Classroom Techniques for Contextualization: How to make "This is a pen." a pragmatically motivated utterance

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It has long been recognized that the insufficiency of the audiolingual training in fostering functional communicators is partly due to unrealistic pseudo-communication prevalent in a classroom (Omaggio-Hadley, 1993). A huge number of such transactions as "Is that a pencil?"-"No, it isn't. It is a pen." (Ota, Ito & Kusakabe, 1980, p.7) are conducted solely for the purpose of structural pattern practices, without participants' intrinsic motivation to make such utterances: Answers are often so obvious that there is no reason to ask them (unless the inquirer is trying to confirm the meanning of the word, or s/he is perceptually/cognitively deficient.) Sometimes teachers under a strong curriculum constraint are forced to have their students practice such model dialogues which are presented in a textbook. This is regrettable because lack of a pragmatic motivation behind a question makes subsequent classroom communication less active (Long, Brock, Crookes, Deicke, Potter, & Zhang, 1984).

Fortunately, techniques have been developed to contextualize such utterances so that they make pragmatic sense within the provided situation. This paper summerizes some of such techniques.

Techniques for Contextualization

Technique #1: Use abstract arts

Show Pablo Picasso's abstract picture and ask such questions as "Is this a woman?". Variation: * Use ethnic arts, such as Japanese folding paper arts (Aoki, Ikeura, Ide, Kaneda, Sato, Sato, Shimaoka, Hayasaka, & Nitani, 1983) and African masks.

Technique #2: Use a disguise

Show a picture of an actor on a female makeup (e.g., Japanese Kabuki play) and of real women, and have students guess their gender. Variations: * Ask the real function of goods of unusual shapes (e.g., a video-tape rewinder which looks like a car toy.) * Present tape-recorded voices of men and women; Some of the men have high-pitch voices, and some of the women have low-pitch voices. Have students guess their genders.

Technique #3: Reduce available perceptual information

Initially show students only a small portion of an object/person (e.g., the chin portion of a picture of a well-known actor), and gradually expose the rest, until one of the students comes across a correct answer who/what it is. Variation: * Put a pen, a wrist watch and a pencil each in a brown bag, and shuffle them rapidly before students' eyes. After that, point a bag and ask students, "Is this a pen?"

Technique #4: Introduce a change of state

Aoki, Ito, Endo, Ootomo, Kitaichi, Nakamura, Matsui, Morizumi, Morinaga, Wakabayashi, Hattori, and Dobbyn (1983) cleverly contextualize "This is an egg." and "That is a bird." as utterances of a conjurer who transforms an egg into a bird. Variation: * Use one of the growing number of digital movies in which an item seamlessly transforms into a different one.

Technique #5: Take advantage of cultural knowledge gaps

In the absence of a speaker's solid knowledge about local American culture, asking such questions as "Is he an Amish?" makes sense with reference to a picture of a person in a folk costume. This type of activities can also lead to a fruitful cultural discussion.

Conclusion

Foreign language teachers sometimes come across pragmatically unmotivated model dialogues in a textbook. However, it is often possible to make those seemingly nonsense utterances a motivated one by providing an appropriate context, so that transactions in class provide a realistic communication.

References

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