Making progress in a foreign language -

including observations on the role of the teacher

Peter Ackermann, lecture, 2016

The "hard ware" of language: vocabulary, grammar / syntax
The "soft ware" of language:
-- the <u>productive level</u>: properly creating language FLOW
-- the <u>receptive level</u>: properly understanding the FLOW of others

What is FLOW ?
The <u>music</u> of language: sound, rhythm, speed, prosody, tone colour, accents, hesitation, interruptions etc.
The <u>dance</u> of language: body movement, proxemics, face and eyes, management of time etc.
The <u>contents</u> of language: What do I say, what don't I say? Why does someone say something? What does the speaker assume the listener or reader knows / doesn't know? etc.
The <u>trigger</u> of language: Communication is historically rooted – there are REASONS why people say something, how they say something, or why they don't say something.
(cf. also the philosophical thoughts of Eugene Gendlin concerning flow)

The problematic link between LANGUAGE and IDENTITY
Examples:
- In one specific context I *must* show that I am a "real" man / a "real" woman. Otherwise the people of my community will laugh at me.
In another specific cultural context I *must not* show that I am a "real" man / a "real" woman, otherwise the people of my community will condemn me for being sexist, macho or undemocratic.

However, showing or not showing an aspect of self is part of my identity and can hardly be adapted to situations.

- In one specific context I *must* show my authority, otherwise I will not achieve anything.
In another specific cultural context I ***must not*** show my authority, otherwise my community will criticize me for being unsocial.
However, appearing authoritarian or not is part of my identity and self-conception and can hardly be adapted to situations.

- My language accent ***must*** show where I come from, so that others know how to deal with me.
My language accent **must not** show where I come from so as to appear educated and polite.
But here too it is almost impossible to switch between the two forms of self-presentation.

We need to be aware of the fact that GENERATIONS do not only portray and represent values, they also always *negate* values. For instance many young people said NO to religion, NO to traditional careers, NO to classical music. What are the specific fields that a generation wishes to negate, and why? And how absolute are these negations – does negating shift with time?
We must understand generational dynamics within a society, there is no stable pattern of communication within a culture!

What is the role of the STATE in shaping communication?
Are we all "victims" of national education?

A <u>state</u> backs an education system meant to produce good national citizens. A state may educate to develop tolerance, but it does not educate to communicate with *other* cultures.

The <u>national education system</u> emphasises the history of the

nation, the need to defend its borders and to support its institutions. And national identity is always linked to a national vision of communication, as a rule (but not always, such as in Switzerland) in one specific language.

However: the relationship between individual and state is not in every case positive. In many societies communication only follows national standards on the surface, people say one thing and do something else.
For instance: they pretend to be polite or tidy, and in reality they are proud to show protest by being aggressive or dirty.

>>How do we UNDERSTAND and ACCEPT these processes (passively)?
>>How do we ADAPT (actively) to these processes when we learn a language?

How should we acquire COMPETENCE?

●Making a time plan, defining the steps

●Careful observation, analysis and keeping written record of what is happening in our own or in observed communication

(cf. the writings and thoughts of Michael Byram; M. Byram et al. Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters – Conseil de l'Europe)

●The teacher's role: 1) Organise the "hard ware" of language in a logical way

●The teacher's role: 2) help, guide and encourage the learner in his / her own individual way of observing and interpreting the "soft ware" of language

●A teacher must know the historical, social and (as far as possible) psychological <u>background</u> of what makes up communication and what shapes its flow. By contrast, "ordinary" speakers of a given language as a rule do not reflect on these points.

●A teacher must <u>defend and legitimate</u> towards outside the long and intensive process of acquiring competence, so that the learner feels protected.

<u>Important current topics:</u>
- CONFLICT is caused by small thinks, not big things. For instance, a mistake in grammar or vocabulary is often quite unimportant, but if I say something just a little bit too loud or too fast, this can be interpreted as an attack. Being slow may be interpreted as polite in one culture, or as rude in another.

- Most people nowadays have only PARTIAL COMPETENCE. They may have moved here from elsewhere. These may have – often forcefully - acquired one form of competence at school, and another form of competence at home.
Partial competence also occurs in social mobility (for instance poor to rich, or rich to poor).

How are societies changing when its members have complex forms of communicative competence? How do national educational institutions answer this question? Through more, or through less emphasis of national norms?