

FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING METHODOLOGY IN THE CONTEXT OF SOCIOCULTURAL DISTANCE

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Abstract

During a research period in Japan I had the opportunity to follow a number of students learning the Italian language, both from Universities and private contexts.

According to an anthropologic interpretation, meetings between cultures is based on practices that cannot be reduced to feelings or individual ideas; the sociocultural aspect is an open system, and not sheltered from external influences; so there is not a privileged point of view for a detached observation, because a meeting is equal and is an exchange of meanings produced from both the parts.

Meeting another culture carries a number of differences that can be misunderstood. The singular knowledge of the foreign language, even if useful, does not constitute a guarantee to understand the culture of a society.

Incomprehension of attitudes or an improper use of the language are maybe not sufficient to damage a relationship, but they have the ability to complicate it, and for the same reason stereotypes often block other possible interpretations.

Teaching implies a bi-directional communication that needs to give an input to the student but also an understandable feedback for the teacher.

The communicative exchange between two cultures is furthermore difficult when we try to understand the psychological influence of linguistic signals in verbal and non-verbal communication. In that way, the relationship between teacher and student is a delicate balance that can easily be upset, especially in cultures such as the Italian and Japanese ones which are very far from one another.

I shall illustrate, in a summarised form, the description of the subjects under study by means of appropriate tables in this report, analyzing the oral production, the learning processes and the cultural differences that could create misunderstandings.

Key words: stereotypes, cultural differences, learning processes.

INTRODUCTION

An American anthropologist, Ralph Linton, said that culture was like water for a fish: a fish lives in water but is not aware of the fact of being surrounded by water. We are just like that fish in our own culture and we do not realize this fact, instead we see the culture of the others (Linton, 1961).

In order to observe our culture from the outside it requires the desire to do it and the skill to decentralize oneself, accepting the fact that also others can be at the centre of things. In order to do this, sciences such as anthropology, ethnology, psychology and sociology propose different methods which allow man to study and understand culture and cultures.

The greatest difficulty lies in the fact that each individual tends to have an innate ethno-centric mechanism (Geertz, 1988), and due to this he has the tendency to classify and evaluate others in order to categorize them into his own group (in-group) or out of it (out-group). Cultural stereotypes are born from this point onwards which give rise to a higher resistance and are very difficult to modify or uproot (Pike, 1954). In their turn these stereotypes easily predispose an action in that they are closely associated to cultural prejudices and they very often provoke negative or even hostile behaviour towards other cultural groups (Anolli, 2004).

Intercultural psychology notably reduces risks of ethno-centrism in that it observes, values and interprets the differences in individual functioning between different cultural and ethnic groups, relationships and psychological, socio-cultural, ecological and biological variables as well as the changes that concern such values, without classifying the groups (Berry, Poortinga, Segall, Dasen, 1994).

Cultural differences are born out of numerous factors: historical, environmental, economic, political ones etc. and the actual act of comparison which permits the discovery of new values: we are what we are in incessant acts of becoming (Anolli, 2006). Naturally, ethnical barriers may be overcome but they cannot be absent because they serve the purpose of manifesting social production of cultural differences.

Focusing on the language, cultural and location unit brings to the mind's eye an ethnic group as an immutable entity having closed and clear-cut barriers. In effect, the definition of an ethnic group should instead

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base itself on criteria used by those involved to feel united one with the other or to possibly outline a distinction (Barth, 1969,1994).

Therefore, the meeting with another culture carries with itself a series of differences which may, in some ways, be misunderstood. The sole knowledge of the foreign language, however useful it may be, does not constitute a guarantee for the comprehension of the cultural structure (Gannon, 1997). In fact, words limit our representation of the world and of ourselves (Kitayama, 2004), in that we translate that which we feel by means of a linguistic code that already, in itself, represents a category. (Wierzbicka, 1999).

In a certain sense, behaviour is always a type of state of predisposition to act in a certain way, but it is only one of the factors that intervene in determining effective behaviour side by side with the circumstances of that situation on one hand, and then with the regulations, values and daily habits of the social community on the other hand (Berruto, 1995).

Many considerations can be interpreted with a somewhat limited vision if not even a stereotypical one, and this precludes many other possible interpretations. It is sufficient to consider that one type of behaviour then may be seen as polite in one country, may be seen quite mistakenly as hostile or sheepish in another, and as a consequence one often arrives at a negative classification of it. This is due to prejudices, or rather behaviour that we have in mind beforehand, independently of having ever had direct contact or knowledge with the next person. In fact prejudice is based on that pre-established category (stereotypes) which come to be attributed to an object based on an unfounded (or wrong) generalization (Baroni, 1983).

METHOD OF STUDY

This type of research includes both social and educational contexts in a set of holistic and empirical research at the same time. Thanks to an interdisciplinary approach based on the foundations of anthropology, psychology, sociology and education, it has been possible to have a right assessment about the problem. Anyway thanks to questionnaires and interviews with the directly and indirectly involved persons, it has been possible to converge views and data, describing the thoughts of the social actors involved.

SAMPLING

The research has been carried out in two geographical contexts and different school contexts of language learning, both in Italy and in Japan. In Japan approximately a quantity of 220 students has been observed. In Italy a quantity of about 30 Japanese students has been under observation.

In Japan, students have been examined mainly in the city of Kyōto in both academic and private sectors. We have taken into consideration 5 Universities, where Italian is studied as a foreign language: the Kyōto Gaikokugo Daigaku, Kyōto Daigaku, Dōshisha Daigaku, Kyōto Sangyō Daigaku, Ritsumeikan Daigaku. In the private sector we have taken the data given by the Italian Institute of Culture in Kyōto and Tokyo.

In Italy, on the other hand, the research has been carried out mainly in the city of Genoa in a private school. As a confirmation of the main aspects noted during this research, there is a corroboration of interviews with different, both Italian and Japanese, teachers met both in Italy and Japan.

Anyway the general framework that is possible to obtain from the Japanese students remains linked, in spite of all efforts, to a Western perspective, and it is very difficult to be able to provide the details of a decentralised vision on a scientific basis, or to be able to assess the foreign teacher as in the perspective of a Japanese student.

MAIN SOCIO-CULTURAL PROBLEMS

The act of teaching in itself includes two-directional communication, or rather the input provided by the teacher to the student and then the return act, or the feedback; then also the output provided by the student to the teacher which above all is useful for the teacher to understand if the provided input has been taken in. The area that shall be dealt with in the next chapter concerns communication because, as is somewhat predictable, it is not a simple process; in fact, communication is nothing else than a delicate balance which may be easily interrupted or render particularly difficult the requisite compatibilities which do not subsist for the exchange of messages. The communicative exchange between two cultures is rather complex in that factors come into play which are not always noted; in this case there are not only linguistic signals but also those parameters tightly bound to the culture which concerns non-verbal communication.

Non-verbal communication is the psychological dimension that produces and supports the definition of the self and the other in a more or less explicit manner. By means of this faculty it is possible to carry out different

functions that take on an important role in human social behaviour, it in fact allows the definition of the act taking place, the addition of implicit messages, to contain indirect requests bound to the behaviour of the interlocutor and to make richer the verbal content with elements and nuances laden with meaning. According to elementary psychology, non-verbal communication is held to be more spontaneous and 'natural' than verbal communication in that it is less subject to forms of voluntary control. For this reason, it would be a greater 'revealing agent' of the individual's state of mind since it would allow a filtering through of the individual's reactions and intentions. This would also happen in spite of what is actually said (Anolli 2002). Therefore, the verbal form would serve the function of denoting, the non verbal one of connoting; if the former includes the relevance of semantic material, then the second includes emotional information (D'Urso, 1988) Non verbal communication varies notably from culture to culture and cannot be seen as just a 'colouring agent' of the verbal version (Rimé, Schiaratura, 1991) but rather as a basic action for obtaining an enlightened comprehension where the word is not sufficient.

Kinesics, taken from the Greek 'kynesis'-movement- as we have already said refers to facial expressions, looks, body language, physical contact between the interlocutors and to gesticulatory behaviour. In a way similar to verbal behaviour, every culture develops its own kinetic language and it shares its signs and meanings based on a network of rules and conventions.

Traditionally, eye contact in oriental cultures is limited, more over in Japan, and is regarded as the boundary between bad manners and an invasion of one's privacy. However, in the majority of western countries, the act of looking directly into a person's eye is seen as a sign of sincerity, spontaneity and of interest. In fact, during a normal day to day conversation the look on a person's face takes up a ponderous quantity of time and serves the function of sending and gathering information. In the west, without this eye contact people do not get the actual impression to be communication with one another. Generally speaking, people who look at other people with greater frequency are perceived as being extroverts, socially skilled, enterprising and gifted with a good amount of self-control. In contrast to this, people who have the tendency to avoid eye contact are often thought to be suffering from some type of psychological problem.

As with all cultures that come into contact with one another, these behavioural types are subject to variations, but nevertheless they leave their marks. In Japan, eye contact is however seen as a sign of aggression if it takes place between two strangers, and the use of a 'glance' between members of different genders remains different (Balboni, 1999)

In the field of gestural behaviour, of great expression, generally speaking, are nods of the head and hand gestures. Head gestures play an important role in the rate of progress of an interaction, for example a nod of the head from a person who is listening is commonly seen by the person who is speaking as a sign of attention or assent and can also be seen as a sign to continue with the output of information. This does not mean to say that the same nod of the head in Japan for example is seen with approval; in this country it is more tied in with the concept of listening, in that each frank and direct declaration gets considered more or less as a manifestation of vulgarity (Zimmerman, 1985).

Hand gestures vary greatly from culture to culture; there are cultures with a small usage of the hands when communicating and also cultures with a high usage. The Italian people would be classed as 'high gestural', where as well as semiotically independent gestures (emblems), therefore provided with a precise meaning and which are shared socially, illustrator agent gestures are very pronounced (they accompany verbal communication and they 'illustrate' that which is being said), the emotive indicators, (tied to an emotional state) and illustrator gestures (they regulate the interaction, they permit the stressing of the speech in 'points' of emphasis or for indicating a change of 'position' in the speech strategy).

In this context the Japanese culture is diametrically opposed, the only gestures used are generally speaking 'emblems', and in this case hand gestures become more animated only in cases of refusal or prohibition.

Facial mimicry serves important different functions in interaction between people; in fact the face represents the part of the body that is more specialized on an expressive and communicative level. Through facial gestures we manage to express spontaneous emotions, and also deliberate ones, which have the objective of dissimulating other emotions or of showing a form of social convention such as, for example, 'circumstantial smiles'.

Precisely under this aspect, once again Japan has a true and proper culture, the smile is often seen as a type of condescending behaviour that is very often misunderstood by the foreigner. The smile's social convention therefore frequently hides embarrassment or difficulty.

We have to remember that there is a certain grade of separation between facial expressions and internal psychological states, in the sense that not everything that appears on the face necessarily indicates an internal emotional experience. Also there is a certain dissociability between that internal and external. Facial movements are also an important element in the coordination of the communicative exchange, they facilitate the alternation of the 'who speaks next?' situation, and then the synchronism between the interlocutors. The glance generally makes a contribution in this exercise, for the collection of feedback information, to show attention and interest, and also to understand whose turn it is to speak during a conversation. As we have already said, the glance is however somewhat limited in Japan. On this point we must include a type of non-verbal conversation typically Japanese which is called 'Haragei', that literally means 'visceral language'. It is a language/non-language made up more or less of silences, lulls in exchanges, and slow reflexions in which the interlocutor is scrutinized. This could be compared to a type of intuition in which words only act as an adjunct and do not express the true concept (Corddry, 1975).

At this point a form of communication shall be added which constitutes a strategic way of communicating and has numerous meanings- this is quite simply, silence. Silence is not simply the absence of communication but it has well-defined rules with numerous variable standards from culture to culture. Generally speaking, western cultures are characterized by a type of communication with low contextualization and one witnesses a rapid change over in exchanges, conversational lulls are relatively reduced and silence is considered to be a threat or lack of cooperation in conversational management.

As opposed to this, oriental cultures are typified by a high-contextualized communication, the participants exercise long periods of silence between one exchange and another and these are signals of reflexion and deliberation. In the Japanese culture, silence or *mugon* 無言 (むごん) is very often a symptom of trust, harmony and understanding (McVeigh, 1997).

Chronemics, from the Greek 'Khrónos' or "time", studies the use of time, and also in this case it varies greatly according to the culture. As well as the rhythm of the speech, the turns taken to speak and the length of the pauses in relation to the content, one must also add the sense of time in general (Anolli, 2003). This would be the punctuality, perception of future and past events, time management (Hall, 1983), etc. One presupposes that the concept of time not only has a notable influence on socio-cultural competence, but also operates in the syntactical construction of the language itself (D'arcais, Wiley, 1978).

Examples of chronemic differences between Italian and other cultures are numerous, but in this case the risk is run of losing count of historical, cultural and individual variables and then to be overly influenced entirely by stereotypes (Lipovetsky, 1989). The fact however remains that generally speaking there is a certain diffidence upon the concept of punctuality when we turn towards Italians and that this contributes to relationships with Japanese people.

Proxemics studies the use that a person makes of the distance and the space of social and working organization and of interpersonal relationships. In particular, in the field of communication, inter-personal distance and orientation towards the interlocutor have important consequences on the efficacy of the interaction.

The distinction between the different types of distance includes four areas which may vary from a maximum and a minimum according to the influence due to socio-cultural factors. The Japanese culture may be located between those cultures having a distance where spatial reduction is perceived as an encroachment, against the Italian culture which is characterized by a culture of vicinity and which considers distance as a symptom of coldness and hostility.

At the same time, from an anthropological point of view, given the elevated population density in the big urban centres, life in Japan forces upon man a lifestyle in which distance is reduced, and for this reason right from infancy respect for interpersonal space is inculcated so as not to bother the next person. In this category, Japan may be placed among the countries having a 'no-contact' culture, in fact the haptic is very limited and as a consequence bodily contact between people is avoided as much as possible (Balboni, 1999). On the other hand, in line with many other Latin or Arab cultures, Italy plays a part in the culture of contact.

Maybe the socio-cultural aspects are not the most complex to describe, but they are when it comes to an analysis. This is because often they are the ones that, more than anything else, are subjectively bound. Beneath are those aspects that shall be taken into consideration that may influence the class didactic progress, and this phenomenon shall be looked into further on in this paper.

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“Shame culture” 恥の文化(はじのぶんか - hajinobunka) is one of these. This has been analysed by numerous psychologists and, according to an analysis carried out by Kent (Kent, 1992), it may be understood both as a private phenomenon (embarrassment) and a public one. Shame has fundamentals based upon society itself and on psychological ideals. (Sakuta, 1967).

Along with many other oriental cultures, Japan can be located in the area of collectivism, while individualism is found in many western cultures. It would be opportune to add to this that, ‘ Individualism and collectivism do not constitute two opposing poles in a unique dimension, but are rather two independent dimensions, further defined within their internal areas’. (Anolli, 2004).

Among its various characteristics, collectivism often has a strong sense of ‘social harmony’ and lends priority to group objectives with respect to those of the individual. The sense of belonging to a group, that may be either for work or study, is very important in the Japanese culture, therefore competition stands at an acceptable limit between different groups, but even in this case it is always experienced with a collective spirit aimed at achieving a wider social wellbeing. In one group on its own, the competition on the contrary would shatter a fundamental balance, and this is one of the reasons why competition is also avoided in the classes. Amongst the various forms brought into play to avoid competition, ‘haji’ (understood as shyness) is the ideal, in that it tends to flatten out the personality as it were, and not put the individual on show (Sumiko, 2000).

The concept of ‘on’ is tied to a sense of duty, to which each and every Japanese person is tightly bound; the concept of ‘giri’ instead represents the good name and reputation. In the case of the Japanese, the ‘giri’ must never in any way be dishonoured (Benedict, 1968).

There is an aspect of communication that is not separable from socio-cultural characteristics, or rather the communicative competence relative to the conquest of the emotional filter. This filter is a psychological-emotive block due to a form of mental self-defence against states of anxiety. This anxiety, as also reported in *Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Learning* by Krashen, in fact has had a very powerful influence and jeopardises linguistic acquisition (Balboni, 2004).

There are many characteristics that cause the emotive block to come into the field of linguistics; this is because the higher the knowledge of a language, the easier it is to get over the emotive block. However, a psychological factor remains which is consequence of being tied to both to the typology of the student (behaviour towards studying or the teacher, personal confidence, individual organisational skills, a more or less extrovert character etc.) and to the cultural origin. This is due to the fact that was discussed previously; students may be more predisposed than others to this emotive block. According to the Communication Accommodation Theory worked on by Giles and Coupland (Giles, Coupland, 1991), following determined strategies of synchronisation and accommodation of linguistic and extra-linguistic signals, it is possible to arrive at a position of convergence which allows a good interaction in communicative exchange, avoiding in this way divergence which would on the contrary not facilitate the understanding of an input.

The Communication Accommodation Theory is favourable towards a meeting point that does not include a masking of culture or, even worse, the imitation of others. It uses a perspective that works side by side with a balanced management, which in the case of education respects that which the student thinks without giving up other positions on the part of the teacher. It therefore requires a pause control, the use of proxemics and gestemics, vocal intensity, enunciation length and also the use of vocal frequency (a tone of voice which is too high and strident can cause problems in much the same way that low and monotonous tone of voice can be boring). Psychological social research of language has illustrated how behaviour and reactions towards a person are strongly determined also by the way that person speaks and by the relative ‘speaker’s paradigm of evaluation’ which is activated by the listener (Giles, Johnson, 1995).

In every communicative relationship between two people a continuous work of deconstruction and reconstruction equivalent to an upturning of perspective is necessary to an exchange. The occurrence of a true and proper inter-subject communication is in fact tied to the capacity of an individual to alternately take on his own and the other person’s plan of reference, reconstructing the field every time without ever making his own point of view that specific privileged moment. (Mizzau, 1974).

Teaching to an audience made up of different culture classes includes as a consequence a certain conscience of the use of these abilities that, above all in the collectivist culture, is particularly felt. On the other hand however, we find a more accommodating behaviour in the more individualistic cultures. (Gallois, Giles,

Jones, Cargile, 1995). Therefore, one has to succeed in creating a type of empathy that allows the lowering of the emotional filter (Krashen, 1981).

Also, according to Schumann, an increase in empathy between student and teacher would diminish the negative conditions caused by factors such as anxiety, stress, and it would obtain an improvement in learning as a result (Schumann, 1975).

A condition of empathy leads the student to feel less the cultural distance in that this factor is of an emotional nature, and as a consequence can be managed with an approach of the psychological type.

CONCLUSION

Thanks to cultural psychology and other sciences, in this study we have been able to observe some of the more evident characteristics in the Japanese culture. The field circumscribed by education in the student-teacher relationship has given way to an understanding of the importance of the knowledge of various communicative signals, in that only a continuous interaction between them has allowed us to interpret signals and to understand the relative prerequisites.

It has been also possible to also observe how some communication systems are to be limited to certain cultures and that it is not always possible to generalize by classifying behaviours; suffice it to bear in mind that among the western, non-verbal, vocal (shouting, crying, voice intonation) signal communication systems, and the non-vocal (smiles, a global motivator), some behavioural traits such as the lowered head, the fleeting glance, the scanty use of gestures, the absence of facial mimicry, the attenuated tone of voice etc. are more or less classified as characteristics of the depressed subject (Jones, Cumming, Horowitz 1981), characteristics which cannot obviously be applied to an intercultural context.

Many reasons for intercultural incomprehension are born directly out of the absence of knowledge of certain communicative forms. An individual must know how to use a communicative signal in the same way in which the others use it. This mechanism ensures that the interlocutor comprehends that which he has learnt and that he is employing a 'shared' communicative social sign, in this way one is able to produce and understand the same symbol with the same meaning.

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