

SOCIOLINGUISTICS AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING: A PERSPECTIVE OF SOCIOLINGUISTIC COMPETENCE

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Abstract

Sociolinguistic competence has been an integral part of communicative competence in that it includes learning pragmatic and sociolinguistic knowledge about how to use language linguistically and socially appropriately. Sociolinguistics is the study of language and the society. However, a number of studies highlight the lack of such communicative skills among second language learners regardless of their proficiency level of linguistic knowledge. More specially, learners may not be able to develop socio-pragmatic knowledge of language as much as grammatical knowledge of the language being learnt. Its dynamic growth makes English an international language that connects people all around the world. As a consequence, English can be regarded as the common focus of all English speakers who do not share a language or a culture. As a matter of fact, English is spoken in different settings and levels of intercommunication. As a result, speakers must know many sociolinguistics elements in order to avoid inaccuracies and misunderstandings during communication. The development of sociolinguistic rules can guide learners in the choice of appropriate forms which should be closely integrated in language teaching and learning curricula. Sociolinguistic competence should be a leading goal for all those who teach English as a second language, which simultaneously represents a challenging task as well.

Key Words: Sociolinguistic, sociolinguistic competence, communicative competence.

Introduction

Nowadays English is the language of globalisation, international communication, commerce and trade, music and the media, therefore different motivations for learning it come into act. As Richards (2001) stated, English is no longer viewed as the property of the English-speaking world but it is an international commodity sometimes referred to as 'English an International Language'. In today's increasingly globalized world, the ability to express oneself in a second or foreign language has become a vital skill (Mizne, 2007). A second language speaker is considered fluent if he or she is able to use the language in a range of situational contexts such as talking in a formal meeting, or making telephone calls. However, no matter how long the second language learner is exposed to the target language, he or she might still have difficulty in expressing that language to a native speaker in different social settings. Recent methods and approaches in teaching English as a second language focus on English as a practical tool and world commodity rather than a cultural enrichment. Due to such circumstances, the Communicative Language Teaching approach

becomes paramount. As such, the principles of this approach are: Language learning is communicative competence; Learners learn a language by using it to communicate; Fluency and accuracy are important keys of authentic and meaningful communication. The inconsistency between the language teaching methodologies and the specific needs for language use in the real world has become more distinctive than ever. Kramsch (2014) highlights this tension:

"...there has never been a greater tension between what is taught in the classroom and what the students will need in the real world once they have left the classroom. In the last decades, that world has changed to such an extent that language teachers are no longer sure of what they are supposed to teach or what real world situations they are supposed to prepare their students for".

The lack of promoting sociolinguistic competence in foreign language learners becomes more evident when they start to use English for actual communication in real life. Many linguists have used the term competence in different

contexts to refer to different types of knowledge. The term competence however was originally set out by the father of linguistics Noam Chomsky. In his book 'Aspects of the Theory of Syntax'. Language learning came to be seen as a social and cognitive process. It is evident that teaching how to use language in classroom setting is not a simple task that could be changed readily. Learning a second/foreign language is a holistic process that requires not just the mastery of structural, discursual, and strategic rules but also, learners have to internalise sociolinguistic rules to assist them in the choice of appropriate forms (Yu, 2006).

Sociolinguistics and Sociolinguistic Competence

Sociolinguistics can be defined as the relationship which exists between a language or languages and the culture and tradition as well as the politics of a particular community. It is a discipline which assigns functions to various languages which exist in a community, and such functions may suggest that a language be used as a mother tongue, another as second language and yet another as a foreign language. Sociolinguistic as a discipline, provides answers to such questions as: who speaks what language to whom and when and to what end. Sociolinguistic competence on the other hand, is the learning of pragmatic aspects of various speech acts such as the cultural values, norms and other socio-cultural conventions in social contexts. The specific ability to use a second language in various ways that may fit in various social settings in which the communication takes place is called sociolinguistic competence, and without this ability, even the most perfectly grammatical utterances can convey a meaning entirely different from what the speaker intended because there are several factors that are to be considered when communicating in second language such as age, gender, status of the participants and the formality of the setting. Specifically, sociolinguistic competence can be generally divided into two areas. One is appropriateness of form, that is, pragma-linguistics, which signals "the particular resources that a given language provides for conveying particular illocutions" (Leech, 1983:11); the other is appropriateness of

meaning, that is, socio-pragmatics, which defines the ways in which pragmatic performance is subject to specific socio-cultural conventions and values (Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993).

Communicative Competence

Widdowson (1989:135) described communicative competence as "...communicative competence is not a matter of knowing rules for the composition of sentences and being able to employ such rules to assemble expressions from scratch as and when occasion requires. The communicative competence considers language as a tool used for communication. This competence focuses on the development of four language skills, and on the correlation between the skills. The term "competence" is derived from the concept of "performance" firstly proposed by Chomsky in the 1960s. The former is the linguistic knowledge of the idealised native speaker, an innate biological function of the mind that allows the speaker to generate the indefinite set of grammatical sentences that constitutes the target language whilst the latter is the actual use of language in concrete situations. Canale and Swain (1980) defines it in the context of second language teaching as a synthesis of knowledge of basic grammatical principles, knowledge of how language is used in social settings to perform communicative functions, and knowledge of how utterances and communicative functions can be combined according to the principles of discourse.

Based on their view, communicative competence comprises four areas of knowledge and skills. These are grammatical competence (also called linguistic competence) or the acquisition of phonological, morphological, syntactic and semantic rules. In other words, it is the mastery of the language code itself. According to Canale (1983), grammatical competence refers to mastering the linguistic code of the language that is being learnt; sociolinguistic competence means knowing the socio-cultural rules of the use of the second language; discourse competence refers to the ability to select and arrange lexical items and syntactic structures in order to achieve well-formed texts; strategic competence refers to the ability to command verbal and non-verbal

devices in order to compensate insufficient mastery or to enhance communication. Bachman (1990) suggested that language knowledge includes two types of knowledge that a second language learner must internalise: a) Organisational knowledge, that is, knows how to control the formal structure of a second language so as to produce correct sentences and organise these in texts. It subsumes grammatical and textual knowledge. b) Pragmatic knowledge, which involves knowing how words and utterances can be assigned specific meanings in context and function according to the user's intentions. This knowledge is also structured in lexical knowledge, functional knowledge and sociolinguistic knowledge.

Types of Competences in the Process of Language Teaching

As it was mentioned above, communicative approach and the term 'competence' brought into discussion different aspects of the communicative competence; all these aspects are interwoven and it suffices to discuss each below:

i. Sociolinguistic Competence

Sociolinguistic competence is the ability to interpret the social meaning of a linguistic item and to decide and use language in an appropriate social meaning for communicative purposes. As Savignon (1983:37) mentions, "Sociolinguistic competence is the knowledge of socio-cultural rules of discourse and language. It requires an understanding of the social context in which language is used; the roles of participants; the information they share, and the function of interacting". As Erton (2007) further explains in his article *Applied Pragmatics and Competence Relations in Language Learning and Teaching*, the sociolinguistic information which the speakers convey to each other share a pragmatic competence which helps them to interpret and act in different situations by making use of different contextual clues. Other included components are: 'culture' and 'interaction', which reflect the fundamental concepts of verbal and non-verbal communication.

ii. Interactional Competence

Kramsch (1986: 367) in her article *From Language Proficiency to Interactional Competence* defines the term 'interaction' as

"...interaction entails negotiating intended meanings, i.e., adjusting one's speech to the effect one intends to have on the listener. It entails anticipating the listener's response and possible misunderstandings, clarifying one's own and the other intentions and arriving at the closed possible watch between intended, perceived, and anticipated meanings." As Erton (2007) concludes, considering this definition, it can be said that interactional competence not only makes the use of structural rules of language, but also runs the psycho-linguistic and socio-linguistic functions of language which help to provide accuracy and clarify to the mutual comprehension of the speech acts covered in the course of a conversation. Thus, the so called 'functional competence', involves the ability to establish the tie between the question and its equivalence in particular real life situation, recognising the speaker's intention by evaluating his/her body language, awareness of the semiotic symbols used, types of social interaction (i.e. introducing, greeting, farewell, etc.), the communicative functions of language, acting accordingly and appropriately.

iii. Cultural Competence

Lyons (1990:302) defines the term culture as, "socially acquired knowledge i.e. the knowledge that someone has by virtue of his being a member of a particular society". Thus, cultural competence is the ability to understand and use language in a way that would be understood by the members of that culture. According to Le Page (1978:41), "When we come to the central question of 'competence' we have to ask: 'What is it an individual needs to know, in order to operate as a member of this society?' A society only exists in the competence of its members to make it work as it does; a language only exists in the competence of those who use and regard themselves as users of that language. Here, the term 'competence' is regarded as a living social action which effects social behavior in order to be achieved clearly and to avoid misunderstandings.

iv. Strategic Competence

Strategic competence is an ability which deals with the knowledge of language and the ability to use this knowledge effectively and appropriate in order to take an active part in communicative

interaction. As Erton (2007:64) further clarifies, "...the strategic competence as the link that ties 'everything' together. A typical example for this case can be: if you are late to a meeting and if you need to find a good excuse, the white lie that you utter at that time is a product of your strategic competence which reflects criteria of the competence types that the language user has. However, under the title strategic competence, the critical and the creative aspects of the human mind can also be considered as well". Thus, under such speaking terms, there is accordance between strategic competence and critical thinking. Richards (1998:95) says, "Critical reflection refers to an activity or process in which experience is recalled, considered and evaluated, usually in relation to a broader purpose. It is a response to a past experience and involves conscious recall and examination of the experience as the basis for the evaluation. As such, this process can be considered as a strategy between questions and answers and stimulating critical thinking.

v. Discourse Competence
Erton (2007: 64) says "...discourse competence deals with the ability to arrange sentences into cohesive structures. In Discourse Analysis, the term discourse competence is studied within the limits of conversational interaction where language is considered a tool for successful communication. Such interactional patterns can be of great variety". As Akmajian (1997:369) exemplifies, "There are many forms of discourse and many forms of talk- exchange. Letters, jokes, stories, lectures, sermons, speeches, and so on are all categories of discourse; arguments, interviews, business dealings, instruction, and conversations are categories of talk exchanges. Conversations (and talk-exchanges in general) are usually structured consequences of expressions by more than a single speaker". Therefore, the development of discourse competence helps the language learner to gain insight by experiencing different interactional patterns in varying socio-cultural and physical contexts.

vi. Pragmatic Competence
Pragmatic competence refers to the ability to comprehend, construct, and convey meanings that are both accurate and appropriate for the social

and cultural circumstances in which communication occurs. Pragmatic competence is the ability to analyse language in a conscious manner (Holmes & Brown, 2007:524). It refers to the ability to comprehend, construct utterances which are accurate and appropriate to the social and cultural circumstances where the communication occurs. Blackman cited in Barron (2003:173) identified pragmatic competence as one element of communicative competence, placing pragmatic competence as part of illocutionary competence, which is a combination of speech acts and speech functions along with the appropriate use of language in context. In order for second language learners to acquire pragmatic competence, they need to acquire cultural understanding and communication skills.

Why is Sociolinguistics Needed in Language Teaching Classes

The teacher should understand that most sociolinguists such as Labov believe that all languages are equal when it comes to esteem and usage. By teaching English, it is therefore, crucial to disregard any form of prejudice or class differentiation towards the existing culture of the child and the English culture. In the same vein, sociolinguistics knowledge is relevant in deriving the style to teach English in class because in both situations, students have to be taught to assimilate the language and culture that comes with it in order not to totally disrespect or forego his own culture and values of his first language as it may cause other social problems.

Sociolinguistics is the study of language and society. So, someone teaching English language from a sociolinguistic point of view will be able to understand the importance of language in different contexts. English is a global language right now and its use is continuously spreading. But, sociolinguists also believe strongly in the importance of all languages and not seeing one language as better or more superior than others. Hence, sociolinguistic knowledge will simply help a teacher to understand and teach the dynamics of English language and its place in society on a better level.

In language teaching, knowledge of sociolinguistics will enable second language

teachers' not to merely emphasise learners to acquire linguistics features or how to use the language in communication without considering the important of culture from not only the language but also from the cultural background of the various English users all over the globe where English is used. Moreover, Hinkel (1999) illustrates how teachers' view of ourselves, our students, and relationship among cultures are represented not only through explicit instruction regarding cultural differences in rhetorical and aesthetic values for texts, but also implicitly in the course content, assignments, and class discussions which engage with the students.

Therefore, based on the teachers' awareness of language variation to the diversity of language use and users from different cultural background, the need to create situations that will arouse the students awareness of the differences in language so as to avoid misunderstanding or miscommunication, and to improve their academic of language in order to get better opportunity of study or occupation in future becomes pertinent. Research has proven that students who have language variation awareness, a positive attitude towards learning of variation, and a clear understanding of the role of variation and identity, culture and communication, learn language fast.

Linguistically, sociolinguistics came into existence due to a plain dissatisfaction with structural linguistics from a communicative point of view. As a matter of fact, Chomsky's theory of competence was refuted by Hymes (1972) who held that Chomsky's theory is 'sterile' as it mainly focuses on the mere knowledge of the grammar rules of a language with no much consideration to the actual knowledge of the usage of a language. He stated that "Communicative competence encompasses the knowledge of how to use the language in the real world, without which the rules of grammar would be useless" (1971). Historically, sociolinguistics contributed largely in the birth of the communicative language approach as a response to the Audio-lingual Method. The incorporation of the sociolinguistic norms in English learning classes is not restricted to the communicative language teaching approach. On the contrary,

ever since these norms have been introduced to the field of learning strategies and teaching methodologies, the sociolinguistic competence have been put into account in all the after-coming methods and approaches. Now it can no longer be ignored seeing the huge impact it had left behind at all different levels. Succinctly put, however, the relevance of sociolinguistics to the teaching of English as a second language can be viewed from the following perspectives: teacher role, classroom management, curriculum design, accountability for stylistic variations, and the importance of the four language skills. Indeed, language is not merely structural (i.e. about grammar rules), but it also has a social dimension which is recognised as the sociolinguistic component.

Sociolinguistic Competence and the Teaching/Learning of a Second Language

Ya (2008) argues that one of the factors that make sociolinguistic competence so hard to acquire is the variance in cultural rules of speaking as well as the social, cultural and pragmatic elements that inherently exist in that competence. To put it differently, what is appropriate in one cultural situation might be entirely inappropriate in another one. The language learner often cannot differentiate between the rules of speaking of his or her native context and those of the target context. These rules of speaking can be gradually acquired when the learner is immersed in the target culture. As for the second or foreign language context, raising learners' awareness about the rules of speaking might help them acquire these skills more efficiently and in less time (Mizne, 1997).

It is clear that sociolinguistic competence is a multifaceted and multi-layered one that requires knowing how speakers of a language use it to communicate in a way that will not bother one another. Such social, cultural and pragmatic aspects would be hard to acquire without being integrated into the culture, however, it is not impossible. Access to books, videos and any materials that reflect the culture of the target language community is available. There are also more opportunities available that enable people from different cultures and countries to come together whether face-to-face or online. However,

how these resources are brought together and how they are implemented and made use of by language teachers in the classrooms are the key issues in the teaching of sociolinguistic competence. This leads to the question of how second or foreign language teachers can develop the sociolinguistic competence of their learners?

“We don’t learn from experience. We learn from reflecting on experience.” (Dewey, 1938:13). Dewey makes a simple but powerful point: experience is not the source of learning, but rather it is reflection on this experience. The four skills in language learning; reading writing, listening and speaking do not occur in isolation in communicative texts or activities. In order to shape a good socio-pragmatic competence for the language learner, the following should be taken into consideration:

1. The goals and the objectives of a language course should be designed to meet the needs of the language learner to help them develop and improve their communicative competence. Since the primary goal of learning a second language is to provide fluency and accuracy in written and spoken modes of communication, first, the language teacher and the learner should pay attention to design communicative activities which would help to develop the communicative competence. Stern (1983:346) summarises ‘competence’ in language teaching as: The intuitive mastery of the forms of language; the intuitive mastery of the linguistic, cognitive, affective and socio-cultural meanings, expressed by the language forms; the capacity to use the language with maximum attention to communication and minimum attention to form; the creativity of language use. Obviously, the term competence invites both the teacher and the learner to develop linguistic and sociolinguistic skills, in order to achieve complete and accurate communication.

2. The language teacher should design the course material to engage the learners in the pragmatic, coherent and functional uses of language for communicative purposes. As Erton (1997:7) claims, “The functional study of language means, studying how language is used. For instance, trying to find out what the specific purposes that language serves for us, and how the members of a

language community achieve and react to these purposes through speaking, reading, writing and listening”. The sociolinguistic competence of the learner must be well developed; consequently he or she will be able to conduct communication with accuracy. The development of coherence and the ability to react in different situations show a good level of functional competence. The grammar of the target language should not be taught in isolation with its use. The learner should be able to put his or her knowledge of language into practice.

Moreover, awareness of the importance of sociolinguistics competence in the process of acquiring a target language is paramount. As Mey (1993:185-6) states, “Linguistic behavior is social behavior. People talk because they want to socialise, in the widest possible sense of the world: either for fun, or to express themselves to other humans, or for some ‘serious’ purposes. Thus, Mey claims that, language is a tool for human beings to express themselves as social creatures and the language used in that particular context is important in terms of linguistic interaction that takes place. Such a context naturally presupposes the existence of a particular society, with its implicit and explicit values, norms, rules and laws, and with all its particular conditions of life such as; economic, social, political and cultural.

There are two basic ways of introducing and teaching sociolinguistic competence. One of them is resorting to cultural models where students are explicitly or implicitly taught cultural elements ingrained in language use and/or integrating speech acts as situations where learners are forced to use language in consideration of socio-pragmatic factors such as social status of the hearer, the degree of imposition, or the content of the request. Classroom environment may not be an appropriate context where sociolinguistic competence can be developed due to several reasons unique to any learning experience in English as a second language context such as non-authenticity of the content of the materials. For example, Izumi (1996) highlights that in developing sociolinguistic knowledge, most non-native speakers (NNS) who teach English, experience challenges such as their own lack of

knowledge, the existing curriculum requirements, the various teaching goals, students' motivation, and evaluation procedures. These factors play a critical role in the process of learning how to use language in an appropriate way because the major concentration of most English as a second language learners is devoted to learning what the rules of language are and how they can produce grammatical sentences rather than how they can produce appropriate sentences that fit the specific social context. For example, whatever the proficiency level of English as a second language learners is, there is usually room for development in their socio-pragmatic use of language because Bardovi and Harlig (1996) claim that proficiency does not improve concomitantly with the ability to use foreign language appropriately by operationalising their sociolinguistic competence. Izumi (1996) concludes that for all the challenges in learning and teaching of sociolinguistic competence, it is possible to help students to will also react coherently and accurately as a result of good mastery of the sociolinguistics competence.

promote and acquire this competence by raising their awareness in the rules of sociolinguistic use of language.

Conclusion

The purpose of the application of different teaching and learning activities is to help students become more effective, fluent and successive communicators in the target language. Most importantly, both teachers and textbooks alike need to emphasis to the learner that language is composed of not just linguistic and lexical elements; rather, language reflects also the social context, taking into account situational and social factors in the act of communication. And sociolinguistics competence is a combination of these factors; as such the development of the sociolinguistic ability should be accepted as one of the primary goals of teaching. Sociolinguistic competence will secure pupils/students good levels of understanding and functional competences as well. Students/pupils

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