Successful Communication in the Global Village: Is Speaking a Common Language Enough? Some Considerations for Needs Analysis of CSP Courses

Carmen Foz Gil
Universidad de Zaragoza

The economic changes which have taken place in the second half of the 20th century have led most nations in the world to be more open to foreign investment, to take part in international business and in international scientific proyects. As a consequence, communication between people of different nationalities is mainly due to professional matters. All this means a sudden opening of communicative channels and a quick rise of the frequency of direct encounters between people who not only speak different mother tongues but come from different cultures as well. Although English has become the most common lingua franca among professionals from all over the world, cultural differences may influence the relationship between partners, even at purely human relations level.

This paper aims to heighten awareness of the dependence of language on culture and emphasises the need for research in intercultural communication applicable to the design of courses in Language for Specific Purposes (LSP).

1. From LSP to CSP

When designing a course on a foreign Language for Specific Purposes (LSP), we are in fact aiming to help professionals within a particular area of activities (medicine, science, engineering, business, etc.) to communicate with colleagues of the same or similar area, but of different nationalities. The main feature of these courses on LSP is that before the course is designed, an analysis of the needs of those professionals with regards to the use of the foreign language is carried out, as well as a detailed study of the corresponding language register. The representative target group usually corresponds to speakers of different languages who are bound to communicate successfully in a given field, but at the same time they are confronted with their partners' attitudes and expectations in all communicative activities, i.e. with their respective cultural differences and reactions.

Thus, if the aim of a LSP course is to provide enough information for its students to communicate successfully, then intercultural behaviour is to be taken into account, namely the interlocutor's environment, his communicative strategies, and, of course, his linguistic behaviour. This approach to the teaching of LSP is called Communication for Specific Purposes (CSP), a growing field within the teaching of foreign languages devoted to researching into communication between professionals and to devising new methods of teaching how to communicate successfully; CSP is concerned with language use as just one aspect of the communicative process, and when designing a course on intercultural communication, three main questions are raised:

— Who communicates with whom?

— What is it that should be taught in order to reduce the intercultural gap?

— Where and how is the necessary information to be gathered?

Finally, when answers to the above are formulated, the following question is their logical consequence:

— How to organise and present the collected information to learners, so that they can benefit from it in real situations?

We will have to look into them in more detail, in order to tailor the answers to our specific needs.

2. Cultural gap and communicative failure

The first question to answer is «Who communicates with whom?» We know that courses of CSP are aimed at people who are involved in international professional relationships; however, there are sociolinguistically interesting aspects of the actual communicative situations between them that have to be considered in the needs analysis.

In such communicative situations, the language used is foreign to at least one of them and interlocutors represent different societies. Each participant (P1, P2) has his own setting (S1, S2) representing his cultural environment or context, his set of values and beliefs. In theory, both one's linguistic behaviour (LB) and non-linguistic behaviour (NLB) should concord with one's language (L) and setting.

In practice, however, if the settings of two participants are different, then misunderstandings and conflicts are likely to happen. While L is the most obvious component of every communicative situation, it is only in its consequences —LB and NLB— that the potential for communicative success or failure is hidden.

Each message sent by the speaker has an intended meaning (IM) which is decoded by the hearer (DM), and while there remains a possibility of IM = DM, the opposite situation may mean that the message sent was misunderstood. In principle, even the choice of a neutral language entails expectations as to LB and NLB. Loveday (1982: 6) gives a typical example of incompatibility of IM and DM:

> *For Westerners, expressing gratitude has not very much to do with apologising, but for a Japanese, one is only as intensified form of the other. Thus, a Japanese speaker may offer thanks in English by saying 'I'm sorry'.*

This would cause LB communicative failure. Similarly, misinterpreting NLB may cause far-reaching negative consequences. Loveday (1982: 8) gives the example of the different interpretation of silence and volubility by English and Japanese Speakers:

> *Japanese performing in English often do not realise how much distress is caused by remaining silent for long periods. A hesitancy to speak out and verbalise one's thoughts and feelings may be interpreted by P2 as coldness, hostility, unconcern [...]. Of course, well-meaning attempts to make the Japanese partner 'speak up' often tend to cause silent frustration and resentment* [...]

Indeed, what the receiver understands is no less important for the communication process than what the sender intends to convey. It seems that too often linguistics concentrates on the latter; and for that reason it is crucial to work on models encompassing the whole communicative process, including both participants at the same time. The above considerations prove, first, that the locus of communicative failure is distributed between LB and NLB; and second, which seems to be the fundamental factor to determine the choice of LB and NLB: the setting.

We have tried to give a preliminary answer to the question «What is it that should be taught in order to reduce the intercultural gap?» However, how much preliminary this answer is can be seen as soon as one starts formulating statements concerning a given target cultural professional environment without falling into stereotypes. This is not easy, as researchers and teachers usually look for brief clear formulas identifying the most striking features of a target group that would be neither stereotypes nor trivial generalities, and that could have practical value in learning to communicate with representatives of the target group.

The aim of the CSP approach is to provide students enough information in order to help them avoid misunderstandings and conflicts likely to happen due to the cultural gap between interlocutors with different settings. Therefore, to the extent to which the participants are (or at least one of them is) conscious of their differences and of the communicative goal, they can 'negotiate' a more or less neutral setting, which may be closer to either S1 or S2. It is also possible that S3 be unrelated to both S1 and S2, when the participants find it convenient —and possible— to adopt an alien setting, that of a host country, for instance. In a communicative situation, one can usually make concessions to the interlocutor when the respective settings differ in a significant way, and to 'pretend' to have a different setting, conformingly to the needs of the situation. The linguistic behaviour will then reflect a setting different from one's own, that is, a setting adopted for the purpose.

3. Gathering information

We have thus come to the third basic question: «Where and how is the necessary information to be gathered?» As in all sociolinguistic and, more generally, sociological research, there are several possible ways of getting the information we are interested in:

i– theoretical considerations

ii– inferring from published literature

iii– direct observation of actual communicative situations

iv– interrogation of other groups' members having experience with the target group.

The first two techniques may have numerous limitations and can only serve, to varying extent, as an additional support. It seems that the ideal technique would be direct observation of professional encounters using video equipment, followed by systematic analysis and discussion with the participants. However, for practical reasons this techniques can only be rarely used; many professional talks are considered as confidential by at least one party and, because of tight time schedule of busy people, lengthy debriefing sessions are out of question. Therefore, interrogation by using questionnaires seems more suitable.

A questionnaire is a very handy tool, because it does not require any equipment and interviews can be carried out almost anywhere and at any time. The questionnaire also allows for personalised treatment and double-checking of answers by using reformulated questions and camouflaged questions, as well as for easy statistical treatment. Its major shortcoming is that it has to be elaborated first.

Since our subject concerns attitudes and evaluations, the formulation of questions is a very delicate matter. An additional factor in this particular case is the usual practice-oriented and no-nonsense attitude of most professionals. It is important that the questions:

— should be formulated in a neutral, non-suggestive way,

— should avoid all sorts of academic jargon, sociolinguistic and technical terms,

— should concentrate on concrete, practical situations rather than general statements.

Questions can be closed (yes-no), multiple choice, scaled or open. The more closed the questions, the easier their statistical treatment, but at the same time, answers can be satisfactory only if they concern very concrete well-defined matters.

Although open questions require more interviewing time and considerably more evaluation work later, they act as triggers and the respondents are motivated to talk about their working experience. They should concentrate on misunderstandings, conflicts, surprising situations and the like, as every respondent usually has plenty to say about it from his/her personal observations.

One important remark should be formulated here: information gathered by this technique should always be confronted with analogical information coming from the partner's group. If, for example, the interviewed business people are Spanish trading with their Dutch counterparts, a series of interviews should be carried out, independently, with representatives of both groups, and only the comparison of answers can give fully significant results. Indeed, very often respondents are not aware of their own behaviour, nor of the real impact, it has on their partners.

4. Bringing intercultural context into the classroom

We thus come to the fourth basic question asked at the beginning: «How to organise and present the collected information to the students so that they can benefit from it in real situations?» Since CSP is above all concerned with behaviour, communicative behaviour of all kinds, a particularly relevant form of training seems to be the role-plays and simulations. The main problem is to design scenarios which would correspond to the real needs of the participants.

The aim is then to create clearly defined situations typical for encounters between representatives of two culture groups and at the same time characterised by features unfamiliar to at least one party. The practical problems arise in finding actors. Indeed, ideally the target culture representative in the role-play should be genuine, in our case, a real businessman/engineer/scientist of the target group. Nowadays this is often feasible thanks to the increasing presence of students from other European countries, mainly, but also from non-European ones, too, in our universities; they bring a more realistic intercultural context into the classroom. Then the use of video equipment plays an important role, permitting extensive debriefing sessions during which an analysis of what had been going on can be made by the participants guided by the teacher.

5. Concluding remarks

All that has been said above shows that communication is more than just language use; on the one hand, teaching CSP should mean teaching how to control and adapt one's communicative behaviour to the interlocutor's expectations, which implies a knowledge of these expectations; and on the other hand, it should mean how infer the interlocutor's intentions (IM) from his communicative behaviour. This entails several important consequences for the organisation of such teaching.

The principal aim of teaching LSP has been to enable students to say/write/understand things in a foreign language within a specific professional context. In the business field, for example, typical LSP courses usually assume that the student (P1) totally adapts, or at least tries to adapt, to the foreign partner (P2), he uses L2 and shows LB2.

Stress is no doubt on language itself, and courses are seldom adapted to a particular learners' group; they are usually meant to be universal, at least in the behavioural sphere. In the purely linguistic sphere, if any contrastive/ confrontative efforts are made, they usually concern vocabulary and syntax, and, sometimes, minor technical features (legal company types, accounting systems, letter writing rules, etc.).

The CSP approach is totally different. It is by definition contrastive/confrontative; if a course is to be prepared, the first requirement is a comparative analysis of communicative behaviour in the groups concerned. In CSP stress is put on communicative behaviour, both LB and NLB, and behaviour selection by P1 should normally result from knowledge of P2's setting. This approach is based on the believe that what people know about each other and their environment is paramount to achieve successful communication.

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