

LEARNERS' REPRESENTATIONS OF LANGUAGE AND LANGUAGE LEARNING

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RESUME

Qu'est qu'un apprenant croit qu'il apprend quand il apprend "une langue étrangère" ? Qu'est-ce qu'il croit qu'il fait quand il est en train d'"apprendre" ? Quelles sont ses représentations de l'objet et du processus d'apprentissage ? Ces représentations font partie du système de croyances de l'individu, un système qui d'après des recherches récentes peut être abordé en termes de quatre catégories de représentations :

- (i) Les représentations d'ordre général
- (ii) Les représentations de soi-même
- (iii) Les représentations des normes et des règles
- (iv) Les représentations des objectifs poursuivis

Un corpus d'énoncés produits par un groupe d'étudiants anglophones de français langue étrangère est présenté et analysé sur la base de cette approche.

INTRODUCTION

Although, in the words of John Trim, "the concept of autonomy has always been a major plank in the Council of Europe's platform", it is a concept which has been relatively obscured by the energy and interest generated around the communicative approach. However, a number of recent publications have redirected attention to the fields of autonomy and self-directed learning and, in doing so, have confirmed the original hypothesis (as exposed in Holec, 1979, for example) that the communicative approach necessarily entails an increase in learner-centredness and self-direction. In a nutshell, this is because the communicative approach aims at helping individuals to express their personal intentions, to select and perform those acts and to adopt those strategies which will enable them to attain their objectives in a manner appropriate to their particular situations : there can, therefore, be no question of off-the-peg solutions and some degree of self-direction and learner autonomy is a necessary and even defining characteristic of the communicative approach. Acquiring autonomy, the capacity to direct one's own learning, involves the learner in a number of decisions and acts which are traditionally regarded as appertaining to the role of the teacher. So the learner needs to adapt his/her representation of the teacher-learner relationship and of his/her function in the learning process. This is by no means an easy task since it usually involves going against "common sense" and against all the learner's previous experience of language learning and teaching.

Four of these publications deserve particular mention :

- Anita WENDEN and RUBIN J. (1987), *Learner strategies in language learning*, Englewood Cliffs, Prentice Hall.
- Leslie DICKINSON (1987), *Self-instruction in language learning*, C.U.P, Cambridge.
- Henri HOLEC (1988), *Autonomy and self-directed learning : present fields of application*, Council of Europe, Strasbourg.
- Viljo KOHONEN (1987), *Towards experiential learning of elementary English*, Department of Teacher Training, University of Tampere.

Taken together, these works clearly demonstrate that the notions of autonomy and self-direction have come of age, in the sense that they are no longer simply ideals to be striven after but the driving forces of a wide range of pedagogical projects and practises.

Despite the numerous differences in structure and approach which can be noted in the rich variety of schemes they describe, these books do share, then, a common commitment to learner-centredness and the communicative approach. A further point which emerges quite clearly, in both logical and practical terms, is that if we as teachers ('helpers', 'facilitators') are to help our learners to learn, both we and they need to have some idea as to what they think 'learning' is.

In this article, then, we will be discussing learner-representations of language and learner-representations of learning in general and language learning in particular, within the general context of the communicative approach.

LEARNER REPRESENTATIONS OF LANGUAGE AND LANGUAGE LEARNING

Just what is it that learners think they are learning when they are learning a foreign language ? What does the term "English" or "French" or "German" mean to them? What does it represent affectively, intellectually, socially, politically ? What are their beliefs about it ?

What is it that learners think they are doing when they are learning a foreign language ? What are their beliefs about the nature of the activity they are engaged in, its different components, its purpose ?

Investigating such questions is obviously a complex and delicate business and given the central role of language in social life, it is not surprising to find that attempts to answer them are being made across the spectrum of the social sciences. For example (and as one would expect) cognitive anthropology continues to preserve and extend that discipline's traditional interest in the learning process in general (see Bureau and De Saivre, 1988 for an exceptionally rich sampling of this field). Similarly, research on learning and in particular learning style (Duda and Riley, 1990) is providing both useful insights and helpful investigative tools. The inter-discipline of the social psychology of language has focussed specifically on questions of attitude and representations, though not usually in the context of foreign language learning in the classroom (Giles and St Clair, 1979, is probably still the best introduction to this field). Work in applied sociolinguistics (Trudgill, 1984) has thrown into relief the pedagogical implications of such research, as have ethnographic studies of pedagogical practices (Green and Wallat, 1981), and analysis of exolingualistic discourse carried out within the general framework of the sociology of knowledge (Riley, 1987).

Recently, attempts have been made to synthesise these various approaches into a coherent whole, ethnolinguistic vitality theory. This theory aims at describing and accounting for a group's ethnolinguistic vitality i.e. "that which makes a group likely to behave as a distinctive and active collective entity in intergroup situations" (Giles, Bourhis and Taylor, 1977). A considerable number of factors affecting this construct have been identified, including status, demographic and support variables. Although most of the appropriate research techniques in the social sciences have been employed, the main investigative tool in use at present is the Subjective Vitality Questionnaire (Bourhis, Giles and Rosenthal, 1981). This tool and the construct it represents have been widely used in the study of ethnolinguistic phenomena and intergroup setting (e.g. Allard and Landry, 1984). In terms of our immediate interests, though, the most relevant fields of application are obviously those of language attitude (Bourhis and Sachdev, 1984) and second language acquisition (Giles and Byrne, 1982). Here, the importance of subjective variables, i.e. the individual's perception of ethnolinguistic reality, his or her representation of the linguistic situation, is regularly stressed by all the writers mentioned. In other words, my behaviour as a member of a group and with respect to other groups, will vary according to my beliefs about the linguistic situation : and language learning is a crucial aspect of that behaviour.

In a most interesting discussion of this problem, Allard and Landry (1986) have proposed a model of "subjective ethnolinguistic vitality viewed as a belief system". They argue that attitudes to language and language learning fall within the sphere of cognitive theories of behaviour and that the most appropriate model proposed to date is Kreidler and Kreidler's "cognitive orientation model" which they summarise thus :

"According to this model, all of human behaviour, with the exception of the rachidian reflexes, is guided by one's cognitive orientation. The Kreitlers postulate that human beings are constantly endeavouring, both consciously and unconsciously, to give meaning to various incoming stimuli in order to orient their behaviour... It is well documented that certain stimuli evoke responses of the conditioned reflex type. What happens, however, when the meaning of a stimulus is unclear and cannot evoke appropriate responses at the conditioned reflex level? The Kreitlers postulate that it is at such times that complex higher level processes are initiated which typically consist of more extensive elaborations on the stimulus's meaning. Whenever the process of clarifying a stimulus's meaning is engaged, meaning values, i.e. references to a stimulus's functions, purposes, states, etc. are regrouped to form clusters of beliefs. Beliefs, therefore, are cognitive units of meaning embedded in networks of belief".

In their research, the Kreitlers have identified and described four main categories of belief. Each category orients behaviour in specific and predictable ways:

1. General beliefs

"General beliefs establish factual (is/is not) relationships between meaning values which convey information about between meaning values which convey information about people, objects, events and situations or combinations thereof".

e.g. Small children often have pretty awful table manners

2. Beliefs about self

These "reflect relationships between meaning values which convey information about any aspect of self, i.e. habits, actions, abilities, feelings, sensations, etc".

e.g. I have very nice table manners

3. Beliefs about norms and rules

These "reflect normative relationships (should/should not) about norms and rules of an ethical or non-ethical nature applied to people, situations, or combinations of aspects of these".

e.g. Small children ought to have decent table manners

4. Beliefs about goals

These "reflect desired relationships between meaning values intended to convey information about one's desiring or aspiring to act, behave, experience, possess, etc."

e.g. I want my children to acquire proper table manners

The studies mentioned above have shown this approach to be an extremely insightful one in the investigation of ethnolinguistic attitudes and behaviour. One only has to consider the examples given by Allard and Landry (1986) to see, albeit intuitively, why this should be so :

General belief :

Anglophones control most of the businesses and industries in my community.

Belief about norms and rules :

It is legitimate that anglophones maintain control of most of the industries and businesses in this community.

Belief about self :

I feel that I may not have the ability to succeed in the anglophone business community.

Belief about goals :

I would like to be accepted within the anglophone business community.

By distinguishing between these different categories of belief and by integrating them all into subjective ethnolinguistic vitality questionnaires, considerable progress has been made in the study of intergroup perceptions and activities, on the relationships between attitudes and actual behaviour. To the best of my knowledge, however, no attempt has yet been made to apply this approach to the foreign language classroom. As a first, tentative step, I would like to present some data concerning learners' representations organised on the basis of my understanding of Kreidler and Kreidler's categories. This data draws in an informal way on a number of recent and ongoing studies being carried out at the C.R.A.P.E.L. and involving Danish, American, Vietnamese, British, Nigerian and Moroccan learners of French (Cembalo and Regent, 1981 ; Cabut et al., 1983 ; Riley, 1986, 1987b). However, I have deliberately restricted my data to the representations of adult, anglophone learners of French : this point is an important one, since it means that most of the representations exemplified here will be familiar to or shared by European teachers. More striking cultural differences are mentioned in the conclusion.

Obviously, since all the factors determining societal, textual and individual sociolinguistic variation (sex, religion, profession, education, region, period, situation, genre, modality, culture, handicaps... etc) may influence the individual's beliefs and representations, the data fall far short of exhausting or illustrating the full range of representations even for a limited group.

1. General beliefs

- To learn a language, you need a teacher, preferably a native speaker.
- You need to follow a course, in a class with a textbook.
- The younger you are, the easier it is to learn a language.
- You have to start at the beginning.
- You have to start with the simple parts.
- The only real way to learn a language is to spend a long time in the country where it is spoken.
- French is a beautiful language.
- French is very difficult, especially the pronunciation.
- French is useful.

2. Beliefs about norms and rules

- French is much more difficult to pronounce than English, or most other languages, I think.
- People say French is clearer and more logical ; it may be true because French has much more grammar.
- You have to be much more polite in French, at least as far as the words go, but people can interrupt at any time and in lectures and meetings they have conversations openly.
- French doesn't vary like English does. You speak like you write and there aren't so many accents.
- The most important part, and the most difficult, is learning the grammar.

- Some languages have more grammar than others. In some languages, the rules are not so important as others.
- The French get easily offended if you make mistakes. They look down on you.

3. Beliefs about self

- I don't think I'll ever learn to speak French properly. I can manage the vocabulary and grammar and reading is easy, but I'm not gifted for languages and it is speaking and pronunciation that is the problem.
- Some people are gifted for languages. They have a good ear, they just pick it up. I am/am not one of these people.
- I need to be made to learn by a good teacher. Otherwise I'm just not disciplined enough.
- I sound stupid/childish/English when I speak French.

4. Beliefs about goals in language learning

- There is not much point in an English-speaker learning foreign languages.
- There is only one important foreign language -the one spoken by your customer.
- People from small countries learn lots of foreign languages because they are highly motivated.
- The ideal aim is to speak like a native-speaker, but of course you can't.
- You should try to learn as many words as possible.
- You need to learn the ordinary language before you start a language for specialised purposes.
- I just want to be able to make myself understood.
- What I had to do is learn to read, but really I want to speak more.
- If you want to get to know the French, you've just got to learn their language.

CONCLUSION

Is this approach to the study and categorisation of learners' representations of language and language learning helpful -or does it simply tell us what we know already ? I suspect that for most experienced European language teachers the examples given were very familiar. However, this does not necessarily mean we have been wasting our time : they are familiar because, to a considerable extent they are (or have been) our own representations.

Learner-autonomy in institutional settings inevitably requires both teachers and learners to modify their representations of their respective roles and such an analysis can make a useful contribution to the process of negotiation.

Moreover, it is important to remember that such representations vary considerably from culture to culture. Let us consider briefly three examples :

(1) A Burmese student struggling with French confided that "pour moi, le mot "je" manque de précision". It is not sufficient to say that he missed the honorific particles of his native language : that would merely be a description of his problem, not a solution to it. For him, French was a clumsy instrument for the expression of social relationships and he felt permanently ill-at-ease when using it.

(II) One of the main functions of language in most European countries is the expression and exchange of personal views and information. However, there are a number of cultures where this is not the case and where, therefore, such activities as discussions and debates, are regarded with distaste by learners. A "conversation class" with Finnish students is usually uphill work for the teacher, for example, because he/she is the only person present who perceives the situation as one where everyone should take a turn at speaking. Complaining and badgering will only make things worse : only explicit analysis and discussion of the learners' representations of language and learning will be of any help.

(III) In most North African and Arabic-speaking countries rote-learning and chanting is one of the main classroom activities. European teachers who dismiss this out-of-hand because "they don't understand a word they are saying" completely miss the point : understanding (which is individual, personal) can take place gradually afterwards.

If we bear these points in mind when we look at quotations of the kind included in the mini-corpus above, it becomes clear that the representations they reveal are very "European", that far from being "natural common sense" they are based on culture-specific beliefs about language and learning.

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