



DEVELOPING SYMBOLIC COMPETENCE AS A METHOD TO LANGUAGE LEARNING

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Abstract

Several methods and approaches have been developed within the second language learning. Language learners need to understand how to use symbolic competence to construct new meanings while thinking, speaking and writing. In this regard an attempt is made to explore and develop a different approach, by name ecolinguistic, in engineering courses. This paper talks about how meaning is mediated while listening to an English text in language classroom, from ecological perspective.

Introduction

Language ecology, proposed by Haugen (1972: 323), is 'a study of interactions between any given language and its environment'. Few linguists developed theories on Ecolinguistics which can also be used as a different approach to learn second language. There are several methods and approaches when we talk about second language learning. Language learners need to understand words to what they listen, read and write. Symbolic competence is a skill that the learners require to develop. They must know how to use this competence to construct new meanings while thinking, speaking and writing.

According to Kramsch (2010: 24), symbolic competence is defined as 'the ability to read and interpret spoken and written discourse, identify the symbolic value of words and metaphors, grasp their social and historical significance, contrast them with metaphors in one's own language, and reframe one's interpretation of events'. Kramsch (2006) and Kramsch & Whiteside (in press) suggested that 'we teach our students less the ability to exchange information precisely, accurately, and appropriately in monolingual conversations with speakers of standard national languages, but, rather, that we develop in them a much more flexible capacity to read people, situations and events based on a deep understanding of the historical and subjective dimensions of human experience'.

In this regard an attempt is made to explore and develop a different approach, by name ecolinguistic, in engineering courses. This paper talks about how meaning is mediated – as entertainment, as support, and as counterpointed to language, while listening to an English text in language classroom, from ecological perspective.

Method

There were 30 students in the language class. They were divided into three groups. The first group was given a listening task on 'two dialogues and an interview'. The second group was given the listening track and its transcript, while the third group was given only transcript.



Students were asked to answer the questions given in the exercise. The first group of students was instructed by the teacher to listen to the text carefully while second and third group were asked to read the transcript using their imagination for the correct answers. Once the task was done, the groups were asked to gather in the class and present their responses separately. Students were asked to reflect on the way the meanings they attribute to the listening text which are through their own feelings, memories, and projections (Kramsch 2001).

Analysis and Discussion

The listening text was taken from *Enjoying Everyday English* which was written for undergraduate students. There are six units in this course book to practice reading, writing, listening, speaking, grammar and vocabulary. Let us look at the listening task on ‘two dialogues and an interview’ and the answers given by the students.

1. Dialogue 1

- a) What is the name of the restaurant where the exchange takes place?
- b) How many people does the customer want a table for?
- c) Where does the waiter seat them?
- d) What do they ask for?
- e) What special request do they make?

In the dialogue 1, the first question was answered by the first group as ‘outside the food restaurant, Amruthsari Chula’, the second group as ‘Amruthsari Chula, near the counter’ and the third group as ‘Amruthsari chula’. For the second question the first group answered as ‘Neelima and her friend’, where the second and third group answered as ‘two people’. The third question had similar answer from all the groups as ‘corner table’. For the fourth question, the first group answered it as ‘two tandoori rotis, peas with potato curry and veg. pulao with cucumber curd’. The second group and third group answered as, ‘two tandoori rotis with peas and potato curry, and also a plate of vegetable pulao with cucumber curd’. Coming to the fifth question, the first group answered it as ‘2 requests – food piping hot and not spicy either. The second group as ‘food in 10 minutes which is piping hot’ and the third group as ‘food in 10 minutes which is hot and but not spicy’.

2. Dialogue 2

- a) Where does the conversation take place?
- b) What information does the woman want?
- c) Who is she asked to meet?
- d) What will she have to leave with the person?
- e) What tone does the man use to respond to the woman’s query?

In the dialogue 2, the first group answered the first question as ‘at bank reception’, the second group as ‘at bank enquiry’ and the third group as ‘bank enquiry section’. The second question was answered in different ways as, the first group answered as ‘bank’s educational loan section’,



the second group as 'meet concerned person who gives educational loan' and the third group answered as 'educational loan section'. The third question was answered by all the groups as 'Mr. Kamal nath'. The fourth question was answered by the first group as 'submit photo copies of salary certificate and other documents. The second group answered as 'fill the form, copies of salary certificate and other documents' while the third group answered it as 'fill in the form, leave documents of photo copies of salary certificate and other documents, also a cheque'. The last question was answered as 'kind and helpful tone', the second group answered as 'cool and loving' and the third group answered as 'caring'.

3. Interview

- a) What work does Tara do?
- b) Why did the interviewer congratulate Tara?
- c) What were the names of Tara's first and second films?
- d) Did Tara have training in any form of dance before she began acting?
- e) What is most important to Tara as far as her work is concerned?

In the Interview, the first question was answered by the first group as 'acting and dancer', the second group as 'actor and dancer' and the third group as 'actress'. All the three groups answered the second question as 'winning young talent award'. The first group answered the third question as 'second film *shakti* and first *Tamanna*', the second and third group as 'first film is Hindi *Tamanna* and second film *Shakti*'. The fourth question was answered by the first group as 'Bharatanatyam' the second group as 'classical dance bharatanatyam for 12 years', and the third group as 'trained in Bharatanatyam for 12 years'. The last question was answered by the first group as 'hard work and do variety of roles', the second group as 'work with gifted artists and directors in the country' and the third group as 'work with gifted artists and directors in the country and work for satisfaction'.

Conclusion

This paper talks about how meaning is mediated while listening to an English text, from the ecological perspective. According to Kramsch (2006), meaning is mediated – as entertainment, as support, as counterpoint to language. The questions on 'Dialogue 1' show that the first group responded as the text had counterpointed to language. The second group and the third group reflected on the questions as, it were entertaining while learning language. The 'Dialogue 2', for the first group it was entertaining to learn the language. The second group responded as counterpoint to language, while the third group reflected as both entertaining and counterpoint to language. The last task 'Interview', for the first group it was counterpointed to language, the second group opined as the meaning is mediated as support, while the third group responded as both support and entertainment. These results show that meaning can be mediated through different perspectives. It is an attempt to explore on ecological perspective to find out how meaning is mediated while listening to a text in English. These type of activities can help the learners to understand the meaning if they include ecological approach in engineering courses.

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