Discovering self through teaching in a second language in the multicultural classroom

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DISCOVERING SELF THROUGH TEACHING IN A SECOND LANGUAGE IN THE MULTICULTURAL CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT
Teaching at tertiary level is not always an easy task, even if the students are of the same socio-economic and cultural background as ourselves. It is a job that requires a giving of the self in ways that less interactive employments would not require of us. When this job (calling?) of ours is complicated by multicultural groups of students with differing language backgrounds, comprising different learning styles, varied expectations and hopes, our job becomes more taxing. The situation becomes even more complex when one is required to function professionally in a language which is not one’s native tongue. This paper draws on research conducted during an extended period spent living and lecturing in Europe. The original research closely followed seven lecturers (using English as their second language) teaching international undergraduate and master’s degree students for a semester, in Surabaya (Indonesia), Amsterdam, Haarlem (Netherlands) and Brussels (Belgium). In-depth interviews, questionnaires and discussions were used to ascertain in which areas and to what extent lecturers needed training in not only intercultural competence, but also intercultural confidence, to strengthen their abilities as teachers in the multicultural classroom. The study found that the impact of intercultural communication issues, when exacerbated by the challenge of speaking a second language, have profound consequences for the personal sense of self; and this is explored in the professional context of lecturer and student. English is my first tongue, and interestingly, during the research process I discovered that the findings echoed many of my own experiences and insecurities that I had undergone as I had learned to function professionally in a second language myself – namely, Dutch. Trust and confidence – issues which are only tacitly acknowledged in a professional context – are found to be of great importance and can offer great personal reward. Finally, some strategies – both practical and emotive – are suggested to aid anyone faced with teaching and interacting with students from other cultures.

1 Introduction
The task of a teacher - on all levels of education from primary to further education, is not an easy one. Standing in front of a group of people, whether it be to describe, elucidate, instruct, give an exposé, coach or train, involves exposure on a personal level, a giving of the self, such as is required during the development of mutual trust between student and lecturer. It is an activity that demands a high level of communicative ability - simply being ‘fairly good’ at communicating would make the task of teaching, lecturing or training far more difficult. To the successful educator, high levels of communicative competence are essential.

As the Western educational system becomes more geared to multicultural society, and a need to find funding outside the usual paddock of local students and research projects emerges, more pressure is being exerted on tertiary institutions to open their doors to foreign students. English is the lingua franca in most institutions that offer courses to international students. In the multicultural classroom, communicative competence can be even more important. During
the writing and research of my ‘doctoraal’ thesis (European MA), which focused on teaching and learning issues in the intercultural classroom, I discovered the very real impact of speaking a second language upon the personal sense of self.

1.1 Research method

This study used a multi-method approach utilising a literature review of intercultural communication, semantics, sociology and multicultural education texts, participant observation, structured and semi-structured interviews. Participant observation and interviews were used to collect primary data about the teaching experience in the multicultural classroom. The research closely followed seven lecturers teaching international undergraduate and masters degree students for a semester, in Surabaya (Indonesia), Amsterdam, Haarlem (Netherlands) and Brussels (Belgium). I asked these selected lecturers and staff of the Hogeschool Holland, Holland International Business School, and Hogeschool Haarlem to see where - in their view - the main problems and issues surrounding intercultural communication in the multicultural classroom lie, when English is used as the lingua franca. The result is detailed, personal and closely resembles case study. The names of the lecturers are Hans, Bertus, Annerie, Rene, Anne-Marie, Liesbeth, and Jeanine. With the exception of Bertus, who requested a pseudonym, the names are original.

One underlying theme that is explored further here is what issues arise when a lecturer is required to communicate in English as a second language in the multicultural classroom, and does this exacerbate the already potentially difficult situation of intercultural communication?

The issues that arose, I have found, do not necessarily apply only to European lecturers. For example, the course co-ordinator of a Dutch international degree program, Hans Mol, gives an example of one of the problems the facing the faculty - an inability or unwillingness of the lecturing staff to differentiate between the quality of the message and the quality of the medium:

Many lecturers are concerned about the quality of, for example, reports that are written - not because they don’t believe that the standard of the students is up to scratch, but because the carrier language is considered not to be of sufficient quality, which thus has an impact on the quality of the product that they deliver. The English of the report isn’t good enough and hence the report itself is seen as not good enough, which is not necessarily true. (pers. comm. 2002)

This is an issue which is pertinent at any University which has international students (including my present one, Southern Cross). This sort of issue, in Swale’s words, “opens up a whole can of worms as to ‘how to make EIL [English as an International Language] a more equitable instrument of international education and communication’ ”(Swales 1988: 211):

Native speakers as much as non-native must learn how other cultures structure information and argument, as well as how they use English to do things such as make refusals, compliments, suggestions etc.
2 The impact of speaking a second language

Many people have experienced the feeling of disquiet and embarrassment when asked to communicate in a language they are not entirely familiar with. People are afraid of making mistakes, of appearing clumsy or ridiculous. The roots of our cognitive processes are to a certain extent determined by our native tongues, and to be required to function in a second language can have a profound effect on the speaker, whether lecturer or student.

Although the concept of an individual ‘self’ is in itself a Western concept, it remains an interesting and viable concept when discussing second-language use. Sapir-Whorf’s oft-quoted hypothesis states that the (native) language we use determines the way in which we view and categorise the world - including such deep-seated cognitive processes such as the way we deal with space and time. For example, the Navajo consider a tree (which to many Westerners is an object represented by a noun) as a process, and it is referred to by a verb. There is in fact no clear category of nouns in the Navajo language (Pinxten, 1994:39), which does give the outsider a sense of how the Navajo might view the world and hints at their philosophy that all things in nature (man included) interact and influence each other. Naturally, however, a Navajo driving his truck along the road will avoid colliding with a large tree, just like any Westerner would. African languages and African thought in general have no concept of future tense, but rather a ‘long-ago’ past (‘zamani’), and a present tense or time, the ‘sasa’ (Mbiti, 1969: 17). In traditional African cultures people tend to mirror all values and morals against the remote past where the essence of all existence can be found. Life now (in the ‘sasa’ time) needs to be related to and linked with that remote ‘zamani’ time, which transcends all time as such, not least because the ancestors have laid there the stories and myths necessary for life.

Obviously, the words and linguistic structures a culture needs to convey its thoughts and messages do tell us a little about the nature of that culture or country.

2.1 Do speakers ‘relinquish control’ when using the second language?

People generally prefer to converse in their mother tongue as it gives a sense of security and strength, and a greater degree of control (Watts 1991). A speaker is sometimes placed in a position of vulnerability as using the second tongue involves a certain amount of relinquishing of control. For a lecturer, as someone who is traditionally in a position of ‘power’ in comparison to his students, it can be a difficult and unsettling position to be placed in a situation where the lecturer is obliged to use a second language while some of the students may be native speakers. In such cases the lecturer is thrown back onto himself and must learn to utilise a ‘strength’ which is separate from linguistic ability – his intelligence and knowledge and skills as a facilitator and teacher must stand unaided by the props of native-language competence, leaving behind the familiar tool of expert manipulation of a code:

René, a Dutch professor of Economics, expresses his feelings of vulnerability:

I feel more vulnerable to native speaking students (British) than to non-native speaking students, although in the end it’s my knowledge of economics and the way I explain this, that counts.
2.1.1 The relationship between language and power, and language and identity

Much research illustrates that language and power are inextricably mixed. ‘All socio-communicative verbal interaction, at whatever level of formality or complexity, reflects the distribution of power among the participants’ (Watts 1991). A person who is a good communicator has power at his disposal – and as communication is of such essential importance to the lecturer in his relationship with his students, the use of a second language in the multicultural classroom can lead to subtle shifts in the customary positions of power that are tacitly adhered to in the classroom. These shifts can be accompanied by a sense of insecurity, or security, as well, and can bring different aspects of personal character forward.

In a series of studies that have to my knowledge not been repeated since in such an manner (unfortunately), Ervin-Tripp (1968: 203) studied the close relationship between language and identity. She demonstrated in her Thematic Apperception Tests (TAT) (Ervin, 1964) that the content of picture descriptions changed according to the language a person used. When bilingual Japanese-English women were asked to do a sentence-completion test, the content of their responses changed dramatically according to the language used. Her most famous example is probably the one where a woman was asked to complete the stimulus “When my wishes conflict with my family…”:

In Japanese:
“When my wishes conflict with my family … it is a time of great unhappiness”

In English:
“When my wishes conflict with my family …. I do what I want”

What sense of ‘self’ does a person have in English which is perhaps different from his or her sense of self in Dutch? Jeanine, a course coordinator in Amsterdam, found speaking a second language in the classroom somewhat restricting:

In a group with Dutch people I can be very ‘present’: joking, making remarks, laughing. In a group where I have to speak English it takes much more time and much more feeling comfortable before I make jokes. I close up more, and tend to listen instead of speaking.

This sort of intuitive perception of ‘self’ can have a formidable impact on the way lectures are conducted. Bertus, a Belgian - Dutch lecturer whose command of English is somewhat limited described the impact of his sense of self on his lectures in English as follows:

I don’t tell stories as often as I would like to do. I am not the narrator that I usually would be when speaking Dutch, the reason being that I have not enough knowledge of the colloquialisms necessary for successful narration. This means that for the students I am as a result less of a narrator behind whom something existential and symbolic can be perceived, and instead, I become more formal, hanging onto theories instead of stories.

Interestingly, this lecturer also reported that though he became more formal and felt more vulnerable when speaking English, he also used more humour, perhaps in an attempt to regain some of the control he felt he had lost.
Some Dutch lecturers found that speaking English gave them more flexibility and the opportunity to adjust better to the subtle shifts of footing between teacher and student, and enables them to fulfil their need for higher context communication:

Annerie: When using English I feel more confident. The English language gives me better ways to express myself; better ways to be ‘political’, indirect.

Hans: I feel more at home in the English language. I feel I can express a lot more in English than I can in Dutch ..... when I speak with British students in my capacity as programme manager I find that I try and manage to link to their linguistic and cultural sensitivities more than with Dutch students.

For these lecturers, English becomes a language which empowers them and gives them confidence. The study brought to light how much of an impact working in a second language has on the lecturer. This impact is not necessarily negative: depending on the level of lexical and grammatical competence, the use of English can empower, but on the other hand, if the level of English is weak it can bring with it a sense of vulnerability which can have a large impact on the sense of self. This has a noticeable effect on the lecturer’s performance in the class. Of course, the same can (and does) happen with international students. A Thai student reported that “it takes so long to understand and to express, and the concepts don’t match. In Thailand I was clever and strong and here in Australia I feel like a child, smaller and weaker. But free, too, like a child” (Tuangkarn, pers.comm, August 2003)

English is my first tongue, and interestingly, during the research process I discovered that the findings echoed many of my own experiences and insecurities that I had undergone as I had learned to function professionally in a second language myself – namely, Dutch. Personally I realise that my ‘Dutch’ self is different in character than my ‘English’ self: in Dutch I perceive myself as more formal, less effervescent, more well-behaved, and perhaps more concentrated. In English I use more humour, am more provocative, more expressive, and I more often overstep social boundaries. I am perhaps better suited to teaching my business report writing classes in Dutch, and creative presentation techniques in English.

3 Trust and confidence

In all, it is apparent how indivisible the professional persona is from the personal: the lecturer is faced with his or her own character, own self whenever he or she teaches. Accepting that intercultural communication is a very personal matter and therefore has an impact on one’s sense of who one is, on the personal self, and how this is expressed to the outside, multicultural world, has an impact on the professional context of lecturer and student.

Being faced with a multicultural classroom can be very unsettling for the lecturer. All the approaches and methods that had, up till then, worked very well with a monocultural group, suddenly might not be felt to work any more. The sense of “I am a good teacher” makes way for “Am I really a good teacher? If so, why aren’t my tried and tested methods working?”. Confidence plummets and there is at times less pleasure in the teaching:

Bertus: I feel that I’m more vulnerable for conflicts, misunderstanding that might come when we have to bargain about workload, etc. … it’s not so easy as a non-native
speaker to express immediate feelings and thought, nuances and subtleties are often lost

Rene: I feel I’m limited when I’m teaching in the multicultural classroom and need to give response to students.

Jeanine: [I have become] More strict, since it is more difficult to explain for me and for them to understand because of their language and cultural ‘problems’ if I would make exceptions or if I would be more loose with the rules in some cases.

Trust and confidence – issues which are only tacitly acknowledged in a professional context – are in fact of great importance and can offer great personal reward.

4 Regaining trust

An essential skill in becoming a better intercultural communicator, is the ability to recognise one’s own culture-specific norms and values, what it means to ‘be’ Dutch or English or Australian or a mix of cultures.

We believe that the most successful professional communicator is not the one who believes he or she is an expert in crossing the boundaries of discourse systems, but, rather, the person who strives to learn as much as possible about other discourse systems while recognizing that except within his or her own discourse systems he or she is likely to always remain a novice. We believe that effective communication requires a study of cultural and discourse differences on the one hand, but also requires a recognition of one’s own limitations (Scollon 1995: 15).

This last aspect - a recognition of one’s own limitations - or, as the interculturalist Pinto puts it, becoming aware of one’s own culture-specific norms, values and practices - is one which is found in many theoretical frameworks which deal with intercultural communication. The basic premise is that whereas it is important to learn as much as possible about the other culture, there are limitations to how well one can achieve this. Also, there may be drawbacks to delineating the differences between cultures:

For cross-cultural training to be successful, it must not be limited to delivering more or less detailed information about other countries and cultures. If it is, even the most sophisticated model of cross-cultural differences will only enhance the particular stereotypes that the participants have about another culture (Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars, 1998:201)

It is better, then, to learn to recognise that:

...Genuine self-awareness accepts that we follow a particular mental cultural program and that members of other cultures have different programs. We may find out more about ourselves by exploring those differences (ibid., 201).

A knowledge of self, however, is in itself a Western concept and may not be entirely appropriate to non-Western cultures where the ‘self’ may be a more collective ‘self’. It is important to be aware of the notion of individualism versus collectivism in cultures, (one of
Hofstede’s four dimensions), and Scollon (1995: 36) points out the incongruity of utilising ‘self’ as a notion when discussing face systems in issues of interpersonal politeness and power.

Creating a knowledge of self and regaining trust is a starting point to becoming a confident teacher of the multicultural classroom. Learning styles, language (in)competency, logic structures, metalinguistic communication, second-language issues, control, evasiveness and bluntness are just a few of the topics that can be discussed when talking about the multicultural classroom. There are many more topics that we could pinpoint as being relevant. But where can we start? At what point can we say “This is how I start become a really good teacher of international students”? What might help is if a lecturer can dare to let go of the ‘traditional’ teaching methods and instead places trust in the students to learn as they have learned to learn (rather than try and force them to learn in a Western way).

What is really essential, to my mind, is a belief that its all worthwhile; that the effort one makes to teach under trying circumstances is appreciated, and makes a real difference to those who come here to learn. Some suggestions are (de Marequois Witsel, 1998):

- get to know the individual
- understand others’ behaviour from their perspective.
- manage stress and be able to cope with ambiguous situations as well as unpredictable demands
- be sensitive to the cultural background of the others and adjust the suggestions one wants to make to the existing constraints and limitations
- express one’s ideas in such a way that the people one is talking with will objectively and fully understand what one has in mind

Being able to interact successfully with international students is a rewarding and fulfilling experience. Once, while discussing communication skills with an international master’s group, a Chinese student came forward and drew the Chinese character for ‘listening’ in the board, and then quietly explained that it included equal parts signifying ‘ears’, ‘eyes’ and ‘heart’:
In other words, it suggests that real listening is done not just with our ears, but in equal parts with our heart, and our eyes.

6 Conclusion

In the multicultural classroom, the lecturer’s sense of self – and thus confidence - can be challenged. Whether the lecturer or the students are using a second language can have a significant impact on the expression of character. A knowledge of self in cultural sense can aid the lecturer in regaining trust. There is a real need to listen to one’s students, and to oneself.
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