

Perception and Prejudice in Oral Communication

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Abstract

Successful teachers of English as a Foreign Language understand the power of their 'classroom talk'. They recognize and understand the prejudices that they bring into the classroom and use accommodative processes that will enhance student rapport, attentiveness and ultimately learning. Successful teachers balance linguistic convergence and divergence techniques to accommodate for the differences between individuals in the classroom.

Everyone enters a social situation with 'baggage'. It can be the conscious and current weight of a bad night's sleep or worry over a sick child or parent, which often affects the manner in which we deal with others on any given day. Far less obvious, but much more powerful is the deep-rooted, often non-conscious baggage we bring into our oral interactions that help people create their impressions of who we are and what we believe. The individual is often the last person to fully understand the signals he/she sends to others. The teacher is no different, and given the classroom environment it is important that the educator is fully aware of the existence of such paradigms as they can be either an extremely positive facilitation of learning or a detrimental intrusion that no amount of lesson planning can eradicate. This is particularly true in the second language classroom, and even more so in the English as a Foreign Language class, as discussed in this chapter.

Dwyer (1989) states "...the theory holds that against the background of our experience, beliefs and intentions we attribute certain motives, intentions and abilities to others, thus converging or diverging from their language behavior and signaling through our language, gestures,

tone of voice, body movements and so on our own values and attitude toward them" (p. 32).

This statement encompasses an infinite set of cultural, professional, personal, cross-cultural and linguistic situations. To determine whether the quote holds true in all these situations would be a monumental task. For the purpose of this chapter, we shall discuss the idea with regard to inter-group and cross-cultural situations, with particular reference to the second language classroom.

To 'attribute certain motives, intentions and abilities to others' is a prejudgment or prejudice, and so we shall use the term prejudice, not in the classical sense of intolerance, but in the sense that we all have certain personal biases based on our linguistic perceptions of others.

Much like the old sociological arguments of heredity versus environment, there are theories in linguistics which argue that language determines thought (linguistic determinism) versus culture determines language. Early in the history of linguistic studies (1930s), Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf claimed that one's mother tongue determined the way one would view the world. They theorized that our outlook on life was innately fused to the categories and structure of our first language. Their ideas have become known as the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis. Today, most theorists believe that the human manipulates the language, not the other way around. (Yule, 1985) It is agreed however, that the different group language and culture do reflect various and differing world views (Yule, 1985).

Regardless of which point of view is taken, individuals will judge and react to others differently, depending on how they perceive the person. These perceptions are very much linked to language use and body language. Teachers of English as a Foreign Language should be very cognizant of the bias they bring to the classroom in order to consciously control the oral messages transmitted.

One common example of differing perceptions on a large scale, involves large groups and varying dialects. In the United States, African-Americans use a social dialect commonly referred to as Black English Vernacular (BEV). African-Americans were officially segregated and discriminated against historically and so BEV carries with it many prejudicial connotations (e.g. 'bad English'). An interesting study of African-American five to six year old boys and girls, by Washington and Craig (1998), showed that BEV is spoken by all socioeconomic groups. Linguists argue that BEV is not 'bad' but simply carries with it rules and structures found in other dialects, but not in Standard English. Labov (1972) showed that lower-class speakers can handle abstract intelligent concepts despite the non-standard language and the restricted code. This carries important significance for education. Yule sights that BEV has similar structures in Russian and French. These arguments are academically interesting, but do not change the social perceptions of BEV. Unfortunately, most North Americans speak English, and compare BEV to Standard English, not to French or Russian.

Many non African-Americans today do not criticize BEV as an identity unto itself, but would certainly view an African-American negatively, if he/she were to speak BEV during a formal situation. If they are incapable of speaking Standard English in a business or formal situation, they would be viewed as uneducated or, in the extreme, not very intelligent. It should be noted that this is not totally without merit, since all languages have a standard level for use in formal situations, which individuals are required to master if they wish to function in such settings. On the other hand, teachers need to be fully cognisant of this common prejudice, since the majority of their language students will not be functioning at a high English level and therefore will not have mastered a language form which would constitute Standard English proficiency. Standard speakers tend to be rated higher on intelligence, ambition and confidence than non-standard speakers. (Ryan, Giles and Sebastian, 1982) One form of racism that Skutnabb-Kangas (1990) termed as 'linguicism' accepts the prestige world

languages such as Standard English as intrinsically better. Once again, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers should honestly reflect on their own level of linguisticism, and work to erase it in the classroom.

The question remains, just how would someone speaking one language (dialect or with a certain accent) react to a speaker using another form, in varying situations? Preston (1992), evaluated Lambert's matched guise procedure (Lambert, Hodgson, Gardner and Fillenbaum, 1960), as well as other studies done, to elicit both attitudes to language and the underlying stereotyped beliefs held by groups about each other. It should be noted that many attitudinal studies have been completed by people like Lambert, with backgrounds in social psychology rather than by sociolinguists, and therefore lack linguistic detail. Bell (1984) and Trudgill (1986) represent major attempts to integrate the detailed findings of sociolinguists with the studies of social psychologists. Trudgill found that stylistic variations can be explained by the processes of convergence and divergence within interpersonal social dynamics. Bell (1997), using the accommodation theory, notes that "the link between differences in the language of different groups (social variation in Labov's terms) and within the language of different speakers ('stylistic' variation) is made by society's evaluation of the group's language" (p. 244).

Accommodation is the adjustment of one's speech or other communicative behaviors vis-à-vis the people with whom one is interacting. Communication accommodation theory (CAT) is a framework designed to explore accommodative phenomena and processes, and in its early years was concerned with the antecedents and consequences of shifting one's language variety towards or away from another, called speech convergence or divergence, respectively. Whether verbal or nonverbal, some accommodative processes can have profound social implications (Asher, 1994). Teachers need to constantly evaluate their own language and determine whether their accommodative processes maintain an appropriate level of convergence to make the student feel comfortable and respected, while at the same

time using divergence to improve the spoken English of the students. Master teachers intuitively find the appropriate convergent level for any given class. Teachers who are struggling with student rapport, student attentiveness and/or student academic achievement in the classroom should observe as many successful teachers as possible in order to attempt to redefine their spoken English in the classroom. In most cases, it is not what content is being taught, but how that knowledge is being transmitted orally. Speech convergence and accommodative processes are fundamental to any successful classroom environment. Labov (1972) did find that speakers using less social and stylistic variation resembled more closely the speech patterns of higher social groups. In studies by Gutierrez (1994), the upper-middle socioeconomic group showed only 8% innovation, whereas the low socioeconomic group showed 29% innovation. This is probably recognized intuitively by most speakers of any language.

One method cited for recognizing modern bias (in the extreme, racism), is described in the work of Schnake and Ruscher (1998). They found that how abstractly communicators characterize the behavior of others is one way that underlying beliefs about them may be betrayed. Like other implicit measures of prejudice (Dunton and Fazio, 1997), the linguistic abstraction of out-group stereotypical behaviors can serve as a subtle measure of a person's level of prejudice. Teachers commenting on the fact that their Arabic students have difficulty with a particular consonant differentiation such as 'p' and 'b' is quite different than teachers who state that none of their students are capable of grasping abstract concepts. The latter teacher has either not learnt to accommodate their language to the classroom or comes with serious bias to the teaching situation.

There have been substantial studies done that prove individuals do bring to a dialogue personal bias or prejudices based on linguistic variations, but what role does convergence and divergence play in these interactions, particularly in the language classroom?

One of the most important functions of language variation is to enable individuals to identify with a social group or to separate themselves from it (Crystal, 1987).

Asher (1994) proposes that speech convergence reflects a speaker's or a group's needs (often non-conscious) for social integration or identification with another. It has been argued, and often found, that increasing behavioural similarity (or put another way, reducing dissimilarities) along communicative dimensions in social interaction is likely to increase speakers' perceived attractiveness, predictability and supportiveness, level of interpersonal involvement, and speakers' ability to gain their listeners' compliance. Lambert et al (1960) showed that the more effort in convergence a speaker was perceived to have made, the more favourably that person was evaluated and the more these same listeners would converge back in return. This is the tacit understanding that a successful teacher brings to the classroom. Often it is confused with lesson planning, scaffolding or classroom management skills. These tools can all be learned. Often what student teachers or observers miss is the innate ability of master teachers to flow into a linguistic accommodative state as soon as they enter the classroom. This talent creates an atmosphere of immediate respect and comfort, which in turn, facilitates the lesson and the classroom behavior. If students sense that a teacher is sincere, easy to understand and likes them (demonstrated by no apparent prejudgments about their world), then they are more likely to react positively to that instructor. This is linguistic convergence. Convergence is not always viewed favorably. In the classroom situation, convergence is a delicate process. Students would be very suspicious of a teacher (as an out-group member), who converges too drastically with student 'lingo' and the reverse is also true. Depending on the level of the students, convergence could be seen as condescending or prejudicial. We are all familiar with those primary school teachers who speak 'baby-talk' with students. Even six year olds, regard this method of speaking as condescending. This is called over accommodating by the use of patronizing language (Ryan, Hammert and Boich, 1995). In the second

language learning (SLL) situation, it could go further and be viewed as a belief by the speaker that the students are not intelligent.

Divergence, on the other hand, refers to the ways in which speakers increase perceived dissimilarities of speech and nonverbal differences between themselves and others. (Asher, 1994) Some studies have shown that divergence is often seen by its recipient as rude and hostile. Yet, divergence could be used positively in the second language classroom to upgrade the level of the SL in students. On the other hand, the use of one language instead of another empowers the native speakers of that language and disenfranchises the non-speaker or the speaker who uses it only as a second language. Language choice advantages or disadvantages us all. (Ager, Wright, 1990) Administrators and teachers who feel that EFL students should never speak their mother tongue in the classroom are limiting the students and creating a disadvantage that is unnecessary and imperialistic. Student comprehension is limited if they cannot quietly ask each other about a term or a teacher comment in their first language. First language discourse does not hinder SL progress but can actually improve understanding, if used modestly and efficiently.

Previous studies have shown that higher and lower status individuals differ in their forms of address (Brown and Levinson, 1979), communicative styles (Alkine, Coilurn, Kaswan and Love, 1968) and amount of verbal productivity (Siegman, Pope and Blass, 1969). Jablin (1979), found that higher status people initiate contact with lower status people and not the reverse. Higher status people gaze more while talking and less while listening, they engage in more nonreciprocal touch, and they use less facial expressiveness. More dominant people also have a larger area of personal space and use a more relaxed postural style (Patterson, 1983). Higher competence or status retains are associated with faster speech rate, shorter response latency, longer turn lengths, and more standard and prestigious accents (Putman and Street, 1984). Lower power styles are judge more negatively in terms of attractiveness, like ability and competence (Bradac and Mulac, 1984).

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers need to be aware of this research in order to limit their teacher talk, reduce their personal social space and improve their enunciation and speech rate. They also need to monitor the responses of students and the number of questions self-initiated by students. The greater the divergence between the teacher and students, as well as the teacher's perception of his/her status level will greatly affect oral communication in the classroom. As mentioned above, students will become less communicative and limit their oral responses if they are made to feel of a lower status than the teacher.

An interesting study by Jones (1994) demonstrated that personal prejudice is not absent even in the academic setting. Her work with Australian and Chinese university students and professors highlighted the importance of examining the interactive nature of conversations to understand how speakers maintain power and control. Power was found to be subtle and dynamic, situated in a context, and differed with reference both to interpersonal factors and to group membership. Regardless of how many teachers wish to view themselves as facilitators and mentors, there is still the reality that teachers are in a position of power. A subtle balance has to be maintained in the classroom in order to enhance the flow of knowledge, while at the same time allowing students to drive and foster their own learning, by feeling confident enough to participate in communicative and oral activities.

On a personal level, as an EFL teacher in the Middle East, I am constantly reminding myself that I am teaching dynamic students. Their creative attributes, personal activities and experiences, as well as their philosophical thoughts, usually cannot be expressed fully in the SL. In the classroom, regardless of a strong student-centered approach, the focus is only on English and the knowledge that they wish to acquire.

Today, researchers point out the new approaches necessary to produce second language students who are capable of proficient verbal communication. Corder (1967) states that first language learning

follows a lawful sequence or built-in syllabus and should be, by and large, identical to second language learning. If his Creative Construction Hypothesis proves to be valid, then the approach to teaching a second language has been at fault. The cross-lingual approach should be replaced with intralingual practices. These ideas certainly support the Direct Method approach in the classroom. It is described by Brown (1987) as a great deal of active oral interaction, spontaneous use of language, no translation between first and second language and little or no analysis of grammatical rules.

Stephen Krashen has developed a theory of second language acquisition, which is influencing classrooms and teaching techniques worldwide. He has studied and researched children and their patterns in acquiring their first language. He points out that when children acquire their first language, it is through meaningful interaction in the target language and natural communication. Young children are not concerned with the form of their statements, but with the messages they are attempting to convey. Children do not sit through grammar lessons at the age of two, nor do adults correct every grammatical error a young child utters. When a child utters his first words or statements that are understood by his caretakers, there is usually celebration that he/she has begun to communicate and clearly send a message. Parents respond to the child's utterance with bravados and if the child has asked for something, then it is given to him, to reinforce that he has sent the correct message. Children do not plan to learn a first language. They see a need to communicate with the people around them and attempt to send messages in whatever form they can master. To the young child learning his/her first language, **the message is most important**. That is the key to the language classroom, from both the teacher's and the student's perspective. The teacher must be aware at all times exactly what message is being sent to the students. The teacher must also strive to motivate the student to sincerely want to communicate in the second language.

With all this research in hand, the teacher of ESL (English as a Second Language), EFL (English as a Foreign Language) or EIL (English as an International Language), certainly does come into the classroom with a lot of baggage! Most important is that teachers understand the tenuous position of the student and work continuously on approaches that promote linguistic and cultural convergence.

The teacher is already in a position of power as 'the teacher'. He/she carries additional prestige as the speaker of English (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1990). Often second language learning also includes learning about the culture of the English country, which opens the door to teachers giving the impression that English ways are better, rather than different. Convergence and divergence can be a positive or negative force depending on context and style. The master teacher of second language learners will walk a tight-rope daily, if she/he wished to maintain a balance of respect, equality and positive oral productivity in the classroom.

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