DIFFICULTIES ARISING IN TEACHING ENGLISH COMMUNICATIVELY

Carmen ARDELEAN*

I. INTRODUCTION

Communication seems to be the favourite leitmotif of the post-modern society, and surely the best way to ensure an optimal passage into the new millennium. "I communicate, therefore I exist", seems to be today's slogan, and teaching needs to keep pace with this requirement. The teacher is always confronted with the dilemma of choosing between linguistic correctness and efficiency in message delivery. On the one hand, there is the students' frustration for not being able to avoid all mistakes; on the other hand, thinking too much about correctness is the sure way to impede a fluent dialogue. Is there a middle way? Are there any guarantees, either way, both in teaching and learning? The present paper is trying to give a possible answer to such questions.

Ever since Aristotle's first definition of communication – whereby someone says something to someone else, and the communication itself has a certain effect, which, in itself, is an alternative reading of the "cause – effect" relationship – this area of research has constantly preoccupied linguists and specialists in humanistic studies. Modern research has even managed to trace a direct link between the two. Thus, it has been stated that "language must be studied in relation to its role in human communication" [1, p. 135], the same authors being adamant in finding a logical explanation of various grammatical applications "in terms of recurrent discourse patterns in human language" [1, p.145].

Indeed, various grammar elements (such as case, aspect, tense, voice and so on) can be seen as "coded communication markers" and, by taking a communicative look at each of them in turn, their understanding – either individually or as a unitary group - can be made easier for L2 (second language) learners. However, the communicative content of each such category largely depends on their weight in the linguistic basis of each language, on the morphological or syntactic structure of the same. Also, the richness of knowledge in L2 can not only help, but also hinder communication, by creating a barrier, an unbalanced relationship between expectations/predictions and the actual delivery.

II. PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

The main question, which arises in relation with the matter under focus is whether one can find appropriate communication equivalents at the level of each linguistic category, of similar value, both in the native language of the speaker and in L2. If equivalents are not well chosen, cross-cultural communication risks being severed, thereby resulting, at best, language errors, which often cannot be corrected quickly enough.

The second aim is to perform an error analysis, by comparing the degree of suitability of *context* (read "lexical layer") and *content* (read "communicative core") of L2 discourse, to the same categories in L1 (the native language, in our case Romanian). That is a way of acknowledging whether the communication has been effective, that is, if the message has been understood by the receiver, in a similar way to that in which it was initially conveyed by its sender. Singer [2, p. 66] is of the same opinion: "To communicate effectively is to be certain that the message the other person receives is as close as possible to the way it was intended when it was sent."

The actual outcome in L2 is considered important from a communicative point of view, only if the linguistic support is chosen in such a way, as to convey the same information as in L1. The choice of *means* used varies from the purely morphological/syntactic elements, to auxiliary equivalents (non-verbal markers of opinion, attitude, and so on) that often have a cultural specificity, as identified by L. M. Alharbi [3, p. 8]: "Communication, he notes, is considered to be contextually designed, linguistically managed and culturally patterned".

The above can easily be proved by the students' progress in learning L2 in a communicative manner, as against learning by traditional methods. The communicative point of view stresses out the need *to*

*Lecturer of English, Ph. D., Chair of Foreign Languages, The Technical University of Civil Engineering, Bucharest

convey the proper meaning, sometimes beyond actual compliance to morphological/syntactical requirements, especially at the level of *spoken* language. Thus, it marks a fundamental difference from the traditional teaching techniques, which were *correctness-oriented*, totally ignoring the communicative value of the sent information. For students, learning to *communicate* in L2 and understanding the mechanism of correct grammar *afterwards* is sometimes a surprising, but useful exercise at the level of efficiency, and their post-learning satisfaction ensures the necessary courage to go on. As a comparison, by the traditional method, learning grammar correctly often hindered the delivery of information in L2, since students were, more often than not, concerned with that part of the task, thereby making communication much slower and more difficult.

Indeed, teaching/learning communication skills can prove to be a challenge, the more so as linguistic requirements are never left behind. The main difference is that they come *as a conclusion* to the task, rather than an aim in themselves. Students are taught that what the receiver of the message needs is *to understand* it, not to judge *only* its degree of correctness, from a linguistic point of view. The message is at the core of any type of communication, and, with the help of linguistic, and other, auxiliary means, it must be conveyed in a form as close as possible to the intentions of the speaker.

III. EVALUATION AND ERROR ANALYSIS

1. Evaluating the degree of linguistic and communicative correctness

The assessment of the correctness of meaning, in communicative teaching, largely depends on the teacher's ability to make a clear delimitation between *linguistic correctness* and the *accuracy of conveying the message*. Also, there are some other important points to be considered: the method of analysis, as well as the materials used by the teacher in order to improve students' communicative performance in L2.

Since the idea of teaching by communicative methods is somewhat new in Romania, there is no unitary set of requirements in the area of assessment of any results obtained. Also, materials used largely depend on individual choice by the teacher, as well as on the financial resources available.

The teacher may use a varied set of teaching strategies, a combination of tradition and renewal, but the essential thing is to address directly the students' *motivation* in L2 learning. Vivian Cook [4, p. 73] selects two main types of motivation. These types are: **integrated motivation** (whereby the student learns a

language and, at the same time, tries to identify with the target culture and people), and **instrumental motivation**, which "... reflects whether the student is learning the language for an ulterior motive unrelated to its use by native speakers". That motive is usually related to an immediate reason (passing an examination or a test), or to later requirements for a job.

In relation to the purpose of this paper, instrumental motivation is more closely linked to the students' need for linguistic correctness, while integrative motivation can mainly be related to communication, and the optimal delivery of the intended message, in a more or less correct form. Both are, however, good for acquiring more information and knowledge, yet the teacher must be perfectly aware of the students' reasons for learning L2, so as to adjust his/her methods and use of materials accordingly. As Hutchinson and Waters [5, p. 157] put it, "... the teacher will have to deal with needs analysis, syllabus design, materials writing or adaptation and evaluation." In addition, modern communication requirements have managed to completely change everybody's perception of the teacher's *role in the classroom*: no longer the Master of the Game, but a *partner* and a member of an *interactive team*.

As for the students themselves, they must, at all times, "... feel they are adding something new to their skills and experience by learning a new language, without taking anything away from what they already know." [4, p. 74-79]. They are expected to understand, first of all, that "... language is a complex system of rules, *but also* that it is used for a purpose: they [must] combine grammatical and pragmatic competence. In other words, they should not treat language solely as communication or as academic knowledge *but as both*." Further on, Cook concludes that "the goal of teaching is to enable a non-native speaker to **communicate adequately**..." [4, p. 134].

The problem of error analysis is still under current debate, in the case of communicative teaching/learning. From what has already been said above, it should be concluded strictly that an erroneous delivery fails to achieve its main purpose, that is, to make its message understood by the receiver, irrespective of the linguistic correctness. However, even if the teacher can be satisfied with this in the first stages of the students' learning process, later stages need to be focused upon the improvement of the delivery, from a grammatical point of view as well. What distinguishes this from a traditional perspective over the learning process is that grammar teaching ceases to be an end in itself, but rather becomes apparent as a conclusion to the repetitive teaching of communication skills. The student needs to become aware that a certain communicative structure in L2 is based on a certain

grammar rule, but preferably *after* confrontation with examples of authentic native-spoken materials, rather than *before*, when the rule is only a rule, without any relation to reality.

Now, some problems are also related to the degree of authenticity of the communicative situations or materials used in the classroom, as well as to the appropriate register to be used according to each situation. Sometimes, it is necessary *to create* a situation, the so-called "here and now" [3, p. 86], by which the students benefit from "... concrete visual information through physical objects or pictures". The register largely depends on the degree of formality of the situation. That is, the *lexical layer* must, in this case, predominate over the *communicative layer*. In this case, the teacher needs to guide his/her students towards a clear understanding of the role of language (and of its correctness), in the same way in which a journalist taking an interview guides his/her interlocutors towards the expected goal. Asking *repetitive* questions (which use the grammar structure to be learned), and *confirming* the correctness of the response is the immediate way of assessing the students' performance. This can be done if the students need the teacher to play the role of the "leader", while they only act as "followers". In a different situation, in which the teacher is only a silent witness in the development of the situation created in the classroom for learning purposes, the *students themselves* take the responsibility of making the choice at a lexical level. The teacher's evaluation in this case comes step by step, but the students' performance may lose, in point of accuracy and fluency, due to the stress of being closely watched while performing.

2. Cultural specificity and good communication

Besides being intelligible and making its message understood, accurate communication largely depends on students' knowledge of elements of cultural specificity. It is not enough to communicate correctly (meaning, to observe both lexical and communication rules), but also to communicate without infringing the cultural requirements of L2 natives. For instance, in the case of *oral communication*, non-verbal elements (e.g. the body language) are very important. If *written communication* is involved, the nature of the message becomes essential (e.g. to announce, to inform, to request or to propose something), and the proper degree of formality (or the proper register) must be complied with. The teacher's main role *before* applying the communication context/situation in the classroom

is to teach the appropriate cultural norms and conventions, especially if they differ, to any degree, from those applicable in L1. Thus, any ambiguity of the message is avoided, making communication not only easy to achieve, but also "acceptable" and even pleasant from the point of view of the listener or reader.

By assessing the results in teaching L2 with a focus on communication, in a period of a full academic year of study and using 4 different groups (of approx. 20 students each) for this purpose, the results were as follows:

a. *Improvement at the language level:*
- 70% for students with an advanced level of L2 knowledge (where improvement proved easier due to a more solid initial background);
- 55% for upper-intermediate students (who started by considering their knowledge good enough, thus being a bit slow in starting to improve);
- 62% for lower-intermediate students (who considered language improvement as fundamental for any further development).
b. *Improvement of the communicative skills:*
- 82% for advanced students;
- 65% for upper-intermediate students;
- 50% for lower-intermediate students (it can easily be noted that, for them, being insecure in the area of grammar played an important part in partly rejecting the communicative learning).
c. *Understanding of the importance of cultural correctness:*
- 87% for advanced students;
- 80% for upper-intermediate students;
- 70% for lower-intermediate students (who took great interest in learning as much as possible about L2 cultural details).

IV. CONCLUSION

The main conclusion that can be derived from this study is that in L2 teaching in Romania there is still a great deal of resistance by students to a kind of teaching which seems to put language (grammar) on the second place. The teacher is the one who can choose the right amount of communication-oriented and grammar-oriented materials and applications to be used in the classroom, in order to achieve optimum results in students' performance in L2.

REFERENCES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. BROWN, H. – *Learning a second culture*, in Valdes, J. (ed.), Cambridge, CUP, 1986
2. SINGER, M. – *Intercultural Communication*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1987
3. ALHARBI, L. M. – *'Communicative' and 'Gopher' forms in Cross-cultural Communication: Analysis in Linguistic and Cultural Components of the Business Letter*, in "Poznan Studies in Contemporary Linguistics", Adam Mickiewicz University Press, 2000
4. COOK, V. – *Second Language Learning and Language Teaching*, Edward Arnold, 1991
5. HUTCHINSON, T., and WATERS, A., – *English for Specific Purposes*, CUP, 1987
6. GOODENOUGH, W. – *Culture, Language and Society*, Benjamin/Cummings, San Francisco, 1991
7. RICHARDS, J. and R. SCHMIDT, editors – *Language and Communication*, Longman, London 1981