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Communication Unbound

Coming to Know the Unknown: An Attitudinal Response

Prajna Pani, Ph.D., M.Phil., in English

Abstract

The possibilities for collaborative learning and virtual reality to enhance English language skills are currently attracting considerable academic interest. The teacher and the taught and the subject that is taught stay connected at a global level. The aim of the paper is to meet the challenges in international business to secure effective collaboration from employees who have different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The paper focuses on Communication Unbound, the way it relates to English language teaching and the position of non-native teachers of English and the strategies to empower them through 'learning -to - learn' approach.

Key Words: Useful Ignorance, Miscommunication, Awareness, Self Construct, Collaboration

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The limits of my language stand for the limits of my world - Ludwig Wittgenstein

The paper outlines the experience of English teachers and attempts to address and circumvent the problems involved, and demonstrate a collaborative, learning-centered language environment. This suggests the potential to influence the learner's attitude to language and to learning, increase motivation, and shape their experiences and actions in the classroom.

Factoid

There is a growing need to be aware of the culture of learning that shapes the way a second language is learned and taught. It is often found that the teacher and the students are the players of a "blame game" when the teaching process is found faulty or problematic. Either the student is to blame, or vice versa. In this sense, an understanding of the different perceptions, positive beliefs about foreign language learning, knowledge of the values inherent in a culture of learning, a positive attitude and use of a greater number of teaching strategies, can facilitate mutual understanding. This improves teachers' performance, students' language achievements and contributes to effective teaching/learning outcomes.

Strategies for Teachers of English

Useful Ignorance

Education is a process by which a person begins to learn how to learn. The implication here is that 'Not Knowing' needs to be put to work when you don't know the 'what' and "how" of learning (Pani, 2010). This paper adopts the methodology learning to learn in support of teachers of English. The culture and the linguistic shock have resulted in the immediate need to radically alter the understanding of what it is to learn a second language and employ 'useful ignorance' in learning a language. The pedagogy here is a way of doing learning and teaching - teaching *with an attitude*. It is about connecting the word with the world, extending the educational space to the socio- cultural dynamics of language use.

Inclusion of Real Concerns

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Teachers and students experience pragmatic failure, i.e., the inability to understand what is meant by what is said. The paper highlights ‘pragma-linguistic failure’ and ‘socio-pragmatic failure’. The former is a linguistic problem and the latter originates from cross-culturally different perceptions of what constitutes appropriate linguistic behavior. The paper emphasizes the important aspect of communication style, i.e., the customary or established use of words. Some usage patterns are so rare that it is very difficult to learn them, even with massive input. For instance,

Five dollars is a lot of money is correct but *Dollars is often used instead of Rubles in Russia* is wrong. In the second case, *dollars are* would be a more appropriate expression because the word *dollars* is a special case. When talking about an amount of money, it requires a singular verb, but when referred to dollars themselves, a plural verb is required. Ignorance of the subtle distinctions in the varieties of language and translations create barriers in communication. The expression *I belongs* is a grave mistake and the expression *She don't* is very common in various regions and varieties in English and this is due to lack of linguistic awareness. Again the business world is besieged with poor translations that have caused great problem to their executers due to their lack of cultural sensitivity. Meanings of words are determined by the uses of words within linguistic and cultural settings, never the same in any two cultures. English learners need to learn the words in English as well as the cultural background that gives the words their English meaning. They need to learn words in context to understand the meaning. Therefore, it is necessary for us to call upon cross-cultural awareness, appropriate pedagogical practice and intercultural communication skills to facilitate the learning process.

Self Construct

The paper is built around the *self*- a critical examination of the self. It highlights self- confidence, self- esteem, self - directed learning; self- access learning, self- awareness and self - construct which have emerged in recent years. There are things we inherit but we can change the attitude about it. I would say teachers are the key agents of change. The ownership of any language i.e., the power to adapt and change rests with people who use it (Seidlhofer, 2003). Self-efficacy is an important factor in the successful implementation of educational practice. Administrators and

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Academicians should develop intervention programs like professional development programs either to maintain or enhance teachers' sense of efficacy.

Language proficiency constitutes the foundation of the professional confidence of non-native English teachers. Since language proficiency is related to a teachers' sense of self efficacy, it is suggested that teacher education programs like trainings, workshops and short term courses be organized. Their involvement as life members of different professional bodies, exposure to various language learning platforms, adequate preparation in study skills will build a strong sense of efficacy to use the language and engage students in learning English. The main goal is to help the teachers of English to become the best they can be to reach their potential as a competent educator and receive appreciation as a successful teacher.

Addressing Miscommunication

The non-native teachers of English often ask a question *Is English really a notoriously confusing and crazy language?*

If yes, I would say it originates from the ground floor and the first floor, from the American Trunk of a car and boot in England, different pronunciations for the same words (the American (Sked-ju-el) and the British (Shed -ju-el) and different spellings (centre vs. center). Expressions, familiar to western native speakers would be completely confusing and unintelligible to non western people. The use of hypocoristic words like lechie (lecture) G'day, (good day), sandie (sandwich), ump" (umpire), tabbie (tablet) is widespread.

The mushrooming of New Englishes the globe over can cause miscommunication and mistrust. For example, in Malaysia, to have *an off day* it means to have a *day off*, not a bad day, and *to chop* a document it means to rubber-stamp it, not to cut it. In Britain, one finds people using *sick* or *wicked* to mean good, with great scope for misunderstandings.

Variety in English usage exists even when comparing countries where English is the first language. Words such as portico, bazaar, verandah, gherao, tote form part of spoken and written

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English, sometimes as standard usage. English language carries its unifying property from its openness to new varieties of English in different territories where it has taken root. The real problem arises when there is lack of awareness and understanding of the geographical reach of English and its consequent fracturing into countless overlapping varieties.

Language has also morphed with the current times. The hazy wired use of language is a threat to teachers of English and English Studies as well. Removal of hyphen in co-ordination or use of the simplified left justification, excessive use of acronyms like BFN for bye for now, >:D for demonic laughter, IRL for in real life, LOL instead of laughing out loud, BRB instead of Be right back has corrupted English in the global world. Emails, chat rooms and web pages have made words on the screen more informal. Non native educators need to be careful about the communicative norms. This paper addresses and explores the challenges of language on intercultural context provides techniques for improved cross cultural communication in English between speakers of different native languages.

Do the boys in the mailroom and the girls in the front office bother you?



The image here demonstrates the abuses of language and communication. In today's challenging international business environment, it is essential that your communications do not

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offend, exclude, or inadvertently insult others.

Communicating with bias, prejudice toward or unfair characterisation of the members of a particular group, can result in loss of business, and even trigger conflict. The racial or ethnic bias stereotypes or demeans others based on their race or ethnicity. Blatantly derogatory statements, such as you people, or those foreigners are unacceptable in any context. The bias-attitude is reflected in our language and the way in which people interact with each other. Therefore, it is important to be sensitive to racial, ethnic, age, religious, socioeconomic, political, occupational, and gender groups. The use of unbiased language is a matter of showing respect for and sensitivity to the feelings and beliefs of others. The strategies of biasfree communication are designed to create a sensitive and more inclusive ambiance.

Gender bias in language or sexist language in communication demeans an individual or individuals because of their gender. Traditionally, the masculine pronouns were used to represent all members of a group, regardless of gender. However, many people feel that using the generic *he* and *him* and similar pronouns encourages and reinforces gender-role stereotyping—that is, the belief that men are superior, more able or better-suited to hold a certain occupation or status in society. Language that is sexist brings attention to differences between men and women in ability, temperament, behavior, or occupation.

Such language, whether used intentionally or unintentionally, often offends people and spoils interpersonal relations. In adapting a message to its audience, be sure you are conscious of your communication style and what it may imply. It takes awareness and a lot of practice. There needs to be a description of how the language looks at a particular time rather than as a prescription of what is correct. The constant evolution of language makes new editions necessary. Many people have come to use the word “disinterested” to mean “uninterested” instead of ‘without bias’. Words come and go, and yesterday’s slang is often acceptable today.

English and globalisation have spread hand in hand through the world. Disowning English is a failure in business. There are many instances of business failures like promotion of Chevy Nova at General Motors in Latin America because they did not realize that in Spanish *no va* means it

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doesn't go, American airlines could not advertise its new leather first class seats in the Mexican market, it translated its *Fly in Leather* campaign literally, which meant *Fly Naked* (vuela en cuero) in Spanish. You and I probably speak a common language - English – but our use of that language is far from uniform. If we knew how each of us modified the language, miscommunication would be minimized.

Now the major question is how to 'enculture ourselves' within a western English speaking community?

Knowledge and Awareness

The main and most important key to effectual cross-cultural communication is knowledge. It is extremely essential that people understand the probable problems of cross-cultural communication, and makes a huge cognizant effort to overcome these problems. The openness to change and the commitment to learn from other viewpoints should be the attitudinal response. It comes from our intention to better understand differences and our commitment to interact with the diversity of cultures and groups in our community. That includes social and economic backgrounds, abilities and disabilities, beliefs and sexual orientation.

Patience

There is one area of language learning where knowing the right way of pronunciation or grammar does not immediately translate into "doing it the right way". One can spend hours listening to a native speaker saying a word, and still be unable to repeat it properly. In fact, learning to pronounce the sounds of a new language or master the rules of grammar takes time. The main challenge lies in the fact that, for most teachers, English Phonology input, provided by college education programmes, generally does not equip them with the necessary tools for transforming, reorganising or adapting the course content to their needs as language users and as English teaching professionals.

On the other hand, teachers do not feel prepared or confident enough to carry out speech work with their own students. The teachers can attend to some pronunciation courses. Helping the

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teachers identify possible directions to meet their pronunciation needs has been a special concern. Speech improvement lessons and short pronunciation modules may be designed to assist the learners on their own journey towards self-knowledge and self-reliance. Focus is on the process of learning- how they learn in addition to what they learn, so that they become aware of the wide range of alternative strategies available to them for pronunciation learning.

Emotional Intelligence Lead to Language Learning Performance

Emotional intelligence and empathy are a part of second language acquisition. Skills of cultural awareness are part of the newly developed subject of emotional intelligence, coined by psychologist Daniel Goleman. Teachers ought to develop awareness of their learners' culture of learning including their needs, wants, capacities, potentials and learning style preferences to meet learners' expectations and to foster their guided style-stretching. Facilitators should continuously re-design new study plans which can cater for learner-teacher needs, so that they take control over their learning towards more independent learning. Developing EQ and good communicative language teaching go hand in hand, however the group dynamics necessary for meaningful interaction in the class do not occur automatically, but need to be fostered through techniques which build confidence, create a positive classroom atmosphere and encourage cooperation.

Collaboration

For the empowerment of teachers of English development of an appropriate pedagogy is a must. Collaborative learning, task-based learning and discovery techniques can be used to help both teachers and students learn for themselves. The model of 'Four Walls' concept is problematic today. The focus on collaborative design can support the non-native learners in communicating ideas, sharing information, problem solving and other learning activities which address the dimensions of growth and motivation.

This study proposes a variety of approaches via multimedia tools including internet use, blog, email, on-line chatting, gaming, video conferencing that reflect culture and utilize authentic language for leading to an exciting and cross-cultural curriculum and creating an authentic

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learning environment. Metaphors such as Web, Net, Network, Chat room and all Links suggest connection. The purpose is to facilitate quick learning, and encourage collaborations by effectively practicing the communicative proficiency in terms of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. This indicates that a change in concepts of learning has been taking place, especially among those young people who have been exposed to the culture of learning. Inclusion of ‘culture spot’ or ‘cultural corner’ in the curriculum and enculturation is very important. They help in exploring new avenues for teaching and learning. This change will, at least in principle, have an impact on their English language learning and classroom behaviours.

Teachers need to free themselves from traditional thoughts or methodological dogmatism and cultural stereotypes and look for collaboration that blend the best practices from their own culture and the culture that their students are bringing with them into the classroom. The students’ views, perceptions and comments, no matter how subjective and critical they might sound, will enable non native English teachers to identify the gap between their espoused teaching principles and the students’ interpretation of them, as well as students’ perceptions of their learning experience, to critically reflect upon their teaching practices . Also dealt with in this study are bridging strategies that can help educators to adjust their teaching styles to the needs of their students. This is particularly important in international context.

The saying *coming together is a beginning; keeping together is progressing; working together is success* rightly goes with the right attitude (Ford, 2011). Thus, Global platform allows more people to plug and play, collaborate and compete, share knowledge and work. Using tools from multimedia in teaching and learning all aspects of the foreign language greatly enhance the possibility learning/teaching success.

This study is to elaborate curriculum design by exposing teachers to differential cultural interpretations for language education and make it learning centered, aiming to design an information technology based English course for students. Adequate attention also needs be paid to both meanings and linguistic forms so as to meet their needs to pass the TOEFL or IELTS examinations, required for enrollment of international students into various institutions.

Moreover, classroom materials and the topics for group discussion should be carefully selected to stimulate the students' interest and help them to express themselves freely without embarrassment when they make a mistake. Preference can be given to a class mixed with students from other cultures which would contribute to their linguistic skills and cross-cultural communication. It is necessary to plan strategy for sharpening perception cross-culturally.

The potential for pedagogy would reside in knowing which features tend to be crucial for international intelligibility and thus should be taught for production and reception, and which (non-native) features tend not to cause misunderstandings and thus do not need to constitute a focus in the teaching for production. Exposure to a wide range of varieties of English and a multilingual approach are likely to facilitate the acquisition of learnability skills. Research on language variation and change, understanding of nativized varieties, pidginization and creolization as well as work on plain English use will strengthen the position of teachers.

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