

Overcoming barriers in developing conversation skills: A pedagogical perspective

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Background information

Seven years of teaching English to Omani students opened many vistas to me to understand the culture of Oman and how it influences Omani students' learning of English. The more I understood, the more I began to understand our students better. I noticed many weaknesses in students' communication and started tracing the reasons. One important reason I observed was that these students lack strong conversation skills which, in turn, is reflected in their communication. My reading of the book 'Lexus and The Olive Tree' by Thomas Fried(1999) man made me understand that the Omani culture is unique, in the sense, it is at the threshold of modernizing and acquiring the material welfare and at the same time maintaining the culture and traditions of the land as well as the Islamic values. It is still traditional when compared to its neighbours in the rest of the Arab world. (I toured most Arab countries and read a lot about their culture). In addition, most of these students are first generation learners of English. This feeling of understanding students through their culture and noticing certain weaknesses in their communication triggered off this paper.

This paper examines the relevance of culture to language learning, the meaning and the structure of conversation, the obstacles in developing good conversation skills, the impact of these obstacles on students' communication skills in the first part of the paper. The second part describes the class-room based project carried out during the spring semester 2007, and reports the findings.

Language and Culture

The mutual relationship between language and culture, i.e. the interaction of language and culture has been well established in the writings of great philosophers such as Sussure (1966), Davidson (1999) and Chomsky (1968).

‘Linguistic relativity’ theorists Sapir (1962) and Whorf (1956) say that

- ◆ We perceive the world in terms of categories and distinctions found in our native language.
- ◆ What is found in one language may not be found in another language due to cultural differences.

Language and culture are ‘intricately interwoven.’ (Jiang 2000). She establishes this inseparable nature of language and culture using metaphors. For example, she writes that from a philosophical view, language is flesh and culture is blood and the two make a living organism. From a communicative point of view, she says that language is a swimming skill whereas culture is water and the two make swimming. The pragmatic view provided by Jiang says that language is a vehicle and culture is traffic light and the two make transportation. These metaphors are pregnant with in-depth meaning and largely confirm the intimate relationship between language and culture. In line with this idea of language and culture, Singhal (1998) claims that ‘current pedagogy stresses that language can not be taught without culture and culture is a necessary context for language use.’

Others who concur with this line of thinking are Lessaard-Clouston (1997) who said, “language teaching is indeed culture teaching.” Krasner (1999) who says, “linguistic competence alone is not enough for learners of a language to be competent in that language.” Peterson and Coltrane (2003) stress that “culture must be fully incorporated as a vital component of language learning.”

The central problem

The Omani youth, by and large, like listening to English pop songs, (occasionally students are encouraged to sing songs in colleges and we the teachers hear only English songs), listen to English news to be in touch with American and British pop stars, like watching T.V. programs of English celebrities, other programs in English on Hot bird satellite dish, read news papers in English, use internet for messaging, chatting and surfing, use top model mobiles, drive Lexus

and other top brand cars- truly representing modernity. Through these activities students only become good listeners, though they do pick up some English. But what opportunities are there for these students to interact in English?

In school, 'Our World Through English (OWTE)' (Ministry of School Education) series are used at different levels to teach English to young Omanis. These series confine language to three types-Narrative, Descriptive and Instructional. What is missing in these materials is good and generative literature, thus depriving students of developing imagination, intuition, active thinking and critical analysis skills. Another interesting finding with these materials is that OWTE series give more attention to the local culture and try to transmit knowledge about selective traditions through language. In addition to this the Teachers' Guide encourages teachers to collect text and articles, if they need to prepare supplementary materials, strictly related to the topics given in the text books and prepare materials using simple language.

{ I just came to know that these series are used in General Education stream. The new materials named 'English for me' consists of one activity book with exercises meant for class work and the other Pupil's book meant for home work are introduced in Basic Education stream and I am yet to go through these books for better insights }

Yet another dimension to this problem is that Oman has crossed the local frontiers in many fields which demand Omani students to have strong communication skills in order to face global competition. Such a situation fits well into the metaphor-use olives (be local) and drive Lexus (behave global) (Friedman 1999). Friedman argues that this tension between the 'Lexus (global) and the Olive tree (local) is 'one of the defining characteristics of the new world'. Good communication skills may ease this tension and strong conversation skills may lead to developing good communication skills.

Conversation

“A good conversationalist is not one who remembers what was said, but says what someone wants to remember” (Brown 1812). Conversation in plain context means the use of speech for informal exchange of views or ideas or information, or the spoken exchange of thoughts, opinions and feelings. It needs at least two persons to carry out a conversation because it is interactive and participants take turns to exchange messages. Therefore, conversation is fundamentally a sequential activity. Strong conversation skills benefit both the speaker and the listener in several ways.

- It promotes friendship and develops confidence to express ones ideas succinctly to build rapport.

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- It also helps make better-informed decisions.
- It sharpens ones listening strategies to gain information and thus integrate confidence and competence into ones conversational behavior.
- If one has good conversation skills, one can be confident in any conversation context and eventually become an effective communicator.
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Having good conversation starter skills are a key to success (Agar 1994). To prepare Omani students as effective communicators, there is a need to strengthen their conversation skills which will in turn, build confidence in students to speak, to have better understanding and to be understood better. This is required in order for students to first, take care of themselves by having tact, second, to develop healthy relationships. There are five main obstacles in developing good conversation skills in Omani students.

Perceptual barriers.

One of the important problems with communicating with others is that we all see the world differently. Omani students read very little because Oman does not have a reading culture. As a result, their perception of the world is limited and so they cannot think beyond certain parameters (seven years of teaching experience in Oman). An awareness of this limitation prevents them from conversing freely with outsiders.

Emotional barriers.

These are one of the chief barriers to open and free conversations. Emotional barriers include fear, mistrust, anxiety and suspicion. As a result, many students hold back from communicating their thoughts and feelings to others. The fear of what others think of them prevents their development as effective communicators. Some students (Zainab, Maher, Faisal, Ali, Alia) said that though they want to converse with teachers and friends in English, they do not do so because of the fear of making mistakes.

Cultural barriers

Omanis feel close only when they speak in Arabic (Many students expressed it on several occasions). In addition to this, many cross-linguistic factors come in the way of effectively communicating their ideas in English. Some examples of cross-linguistic factors which pose problems to students are the absence of phrasal verbs, capitalization, silent letters and helping verbs in Arabic. Also in Arabic one word carries one meaning only unlike in English. In Arabic adjectives come before nouns. Many Omani students very frequently and inappropriately use the preposition for. These differences in Arabic and English pose problems leading to communication breakdowns.

Language barriers

Language that describes what we want to say in our terms may present barriers to others who are not familiar with our expressions, mainly idiomatic expressions. Language is a main barrier for Omani students to initiate and continue conversations in English mainly due to lack of adequate vocabulary and the differences between Arabic and English syntax.

Interpersonal barriers

Closeness is the aim of interpersonal contact where there is a high level of honesty and acceptance of each other. Most Omani students suffer from interpersonal barriers. They distance themselves from others in several ways-withdrawals, just doing routine activities with out any real contact, fear of making mistakes, lack of necessary vocabulary, and lack of broader world knowledge and so on. As a result their participation in conversations is either poor or mainly in Arabic. (Personal observations made over a period of 6/7 years). In order to help students overcome these barriers and to engage them in conversations a small classroom based project was designed and carried out.

The project

Having said that strong conversation skills are necessary for effective communication and to prepare Omani students as effective communicators, there is a need to strengthen their conversation skills, which will in turn, build confidence in students to speak, to have better understanding and to be understood better. A small classroom based project was undertaken to enhance the conversation skills of students. In the light of Oman going global in various fields, especially in the business field, it is very important to prepare students, particularly in College of Commerce and Economics as effective communicators. Common sense says the ability to

converse succinctly will be the first step to become an effective communicator. So to develop good conversation skills and to make these students confident speakers, some activities were designed. These activities are premised in four main principles.

Dale Carnegie principle

When we are genuinely interested in others, curious about them, they feel respected and valued. Implied in our interest is the suggestion that they have a lot to offer. As we show our interest, they tend to become more interested, more creative, and more capable. Dale Carnegie principle advocates developing courage and self-confidence through preparation. Good preparation keeps audience awake and pay attention to what you say. It also says that the flavour with which you say is more important than what you say. It is mainly the principle of 'Be nice' to others to win friends.

Principle of Pygmalion effect

When we act toward people as if we expect outstanding behavior from them, we are applying a principle known as the Pygmalion Effect. Basically, teachers have a huge effect, but it's poorly understood. The implication of the Pygmalion effect for teachers and leaders is massive. It means that the performance of your team depends less on them than it does on you. The performance you get from people is no more or less, than what you expect: which means you must always expect the best. Based on this principle, certain activities were designed expecting high out comes.

Principle of Bifocal vision

Many high achieving people have reported that along the way of their lives, some person has seen potential in them even when it was not obvious to others. That is, a teacher, coach, or mentor had a sense of their potential, even if that potential was not readily apparent. For example, a young student from a poor background and education may be seen by a teacher to have certain giftedness when others have written him/her off. Thus encouraged and supported, the student begins to excel. Bi-focal vision is a term that denotes our ability to see both the actual behavior and a person's potential within. When

we act toward persons as if they are more than they appear to be on the surface, the potential within tends to emerge.

Principle of Collaboration

Collaborations often cross boundaries of age, class, race, or ethnicity. Social collaboration is unambiguously central to the work. Collaboration between speakers on different linguistic levels is one of the basic conditions for communication. Sacks (1995) see the main contribution of collaborative productions to discourse as social. For him, the syntactic possibility of constructing a sentence together is at the same time a possibility for collaboratively constructing a social unit. Following Sacks' interpretation, collaborative productions are a way of using syntax as a linguistic resource for social aims specially for the forming of a social group within a conversational setting. Based on these principles some activities were designed with the following objectives, to improve the conversation skills of the Omani students.

- To develop competencies to manage themselves in different conversation contexts. These competencies include self-awareness, self-regulation and self-motivation.
- To develop competencies to handle relationships. These competencies include social awareness and social skills such as communication, conflict management, building bonds, team capabilities and cooperation.
- To help students understand the different dimensions of communication. For example, verbal, non verbal dimensions which include the appropriate use of language and the body language, listening and responding, providing and getting feedback, and assertive communication.

The students in the first credit course (LANC 1070) showed interest in developing their conversation skills and were willing to put in extra work. So 19 students, 11 boys and 8 girls from one section of the first credit course participated in the project.

The corpus for this study was approximately 40 hours of video-recorded spoken interactions. Three types of conversational settings have been used. They are- individual student and the whole class interaction, pair interactions and group interactions. These interactions were videoed and replayed after the activity was over followed by a feedback discussion. A record of student's progress in terms of confidence, use of appropriate words, turn taking, initiating and closing conversations, and so on were maintained for the entire semester period.

Findings

- Replaying of the recorded videos helped students to see how they talk, what mistakes they make and what to do to overcome these mistakes in their next activity.
- Many students showed huge interest to participate in the activities.
- Everyday speaking opportunities helped them gain confidence to speak and to become good conversationalists.
- Working in groups developed group spirit and students learnt how to work as a team.
- They also learnt the dos and the don'ts of a conversation. For example;

Do's

1. Look at the person or people you are talking to
2. If you haven't met before, introduce yourself and ask their name
3. Use a person's name when talking to them
4. Ask questions when you don't understand something
5. Stick to the subject
6. Say nice things about people and praise those who deserve it
7. It's fine to disagree, but disagree politely

And Don'ts

1. Don't fiddle, look elsewhere, or wander off while someone else is talking
2. Don't listen in on conversations you aren't part of
3. Don't interrupt when someone else is talking
4. Don't whisper in front of another person
5. Don't whine, rattle, brag, or say mean things about others
6. Don't ask personal questions such as how much things cost or why someone looks or dresses the way they do
7. Don't point or stare
8. Don't argue about things that aren't important
- 9.

Sample activities

Keeping in mind the four important principles discussed above, several activities were designed. The topics for some activities were taken from the course book and the others were taken from newspapers, magazines, and internet.

As far as possible, the activities progressed from easy to difficult.

Activity 1. 30-seconds stimulus talks

Aims: To build confidence to talk and to express ideas freely.

Materials: Objects-bicycle bell, mobile phone, incense stand, white board and so on.

Procedure: Each student was given an object to see for 30 seconds and given another 30 seconds to describe it. At the end of the minute, the audience should guess the name of the object described and then ask questions to know more about the object.

Activity 2. Speaker of the day

Aims: Confidence building, convincingly express ideas, and fluency.

Procedure: Each student is asked to choose a topic of his/her interest a day before the talk.

Next day he/she talks about it for five minutes and invite questions/discussion from audience.

Some students chose topics from their course book. For example, 'Japan's economy' 'Sanad Program' etc.

Activity 3. Challenge the assertion

Aims: Critical thinking, challenging and justifying assertions.

Procedure: Divide the class into groups of four. Each group will be given a statement to discuss.

For example, 'Taxes are necessary'; 'Oman should look for alternative sources for economy.'

Each member will talk for a minute in support of the statement. Members from other groups

Challenge the statement by asking questions. The group answers the questions or accept the

Challenge.

Activity 4. Debates

Aims: Creating and presenting an argument, expressing a point of view and fluency.

Procedure: The class will be divided into groups of four. Per day, two groups will participate in the debate. One group will support the proposition and the other group opposes it. All groups will be given time to prepare their arguments. In the first round each group will present their arguments and in the second round, each group will counter the arguments of the other group. A moderator will be nominated for each group to sum up all arguments and invite audience to vote for the proposition.

Activity 5. Group presentations

Aims: To develop team work, to express ideas clearly as a team and to develop confidence and fluency.

Procedure: Divide the class into groups of 3 or 4. Each group will be given a topic. Each member of the group will research the topic and collect information. Collectively, they prepare visuals to support their points. Finally the group makes the presentation and invites questions.

Activity 6. Language games

Aim: To overcome cultural and language barriers.

Procedure: A word will be written on the board. One student will be asked to talk about the word for two minutes. Half of the audience will be asked to listen to the mistakes made by the speaker and the other half will listen to the number of Arabic words used by the speaker. At the end of the talk, who ever had made less mistakes or used less Arabic words in his/her talk wins the game. A student monitors the game, and controls the game.

Activity 7. Small talk

Aims: To overcome inhibitions and talk freely about a small topic

Procedure: As a gap filling activity, either at the end of a class or in the middle of a class, two students will be asked to ask and answer a small question/enquiry. Some of the questions asked were;

1. What do you see as the coming trends in Foreign investments in Oman?
2. What challenges do you think the future business people in Oman face?
3. Tell me about the best vacation you have ever taken.
4. What one thing would you really like to own? Why?

[Activities adapted from 'Language Activities for Teenagers' edited by Seth Lindstormberg]

Follow up activities.

After completing nearly 40 hours of everyday activities followed by feedback from the teacher and the peers, it was decided to practice everyday conversations, as filler, in many classes. To do so, several functions were elicited from students and a final list was prepared. Before starting each conversation, the required language was discussed. Each day 2 or 3 students were asked to perform the given function.

The final list of functions agreed upon for conversation practice were

1. Greeting and making polite enquiries.
2. Asking for and giving information.
3. Showing directions.
4. Making suggestions.
5. Agreeing and disagreeing.
6. Complaining.
7. Describing things.
8. Arguing.
9. Guessing.
10. Bargaining.
11. Rejecting.
12. Reminding.
13. Inviting.
14. Introducing.

15. Placing orders.
16. Comparing.

The observations recorded during the follow up activities were very encouraging. Students exhibited confidence while conversing with peers and the teacher. There was eye contact and turn-taking. Hesitations noticed earlier were reduced to bare minimum. Students were asking relevant questions and were very enthusiastic about their participation. Linguistic mistakes were also reduced in their talks. Whenever there was a crisis, students managed it well, though they used some Arabic expressions as a last resort. They seem to understand what it means working in pairs and teams. Towards the last four activities students became very humorous and it was fun watching these activities. Slowly they were coming out of shyness, willing to talk, and often found using dictionary to get the right words. Another important observation made was girls started talking to boys and towards the end teams consisted of both boys and girls which is usually not a common feature in the Arab world. Some students expressed happiness about their participation in the project and said that they are now confident enough to converse with any body in any context, fairly well in English.

Conclusion

It needs to be reiterated that there is a need to prepare the Omani students as good conversationalists in order for them to become effective communicators in the global business world because Oman has joined the World Trade Organization, invites Foreign Direct Investment, and rapidly developing tourism sector. Some cultural aspects and the cross-linguistic factors which creep into their conversations need to be minimized in order to be better understood globally. More opportunities to speak, and everyday conversations proved certainly beneficial to students.

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Biography

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