

The Importance of Cross-Cultural Communicative Competence and Complexity Theory in Second Language Acquisition in the Algerian Academic Context

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1. Introduction

The relationship between self-identity and several forms of oral and written expression and comprehension lies in the very heart of applied linguistics, the didactics of EFL and post-modernist debate which may be the cause of alarm to foreign language teachers, researchers and didacticians alike. However, this could mean that we are moving, though slowly, in the right direction.

One should also confess that the SLA theories in the 1970's ; the communicative approach in the 1980's ; the inter/trans-cultural dimension in the 1990's are difficult to apply in the era of computer-mediated and de-contextualized forms of communication, especially in multilingual and multicultural educational contexts.

For this reason, the aim of this paper is to understand and interpret how Algerian university EFL learners achieve cross-cultural communication by focusing on the examination of their socio-cultural representations. In other words, EFL learners and teachers construct representations of the Other, his language and culture which are sometimes positive and negative, and this can then affect an effective cross-cultural communication.

The other focus will be on the development of the learner's knowledge, his/her behavioral skills, and his/her awareness of the Other's language and culture in a socio-cultural anthropological context. This paper also studies the role of complexity theory in Applied Linguistics in order to show that unlike the SLA model, in which the

learner evolves linearly until he/she reaches approximately the native speaker competence, complex systems are dynamic rather than static.

2. The Importance of EFL Learners' Representations

The aim is to deconstruct the student's vision of social world for a better reconstruction as learners bear positive and negative representations of learning a foreign language which lie unconsciously in their mental life. However, positive representations are reflected by xenophile attitudes towards the Other, and negative ones lead to behavioral rejection of the foreign culture (Lussier, 2004).

For this reason, as language teachers and researchers, we must reflect on these two questions:

- Which communicative competence to teach: To be linguistically correct or pragmatically correct?
- How do learners acquire their socio-cultural representations? How can we help them achieve a cross-cultural communicative competence with appropriate learning activities?

The school as an Algerian institution is required to develop social cohesion in the field of foreign languages in order to maintain national values and identities, and to promote positive attitudes and values towards the culture of the Other (Algerian Constitution and the National Education objectives of teaching/learning foreign languages). To achieve this goal, education curriculum should favor an active and reflexive critical pedagogy which encourages critical thinking, reading and writing that is, to train learners to develop a better linguistic, strategic and socio-cultural awareness of their own language and culture and that of the Other's. This emphasis has become an important aspiration of education (Assaf, 2009: 4) to nurture learners' critical capacities.

Learning a foreign language implies learning the culture of the Other. In this contact, the development of socio-cultural representations needs to be taken into consideration. Our preoccupation as teachers-researchers and didacticians is to know whether a pedagogical model can favor the development of positive socio-cultural representations and encourage learners through appropriate contents towards a cultural mediation in order to overcome misunderstandings and to a certain extent conflicts.

One of the drawbacks of the definitions of a language is to let the other think that it is a neutral relationship between the user and his/her language (Calvet, 1999 and Lussier, 2004) that is, the learners come naked in this contact. Learning a language implies going beyond the above definition. We must take into consideration the historical, social and political aspects of training. In other words, we need to start with the learners' actual attitudinal and conceptual background as their beliefs about the learning process influence their approaches to learning a foreign language (Riley, 1996). The objectives of educational training can mould our perceptions and visions of the social world. What needs to be done to achieve the acquisition process of (a) foreign language(s)? We shall try to put forward some possible answers.

First, as mentioned earlier, learners have positive and negative representations of choosing and learning a foreign language. Their choice stems from their interests, personal motivations and mainly their socio-cultural representations (Boyer, 2002). Therefore, from previous studies undertaken in this field, from our experience and research¹, we can state that, if ignored, representations, especially the negative ones, refuse to go away. They remain as a filter to all cognitive intake (Riley, 1996), providing at the same time the fundamental bases for memorizing, processing, interpretation and understanding (*idem*). They reflect the 'how' and the 'what' of the language learning process and are consequently linked to learning in the broad sense that is, learning attitudes, motivations, styles, aims and objectives, problem-solving situations the Algerian learners face (*idem*).

Second, we should not limit the work to the visible (surface) aspects of socio-cultural representations such as stereotypes as they entail superficial interpretations and understandings of the language and culture of the Other (Boyer, 2002). Finally, instead of focusing on the communicative competence based only on linguistic discourse and pragmatic components, it would be advisable to set up a model which will take into consideration language and thought (Vygotsky, 1962) and socio-cultural anthropology of communication (Heritage, 1988, Schegloff et al., 2002).

¹ Refer to my doctorate (doctorat d'état) defended at Blida University (2006), and other magisters on French as a foreign language defended at Blida University since 2002, and some other magisters, masters and doctorates on EFL still in process in the LMD study scheme since 2009.

3. The Role of Cross-Cultural Anthropology of Communication

The first aim is to develop a cross-cultural anthropological communicative competence in addition to the linguistic and strategic components. Anthropology of communication will highlight the identity and cultural processes as it completes research in didactics and pragmatics (Heritage, 1988). It will help us demonstrate how the concepts used by our Algerian learners can be co-constructed with the Other in order to give a global dimension to local data as the Algerian learners construct meaning according to their local environments be they geographical, ecological, social, cultural (Kramsch, 2012).

Therefore, communicating with the Other is not limited to a good command of the linguistic code only, it is a mental process which is the object of psycholinguistics (Riley, 1996), and a social process, aim of sociolinguistics and developmental sociolinguistics (Anderson, 1992) that is, how learners acquire communicative competence. It is also a cross-cultural anthropological approach – object of socio-cultural anthropology (Heritage, 1988, Van Lier, 1988).

In this context, learners should be trained while learning a foreign language, to overcome clashes between cultures, accept differences and encourage the search for similarities, if any. It is necessary to work on their representations, attitudes and beliefs in order to bring the necessary readjustments. To achieve this, we need to work on their knowledge, their behavioral skills, the language and culture awareness of the Other, their own social vision of the world in order to be able to adjust to the Other and vice-versa. As the underlying power of language is based on models of perception and thought (Bourdieu, 1982, Vygotsky, 1962) acting on their knowledge, behavioral skills and their awareness of the Other's language and culture will help them become cross-culturally competent.

This model contains three dimensions- knowledge, behavioral skills, and learners' awareness of the target language/culture in a socio-cultural-anthropological context. Firstly, knowledge refers to the individual's cognitive processing of data. It is associated with the memory functioning and lexicon, and with knowledge of the internal structures, phonological, morphological and syntactic of the linguistic code, and the social vision of the world. It also refers to the socio-cultural context that is, attitudes, beliefs and values of their own culture

and that of the Other conveyed through stereotypes, customs, and metaphors. When the second type of knowledge is applied to a foreign language learning/acquisition, it will imply the study of how learners acquire communicative competence (Anderson, 1992) and of code-switching that is, of how the way speakers or writers alternate between language varieties shows their representations of social realities.

Secondly, the behavioral skills refer to learners' critical abilities to function in the target language, to adjust to the Other socially and culturally in a bilingual or multilingual context. The approach is critically reflexive as the learners need to develop critical thinking at the level of discourse, language competency and interpretation of socio-cultural aspects of discourse. Thirdly, the learners' awareness of the Other language and culture in a socio-cultural-anthropological context refers to the socio-affective and cognitive dimension which focuses on the role and effects of socio-cultural representations.

This aims to improve the relationship between self-identity and the several cultural aspects of a foreign language, and avoid misunderstandings and conflicts that is, a better reconstruction. It also aims to raise the learners' socio-cultural-anthropological communicative competence in order to achieve the internalization of their own values and respect the values of other cultures to facilitate the communicative interaction.

The purpose is to show and understand how foreign language learners exhibit aspects of interactional competence to communicate and learn a foreign language. It implies to pay a particular attention to the learners' context (Heritage, 1988) and to the behavioral and situational interpretations (Van Lier, 1988). Hence the importance to favor another paradigm of research, sociocultural anthropology of communication. However, what arises from the above considerations is the following question: What about these reflections in computer-mediated and de-contextualized forms of communication? This leads us to question the relevance of the concepts of complexity theory, object of the following section.

4. Complexity Theory for Language Learning: An Alternative to the SLA Model?

Before moving to complexity theory and its inevitable epistemological incidences, let us have a brief historical overview on the previous approaches to knowledge. In the 1960's, social factors

contributed to the rise of interest in the learning processes and approaches characterized by the focus on the learner in the field of didactics (Gremmo & Riley, 1995, and Riley & Duda, 2005). The search for a learning model centered on the individual led didacticians to investigations in the fields of anthropology and psychology with a focus on intercultural and personal cognitive variation (Riley, 2012: 59). The interest in 'learning styles' was accompanied, in research, with the adoption of tools to identify and measure the processes of recruiting, selecting and orienting more efficiently.

This method of investigation was largely used by non-psychologists that is, teachers- researchers in SLA and didactics to account for psychological features such as intelligence, behavioral skills, personality.... Hence, the important number of styles which rose from 25 in 1970 to 71 in 2004 (idem.). However, this enthusiastic trend in the 1960's was criticized by the psychologists who questioned the extrapolation of the learning styles (dependent/non-dependent... based on visual tests) proposed by Witkin et al. (1971) to the linguistic field. They considered it as unreliable and rejected the theoretical bases, the methodology used and then, the results obtained by the didacticians (Coffield et al., 2004; Ivie, 2009).

The main reason was the lack of theories, definitions, evaluation and inappropriate implementations that failed to sustain the results obtained (Riley, 2012). Peterson et al. (2009) explained the impossibility for the researchers to reach a coherent disciplinary framework and discourse following their survey on 94 members of European Learning Styles Information Network (Riley, 2012: 60). Therefore, the notion of 'styles' itself was not rejected but they were very skeptical towards the absence of a coherent theory and tools used for their extrapolation in order to make scientific correlations between tests and applications (Idem.).

Therefore, in the 1970's, researchers in SLA continued to put language learners at the central point of the learning environment because learning was still considered as linear, programmed, determined and then, known. Later, these models have been supplemented by models that focus on discontinuity. Hence, the need to bring continuous adjustments according to contexts (not to texts only), individuals, space and time, especially in the era of de-contextualized forms of interaction even though ICT and computer corpora in language learning can take us beyond our initial limits. For

this reason, this section explores and also questions the relevance of complexity theories put forward and advocated by Anglo-Saxon researchers in SLA such as Ellis & Larsen-Freeman (2009).

Complexity theory has its advocates and its critics but the aim of working on this theory is to make a relation between domains of SLA that have developed independently of one another: Socio-cognitive dimension, second and foreign language acquisition, SLA and bilingualism/multilingualism and multiculturalism. In this paper, we have chosen two advocates of complexity theory for the emancipation of EFL learners from the limited roles they have been given so far, Schmenk and Kramsch based on the theoretical work of Larsen-Freeman (1997) in the field of SLA.

According to Diane Larsen-Freeman (1997, 2002, 2011), a complex model of SLA is based on complex systems like the weather, economic systems, human learning which are not static. They change when they interact with things (Oberg, 2008). If we apply this theory to language learning, contrary to the traditional model of SLA (linearity from a non-knowledge to a knowledge state), learning creates its own conditions of development while interacting with its environment (ecological, social, economic, human...) and is bound to change¹.

Then, a complex system is dynamic as it structures and is structured by its environment defined as “geographical space and the social situation in which learning takes place..., but also memories of past interactions, expectations of future ones, imagined exchanges and fantasy worlds.” (Kramsch, 2012: 11). In the traditional SLA model, pieces of knowledge learnt are just added in a linear and static way under the form of input-output and the learner moves slowly from a state of non-knowledge to a state of knowledge in order to reach approximately the native speaker (idem.) through the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1962).

In complex theory, there is no ‘initial’ or ‘end’ state as Larsen-Freeman posits (1997, 2011). The learning process is created by its own conditions in interaction with its environment and is therefore dynamic and bound to change. This means that the new piece of knowledge you learn changes the whole set of other things you acquired initially

¹ For more details, see Kramsch, nov 2012, *Mélanges*, 33, numéro special, didactique des langues et complexité, ATILF, Equipe CRAPEL, Université de Lorraine et CNRS .

because change and dynamism are important in complex systems which “adapt both through interaction with the environment and through internal reorganization and self-organization”(Kramsch, 2012:12).

When we apply this vision to SLA, Kramsch (idem.) explains that Larsen-Freeman does not refer to lexical or grammatical rules found in a dictionary or a grammar book; “she refers to the rules of the learning game itself” (Kramsch, 2012:12). She further states that “foreign language learners, through experience or hearsay, think they know how one learns a foreign language, namely, item by item, tense by tense, and word by word. They are often dismayed to see that their linear efforts at accumulating this knowledge do not yield the success they expect when they are asked to actually communicate orally or in writing.” (Idem.)

Contrary to SLA model which considers the learner from his/her motivational, cognitive and social angles, personality aspects and learning styles (Ellis, 1994), complex SLA theory takes into account the learner in interaction with his/her environment that is ‘the whole ecology of learning’ (Kramsch, 2012): teachers, peers, textbooks, native speakers, writers, and his/her perceptions of present and past others and selves (idem.). In other words, complex theory can take the EFL learner from a ‘non-native’, ‘defective communicator’ (Firth & Wagner, 1997:285) to an emancipated learner (Larsen-Freeman, 2011). What about the complex SLA insight in the field of the Algerian educational context? To reflect on this question, the focus is on two views we are concerned with: language pedagogy (Schmenk) and critical education (Osberg).

4. 1. Language Pedagogy

The pedagogical dimension of the German language learning methodologist Barbara Schmenk (2008) in relation to the emancipatory vision for SLA through complexity theory owes much to the CRAPEL work on ‘autonomy’ under the influence of Henry Holec, his initiator (for more details refer to Henry Holec’s articles (1999) and (1990) respectively entitled “De l’apprentissage autodirigé considéré comme une innovation”, *Mélanges*, 24, CRAPEL, and “Qu’est-ce qu’apprendre à apprendre?”, *Mélanges*, CRAPEL). She states that the concept of ‘autonomy’, born in the Enlightenment period, was first related to ‘critical and emancipator thinking’ and with Kant’s notion of ‘maturity’

that is “think –for-yourself without appeal to external authority” (in Kramsch, 2012:15).

Currently, under the influence of ‘marketing industry’ it implies ‘self-directed’ learning for political and economic reasons. The notion of self-directed learning implies that the learner is responsible for his own learning and it leads to the learner’s autonomy in a learner-centered approach vs. a teacher-centered approach in a heterogeneous context if the learner decides to choose this formula. However, a ‘matured’ learner needs to be aware of the paradox of ‘autonomy’ and ‘heteronomy’ that is, we are not free of our choices since they are given to us.

According to Kramsch (2012), this complex situation accepts the ‘ambiguity of complexity’. It implies to consider the ‘openness’ and ‘unpredictability’ of the changing language learning process. As the complex systems are open, there is a non-linear relation between an unexpected occurrence and its cause. Therefore, complexity theory “calls for capitalizing on serendipitous discoveries and un-programmed explorations” (ibid., 16) instead of “liberating the learner from the teacher only to attach him/her to pre-programmed worksheets, or to a computer program that tutors or controls his/her every move...” (Idem.) . As an example of this new language learning process, one can refer to Bannick (2002) and Van Dam (2002) to examine how a prepared lesson plan and spontaneous or un-predicted occurrences that may take place are negotiated in a foreign language setting.

4. 2.Critical Education

Contrary to ‘the logic of determinism’, the British education philosopher Deborah Osberg (2008) proposes ‘the logic of emergence’ in order to theorize critical education. She is not interested in the relation between self and other, or the one and the many but in democratic freedom and emancipation of the learner (in Kramsch, 2012). The logic of determinism is based on causality in which the stages learners go through while learning a foreign language are derived from one another (Osberg, 2008). Textbooks, curricula, syllabi and tests follow this logic that is; everything can be predicted and then known.

In ‘the logic of emergence’ instead, we have the possibility of freedom since emergent or complex processes cannot be fully determined because of “probabilistic causality in which an essential component of the process is the unknown (chance).” (Kramsch, 2012:

18). This perspective offers probable causality or the doors of the possible that is, a paradoxical stance of freedom vs. determinism whereby “we are both more free and more determined than we think.” (Narcy-Combes in Kramsch, 2012: 18).

From all the perspectives mentioned above to describe the language learner as a complete individual from the cognitive, affective, social, cultural and motivational aspects in SLA theory, arises the fact that this focus was a very modernist one. It did not ignore the learner as the main subject and agent of his/her own learning. Later, neural sciences played a central role in decision-making in language pragmatics (Schumann et al., 2004). However, Larsen-Freeman draws our attention on the limitations of this modernist view because the language learner is not seen as an active agent of meaning making. Kramsch (2009) also adds the important role of the ‘embodied experiences’ which have not been given enough consideration in SLA research.

5. Conclusion

The expected outcome of the cross-socio-cultural anthropology of communication proposed in this paper is to help language learners co-construct critical knowledge and behavioral skills, and be aware of the language and culture of the Other, bearing in mind their socio-cultural representations in the language learning process. Once identified, these can be completed, improved or replaced (if they are negative) for a better perception of and communication with the self and the Other that will enable a ‘reciprocity of perspectives’ or ‘interchangeability of viewpoints’ (Heritage, 1988).

These reflections will hopefully shed light on theoretical and practical issues in teaching/learning and acquisition of a foreign language with socio-cultural anthropology of communication which is by nature a comparative discipline as it focuses on a deep examination of context and cross-cultural comparisons. However, the multilingual and multicultural realities in the era of digital society and computer-mediated and de-contextualized forms of communication also encourage new questionings and reflections to set up new theoretical and methodological frameworks of reference more appropriate to the socio-cultural realities of our environment.

To conclude, the language learner as the main subject and agent in a world not “pre-given but continually shaped by [his/her] actions”

(Varela et al., 1991:144, in Kramsch, 2012: 12) represents one of the challenges. The other one concerns the involvement of educational institutions to emancipate the learner and encourage his/her creativity. Complexity theory, so advocated by western educators, needs to be adapted to our Algerian environment after questioning its relevance because of its 'paradoxical' nature.

In addition, it is necessary for Algerian educators to be more flexible in selecting, re-adjusting the processes of testing, assessing, evaluating and ranking learners in the context of global learning and competition with one another, either in the name of fairness and meritocracy (logic of determinism) or according to complex/emergent processes in which choice is an operator in the learning process itself not something applied to it from the outside. Therefore, it is more than necessary to set up new criteria for achieving and assessing performance/competence in order to bring more efficiency and productivity in relation to our environment be it social, cognitive, affective, cultural, ecological, economic and emancipator.

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