The 'Competent Foreigner'
A new model for foreign language didactics?

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Abstract
The traditional schema of the language learning-teaching situation is being increasingly challenged by didacticians, sociolinguists and cognitive psychologists, and in particular the constitutive roles of teacher, learner and native speaker have been largely reconfigured to take into account approaches such as learner autonomy and self-directed learning. In this article we will suggest and explain a new model for foreign language didactics: the competent foreigner. This concept emphasizes the fact that learners should be themselves instead of trying to become native speakers. We are using the concept of the competent foreigner in our ongoing research at the CRAPEL: the description and analysis of exolinguistic service encounters.

Introduction

In this article, we will examine two aspects of foreign language didactics. First, we will look at the different participants who intervene in a typical foreign language learning situation. We will also propose that the current concept of the native speaker and the abstract model of the learner are not good reference points for the design of foreign language programmes. Second, we will propose that a better and more realistic model for language didactics be developed, that of the 'Competent Foreigner'. This concept is the result of research done at the CRAPEL. We are interested in using this concept in the description and analysis of exolinguistic service encounters.

The scope of the research

In the research being conducted by GREFSOC (Groupe de Réflexion en Sociolinguistique)[1], we are trying to reveal the 'communicative virtues'[2] in encounters in the service industries in France, lead-

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[1] The GREFSOC group comprises the following members: Hervé Adami, Virginie André, Sophie Bailly, Desirée Castillo, Florence Poncet and Philip Riley.

[2] "Communicative virtues are characteristics of discursive and communicative behaviour which are valued positively by the members of a group" (André, 2003).

ing to a better understanding of the representations/beliefs of 'successful interaction'. The process also highlights intercultural differences, the understanding of which is a major need of our learners. We would like to use that information to prepare courses for two types of learners: French people who work in the service industry and learners of French.

Since the GREFSOC research is in its initial stages, and we cannot show final results, we will focus on the two central postulates in this article that underpin the approach to the design of the courses:

- First, the 'native speaker' is not an appropriate point of reference for the definition of language learning objectives, for pedagogical, sociolinguistic and ethical reasons: Instead of trying to clone native speakers, language programmes should aim to enable learners to express themselves as competent foreigners without having to sacrifice their own culture or identity.
- Second, the current approach to 'the learner' is in fact an abstract model of the learning process, which needs to be extended to include individual and social characteristics.

Having presented our perspective, we will now examine three different elements that play a part in language learning programmes: the learner, the native speaker and the teacher. We will review the notions of communicative, intercultural and plurilingual[3] competencies, as well as GREFSOC's research regarding exolinguistic service encounters. Finally, we will propose a definition of the concept 'competent foreigner'.

The different participants in the process of language learning

Normally, there are three different participants who, to different degrees, intervene in the process of learning a foreign language: the learner, the native speaker and the teacher.
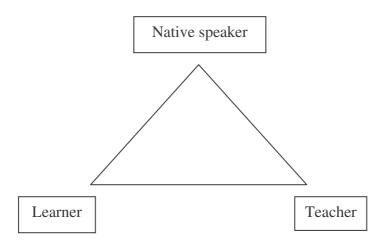

Figure no.1

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[3] We wish to emphasize that we are using the French term plurilingual, as it is used in the Council of Europe, rather than the term multilingual, because the French make the following distinction: 'plurilingual' refers to the capacity of a person to manage more than one language. 'Multilingual' refers to the nature of the environment, such as a society that uses different languages, learning materials in different languages, language centres that provide access to different languages, etc.

Defining the role of the learner
Behaviourism characterised the learner as passive. In fact, the learner was considered to be only a receiver of the information provided by somebody else. After World War II, stimulated by humanistic-psychological and constructivist approaches, and based on research in acquisition and learning, new pedagogies arose. Usually called 'alternatives', they were characterized by 'learner-centredness'. Today they are known as 'autonomous learning', 'independent learning' or 'self-directed learning', and they have changed the roles of student, teacher and school.

A more active role is attributed to the 'student', whose designation also changes. The learner, the active participant in the learning process, acquires his/her knowledge instead of having it provided by someone else (Gremmo and Riley, 1995). At the same time, each learner is recognised as an individual: each has his/her own social and cultural characteristics and his/her own motivations for learning. In recognizing the individuality of the learners, the didactic movement took steps to specifically account for their objectives, their learning strategies, their representations, their past, and also the changes and development people experience while they are learning a language.

Defining the role of the native speaker and the teacher
A learner will usually have two speaking models: the native speaker and the teacher.

a. The native speaker
The native speaker is the keystone of traditional language learning: (s)he is the perfect model of how the learner must speak, and of what the learner, who can be considered as an incomplete native speaker (Byram, 1997: 11), has to become. But in the last 18 years, linguists "have started to examine critically the construct of the native speaker" (Kramsch, 1998: 20). Kramsch mentions that 'identity', 'unquestioned authority' and 'appropriateness of the one native speaker norm' (1998:16) have been criticised.

One of the critics of the native speaker model, Byram (1997: 21), suggests two flaws in the model. The first is a 'pragmatic educational' flaw: It is virtually impossible for learners to have the "same mastery over a language as an (educated) native speaker". Byram suggests that because of the tendency to compare language learners with bilinguals, who are perceived as being capable of speaking two languages perfectly, it is assumed that learners can achieve comparable mastery. But, as Byram says, the literature on bilinguals shows that even if bilinguals can be competent linguistically, they are less so socioculturally. Thus for him, they do not provide a suitable basis for comparison. The second flaw is related to the fact that learners are expected to abandon their language and culture to acquire "a native sociocultural competence, and a new sociocultural identity" (1997: 11). These expectations are according to Byram impossible.

With regard to the three areas of criticism by Kramsch mentioned above, GREFSOC explored that of 'identity'. Indeed, once we try to determine more precisely who the native speaker is, we are confronted with questions that are difficult to answer: Is he male, or is she female? How old is (s)he? Is (s)he five, fifteen, thirty? Where is (s)he from? Is (s)he from England, the United States, Australia? What does (s)he do for a living? These questions, however, cannot be answered. We realize that we cannot find any uniquely distinguishing characteristics of the native speaker.

We have to recognize that the native speaker, whose spirit haunts the world of foreign language didactics, does not correspond to reality: (S)he is an ideal, an abstraction of homogeneity, which Adami et al. describe as "the member of a Chomskian community, from whom any source of linguistic or social variation has been removed" (2003: 542). But the concept of the native speaker is paradoxical: on the one hand, teachers believe that the best person to teach a foreign language is a native speaker (some teachers even feel guilty for not being a native speaker of the foreign language they teach). On the other hand, teachers can become sceptical of the linguistic competence of real life native speakers, as the following examples from France show:

- The case of a group of secondary school teachers who expressed their satisfaction and their relief when they heard that they would not have an assistant for the year, because [they had discovered that young] native-speaker assistants do not speak correctly, have regional or (worse) urban accents, do not articulate clearly, do not form grammatically correct sentences, make other kinds of mistakes, and use a young-age vocabulary.
- The same phenomenon occurred in the university system, where a native-speaker English lecturer found herself in an empty classroom, because the students, with the support of a number of professors, refused to attend [her class] 'because of her poor English'.
- A group of language teachers at a secondary school stopped a tandem email exchange [between their students and students from an Anglophone country], because the young native-speaker correspondents 'expressed themselves poorly'.
(Adami et al., 2003: 543)

Naturally, speaking or acting like a native speaker can be taken as proof that the learner has achieved success in his learning process. But this raises yet another question: To what degree is it possible for a learner to become a native speaker? As Piller (2002: 191) points out, for a person passing as a native speaker, it "is an act, something [(s)he does], a performance that may be put on or sustained for a limited period only", usually within service encounters. However, Piller also describes the paradox faced by a person who has an exceptional level in the learned language and can 'pass' for a native speaker for long periods. In spite of her skill, the non-native speaker often indicates as early as possible in an interaction that she is not a native speaker in order to avoid embarrassment: "If I don't [say that I'm not German], (…) some reference to something every German knows will come up, and I won't understand, and they'll think I'm stupid" (Piller: 195).

Thus, in contrast to the usual expectations of the native speaker in language programmes, we agree with Riley (1998: 439), who insists on a methodology "based on exolinguistic discourse", for example using materials with extracts from competent non-native discourse. This idea is supported by Piller (2002: 195), who argues that "it would help to set up more realistic goals, and support SLL [second language learning] by presenting students with realistic role models of successful L2 users rather than the monolingual native speakers they can never be".

b. The teacher's evolution towards 'supervisor'
Each society seeks for a way to transmit its knowledge and its culture to its children and its new members. In Western countries, one of the main ways in which this is done is via school and more specifically via teachers. The teacher's role is established by society, and, as Bruner explains (1996: 37): "the act of teaching is transfixed in a mold in which a teacher, presumed omniscient, says or shows to learners, who are supposedly ignorant, something that they are not supposed to know any-

thing about"[4]. Thus, the teacher is generally perceived as the source of all knowledge which (s)he will transmit to the learners.

In the educational reconfiguration that was mentioned previously (cf. the section: 'Defining the role of the learner'), the role of the language teacher has evolved into being in harmony with the more participatory role of the learner. As a result, new designations have appeared on the educational scene: 'supervisor', 'counsellor', 'tutor', 'facilitator' and 'mentor'. A supervisor, the term we use at the CRAPEL, is a person who aims not to communicate his/her academic knowledge but rather his/her didactic 'savoir-faire' to the learner so that the latter will be able to make his/her own decisions concerning his/her learning. As mentioned earlier, these decisions pertain to the choice of aims, selection of materials, evaluation, etc.

To develop in this way, the teacher/adviser needs to:

- Distinguish between the four skills (that is oral versus written comprehension and oral versus written production) and to work with them in an appropriate way.
- Understand the learning and acquisition processes in order to be able to suggest appropriate activities for a specific phase of a skill. (The different phases are discovery, practice and utilization, and each requires a different kind of activity.)
- For each skill, be aware of the strategies used by the learners in their mother tongue in order to help them use the strategies in the foreign language.
- Use authentic materials[5] in order to put the learners in closer contact with the target language.
- Help the learners to develop compensatory strategies so they can handle a situation even though they do not have the necessary linguistic skills.

The omniscient teacher no longer has the last word in designing a 'perfect' foreign language programme based on the abstract learner and the idealized native speaker. The teacher/supervisor must know who the learners are, where they come from, why they are learning the language, where and how they are going to use it, etc. This information will help the teacher/supervisor to develop a programme *with* the learners, one which is congruent with their aims, needs, etc., based on communicative items instead of linguistic ones. Furthermore, working in an autonomous way, the importance of learners being themselves will be reinforced.

Communicative, intercultural and plurilingual competencies

The sociolinguistic work of Hymes showed that it is important "not only to see languages as part of systems of speaking but also to see systems of speaking from the standpoint of the central question of the nature of sociocultural order" (Hymes, 1972a: 70). He adds that the speaker must acquire communicative competence, by which he means knowing the rules which govern the interactions of his/her community in order to adopt a communicative behaviour adapted to the situation. Being competent implies "knowing the social and the cultural/situational rules of the interactions" (André, 2003).

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[4] Text translated by the authors.
[5] By authentic materials we mean materials, such as TV shows, songs, etc. that were not designed specifically for instructional purposes.

Hymes' work in the fields of sociolinguistics and American anthropological linguistics (Foley, 1997) have also been a main source of reflection in the didactic world. We have inherited, among other things, the concept of 'communicative competence' (Hymes, 1972b), and we are interested in using this concept in foreign language didactics. But the notion of 'communicative competence' was not developed for exolinguistic communication. That is why researchers working in the field of foreign language learning and teaching have been interested in developing definitions that integrate the characteristics of learning other languages. Thus we find two other concepts related to this field: intercultural competence and plurilingual competence.

Byram proposes that 'intercultural communicative competence' is a concept which expands the concept of communicative competence (1997: 3). Teaching a foreign language involves much more than just teaching the structure of the language. It is also different from teaching the mother tongue of the learner. For Byram, learners with intercultural communicative competence are people who are

> able to interact with people from another country and culture in a foreign language. They are able to negotiate a mode of communication and interaction which is satisfactory to themselves and the other and they are able to act as mediator between people of different cultural origins. Their knowledge of another culture is linked to their language competence through their ability to use language appropriately – sociolinguistic and discourse competence – and their awareness of the specific meanings, values and connotations of the language. They also have a basis for acquiring new languages and cultural understanding as a consequence of the skills they have acquired in the first. (1997: 71)

Byram emphasizes the importance of taking into account the cultural aspect while teaching and learning a foreign language. We further note that we are also confronted with the term 'plurilingual competence', which adds another dimension to the definitions of 'communicative competence' and 'intercultural communicative competence', by focusing on today's complex situations involving plurilingual contacts.

Coste, Moore and Zarate define 'plurilingual and pluricultural competence' as:
> the competence to communicate linguistically and to interact culturally [which is] possessed by an actor who masters, to differing degrees, numerous languages, and has, to differing degrees, the experience of numerous cultures, all the while being able to manage the totality of this language and cultural capital. The major idea is to consider that there is no superposition or juxtaposition of distinct competencies, but rather the existence of a plural competency, complex, even composite and heterogeneous, which includes individual competencies, even partial ones, but which is a unit in terms of a repertory available for the social actor concerned. (1997: 12)

Later, Coste adds that
> plurilingual competence, that is, the potential to manage a plurilingual repertoire, integrates the capabilities of translation, interpretation, code switching, the transition from one language to another, [and] bilingual speaking, [in other words] all of the operations that a 'juxtaposed' conception of 'unilingual' communication capabilities barely takes into account. (2002: 118)

As can be seen, plurilingual is more than just the changing from one language to another. It relates to the fact that a person who is in contact with different languages will himself change: his/her mother tongue, cultural boundaries and identity is modified.

As already mentioned, being competent in a foreign language involves, first, knowing the social and the cultural/situational rules of interaction, and second, being able to manage a repertory of interlinguistic varieties and skills, a repertory based on what the learner believes (s)he needs to know.

Service encounters

In GREFSOC we are interested in the communicative virtues that intervene in a service encounter. In a communicative situation, speakers are not only engaged in transfer of information, but they want also to project a good image of themselves. In other words, we can use the Aristotelian notion of Ethos to describe both the intention of the speaker to give a good impression and the perception or the reception of the hearer concerning the image of his partner. According to Aristotle, ethos is defined as the author's attitude and character towards his discourse.

Ethos plays an important role today in service encounters. It has become a key element of successful communication. To make success of a 'good contact' is clearly present in any social interaction. Ethos "refers to the traits of character which a speaker has to display to an audience in order to make a good impression and thereby assure that his speech will have a successful outcome" (Riley, 2005). However, this impression can also be influenced by the values, beliefs and culture of the listener.

Service encounters follow certain social patterns. The performative value of certain statements produced during such interactions increases their sociocultural dimension. As has been seen, linguistic competence alone does not suffice for mutual comprehension between the speakers in interaction: each sociocultural group has its own norms of interaction and each exchange implies the knowledge of these various parameters. Being competent in a foreign language is to know the social and situational norms which govern interaction. Moreover, cultural variation in the conversational rules is present at all levels of verbal interaction. If a foreigner is unaware of these norms, (s)he can misinterpret the social interaction with a native speaker.

We found several examples that show how important it is to know sociocultural norms. With respect to politeness, consider the following:

- The Mexicans and the English subjects we questioned were shocked by the mechanical "bonjours" (Good morning or good afternoon) of the French cashiers and salespersons. This practice was interpreted as a usual manner of being polite but at the same time as a defence mechanism for keeping customers at a distance.
- A Venezuelan explained to us that she perceived the politeness of French as unpleasant and aggravating. Moreover, this young woman explained that she felt that the purpose of this excess of politeness was to place a distance between the administration and the customer. This feeling comes from the cultural practices of this Venezuelan who is accustomed to being close to her interlocutors. Indeed, this interpretation is related to the relaxed nature of Venezuelan service encounters.
- An Indian confided to us that, at the beginning of her stay, she was shocked by what she felt was an excessive use of 'hello', 'thank you', 'good bye' and 'good day' in stores. She ex-

plained that in India politeness is characterised by a preoccupation with being discreet. She was not aware that forms of politeness could vary from one language and culture to another.

Divergent practices for displaying politeness in service encounter interactions are a cause of tension between interactors. If the two speakers have different concepts of the relationship between customer and service provider, the interaction can be unsatisfactory for both. That is why we are interested in working with both participants in encounter services, the service providers and the foreign customers. We think that making them aware of the differences will promote more openness and tolerance.

The 'competent foreigner'

In this section, we will focus on the French learners. As previously stated, the teacher/supervisor interested in foreign language learning and teaching needs to think about how to help learners to manage, to discover and to behave in different languages and contexts. Some researchers have expressed their interest in ethnographic approaches, because they "offer language learners an opportunity to link cultural knowledge and awareness with their own developing communicative competence" (Barro et al., 1998: 80). This approach should be applied to both cultural and linguistic aspects simultaneously, something that is not developed in most foreign language learning and teaching.

For us, being a 'competent foreigner' is:
- Being sensitive to the intercultural aspects, which means:
  - Becoming aware of the methodology of ethnographers (Agar 1996, Barro et al., 1998): observing, participating, experimenting, knowing how to recognize and put into practice the underlying sociolinguistic rules;
  - Mediating, "that is interpret[ing] each in terms of the other, either for themselves or for other people" (Byram, 2000), which implies a capacity to put into perspective and to 'decenter' his/her own culture.
- Not aiming to become a 'native speaker'. This would mean: trying to erase his/her own identity in order to search for and adopt another.
- Being aware that ethos is intrinsic in every interaction: the image the learner thinks (s)he is transmitting can be misinterpreted?, and the learner can perceive others in a way that is different from what those others? think they are transmitting.

As has been shown, culture can result in pragmatic failure. That is why being sensitive to the features mentioned above regarding the competent foreigner allows learners to bring greater awareness to the process of learning a language and discovering and respecting the new sociocultural context. In fact, it should help learners to act with openness and tolerance.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is our contention that the native speaker is not an appropriate point of reference for a language learner and that the traditional abstract model of the learner should be modified to reflect the individual and social characteristics of each learner. By revisiting the different participants in the foreign language learning process (the teacher, the learner and the native speaker), we hope to have demonstrated the weakness in the typical method of designing foreign language programmes and to have emphasized the necessity to base those programmes more on the needs and the person-

ality (background) of each learner. We think that the notion of ethos should be included in foreign language learning and teaching programmes, which we hope we have demonstrated with the examples from the research we are carrying out at GREFSOC. Finally, we propose a new point of reference for the language learner, the competent foreigner.

To this end, we and the members of GREFSOC propose the following guidelines for the training of the competent foreigner: Learners should not be pushed to emulate a native speaker. They should be **themselves** while learning and speaking the new language, and while discovering and respecting the new sociocultural context. Instead of being trained to be only linguistically competent, they should also be trained to be culturally and socially competent, because, as research in bilingualism shows, it is in the latter domains that people experience more important difficulties.

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