

Intercultural Dialogue and the Quality of Language Knowledge

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Abstract

Treating the use of a foreign language as intercultural dialogue, the role of the teacher as that of a transmitter of culture through language becomes significant even when culture is a multidimensional phenomenon. The context of globalization and the responsibility of educators for quality in language knowledge place the problem in classroom teaching. It arises from declining standards in education and is rather a responsibility of the foreigner teaching English as a foreign language in the context of the classroom, and in that of the supporting community. It is also quality that matters when a foreign language is taught and learnt systemically and when it is learnt individually by a person as an amateur. The concept of the quality of language knowledge in EFL reaches over to the community of the native speakers, which is marked by social hierarchy, language centred attitudes and a number of social varieties of English. Even if one accepts a rational view treating Standard English as only one dialect, this variety is the best described, the most widely current and studied and the least marked variety of English. Adherence to a standard means the acceptance of the recorded and explained usage of which the teacher is only too aware. This also means the acceptance of a certain norm, which entails quality whether sought as an ideal or achieved as a result. The concept of the quality of language knowledge is related, in the present paper, to the opposition between incidental and systemic language learning, which is real in the EU. In this context, institutionalised foreign language teaching associates with quality, while the teacher's competence acquires the primary value. Professional qualification of the teacher spreading between formally correct usage and competence in English, the challenge to the teacher can be met through life-long learning. Treating quality in language knowledge as a continuous process rather than a fixed perfection, one emphasizes real difficulties and challenges to the teacher. However, the existing resources of English and attitudes to the potential of English as the native language do not permit any excuse. If it matters to the speaker of English as a foreign language how he is perceived by the native speakers, the quality of English as a foreign language should feature high on the agenda of the schools teaching it, while the teacher's competence in English should ensure it.

Culture, multilingualism and the quality of language knowledge

It requires no research to be convinced that foreign language learning and the use of a foreign language is an intercultural dialogue, though aspects of culture are many and various, especially to a person in the humanities (Cf.: Greimas, 1998; cf.: Halliday, 1978, 37, 123-126; Denison, 1975). In so far as such communication presupposes the exposure, sharing and exchange of culture, it conceals evaluation. As one can glean from the words of the representatives of the European Commission who spoke in Eastern Europe last year (cf.: Benedetti, 2007), multilingualism is encouraged in the European Union with the view to enable a majority of people to use their native language in international communication because it is only the native language that ensures the accuracy of communication. As a case in the domain of culture, this view also conceals evaluation, and it is the native language that goes to the highest bidder. But high standards to the language in translation are set in the European Union and translators even “with a solid sense of style” are sought (Roth, 2007; Benedetti, 2007). However, communication in foreign languages also goes on and its evaluation raises the question of the quality of language knowledge.

The problem of the present paper is the question whether the quality of English as a foreign language matters in schools and how teachers of English as a foreign language spread culture in the classroom and in society. It is also a question of whether the status of the foreign language is fairly acknowledged and whether teachers of English have some professional identity and share an image of a qualified professional. It has been taken for granted that every speaker reflects his individual and society’s culture. Irrespective of whether we acknowledge some shared image of a qualified teacher or not, in communication, we do reflect the culture of the environment from which we come. This allows one to suppose that professional qualification is also reflected in the person’s individual culture and perhaps even shapes it. Therefore professional knowledge, which is likely to feature in this assessment, might also matter. It is indeed significant that a common concept of how philologists differ depending on the language they study has been alive for decades in universities. It is still more significant that this concept, which is based on mere impression, marks quite accurately the features which identify, for instance, a classicist at university or an academic with a degree in English or French and the literatures. (A classicist is composed and philosophically reticent, while an English teacher is talkative and energetic).

This paper has been based on research into modern English usage, classroom teaching and on the observation of communication in English as a foreign language. Its aim is to reconsider the existence of different standards or varieties of English and of different schools minding that democratic attitudes have been popularised even in language learning and teaching today. Its further aim is to invite the teachers of English as a foreign language in smaller countries to consider their individual ideas of English and their shared attitudes to this language and culture. Such deliberation might hopefully build (or not) a community of foreigners teaching English as a foreign language. Such a community of teachers could not only mobilize them to work to advantage but embody and spread their professional culture of refinement. Ignoring quality in EFL, one seems to defy the function of schooling. Ignoring the potential community and professional culture, one seems to doubt the role of education. As one hears in *The Forum* programme over the BBC, teachers and entrepreneurs in Africa still believe in the power of education, the value of reading and the role of the greater community (BBC WS, 16 June 2008). One wonders why such a belief should require implementation in Europe.

There is nothing extraordinary in the assumption elevating the teachers’ professional culture, which rests on their professional knowledge. The teacher’s knowledge always stands in

contrast to the student's knowledge as it does to that of the laymen. The difference in quality in these pairs is an obvious truth. The list of contrasts of this kind may be prolonged. Diligent learners make up a group to contrast with lazy learners. Cultured speakers make a contrast with careless speakers. Chance learners make a contrast with systemic learners in schools. If one wonders why quality features in this consideration, one will find that learning a foreign language is a fairly long process in which achievement is gradual. Life-long learning is a reality rather than a prescription to many teachers of foreign languages. Depending on what stage in learning one considers, one will find more or less obvious differences in the quality of language knowledge. This quality always shows in school and beyond it.

Standard English and dilemmas in EFL

In so far as the quality of the knowledge of English as a foreign language is concerned, its presence happens to be highlighted by the existence of different varieties of English in the native context. Even when one considers grammar, which is shared in British and American English, *i.e.* in the basic accents of English, one finds a difference between Standard and substandard English. Lexical variation in British and American English is fairly pronounced, while the BBC English pronunciation (or Received Pronunciation) makes British English distinct from American English but also from dialects and substandard English in Great Britain. The differences between the Queen's English, Oxford English and the BBC English are very slight and some recent features of negligence (I would call it) in Standard English pronunciation are not generally spread. For instance, the assimilation of sibilants at the junctures in such phrases as 'this year' or 'as you know' is not general in the BBC pronunciation. Some announcers over the BBC World Service assimilate [s] to make it [ʃ] in these junctures, but some do not. Merely this feature in pronunciation means that a standard of pronunciation exists in British English and it marks a manner in speech.

Although there are authors who treat Standard English with its Received Pronunciation only as a dialect (Stevens, 1964, 26-27) and point out that there is no standard accent of English, Standard English exists. Moreover, learning Standard English means learning registers in language rather than learning another dialect (cf.: Halliday, 1978, 234). A lacking of the standard accent is particularly true of American English and, even in Britain, there is only "a small number of RP speakers" (Stevens, 1964, 26). However, Standard English is widely taught in schools partly because it is the best described variety of English and partly because it is the least marked variety of English. In saying this, one should not forget that Standard English is identified as a social variety of English, which is "acquired either by being born into a social group where it is normally used (...), or as part of the process of education" (Stevens, 1964, 27). Since Standard English is acquired through education and favoured "in upper class families, regardless of the extent of education" (Ibidem, p.27), it is associated with prestige. Irrespective of whether this concept is favoured or not, the existence of Standard English, which is most perfectly practiced by the BBC radio and television, which is current in Government circles and the Universities, establishes the concept of quality with respect to English. However, numerous changes in Standard English, which reflect a relaxed attitude of the speakers, have been noticed and described since the late 1970s. Recent observations on changes in Received Pronunciation and in Standard or Estuary English have also been known (cf.: Trudgill, 2001; Milroy, 2001; Przedlacka, 2001). There is also the point of self-introduction through language and self respect, of what the educated are only too aware.

There is one other aspect to the quality of English and to the quality of language knowledge in EFL. This is the reaction of sensitive people to language, and teachers belong among these people by their professional role. Teachers are sensitive to the correctness of English as a

foreign language. But language is the most pronounced mark of culture, and English is a distinct indicator of the social class of the speaker. Language centred attitudes are usually grounded and they are acknowledged in Britain and the US where social stratification of the native Anglo-Saxon communities is a fact of life. There is more to be said about the teacher as a language conscious person, but something has to be said about tendencies in the learning of languages.

The teacher is an important yet lonely figure in his struggle with students for correct English. One rarely has the support of the community, especially in the case of English as a foreign language in developing countries. Ordinary speakers of national languages know little or nothing of English as the native language of the British and the Americans. The quality even of the native language is vague and unnecessary to many members of the community (cf.: Benedetti, 2007), while quality in foreign language learning rests not only with the individual but also with the community of the language learner and with the community of foreign language teachers no less than with their professionalism.

The quality of language knowledge in incidental and institutionalized language learning
In the context of this paper, I intend to emphasise one important moment: it is a challenge to the teacher and all cultured people who use foreign languages when the learning of languages is encouraged *en masse* and piecemeal. This does not mean that individual people should be discouraged from learning foreign languages from handbooks and on the run and using them if only in fragments. Even a single incidental or spare word can come to rescue to man in a foreign land. Even a single loose fragment of a foreign language can serve, make fun and be a pleasure. However, man's ability to remember and use loose words should not be likened to or thought to be good enough to replace verbal skills acquired in institutionalized language learning. Nor should it be a model for schools. When we praise incidental language knowledge forgetting the systemic, it is not only the dignity of the individual teacher that suffers. It is the authority of all teachers, of school and of schooling in general. This is not taking language too seriously (cf.: Halliday, 1978, 37-38) or creating bogus problems. Erratic learning of languages has gone on and will go on. Nobody can regulate it nor is there a need for that. But the fact that such learning of languages *en masse* is encouraged in the European Union should not mean that school can be ignored and left to its own devices, that institutionalized teaching can be underappreciated and that the teachers can relax. On the contrary, every school worthy of the name should implement its requirements, while the teachers should brace themselves in the stream of unsorted usage. Counter measures in this situation would be the pursuit of quality and models set to the student, without excluding the ideas of good, beautiful or correct in verbal usage. (The Olympic motto might be paraphrased into *Bonius, fortius, pulcherrus* = Better, stronger, finer, for the student in EFL). The question of quality in the teaching of foreign languages was emphasised by Government representatives in Eastern Europe at recent conferences. Quality was seen here as a measure in making the learning of languages more effective. The question of the quality of language knowledge was raised at a meeting with Mr Orban, the European Commission Commissar on Multilingualism on the 21st of February 2008 at the Vilnius Book Fair. Mr Orban acknowledged the reality in the use of foreign languages in the EU, in which quality might be wanted, but he stated plainly that quality and achievement in foreign languages is entirely the school's concern. That was to say that officials of the European Commission were aware of the desirable quality in foreign language knowledge. However, they were language users and regarded quality as a result factor rather than as a stimulus to take to action. This was not saying too much since the quality of foreign language knowledge is indeed the product of school. In this context, it is the teacher who remains an important person and he should take

responsibility. Here again one raises the question of what quality in language knowledge means and what the teacher should do about it.

Quality in foreign language knowledge is an exceptional asset. Mainly because full exposure to the foreign language is limited, the main resource to the foreigner is memory rather than overall impression and reaction. For the same reason, the foreigner's linguistic instinct is limited and uncertain. Proficiency in a foreign language develops gradually with experience and wide reading. Reading, like the media, can enrich foreign language matter in the person's mind so much that the mind starts functioning on the running text as it were. This is the level of competence in foreign language knowledge because a word or a phrase when heard and seen and considered can open up a stream of quotations for the word and confirm its meaning and appropriateness (cf.: Drazdauskiene, 2007). It is memory and contexts (often literary) that ensure competence in a foreign language to the foreigner. Given even this experience, the foreigner's language knowledge is incomplete and, if we are to believe authorities on language, "the meaning of the word to the foreigner is never the same that it is to the native speaker". However, there are ways of keeping up one's foreign language knowledge and ways of improving it.

Error analysis and the restraint of the teacher required

Permanent exposure to the foreign language through reading and the media has remained the most powerful source refreshing one's knowledge of the foreign language. These ways are sometimes more effective than goal-directed practice in language courses. Error analysis, both simultaneous with the process of communication and retrospective, is also an effective way of advancement in foreign language knowledge. This paper has been based on data of error analysis in the students' and my own written papers for over twenty years.

It has been known that verbal errors provide clues to an understanding of how the human mind works (cf.: Fromkin, 1973; Aitchison, 1993) and how man learns languages (cf.: Richards, 1974; Korosadowicz-Struzynska, 1979). I am inclined to contend that error analysis in foreign students papers train the teacher's immediate reaction and his ability to compare and assess what is acceptable and unacceptable in the foreign language. Moreover, the foreigner's retrospective analysis of his own errors tests his foreign language knowledge and indicates his advancement in it.

The engagement with error analysis should not work to alert the person's reactions in public communication and at social events. For instance, it is a feature of Anglo-Saxon culture to tolerate the foreigner's errors and this is not to be overlooked in intercultural dialogue. The foreigner should profit by learning from error analysis and not to demonstrate the quickness of his mind. Papers for error analysis should not be too voluminous, either, for there is a danger to have one's linguistic instinct blunted and distorted in an unlimited exposure to erroneous usage.

The quickness of one's mind that develops in error analysis as part of the foreigner's linguistic instinct should not be exercised even on the students in classroom practice. Too conscientious correction of the students' errors may turn into interference with their disposition to express themselves (cf.: Bolitho, 2008). This is particularly true of phonetics (cf.: Halliday, 1978, 233) and very damaging to the learner if overemphasized. There is also another reason for the slowing down of the teacher's reaction in face of the students' errors. The foreigner and even the native speaker teaching a language may not be able to correct the students' errors immediately. It is required that the teacher should be able to identify his students' errors, often mentally, but can take time to analyse them, consult the sources and

only subsequently explain them. Besides, and this is particularly true about English, only broken grammar and stray collocations may count as downright errors, while usage measures in terms of acceptability. Modern English usage, for instance, is fairly liberal. Even *The Oxford Guide to English Usage* contains a statement that the emphasis in this dictionary “is on the degree of acceptability in standard English of a particular use, rather than on a dogmatic distinction of right and wrong. Much that is sometimes condemned as ‘bad English’ is better regarded as appropriate in informal contexts but inappropriate in formal ones” (Weiner, 1983, x). But there are limits to allowances in usage.

Error analysis is a profitable engagement for the foreigner teaching English as a foreign language. The foreigner in EFL should permanently attend to his own language and use every opportunity to advantage. This is especially true in learner-based teaching when both the student and the teacher become learners. It is good if the teacher retains his youthful mental capacity and memory. If the mind of the foreigner teaching English as a foreign language functions on the running text and if he has developed an immediate mental reaction to the acceptability of the speech he hears, the quality of his knowledge of the foreign language might be sufficient. But the teacher is only one component in the teaching process even though he is expected to be a transmitter of the culture of the community of the native speakers.

A desirable balance between competence and grace

Generalising on the quality of the foreign language knowledge, one can hardly make these requirements more stringent. The quality of the teacher’s language will definitely rub off on the students’ language. Therefore competence in modern English usage and near-native proficiency is expected from the foreigner in EFL. Nobody can expect the teacher’s language to be a body of ultimate perfection. Though polished language is a credit to the speaker, too much focus on polishing and the focus on the slightest details are likely to ruin the learning and the teaching. The final polish and perfection is the result of the efforts of an individual speaker and he has to be given an opening for individual concern. The teacher has to be an expert speaker but he has also to speak as naturally as he can. Even the foreigner teaching a foreign language should strive for communication in a natural guise in the classroom. It is excellent knowledge of the foreign language that can help him achieve this goal.

Language is never a rationally designed, finished and perfect product. Language is a spontaneous and dynamic stream, almost unpredictable and patterned only by recurrence. Therefore the quality of language knowledge as that of language teaching cannot be measured by pedantic precision, infallible accuracy or geometric and algebraic perfection. Such features as taste, culture and style in language cannot be prescribed by an outsider. They can only be the choices of an individual speaker, which are more or less appropriate in a given context of situation. Individual, random and various minor ways of expression may regularly occur in a foreign language lesson the way they occur in spontaneous speech. As the Editor of the *Journal Humanising Language Teaching* has stated, “Language is for communication, so improving the quality of our relationships in the foreign language and speaking in class is in the centre of the teacher’s attention” (*The HLT Journal*, Issue 3, June 2008, The Editorial). These minor and delicate choices are acceptable only when the speaker is using his native language or when he speaks a foreign language in which he is proficient. The effectiveness of speech is confirmed by its contextual appropriateness, the economy of expression and by the sublimity of verbal images in imaginative literature. An expert speaker and the teacher have to be familiar with the structural, lexical and phonetic resources of the language and should possess an arsenal of the language’s semantic potential for unexpected cases. Therefore the

quality of language knowledge and that of teaching always presuppose expertise in the language. Therefore the education of teachers and studies in the humanities are studies of an exceptional category and the standards set high. Professionals in special fields can afford faulty pronunciation, grammatical inaccuracies and other shortcomings. Students in languages, literature and education should not, for they are to teach others and to set models. This, however, is rarely appreciated.

The quality of the foreign language knowledge of the teacher and the superior standard required of it does not mean putting forward the ideal of absolute correctness and launching a new campaign for correctness in the guise of that professed in the eighteenth century (cf.: Fisiak, 2004, 117-133). My idea would rather mean a call for the preservation of culture in language and for at least minimum correctness for the sake of sweetness today when no standards attract ordinary users and students. There is one other obtrusive attitude and this is a stubborn insistence on righteousness of the individuals whose familiarity with English as a foreign language does not exceed single instances of casual usage from random contexts or the Internet. Most of them are bold young students who are too lazy to study but are not loathe to travel. Random instances of usage are no more than raw flesh or youth in the abstract. The value of them depends on what one makes of them. In so far as a modern language is concerned, it matters how well one understands it and how accurately one can assess its appropriateness. When attitudes of this kind start governing the state of the art under the slogan of democracy, one tends to resort to standards which are relatively well defined and which do not bypass "sweetness and light".

Foreign language learning and the role of the community

There is also the social and administrative background in foreign language teaching and this might be favourably activated too (cf.: Motteram and Edge, 2008). Curricula, syllabi and requirements of the school matter in the achievement of quality as do the tested methods, sound pedagogy, the personality and professional excellence of the teacher. But a community whose attitude and reactions would be conducive to quality in language teaching and learning should be fostered. It is really a reminder to foreigners teaching English as a foreign language that the educated community is lacking when a freshman at University declares that he cannot be bothered with pronunciation and rules, - he requires a diploma. This incident means that English, which has historically been and remained the tongue of kings and the language of the most advanced technological country is treated merely as a commodity here. One wonders therefore whether publicity could help if given to the subject and to its teaching to create the supportive community. If there were a community who cherished the learning of languages and that of English in particular for the enlightenment it gives, the teachers would enjoy a favourable atmosphere and language centred attitudes. The atmosphere in the classroom would also be different. The present social background creates a certain void and distorts the image of the reality of English today. The intercultural dialogue which represents communication in foreign languages does not materialise in full. Moreover, there is a lack of familiarity with language centred attitudes alive in Britain, for instance, among learners of English as a foreign language.

Attitudes that matter

It was known, for instance, in the second half of the twentieth century that the informal style was a dominant tendency in communication in English (Warner, 1964, 155-157). However, communication in this language went on in different registers and formality was never entirely forsaken. One can glean it from the attitudes to the potential of English as a native language. Formality is usually associated with careful usage, slow tempo and accuracy to

detail. The teacher of English as a foreign language can be certain that contexts for formal usage were never completely gone from English and this is confirmed by the Dictionaries. Cf.:

“... there is an inclination, among those who are not to the manner born, to question the existence, besides denying the need, of distinctions between *shall/should* and *will/would*. The distinctions are elaborate; ...”
The time-honoured ‘I will be drowned, no-one shall save me, ...’, is less convincing as a proof that there are people to whom the English distinctions mean nothing than the discovery that *shall & will, should & would*, are sometimes regarded as raw material for elegant variation; ...” (Fowler, 1985, 526, 528).

Those who honour the liberal tendency in usage and foreign language teaching as in the humanities in general can brush off this reproach by saying that Fowler’s *Modern English Usage*, from which the quotation has been taken, is a conservative dictionary, while the Internet sources make different exceptions and allowances. The mentioned distinctions are not obvious in the speech of ordinary people on the street, either. However, Fowler’s *Modern English Usage* is an acknowledged book of reference among the educated native speakers, while English, to reiterate, has been and remained the tongue of kings. Even middle class educated Englishmen happen to react to the differences indicated in the above quotation, to careless and ungrammatical speech. And this is a very recent reminder, no older than the Internet. If it matters to the speaker of English as a foreign language how he is perceived by the native speakers, the quality of English should feature high on the agenda of the schools teaching it, and it is teachers as an organized community of the professionals who, apart from the willing students and the supportive community, can make a difference. The teachers can be consoled in view of new developments in methodology. Enquiry based learning (EBL) is a very recent tendency known from the 42nd IATEFL International Conference this year (Motteram and Edge, 2008, 10-15) and it shifts responsibility at least partly off the shoulders of the teacher on to those of the student. But wide knowledge of quality will have to remain the teacher’s province and the teacher will remain the guiding person even in enquiry based learning for the intercultural dialogue to materialize when it comes to communication in English as a foreign language.

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