

# Teaching a Language — Communication or Miscommunication?

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Teaching and learning are not simultaneous. Many a teacher feels her job is completed when she has imparted and disseminated information to her students. The process of communicating is however only successful when the message communicated by the teacher is on par with what is understood by the learner. In other words X message sent must be X message received.

Teachers generally however are of the view that any message sent is the message received. There may be, however, factors which prevent message X as being heard, understood and interpreted as X by the learners.

What then are these factors which hinder communication and cause unlearning or wrong learning instead of learning? First acoustics. Learners simply *cannot hear* the whole message or are able to *hear* only bits and pieces of a message. In this case there is bound to be a problem as the message sent is not completely heard or is only partially heard. Although teachers, for the most part, are clear in their pronunciation and enunciation, what should not be forgotten is that for the learner, especially in a foreign language environment, the sounds emitting from the teacher's mouth are simply that – foreign sounds. Where proficient or even fairly proficient speakers are able to make fairly accurate guesses as to a word misheard/not heard from the context and general semantic gist of a message, this solution is not so immediately available to the less proficient or even early beginner language learner. It is therefore not surprising that "I saw light" (original message) became "I so light." The teacher must thus ensure that the 'foreign' word is not so foreign by slowing down speech, but not to the extent that it is unnatural and unrepresentative of the target language. A solution might perhaps be the reinforcement of the spoken language by some written representation of

the spoken word, perhaps in the form of handouts or merely writing a new word on the black/white board.

However assuming a message is heard, there may still be problems in communication. The message may be interpreted and understood differently from the original intent of the sender of the message, that is the teacher. This can be the consequence of either cultural/individualistic perceptions or L1 influence on the message sent in L2, or sometimes both. Learner perceptions influenced by one's culture and experience can create faulty perceptions and misunderstandings with regard to a message sent. For example, the word dinner to a native speaker of English may have quite different connotations (e.g. table, chairs, table mats, plates, cutlery, etc.) as contrasted to the L2 learners who may have in their minds a picture of sitting on the floor, and using their hands, no cutlery/crockery etc. Two entirely different perceptions of a *word* – merely a word. The problem is surely compounded with a sentence – many words. Different perceptions based and influenced by different experiences and cultures may thus cause miscommunication. The non-native teacher must thus constantly be conscious and aware of the cultural variable when communicating/teaching. Some immersion into the culture of the learners and some understanding of their L1s would hold her in good stead and she would likely be more vigilant of the cultural innuendos of a message sent.

The other factor affecting perception is L1 influence on L2. An illustration would be apt. I have introduced a new word like "traffic jam" and on checking discovered that the word they have written in the book is "traffic jem." 'Capacity and terminology' were written as 'capaciti and terminologi.' It is clear that L1 intonation, spelling and pronunciation, in this case, Malay, has affected the message sent. Interlanguage theory (Corder 1973) has however never deemphasized the importance of L1 influence on L2 but that emphasis has generally been focussed at the productive, that is, spoken and written language of a learner. It is posited here that even at the comprehension phase, the listening and understanding phase, L1 structures, intonation pattern etc. are bound to affect the understanding of a message rendered in L2. Perceptions and L1 affect communication or messages sent in L2 and it is consequently inevitable that at the productive stage, the learner's language will be influenced by his per-

ceptions and understanding at the listening phase. Consequently, spoken L2 will be influenced by L1 perceptions/comprehension. In this case, a teacher who knows the L1 of her learners will be able to anticipate and foresee the possible impact of L1 on messages sent in L2. Understanding and anticipating possible L1 intrusions on the receivers' part will enable the language teacher to take steps to ensure that L1 influence on a message in L2 is minimized. The teacher can ask them to spell a word or pronounce an item which she anticipates will face L1 intrusions.

Selective retention of a message is also another variable which may cause miscommunication of the message sent by the teacher. Unlike robots, we tend to switch off if the message is too (a) long (b) uninteresting (c) merely too difficult. Even in L1 communication we hear what we want to hear – from a long string of words we take the essence – the gist of a message. That is easy enough if we are proficient in the language used. However, less proficient language learners may select wrong words, or pick and choose the non-essential words in a string. The teacher must be able, through a listening class, to show learners functional and non-functional words in a message. For instance, in a long message like:

*Mary* wants to go to the *party* so that she can meet *Tom* and she hopes that she and Tom will then have a *good time*.

The key words (in italics) can be pointed out and the art of listening to key words can be taught as a skill in itself. Once mastered this skill will hold the learners in good stead in any 'communicative event'. But it is a skill that has to be taught.

Learners switch off or pick and choose items from a message when the message is too long, uninteresting or too difficult. One cannot force a learner to give us his undivided attention. Students have learnt the art of looking attentive whilst mentally miles away. The onus of ensuring that the class is attentive and interested is on the teacher. She/he must ensure that the message is not too long – it is believed that our short-term memory will generally not be able to process or retain more than seven items/units of items. She should therefore use shorter sentences so as to facilitate short-term memory processing and retention. Moreover, the level of the content and/or language used must not

be too advanced and there should not be a wide discrepancy between the learners' level of language proficiency and the teachers' language, (i.e. lexis/structures) as students may simply give up if they just cannot understand what the teacher is saying. Krashen 1982, suggested a level of comprehensible input which was just a step ahead of the learners' ability and comprehension. Consequently, the learner would understand and take small steps towards the ultimate goal of near-native speaker proficiency. This lock-step pattern should be maintained since a very high level of language by the teacher will merely appear as gibberish to the learners who have the option of switching off as the message is simply beyond them. The teacher must in the communicating of a message, ensure that what is teachable must be learnable-both in terms of subject matter, language and length of sentences used.

Selinker (1972) states that one of the five central processes causing the emergence of an interlanguage is the transfer of training. He states that faulty teaching or texts could, inter alia cause learners to be in limbo – not attaining near-native level proficiency. This paper contends that so as to minimize the 'faulty teaching' variable in the emergence of interlanguage, feedback is of the essence. Communicating is not complete until the sender of a message is ensured, through a process of feedback, that the message sent is the message received. The teacher must thus constantly insist on feedback and not be content with merely imparting information. The sending of a message is not teaching. Teaching is only complete when what is taught is what is learnt. It is the responsibility of the teacher to ensure, through feedback, that what is learnt is what has been taught.

## **Bibliography**

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