Facing Up to Stereotypes in the Second Language Classroom

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As we teach or study a second language, we have the opportunity of coming into contact with a different world view. According to Fantini (1997:5) " …language reflects and affects culture". Both are human constructs and a dynamic relation exists between the two. To demonstrate this intrinsic link Fantini coined the term " linguaculture" (LC). Thus, as we learn a second language, we also learn a second way of modeling and patterning the world.

As we learn another language or, as I will refer to it from now on, another LC, we will be tempted to use stereotypes to deal with that which is unfamiliar and strange to our cultural horizon. To Berger (1997:54) the use of stereotypes " …is a part of our everyday illogical and uncritical way of thinking". Talburt and Stewart (1999) show that the mere contact a learner has with the LC2 through the medium of an exchange program does not automatically guarantee either that the second language will be learned or that an effective interaction with and in the LC2 will ensue. Coleman (1998:48) asserts that the old adage " to know them is to love them" is not necessarily true. Frequently, when students participate in exchange programs without any previous preparation on how to view the unfamiliar, they simply resort to stereotypes as a strategy for comprehending the strange, and return from their exchanges with the stereotypical explanations more firmly intact than ever.

As teachers of an LC2 we should be aware of how our classes can be forums for discussion. According to Gadamer (1960/2000), the unfamiliar is necessary for there to be understanding. It is exactly when we encounter something strange or different, which causes a rupture in our familiar horizon, that we begin to comprehend. We live in tension between the familiar, that which brings us comfort and the strange, that which brings us feelings of disorientation. When we break out of our comfort zones, we are able to engage in true comprehension involving new perspectives, new horizons. On the other hand, to use stereotypes to deal with the strange is to remain fixated on the familiar and to close ourselves off from change.

In the LC2 classroom, we teachers must be aware of the use of stereotypes to define and explain the culturally unfamiliar. We must be aware as well at how the familiar seems so "normal". Erickson (1986:121) speaks of the " invisibility of everyday life". The discussion of stereotypes can lead the class to begin to question the presumptions of the LC1. As Erickson (1984:62) says, we should remember "the oddness and arbitrary nature of the ordinary everyday behavior that we, as members, take for granted". He suggests asking question like, "Why is this the way it is and not different?". In the LC2 classroom as culturally different events are encountered, either by having them take place in the classroom, or by reading about them, or by seeing them in videos or films, we teachers can use these moments to raise a discussion starting from within the familiar cultural horizon and leading into the unfamiliar cultural horizons. We as teachers can be facilitators in dealing with the tension that exists between the familiar and the unfamiliar.

I would like to illustrate two ways these kinds of discussions have surfaced in my class. I myself instigated the first discussion. The second discussion appeared naturally in the course of a lesson.

Discussion One

The first discussion was brought to class specifically for the purpose of discussing stereotypes. I wanted to use the class for a consciousness raising session on stereotypes and how they are used to fixate definitions of the other. For this purpose, I used an episode entitled, *The Cruise* from the American sitcom *Frasier* .

In the episode the main character Frasier has been invited to speak on what he thinks is going to be a first-class cruise. In fact he has accepted the invitation because he thinks he will be hobnobbing with the famous. Much to his chagrin on getting onboard he discovers that everything is third-rate including the different speakers and performers that are to entertain the passengers. One of these entertainers is a one-hit (*Dance the Barracuda*) Latin American singer named Carlos, El Gato who is the stereotype of the Latin

Lover, frilly shirt and all.

Before watching the episode, I asked the students to list the stereotypes that they thought were used by Americans to classify Latin Americans. They came up with a list of very negative stereotypes: "*They think we are lazy, dishonest, irresponsible, disorganized*"; as well as more positive stereotypes: "*They think we are friendly, musical, and love dancing all the time*". The students were then asked to watch the sitcom paying attention to how the Latin singer was portrayed, detailing his characteristics. The students found the episode extremely funny, laughing a lot at Carlos, El Gato.

In the discussion that followed, the students showed some surprise at the composition of the stereotype of the Latin Lover: "*Why is he wearing those clothes* (i.e., a frilly shirt, tight pants, and wide waistband)?"; "*Why is his trademark a rose?*", etc.. Many students said that though the episode was funny, it was still embarrassing to have a Latin American portrayed as such a ridiculous figure. At this point, it was possible to start examining the truth of stereotypes, "What do stereotypes have to do with the actual reality of real people?", "On what are they based?", "Why do people use stereotypes to define others?", "Why do people find stereotypes humorous?".

From looking at stereotypes from the point of view of the American toward the Latin American (American à Latin American), it was possible to proceed into a discussion about the stereotypes that Brazilian have about Americans (Brazilian à American) and examine them as to their basis in truth and the reasons for their existing. The portrayal of Americans on Brazilian TV in comedy routines, the news, the "novelas" (Brazilian serial TV stories), etc., as well as in the press was used as a reference. Both positive and negative stereotypes were found: Americans were seen as hard-working, organized, and successful. On the other hand, they were also seen as aggressive, arrogant, prudish, only caring about money, and humorless.

This class, then, was used basically to raise a consciousness about the use of stereotypes and to start a discussion about their validity. The class also helped the students remember that all people use stereotypes in one way or another to define the Other. It is not a one-way street.

Discussion Two

While studying the short story *Grandparenting* by John Updike several opportunities appeared to discuss the familiar and the strange especially regarding a key concept such as the individual versus the group.

This is a story about a modern American family gathering at the hospital to witness the birth of a grandchild. *Judith* is giving birth to her first child. Her parents *Richard* and *Joan* are coming to be with her. But there is a small hitch: they are divorced now and are married to *Ruth* and *Andy* respectively. *Ruth* doesn't think *Richard* should go. She thinks,

> *The girl's over thirty, she has a husband. To have her divorced parents both hovering over her isn't just silly. It's cruel…You need space when you're having a baby. You need air to breathe* (p. 305).

My Brazilian students interpreting this from their cultural horizon found it quite difficult to understand. Several students interpreted *Ruth* as having personal problems. She was seen as "selfish" and "egotistical". One students called her an "individualist". Though the student was speaking English, it was obvious she was using the word with its Portuguese definition. In English to be an individualist is to be self-reliant (see the *Illustrated Oxford Dictionary*). It has a positive connotation. In Portuguese to be an "individualista" means to prefer the individual's rights over those of the group (see *Pequeno Dicionário Brasileiro da Língua Portuguesa*). It has a negative connotation. From this, another student came to the conclusion that the American family is not united ("desunida") and that "*each one is the way they wanted. They have their own lives*". This was contrasted to the Brazilian family which works together as a group symbolized in the "*Sunday lunch*" where "*everybody comes*". Thus, a stereotype of the close, warm Brazilian family versus the cold, distant American family was formed.

Based on this interpretation of *Ruth'*s words, it is possible to initiate a discussion of the different world views embodied in the definition of "individualism" and "individualismo" which can in turn lead to a deeper understanding of the LC1 and the LC2. For Bellah et al. (1996:viii), "(i)ndividualism, that first language in which Americans tend to think about their lives, values independence and self-reliance above all else".

From the use of the stereotypes of united ("unida") versus not united ("desunida"), the teacher can lead the students into thinking

about the varied roles that exist for the individual and the group in different cultures. This in turn can lead to discussions of how the collectivity is defined in each culture. Is it to be found in the public sphere (i.e., work, being at the bus stop, etc.) or the private sphere (family, etc.)? What kind of events show the different views on the individual and the group in each culture (Sunday lunch, soccer games, etc.)? How does the story itself and its interpretation show the different cultural horizons? By initiating this kind of discussion, the teacher can aid the students in dealing with the unfamiliar and the strange. The feelings of disorientation that ensue can be a part of the discussion and viewed as normal but as something that can lead on to a wider perspective and an appreciation of the Other.

Thus, from natural student initiated interpretations that appear in class, it is possible for the teacher to initiate a discussion of stereotypes and of different worldviews.

Conclusion

I stated in the introduction of this short article that in learning another language we are engaging in learning another LC and that stereotypes frequently occur to try to incorporate the unfamiliar and the strange into the familiar cultural horizon. For this reason, a teacher should be aware of stereotypes and be ready to discuss them openly in the LC class. As I showed, the discussion about stereotypes can be initiated by the teacher (Discussion One) or occur naturally as a result of students' interpretations (Discussion Two). Either way, the teacher should use all opportunities to help the students deal with the unfamiliar and proceed to a better understanding of the Other.

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