〔Notes〕

How Language Learners Can Develop Communicative Competence

Philippa Nugent

At the start of the twenty-first century, there are more non-native speakers of English than there are native English speakers to the ratio of about 4:1 (House: 2001). International political and trading institutions worldwide have facilitated the globalization of the English language such that it is considered the lingua franca of most international communities. Competence in English is seen by many to be the key to the modern world, not only to that of today's communications media, the internet, television and radio, but also as the language of science and technology. Communicative competence in this global language is the aim of English language students worldwide as they strive to join the ever-growing community of speakers of English as a second language.

As interest in English language education has increased so theories from the fields of the social sciences have influenced how educators view teaching. The past 40 years has seen a shift in focus from the teaching of English as a formal structure of rules to be learned, to a more communicative approach. Among others, the work of linguist MAK Halliday in the 1970's emphasized the importance of the contextual appropriacy of language. That is, to look at language and consider the three functions that it fulfills; in the experiential domain, communicating experience; in the interpersonal domain, the expression of a point of view in interactions with others, and in the textual domain, those aspects that tie the language together (Halliday 1994). All three of these features are realized through

the social behaviour of language use and to take them out of the cultural context in which they occur came to be thought of as inappropriate. Educators began to realize the importance of the cultural background of the language they were teaching: No longer was grammatical competence alone considered to be enough, in fact studies showed that it did not necessarily produce successful communicators (Savignon 1972). Teachers began to see the importance of their students knowing "when to speak, when not, and what to talk about, with whom, when, where and in what manner" (Hymes 1972: 277) and new models of competence were sought, ones that considered culture a key ingredient.

Traditionally, culture in the language classroom meant the 'High Culture' of pursuits such as literature and the arts. Often a student's motivation to learn English centred around a desire to experience the works of literature in its native tongue. As English became more a language of international communication and less a reflection of its colonial past, so culture with a small c began to be considered important to learn for effective communication with native speakers. Through the influence of anthropology and sociology the word 'culture' came to be associated with the set of shared guidelines and unwritten rules that underpin the behaviour of a society and moved away from definitions of the products and artifacts produced by the people; cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz defined this form of culture as "an ordered system of meanings and symbols in terms of which social interaction takes place" (Moore 1997: 238). Geertz's definition of culture emphasized that it is the very framework in which understanding and interpretation of meaning is set; and the awareness of this link between culture and communication led to a different way of thinking about language acquisition and use. Social anthropologists studying different societies began to hypothesize that different languages may not just be different coding devices but reflections of different world views, "speakers of different languages do not

interpret identical events and situations in the same way" (Paul 1993: 64) and this fed into the increasing awareness of the importance of cultural understanding for language learners. Researchers such as Elinor Ochs, studying language acquisition in Samoan children, found linguistic knowledge to be inseparable from sociocultural knowledge, "interpretations and meaning are necessarily embedded in cultural systems of understanding" (Ochs 1988: 4). Ochs maintained that knowledge of societal norms and expectations is necessary in order to understand the connection between linguistic forms and functions since there is rarely a one-to-one relationship between the two.

If culture was seen to dictate the forms of language so too it was said that language influenced culture. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis holds that the way reality itself is perceived is shaped and depends upon the language of the speakers (Steinfatt 1987). How strong this connection is remains open to debate, nevertheless, it is generally agreed upon that the two way link between language and culture is intact; "on the one hand, language influences the perceptions of objects, on the other it is influenced by the perceptions and needs of the community which uses it" (Paul 1993: 61). Without at least some knowledge of the cultural conventions of a society, the practices, concerns and values of the people, is it realistic to be able to expect cross-cultural communication to be successful?

Formerly, foreign languages were learned without addressing cultural or social aspects; words were memorized, sentences formed, but actual communication attempts often led to less than successful results. Learners armed only with grammatical knowledge and theories of the language came across unexpected obstacles in their interactions with native speakers. Pragmatic transfer, not only at the level of discourse, but also concerning non-verbal behaviour, interfered with the transference of meaning across cultures. Miller (1994) identifies two types of misunderstandings; those he terms structural and those he terms pragmatic.

Structural misunderstandings are based upon the lexicon and grammatical features of the language, pragmatic misunderstandings occur when judgments and interpretations are made which differ from the other participants' intended meanings or judgments. At the structural level it may be factors such as 'false-friends' of which Wroblewski (1990) identifies two types; those words that speakers think they know the meaning of but don't (these may be loan words for example or words that are morphologically similar to others) or words that have a common meaning but also have additional meanings. Other problems such as question and answer patterns may also cause confusion and misunderstanding due to transfer from L1. Languages such as English that use the action as a point of reference in a question, for example, often cause problems to Japanese speakers of English because their language retains consistency to the propositional logic rather than the situation or action. Therefore, to the question "Don't you like it?" a native English speaker would answer "Yes" meaning 'yes, I do like it' whereas a Japanese speaker's "Yes" answer would mean 'yes that's right, I don't like it'. Transfer on this level is one factor that can cause misunderstanding, but understanding the form- form, form-meaning and form-function relationships of the language, also helps to avoid a much less obvious form of interference. In English, for example, there is no standard form for giving goods and services as there is for demanding them, and the language is full of grammatical metaphor as speakers say one thing but mean another; "Aren't you cold?" can be a simple question, or an offer of a jacket or a veiled request to shut a window. Conventions of speaker behaviour and speaker meaning such as these can only be understood within the context of the situation, and that context is culture-bound. Furthermore, much of social behaviour and the speech patterns that accompany it have become ritualized over time and the actions and words may have lost their significance except as markers of good manners. Conventions surround-

ing greetings and leave-taking are examples of such rituals where the participants are expected to act in a predictable way to fulfill their roles. Sociocultural expectations reflect the beliefs, goals and values of a culture and pervade every aspect of interpersonal exchange. Such structural misunderstandings may or may not go unnoticed in an interactive event; often, speakers can pick up on a look of confusion or conflicting information and be able to clarify the situation with further probing. Pragmatic misunderstandings caused by mismatched interpretations, expectations and non-verbal behaviour, however, can amount to a more subtle kind of interference. Research into non-verbal behaviour has identified various kinds of culturally based conventions that if speakers are not aware of, may be potential problem areas. These range from kinesics, which refers to gesture and body-language; oculesics, rules regarding eye-contact between individuals; haptics, different touching conventions between individuals and proxemics, how people organise the physical space around them. These conventions may be employed consciously, or more often subconsciously, as methods of back-channeling, turn-taking, message alteration or clarification or they may be a part of the interpersonal system indicating levels of status, respect and manners that are a vital part of communication.

Traditionally, non-verbal behaviour held no place in the striving for intercultural communication, but as culture with a small c came to be viewed as an integral element affecting exchange, the importance of some knowledge and awareness of non-verbal communication such as gesture came to be realized. Indeed, gesture has even been termed as the "long neglected sister of language" (McNeill: 1998 13) and claims that it contributes considerably to the communicative process for both productive and receptive skills have been made. Research shows that it is so closely tied to the spoken word that even under conditions where speech production is disrupted, the gesture-speech synchrony remains intact

(McNeill & Duncan 2000).

Gestures have been classified into two groups; those termed 'Conventional Gestures' and those termed 'Non-conventional Gestures' (McNeill 1998). The conventional gestures, also called 'emblems', are specifically formed actions, usually of the hand, that are established and recognized within the communities they exist. The North American 'OK" sign or 'thumbs up' are examples of these. These gestures have a standard form that must be adhered to if it is to be understood and indeed, it is this feature that has ensured the longevity of such gestures throughout history; the gesture of 'giving the finger' was used in Roman times much as it is today. Non-conventional gestures, by contrast, have no such historical depth, nor are they necessarily communicative acts in their own right. Rather they serve as integral parts, adding clarification to the utterance and unlike conventional gestures are bound to the spoken word. This has been demonstrated in the study of clinical stutterers, where although the flow of words is disrupted, the speech-gesture synchrony is maintained. Gesture researcher David McNeill classifies non-conventional gestures into four groups; i) Iconic Gestures which depict concrete events or entities; ii) Metaphoric Gestures, that also create images but of abstract ideas, concepts or relations; iii) two kinds of Pointing, Concrete Pointing and Abstract Pointing, which he describes as "pointing in the absence of any visible target" and iv) Beats, which are hand motions that typically appear when a speaker is introducing a new idea into the discourse or commenting on what's being said. McNeill's claim that gestures add something to the linguistic construction that 'cannot be reduced to speech' highlights the importance of language learners studying, or at least being aware of the gestures of the target language's community.

Researchers investigating how non-verbal behaviour sheds light on the cognitive activity of language maintain that there is a 'functional continuity' between spoken language and gesture. Gestures are said to

fulfill three functions; to provide the context for the spoken expression, to add to the propositional content of the utterance, and to express the "speech-act status" of what is being said (Kendon 2000: 55). Studies of native English speakers recounting stories reveal their use of gestures to provide contextual information; one story-teller is described as employing two different gestures to enhance the meaning of the spoken verb "slice". The verb is used to describe two very different actions, one of chopping, the other a slitting open. In the first instance the gesture is a downward chopping motion and in the second, a longitudinal slicing gesture. This example demonstrates the inherently ambiguous nature of words and word usage, and shows how gestures provide a context within which the verbal expression may be interpreted.

From studies of Italian speakers in Italy, researcher Adam Kendon concludes that gestures are used to add layers of meaning to the spoken word. His studies of the Italian gesture 'mano o borsa' (the pursed fingers and thumb gesture) show that it is often used as a kind of comment on what is being said. His example is of a speaker answering a question while simultaneously doing the gesture meaning, "Why are you asking me that?" Kendon also maintains that gestures can have 'pragmatic functions'; his example being a speaker saying the same sentence twice, each time using a different gesture, by doing so in effect, "redesigning the utterance" (Kendon 2000: 55). It has even been theorized that it is partly through gesture that ideas are brought into concrete existence and that as such are actually a form of thought themselves, thus aiding lexical retrieval and the formulation of concepts (McNeill & Duncan 2000).

Researchers such as Carl Jungheim (1995) found that speakers' gestures were unconsciously considered in the assessment of their communicative ability and success in getting their message across. Those who used more gestures were judged as having a higher linguistic level than those who used only a few, when actually their abilities were the same.

This may have been partly due to the fact that some cultures employ them as textual devices signaling a change of topic or creating metaphorical reference points throughout the spoken text, guiding the listener with visual as well as verbal markers. Speakers from cultures that do not use such gestures and who are unfamiliar with these devices can find them confusing rather than enhancing. In the case of metaphorical pointing, for example, which is understood by speakers who share a common culture as such a textual device, misunderstanding may interrupt the flow of conversation as the listener misconstrues the gesture as a concrete signal rather than a conceptual reference point. In this way it derails communication rather than fulfilling its intended purpose.

Oculesics, or eye-contact conventions often cause misunderstandings too between speakers of different cultures; not only is the length of eye-contact a cultural variable but also its use as a turn-taking device varies across nationalities (Gullberg 1998). Additionally, the Western practice of attaching a value judgment to the level of eye-contact maintained in relation to factors such as honesty and trust, can not be reconciled with the common Asian practice of avoiding eye-contact to signal humility or respect. Differences in touching behaviour across cultures, haptics, also create a strong impression of the appropriacy of an interactive exchange. Heslin (1974) identified five degrees of intimacy; i) functional or professional; ii) social or polite; iii) friendship or warmth; iv) love or intimacy and v) sexual arousal and noted that different cultures have different haptic behaviour for each level. Ignorance of another culture's touching conventions can not only cause offense but actions that are normal in one culture can be misconstrued as an act of aggression or being inappropriately intimate in another. The conventions surrounding proxemics, or personal space, are often connected to those of haptics and similarly can cause offense or misunderstanding if boundaries of expected behaviour are crossed.

Thus it can be seen that knowledge of more than grammatical rules and conventions is necessary for crossing the cultural communication divide. Not only non-verbal behaviour but also the high or low contexting factor of a language can cause offense if not taken into consideration. Beal (1990) in her studies of cross-cultural communication difficulties between Australian and French workers found that the differences in contexting styles between Australian English speakers and French English speakers were a cause of tension and misunderstanding. The French people, although they could speak English "fluently and correctly at the morphosyntactical level" (Beal 1990: 17) brought to an exchange their French rules of interpersonal behaviour which included the low context, frank communication style which translated into English as being blunt, rude and arrogant. Their high level of English didn't include knowledge of the softening conventions of indirect ways of speaking in order not to give offense. Despite it being obvious that someone is a non-native speaker of English, they are still judged in relation to the native speaker's standards of reference; "conventionalized forms are so ingrained that one cannot see the rationale behind another's conventionalized forms and cannot help but interpret them according to one's own cultural grid" (Beal 1990: 20).

As the importance of cultural understanding came to be associated with communicative competence, so new models were developed that reflected such concerns. Models that addressed not only the knowledge of lexical items, rules of morphology, syntax, sentence structure, grammar, semantics and phonology but wider reaching abilities that included such concepts as sociolinguistic competence and strategic competence (Bachman 1990, Canale and Swain 1980). The sociolinguistic aspect of this new model addressed such areas as the sociocultural rules of interaction such as the interpretation of utterances with low levels of transparency; appropriacy in relation to the context of the situation; the roles of speakers; the attitudes carried on utterances and the norms of native

speaker interaction. It also encompassed rules of discourse; cohesive devices used, grammatical links across texts (written and spoken); the coherence of groups of utterances and examined the communicative functions of combinations of utterances, knowledge based upon studies of what is considered normal and acceptable to native speakers, norms that are necessarily tied to culture and society. Crozet and Liddicoat (1997) suggest teaching culture in an integrated way with the teaching of the language. Whereas traditionally, culturally based lessons were left until a certain level of mastery of the language had been achieved, it is now considered appropriate to begin teaching about the people and their society from an early point. Aspects of culture may be taught through a thematic approach, looking at the events and institutions that a society considers important. Through this type of study, learners may gain an awareness of the social and psychological background of the people in the target culture. Comparing elements of the students' own culture with that of the target culture may serve to highlight the potential problem areas and challenge notions of stereotypes, an important issue in being able to relate to other nationalities. Jin and Cortazzi (1998) recognize the importance of comparative studies such as these, and use the term a "cultural synergy model" (Jin & Cortazzi 1998: 14); they propose that employing this method with immigrant language learners encourages understanding from the point of view of choice rather than assimilation, which may bring with it issues of hostility to the new culture and the fear of the loss of the learners' own cultural identity. Through a study of the conventions and rituals of the target culture, learners may be able to identify the different communication demands put upon them by cross-cultural interaction. Conventions of non-verbal behaviour may be studied through the use of videos and television programmes and learners can be guided to notice the differences in communication styles that different nationalities have. Susan Steinbach, director of the multimedia lab of the International

Education and Training Center at the University of California, addresses such issues by looking at different nationalities' styles of communication through video (Gareis 1999). She also maintains that it is not enough for learners to be proficient in the data of a language but in order for them to be successful communicators they need to be versed in the interaction and conversation styles of the target culture. Steinbach identifies differences in conversation styles such as 'high involvement' and 'high considerate' and highlights the problems that speakers with high-considerate style, for example, may encounter when trying to interact in a culture that uses high-involvement style. Through watching videos of native speakers interacting, learners identify the various communication styles and Steinbach likens these to different sports. Through this analogy, the video series enables learners to appreciate the importance of matching style to culture. US speakers of English are depicted as 'playing basketball' in their style of interaction, where the speakers take random rather than sequential turns, usually not pausing between speakers and with frequent interruptions and overlapping of turns. In contrast to this she terms the Asian conversational style to be like 'bowling'; here the speakers patiently wait their turn, there are pauses between speakers allowing reflection as to what has been said, and the participants respect the guidelines of etiquette in terms of hierarchical rank. This awareness and practicing of other styles of interacting helps to bridge the gap that so often excludes a non-native speaker from the conversation and sheds light upon how the complicated turn-taking conventions are implemented by native speakers. Using exercises such as these, learners may gain experience about what to expect in their interactions with foreigners and learn what is expected of them. What previously may have been perceived as an aggressive style can be realized as merely different. Through this knowledge of what to expect, non-native speakers' confidence increases and they become more culturally competent in their interactions.

Carl Jungheim's research found that a programme of gesture training increased learners' awareness and use of native speaker type non-verbal behaviour, making them more effective in their communicative pursuits with speakers of English. His subjects learned how to use and interpret a variety of non-verbal behaviours or cues appropriately for the target language and culture. The three aspects he highlighted were: i) non-verbal textual ability; ii) non-verbal sociolinguistic ability and iii) non-verbal strategic ability. Non-verbal textual ability refers to gestures such as head-nods and gaze direction used to facilitate communication in back-channeling or turn-taking signals. Sociolinguistic ability refers to the understanding and appropriate use of gestures in the target culture and serves to improve communication with native speakers and avoid misunderstandings; strategic ability covers the compensatory role of gesture a well as its role in supporting and enhancing spoken language.

In conclusion, the importance of speaking English cannot be denied in today's modern society. Never before has such instantaneous international communication been possible or cross-cultural flow of finance and goods been available in the way that it is now. As global trading has increased and world travel and shipping become easier, so the demand to learn how to effectively communicate in English has risen.

Language teaching and linguistics has felt an influence from sociology and anthropology as the link between language and culture has been recognized and accepted. Teachers and students of English have addressed this by becoming more interested in the cultural background and foreground of the language.

It has been said that 55% of speaker communication occurs through non-verbal channels (Revell and Norman 1997) and whether it be through gesture or body language, eye-contact or proxemics these conventions are a vital part of the communicative process. Learning such conventions and patterns of native speaker norms has become an acknowledged

necessity in learning the language.

Studying culture in a comparative and integrated way misconceptions and stereotypes are highlighted and a truer understanding of the nature of the society is gained. The non-native speaker is offered a chance of being able to successfully relate to and communicate with speakers in the target language and a step towards genuine cross-cultural communicative competence is taken.

Bibliography

Bachman, LF. 1990. *Fundamental Considerations in Language Testing*. Oxford OUP

Beal, C. 1990. It's all in the asking: a perspective on problems of cross-cultural communication between native speakers of French and native speakers of Australian English in the workplace. *ARAL* 7: 16-32

Boyd-Barrett, O. 1999. Trends in World Communication. In Theodoulou P (ed) *Global Dialogue*. Centre for World Dialogue Press.

Canale, M. & Swain, M. 1980. Theoretical bases of communicative approaches to second language teaching and testing. *Applied Linguistics*, 1,1.

Crozet, C. & Liddicoat, A. 1997. Teaching Culture as an integrated part of language teaching: an introduction. *ARAL* 1-22

Crystal, D. 2001. The Future of Englishes. In Burns B & C Coffin (eds) *Analyzing English in a Global Context; A Reader*. Macquarie University & The Open University: Routledge.

Gareis, E. 1999. 'Review of Fluent American English' *TESOL Matters* (*April/May 1999*)

Graddol, D. 2001. English in the Future. In Burns B & C Coffin (eds) *Analyzing English in a Global Context; A Reader*. Macquarie University & The Open University: Routledge.

Gullberg, M. 1998. *Gesture as a Communicative Strategy in Second Language Discourse: A Study of Learners of French and Swedish*. Lund University Press.

Halliday, MAK 1994. *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*. Arnold.

House, J. 2001. A stateless language that Europe must embrace. *The Guardian Weekly: Learning English*. (April 2001)

Jin, L & Cortazzi, M. 1998. The culture the learner brings: a bridge or a barrier. In

Bryam & Fleming (eds) *Language learning an intercultural perspective*. Cambridge: CUP

Jungheim, N. 1995. 'Assessing the Unsaid: The Development of Tests of Nonverbal Ability' in J. Brown & S. Yamashita (eds) *Language Testing in Japan*. Tokyo: JALT

Kendon, A. 2000. 'Language & Gesture: Unity or Duality?' in D. Mc.Neill (ed.) *Language and gesture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kirkpatrick, A. 2000. English as an Asian language. *The Guardian Weekly: Learning English*. (November 2000)

Kachru, B & Nelson, C. (2001). World Englishes. In Burns B & C Coffin (eds) *Analyzing English in a Global Context; A Reader*. Macquarie University & The Open University: Routledge.

McNeill, D. 1998. 'Speech & Gesture Integration' in J. Iverson & S. Goldin-Meadow (eds.) *The Nature and Functions of Gesture in Children's Communication*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

McNeill, D. & Duncan, S. 2000. 'Growth points in thinking-for -speaking' in D. Mc. Neill (ed.) *Language and gesture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Miller, L. 1994. Japanese and American meetings and what goes on before them: a case study in co-woker misunderstandings. *Pragmatics*, 4/2: 221-238

Moore, JD. 1997. *Visions of Culture: An Introduction to Anthropological Theories and Theorists*. Alta-Mira Press

Ochs, E. 1988. *Culture and Language Development*. Cambridge: CUP

Paul, P. 1993. Cultural and Social Differences: The Context of the Message in *Linguistics for Language Learning: An Introduction to the Nature and Use of Language*. Macmillan South Melbourne.

Pennycook, A. (2001) English in the World/ The World in English. In Burns B & C Coffin (eds) *Analyzing English in a Global Context; A Reader*. Macquarie University & The Open University: Routledge.

Revell, J. and Norman, S. 1997. *In Your Hands: NLP in ELT*. London. Saffire Press.

Walsh, D. 2000. 'An Interview with Susan Steinbach' *Video Rising: Newsletter of the Japan Association for Language Teaching*. Vol. 12, Issue 1 (Winter 2000) www.jalt/video/vr~SSI.htm

Wroblewski, J. 1990. False friends revisited. In Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk & Thelen (eds) *Translation and meaning, Part 4*. UPM: 213-221