamenco tunes in mind, I play Percy Grainger's version of *A Lincolnshire Posy*, replaying the movement entitled *The Lost Lady Found* in order that the learners appreciate its slow, calm cadence and

mundo que al decir arte castizo, arte nacional, se dice más que al decir ciencia castiza, ciencia nacional; que si cabe preguntar qué se entiende por quimica inglesa o por geometria alemana, es mucho más inteligible y claro el hablar de música italiana, de pintura española, de literatura francesa. El arte parece ir más asido al ser; y éste más ligado que la mente a la nacionalidad, y digo parece porque es apariencia. El arte no puede desligarse de la lengua tanto como la ciencia. ¡Ojalá pudiera! Hasta la música y la pintura, que parecen ser más universales, más desligadas de todo laconismo y temporalismo, lo están, y no poco; su lengua no es universal sino en cierta medida, en una medida no mayor que la de la gran literatura. El arte más algébrico, la música, es alemana o francesa o italiana.»

I retake Unamuno's idea of national arts in order to apply it to the ethnolinguistics of foreign language teaching.

¹⁰ In fact, sociology surveys a 93 percent of Spaniards have never attended a classic music concert, whereas 15 million Britons (i.e. a 23 percent of the population of Britain) listen to classic music on a very frequent basis. The data was provided on the Spanish television channel Tele5 8:30 (p.m.) news on 28 December 2000 (at, precisely, 21:11).

rhythm as an image of the English liking for country calmness. In Edward Elgar's *Pomp and Circumstance March 1* the British feeling about order and solemnity can be elicited; and Vaughan Williams's *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis*, I would suggest, reveals the profound quietness of the English character.

Likewise, in exposing the pictures of the Pre-raphaelite painters, such as Rossetti, Burne-Jones, Hunt or Millais, I present my students with the English love for Romantic tales and their epic past —but, most especially, with the art which resulted from these artists' neglect of classic Renaissance, and also from their returning to and focusing on English ancient identity¹¹.

Afterwards, I display one of these Pre-raphaelite paintings while playing a Pastoral tune: Rossetti's *Bower Meadow* and Vaughan Williams's *Fantasia on Greensleeves*. Greensleeves is, perhaps, the melody that best matches The Bower Meadow—and vice versa—: the ladies in the picture seem to dance along the rhythm of that piece, and one of them is playing a lyre—one of the leading instruments in Greensleeves is a harp. The students will soon elicit that neither Flamenco music nor most of the Spanish classic composers could match Rossetti's picture better than English Pastoral music—indeed Greensleeves is allegedly regarded the musical piece that is most representative of English culture.

Finally, the third and last step of my activity consistently turns out most intriguing. I ask my students to split up into groups (of two, three, and four) and talk in Spanish while I play some Flamenco music —on point 4 on a volume scale of 10. After they have talked for one minute, I ask them to stop and inquire whether they have been able to hear the Flamenco song. They all admit they can hear it clearly while they are chatting. I then tell them to carry on conversing since I need time to rewind the tapes. Instead, I linger for one minute and then play *The Lark Ascending* on the same volume point. The beginning of this piece is so low that the first thirty seconds (approximately) can hardly be heard in silence. Yet, even when the piece raises its normal volume, the students' loud

Il Maria J. A. C. Cordeiro has proclaimed the convenience of using painting in foreign language teaching (2000: 253): «Numa época em que se assiste ao triunfo das imagens, em que os olhos se tornaram ávidos de alimento continuo, também na aula de línguas estrangeiras o recurso à imagem—nas suas diferentes variantes, artísticas ou não, como o desenho, a fotografia, o cartoon, o quadro—conquistou inegável importância. Os objectos de arte pictóricos, em particular, propoem un vasto leque de possibilidades didácticas, tanto no dominio da língua, como da cultura. Paisagens, naturalezas mortas, representações de interiores, retratos humanos, cenas de rua,...—podem servir os mais diversos fins (prática de determinadas estruturas gramaticais, alargamento de áreas vocabulares específicas, produção escrita e/ou oral de uma história), e, enquanto poderosos representantes de uma cultura (de uma época), permitem abordar e discutir aspectos de relevância cultural e civilizacional.»

vocalisation overlaps and silences it. I require silence, and when the students are quiet anew, they realise the piece is in fact being played. At that point I explain to them that *The Lark Ascending* is a very popular melody in England and that I have often heard it at restaurants, shopping centres, and even on coaches. Most important, I emphasise that whenever I have heard it in a public place, it could be listened to clearly, since the pitch and vocalisation in the English language is very

-much lower, at least, than in Spanish.

Vocalisation is a very important feature of language (cf. Fay, 1997: 321): it is one of the instruments Hymes deems a necessary component in communicative competence, and failing to adequate one's speech to the adequate pitch when speaking a foreign language conveys a number of disturbing connotations—especially when the differences are as conspicuous as in the case of English and Spanish. Samovar's and Porter's definition of communication, forged in the context of intercultural language education¹², illustrates that my students' Spanish vocalisation would not, if maintained, contribute by any means to an appropriate communication in English.

Once I have caused them to realise the inappropriateness of the Spanish pitch when speaking English I proceed to provide them with the practical exercise that helps them to acquire an English pitch — without having to partake of countless locutionary acts with native speakers. Leaving the stereo on the same volume as before, I play *The Lark Ascending* and explain that in order to speak English with the appropriate vocalisation they must be able to hear the piece while they are talking. The purpose of this exercise is twofold, for not only does it serve to reach the vocalisation which is decidedly much closer to the English pitch than to the Spanish, but it also denounces the glowing differences between the two languages, and the necessity to make a serious effort to master the foreign pitch.

Outside the realms of British culture but still within the English-speaking domain, there is yet another intriguing classroom activity I believe particularly expressive in order to pinpoint the startling cultural perceptions of the world held by two disparate cultures. This experience I partook of as a student in the USA in a unilateral version. During a lecture, the professor asked us to write

L. Samovar and R. Porter (1994: 7-8): «Communication may be defined as that which happens whenever someone responds to the behavior or the residue of the behavior of another person. When someone perceives our behavior or its residue and attributes meaning to it, communication has taken place regardless of whether our behavior was conscious or unconscious, intentional or unintentional.»

which two books we would take to a desert island with which to educate our children, were we stranded there for good. Most of us chose the Bible and a dictionary. Wherever I have asked my Spanish students to choose two books to take to their own imaginary desert islands, I have usually found that their attitude differs most significantly from that of the Americans: while the Americans wrote quietly, the Spaniards seldom stop themselves from talking to each other, and, indeed, I can hardly ascertain whether they write their own choice. In one of the lectures all students but two declared they were incapable of answering such a difficult question and they spent their time writing a brief account of their lives — two of them even refused to write about anything: notwithstanding my encouraging them, they claimed their creativeness (or, rather, their want of it, I would say) was not ready for such a sophisticated challenge as literary creation. Only three out of those (52) who carried out the task chose the Bible, and only one preferred a dictionary, whereas the others proposed moral literature for children, Cervantes's Don Quixote and made up titles, such as Surviving Manual or How to Survive in a Desert Island. When questioned which books they thought the Americans chose, none of my Spanish students dared jump into conclusions. As I revealed the response of my American classmates they usually startle, for in their prior deliberations they considered the Bible and dictionaries but did discard them right away -some even laughed at the possibility of such an old-fashioned choice.

I would suggest the activities I propose are an optimal means to bridge some culture gaps and to illustrate to what extent these disparities impact language. Undoubtedly, the current political, economic, and professional ends of the EU are demanding a serious intensification of cultural education in the foreign language classroom which, I believe, must be achieved through activities that can actually bring fruition. Classroom cultural immersion by way of such activities is the only means to make the students come close to attaining communicative competence. My experience in using these activities in my lectures of English language evinces a dramatic change in my students' bigoted perception of English culture: they discovered a new interest in learning English and in English-speaking cultures, some of them had previously abhorred. Yet the possibilities the foreign language teacher is given by the exploration of language through culture are multifarious, e.g. the differences between Peninsular-Spanish and British-English prosody are evident in music¹³, or Hogarth's paintings are the closest portraiture to eighteenth-century English society whereas Goya's are to nine-

¹³ For a most recent survey on foreign prosody acquisition vide Cortés Moreno (2000).

teenth-century Spain, not to mention the array of possibilities that the desertisland situation offers. As referred above, cultural realisations can play a momentous role in foreign language teaching; yet, in addition to that, they are an indispensable reference in order to achieve communicative competence.

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