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THE LANGUAGE LEARNER AND CULTURE IN DOING BUSINESS

When a person wants to learn or is in the process of learning another language, he/she will encounter not only syntactical, semantic, and phonological differences but also cultural ones. These differences can be in the learners themselves, within their business culture, and/or within the new business culture. This article will take a look at how learners and their culture can affect their learning a new language and its business culture.

Dilts, Epstein and Dilts point out so clearly that

. . .in our brain structure, language, and perceptual systems there are natural hierarchies or levels of experience. The effect of each level is to organize and control the information on the level below it. Changing something on an upper level would necessarily change things on the lower levels; changing something on a lower level could but would not necessarily affect the upper levels. (26)

At the moment the structure of our brain is clear, but how it exactly works is still open to debate. It is known that our brain consists of three different brains (the Triune Brain). Exactly what each brain does and how they all function together is, however, not yet so clear.

As we know, our neocortex is responsible for most academic functions. However, recent research has shown that the lower parts of the brain play an important role in the production of language (see Leiner, Leiner, and Dow). Hager (1997) has pointed out that language production is a whole brain function, not only a left neocortex one.

For the language learner, it is obvious how language plays an important role in this process. Without the appropriate language or the adequate ability and skills in the appropriate language, the language learner

Global Business Languages (1997)

is at a loss for words in the new culture. There will be no communication or a limited amount until the necessary skills have been acquired.

Our perceptual systems are the same from culture to culture; these being our five senses, seeing, hearing/speaking, feeling/emotions, tasting, and smelling. However, how these are used from one cultural group to another can vary. The now famous but dubious example of the Eskimos having over 70 different words for snow exemplifies this well. (For more information on how our senses can be applied to language learning/teaching directly see Hager 1994 and 1997.)

Our senses are not only dependent on culture but also on the individual. An individual challenged by physical handicaps, for example, uses senses differently than a nonhandicapped person. A visually impaired person is compelled to use or rather not use the visual system differently from a visually nonimpaired person. Consequently, a difference in how we use and filter input through our senses can be expected.

Not only physical characteristics but also personal history makes a difference in how we use our senses and filter incoming information. Our personal history also affects which sense we prefer to use in learning, for instance. Of course, the choice of which sense we use depends on the situation at hand. When telephoning, we are compelled primarily to use our auditory sense. If given the chance, however, everyone will use his/her preferred sense for the task at hand. So which sense the learner uses in learning and how will make that certain difference (see Hager 1997, for more information).

In certain learning situations, the use of one particular sense is more appropriate to the learning situation. In the case of learning to spell, using the kinesthetic (feeling/emotion) system to store the necessary input will not be conducive to spelling. Here the visual system is the optimal mode for storing words for spelling (Hager 1994). However, later in the spelling process, the kinesthetic system is advantageous for doublechecking the accuracy of spelling.

In a nutshell, this demonstrates how brain structure, language, and perceptual systems can affect our learning, especially our language learning.

FILTERING INPUT

While a person is in the process of absorbing input, he/she filters it through the senses. Once the input has been internalized, the person fil-

ters this information again in such a way that parts of the information are deleted, generalized or distorted (see Lewis and Pucelik).

Deletion can be due to a person's personal history. Because of an individual's background, the person might not be aware of cultural differences in certain parts of the world. This is not solely due to the individual's personal background but also to the cultural setting in general. In German business culture, for instance, it is very important to shake hands. However, in many other cultures (e.g. English speaking cultures) this is usually not the practice. If you are doing business, though, with a German, not shaking hands could start the meeting off on the wrong foot.

When the language learner is acquiring new information about the new culture or cultural group, he/she will tend to delete new information due to unfamiliarity or uneasiness with the practice. This can be exemplified by body language.

In German business culture, Americans will probably be aware of the fact that something about their meeting with German businesspeople is different than with other Americans. But they normally will not be aware of what precisely makes it so. This is often due to the fact that German body language tends to be stiffer than American. For German businesspeople, the easy-going American manner can have disastrous effects. During the first encounters, both sides are not aware of what the cause of this is because they do not perceive the source. They overlook or delete it.

Generalization can also be due to the person's personal history or to the particular cultural background. Because of different forms and sources of information, a cultural group will tend to form different generalizations about the world. For example, one culture through its experience with another cultural group may come up with prejudices about the other cultural group. Americans tend to believe that Germans are very accurate and orderly in doing business. On the surface they tend to be so, but if you look a little closer, this notion is overgeneralized. And on the other hand, Germans tend to believe that Americans are not very accurate and thorough in doing business. So both cultural groups generalize about the other.

If we take the example of body language again, we find that a learner can generalize about unfamiliar gestures. When the learner notices an unfamiliar gesture (see Fig. 1) in the new cultural group, the meaning of this gesture is unclear. However, after seeing it enough in certain con-

texts, the learner can deduce its meaning through the contextual experience. The interpretation may not be correct, however.

Figure 1: German Gesture.

This gesture plus pursing your lips and letting out a puff of air at the same time indicates as much as “forget it.” To many learners of German, this looks like the person is doing this gesture is throwing away something. Perhaps he is throwing salt over his shoulder for good luck.

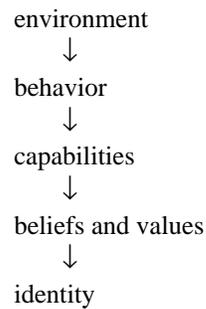
Referring an action back to oneself can be due to the fact that every different culture perceives itself and its members differently than the new one. In the native culture, individual freedom may be of great importance. But in the new culture individualism is emphasized less, and the group or society is of more importance. The learner is confronted with the new belief system and must adjust to it.

This can also be observed in the business world when Americans and Germans meet. Americans tend to be more individually oriented, and the individual will look out for his/her own professional needs. On the other hand, German businesspeople tend to be more oriented toward group progress and social betterment.

In observing all the above mentioned situations, our culture functions as external in reference to the learner. All of his/her experiences with the world are internal in nature. These two points of observation can be carried over into the logical levels.

LOGICAL LEVELS

Logical levels were first suggested by Gregory Bateson. These levels apply well to the language learner and the acquisition of the target culture. When we look at the different levels, it is important to remember that the target culture is external in nature and the learner's world is internal. The five different logical levels according to Dilts et al (28) are:



Environment is of great importance when getting to know a new culture since it normally can make or break the learner's motivation to continue learning about the new culture. If the student is not in the new culture directly, the classroom situation can also have an enormous influence on the learner. The learner's internal environment, of course, is only a map of the external environment but not really the environment itself.

In this situation the learner's internal map of the environment will be extremely influenced by the native cultural environment. So much so that the learner could have extreme problems adjusting to a very different environment. This will depend on the native culture's acceptance of flexibility and tolerance and on the learner's internal ability to be flexible and tolerant. Very often a culture considers itself to be the best and frown upon other cultural groups, thus leading to intolerance. Logically, this affects the learner's abilities to be flexible and tolerant. This can be found in the business world when one business culture believes that it is superior. Consequently, this cultural group believes that others must conform to its way of doing business and can often be very intolerant of the other group.

The level of behavior can be exemplified by the above mentioned examples of body language. Another example of this is shopping in the new culture. An American businessperson working in Germany may be ex-

tremely surprised by how Germans behave when they are shopping. This experience demonstrates two of the different levels, behavior and beliefs and values. For most Americans what they experience at the checkout at a German supermarket would often be considered extremely rude and inconsiderate in the United States. This includes both behavior and the person's belief and value system. This kind of situation may be applied to the business world as well. German businesspeople tend to be more aggressive than Americans.

The third level of capabilities can influence the learner's ability to learn a foreign language and learn about the foreign culture. The individual's internal abilities to learn a language and a different culture vary immensely. The learner's native culture also affects internal abilities to learn a language. In some countries where several languages are spoken and function as official languages, the society considers being able to speak more than one language essential.

In German business it is an accepted fact that a businessperson speaks at least one other language fluently. If the German businessperson does not, promotion is unlikely. However, in the United States it is not considered essential by society as a whole to be able to speak a language other than English fluently. Consequently, the individual in this society will find it difficult and unimportant to learn another language. This will also be a deterrent to language learning. Therefore, this leaves American businesspeople at the mercy of someone else to provide the needed information, either through translation or expecting the business partner to speak English.

The fourth level, beliefs and values, can easily be found in the way Germans and Americans do business. American businesspeople tend to come to a conclusion/response quickly. Time is money. It is, however, possible that this conclusion/response will later be revised or changed. Germans, however, tend to take more time and thoroughly check an item before giving a response. For Germans, the American way of doing business is frustrating and stressful because it goes against their beliefs and values in doing business. And for Americans, the German way of doing business can be equally frustrating.

The fifth level, identity, pertains to how the culture sees itself within the world. In the past, American society perceived itself as the policeman of the world and often as something better than other societies. This is exemplified by the fact that Americans were or still are interested in pro-

viding the world with the American way of life, even though many societies are not interested in being Americanized.

This can also be seen in the business world through the American way of doing business. Through contact with my German students, who are businesspeople learning English, I know that my students often resent the fact that they are expected to do it the American way when doing business with Americans.

The native of this society will be influenced by this attitude. If the individual “really” identifies with the society and its beliefs and values, he/she might not be able to openly accept other ways and values and consequently, another cultural group. This then will hinder the individual’s ability to learn another language and another culture.

However, if an individual is not totally convinced of his/her own culture’s supremacy, there will be more openness to a new language and its culture. It is also possible that this individual becomes so open to the new language and its culture that he/she wants to totally identify with it. So much perhaps that the individual learns the language so well that most native speakers do not notice that this person is not one of them. It is also possible that for this individual it is no problem to give up the original identity with the native culture, consequently, developing a totally new identity.

This is one of the biggest problems for language learners. Most language learners are not willing to accept a new identity within a new society. Therefore, they do not give themselves the chance to expand and enrich their original identity through this experience. It is not necessary that they give up their original identity.

Of course, this is not always the purpose of learning a language. For some, learning a language is only a means to an end, a tool to do business, for example. So we must distinguish between those learners who are interested instrumentally in the language and those who are interested integratively.

Changing negative elements at this level of identity will lead to positive changes in all the lower logical levels in the individual for learning a language and a new culture. Therefore, as language teachers, in order to better understand what is happening in our classroom, it helps to remember these points as a framework in order to give the learner more of what is needed to be successful to the extent desired.

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