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Tracing One Teacher's Approach to Communication Throughout a Semester of Spanish 101: Belief Meets Practice

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Approaches to second (SL) and foreign (FL) language teaching in recent decades have emphasized the centrality of communication both as an end and a means. Both the quantity and the nature of communication that occurs in a language classroom ultimately depend on the beliefs and practices of language teachers.

The present self-analysis, focused on one teacher/researcher, traces her experiences with the challenges of classroom communication over the course of an entire academic term. This longitudinal approach exposed contradictions that surfaced over time in three areas: the use of the L2 for classroom interaction, the assumption of truthfulness in the exchange of information, and learners' voice or control over their own messages. The findings have implications for language teaching and highlight the role of thoughtful reflection as a first step toward minimizing the gap between what teachers believe and what they actually do.

Approaches to second (SL) and foreign (FL) language teaching in recent decades have emphasized the centrality of communication both as an end and a means: that is, communication in the target language is a desired outcome of the language learning process as well as a tool or classroom practice used to achieve that goal. The Standards for Foreign Language Learning, developed in the 1990s, also affirm the value of communication and highlight it as one of the five goals of language study (National Standards, 1999).

At the theoretical level, communication plays a central role in current models of second language acquisition. The concepts of "input" (Krashen, 1982) and "output" (Swain, 1985, 1995) imply the exchange of information, as does the "negotiation of meaning" (Long, 1983). Sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) also makes strong claims about the function and value of communication and actually frames language learning as a collaborative process that takes place in interactional contexts. Ultimately, the quantity and the nature of communication that occurs in a language classroom are affected by the degree to which language teachers believe that interaction is important and choose to incorporate communicative tasks into their practice.

The present self-analysis, focused on one teacher/researcher, traces her experiences with the challenges of classroom communication over the course of an entire academic term. This longitudinal approach made it possible to observe how initial expectations or standards of communication were implemented throughout the semester and to expose contradictions that surfaced over time.

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PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Previous studies have explored a variety of aspects of teacher communication in the SL or FL classroom. Researchers have explored teachers' use of the target and native languages (Cook, 2001, 2005; Duff & Polio, 1990; Levine, 2003; Macaro, 2005; Polio & Duff, 1994; Turnbull, 2001), teachers' use of questions (Nunn, 1999), and the IRF (initiation, response, feedback) interactional sequence, focusing specifically on those forms of teacher feedback that create meaningful dialogue (Cullen, 2002) and support higher-level thinking (Henning & Lockhart, 2003).

There is also a large body of literature that affirms the value of teacher reflection as a tool for professional development (Johnson & Golombek, 2002; van Lier, 1992). Richards and Lockhart (1994) note the insights that can be gained from self-inquiry as well as the fact that "critical reflection can trigger a deeper understanding of teaching" (p. 4).

Reflective practice, including investigations of one's own teaching, is employed by and encouraged among practicing educators (Bailey, 1997; Dhawan, 2000; Dutertre, 2000; Harrison, Lawson, & Wortley, 2005; Walsh, 2003; Yahya, 2000) as well as pre-service teacher education candidates (Freese, 2006; Ho & Richards, 1993; Liou, 2001). Burns (1996) describes the experience of one teacher, Sarah, with a close examination of data from her own classroom: "Despite her feelings of self-consciousness and of being 'stupid,' Sarah displayed considerable open-mindedness, increasing reflection and heightened professional awareness through her willingness to deliberate closely and deliberately on the data" (p. 171). Though confronting the inconsistencies in one's practice may be awkward, those teachers who embrace the process often find it to be enlightening and rewarding.

A common tool for self-reflection used by instructors at all stages of preparation and practice is journal writing (Bain, Mills, Ballantyne, & Packer, 2002; Carter, 1998; Esbenshade, 2002; Good & Whang, 2002; Numrich, 1996; Uline, Wilson, & Cordry, 2004; Yahya, 2000). Richards and Lockhart (1994) identify journals as one of several means through which teachers can develop a deeper understanding of teaching; that is, a written record of teachers' thoughts about and reactions to particular classroom experiences provide a starting point for considering possible interventions or modifications in teaching practice. Yahya (2000) also highlights the role of journals in teachers' growth, which enable them to identify and to monitor their own strengths and weaknesses.

However, whether expressed in a written journal or through other means, teachers' reflections do not always accurately capture what takes place in their classes. Numerous studies note the mismatch between what teachers believe and what they do (Basturkmen, Loewen, & Ellis, 2004; Buzzelli & Johnston, 2002; Hansen, 1993; Wilcox-Herzog, 2002) and between what teachers do and what they perceive that they do (Oskoz & Liskin-Gasparro, 2001). For instance, the teacher participant in the study carried out by Oskoz and Liskin-Gasparro (2001) expressed a strong belief in the need to limit error correction during class and was surprised

by classroom data that revealed how often she corrected her students. Classroom recordings revealed a gap not only between this teacher's expressed pedagogical beliefs and practices but also between her perceptions and practices. An important methodological means of addressing this mismatch is combining "teacher-directed, self-reflective action research and the results generated from researcher-directed microanalyses of classroom discourse" (Lazaraton & Ishihara, 2005, p. 531).

Combining teacher reflection with an analysis of recorded classroom discourse is an important characteristic of the present study; in this case, however, the teacher is also the researcher. In this study I explore classroom communication as a pedagogical dilemma; that is, I assess the consistency between my approach to issues of communication on the first day of class and the manner in which I address them throughout the semester. The goal was not evaluative in the sense of identifying commendable practices that foster greater classroom interaction or drawing conclusions about how one should or should not communicate in a beginning language course. Rather, the aim was to analyze particular verbal statements or exchanges, primarily focusing on remarks made by the teacher to her students, as surface representations of deeper and more complex issues of communication. In short, this circular approach first uses instances of classroom interaction as windows into one teacher's pedagogical beliefs and then, conversely, explores the way those beliefs or values ultimately determine the nature of the classroom exchanges that surface.

DATA COLLECTION

Data were collected over a period of one semester in a university-level, beginning Spanish class. The majority of students were native English speakers who enrolled in the course to fulfill the first of two semesters of language study required by the university. Though some had studied Spanish in high school, their scores on a departmental exam placed their skills at the level of a first semester course. Most students did not plan to use Spanish for personal or professional reasons in the future but hoped to make the most of the obligatory experience by acquiring basic L2 communication skills.

Data for the study came from three sources: audio-recorded class sessions, teacher journals, and quizzes. The class met twice a week for 75 minutes, and at each session I, the teacher/researcher, wore a lapel microphone to record my own language use. These recordings were transcribed solely for content. I also kept a journal in which I made entries after each class session. I commented on a wide variety of issues, giving special attention to my use of the native and target languages (Edstrom, 2006). However, I also made comments about particular incidents that occurred during class, raised concerns over the teaching and learning patterns I saw developing, and, at times, reflected on the implications of my teaching practices. A written record of my immediate thoughts and reactions to each class session, these journal entries enabled me to compare my perceptions of what had happened with

what the audio recordings revealed had actually taken place during class. Finally, I wanted to see the extent to which assessment practices reflected meaningful communication. Because the language program followed a standardized curriculum in which all instructors used departmental exams, composition assignments, and oral exam topics, I chose to use quizzes as a third data source. They were the only form of evaluation that I, the classroom teacher, had created.

Though my dual role as researcher and language teacher in this study gives me an insider perspective, it may also be considered a limitation. Because I was aware that I was conducting research and recording myself, I may have inadvertently modified my regular teaching practices. At times I was conscious of the lapel microphone, but the fact that I recorded myself every day minimized its novelty and made it part of the daily routine. I remember instances in which I bit my tongue upon realizing the recorder was running but also recall moments in which I deliberately pushed ahead and said whatever I wanted to in spite of it. An additional limitation is the possibility that I compromised the quality of the analysis in the interests of protecting my reputation as a teacher. However, at the time of data collection I was interested specifically in my use of the L1; it was only later that I became interested in broader issues of communication. Consequently, though it is possible that the period of three years between the stages of data collection and the present analysis hindered my ability to analyze my experiences with a sense of freshness, it seems to have created a healthy distance between my previous and current professional identities and thereby made self-criticism somewhat less threatening.

DATA ANALYSIS

After the audio-recordings were transcribed, the transcriptions and teacher journals were analyzed qualitatively. First, the transcripts were analyzed to trace instances in which issues of classroom communication surfaced throughout the academic term; that is, all references to the nature of classroom communication were identified. The teacher journals underwent the same process. Observations from the journal provide my interpretation and relatively immediate reactions to instances highlighted in the transcripts. Conversely, excerpts from the transcripts serve as concrete referents for commentaries made or concerns raised in the journal. Finally, the content and design of the quizzes provide a third, less direct angle from which to view my framing of the issues of communication.

The data analysis sought to answer the following research questions. Though expressed in personal terms, these questions are explored on the premise that teachers benefit from reports of other instructor's professional experiences (Borg, 2001):

1. How did I frame my expectations for classroom communication on the first day of class?
2. As specific incidents related to L1 vs. L2 use, the assumption of truthfulness, and voice surfaced throughout the academic term, how did

they reflect or contradict the expectations for classroom communication that I articulated on the first day?

3. How do I propose to change or improve my teaching practices in light of the findings of this analysis?

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

First Day of Class: Establishing Expectations

Teachers and students at educational institutions of many types recognize the significance of the first day of class. Though the excitement often associated with back-to-school traditions in lower grades is much diminished in the university setting, many instructors in higher education view the first day as a crucial moment for establishing academic expectations, outlining performance standards, and setting an appropriate tone for a new course. Entering class on the first day of Spanish 101, I was no exception. Aware that students may not know what to expect in their first university-level language course, I felt it was important to communicate my expectations and standards from the very beginning.

Though I highlighted a variety of issues on the first day, I gave special emphasis to classroom communication, specifically my plan to use the target language as the nearly exclusive language of instruction. Aware that many of the true beginners would panic, as would some students with previous experience in classes that had been conducted, for the most part, in English, I not only wanted to be transparent about my intentions but also hoped to build students' confidence, helping them realize how much they could actually understand in the L2.

With this goal in mind I decided to start our first class session with a brief L2 listening exercise. I spoke no English as students filed into the room and when it was time to start class, gave each student a half-sheet of paper that contained a list of seven true/false statements about me written in simple Spanish with many cognates. I then introduced myself in Spanish, briefly outlining my background and describing my favorite foods and activities, as students listened and circled "cierto" o "falso" for each statement on their list. After going over the correct answers together, I switched into English to talk about the strategies they had used to understand me.

Later, as I further laid out my expectations for the course, I reinforced my intentions to communicate primarily in the target language. Had students missed the underlying message of the listening activity, I articulated it for them: "As you can tell by how we've started, we're going to use a lot of Spanish in this class." I added, "I want you to understand, but you're not going to understand every little word at first. So, just like we did in this activity, you've got to listen for the gist, listen for the main idea so you can figure out what's going on." I later continued, "It's one of the trickiest things about learning a language is getting used to not understanding everything and not kind of freaking out, alright?" (Transcript, January 15, Day 1) Before reverting to Spanish and using the L2 for the remainder of the

class period, I offered the following two-fold justification for my L2 use:

> Transcript: January 15 (Day 1)
> ...the purpose is not to make it harder but to get you ready for Spanish 2, which a lot of you are going to have to take, and um, you know, listening, we have reading, listening, speaking, and writing as the four main skills, and the best way to learn how to listen is for me to speak to you in Spanish.

Most language teachers and researchers value use of the L2 as the primary language of instruction. Thus, it could be argued that the activity designed to help learners recognize the extent of their ability to comprehend target language input constituted a mini-lesson in learning strategies for beginning students. However, the dual rationale justification I offered for my L2 use exposed a deep-seeded contradiction, a pattern that, as I later discovered, would characterize classroom communication throughout the term.

Though perhaps intended as an appeal to some students' practical, utilitarian approach to education, the first reason I offered is purely academic and begs the question: I, the teacher, am going to maximize my use of Spanish in 101, so you will be prepared for 102. Any potential benefit students derive from current exposure to L2 input is deferred to a future course that some students will not take and that, regardless, may very well be conducted in English. The second reason, though also practical in nature, offers more immediate relevance and, framed as "the best way to learn," almost promises a certain degree of academic success. It does connect the language of instruction to the development of communication skills, specifically to the honing of students' L2 listening ability.

There are numerous possible explanations for my weak justification of L2 use: It may reflect the inability to articulate my pedagogical beliefs on the spot, represent an attempt to make a challenging pedagogical practice more palatable to students, or, at a deeper level, reveal a certain ambivalence on my part. It almost seems as though I anticipated that students would not like my L2 use, and I blame it on their future language teachers. Looking back, I was surprised by the shallowness of my rationale and began to question my commitment to exclusive, or nearly exclusive, use of the target language. A careful analysis of my actions and reflections over the rest of the semester uncovers similarly contradictory messages in regard to L2 use as well as issues of classroom communication in general.

Classroom Communication: Long-Term Patterns

Throughout the term, there were periodic disparities between what I said about classroom communication and what I actually did; in addition, there were mismatches between what I expected or intended and what actually happened. Three specific areas of inconsistency have been highlighted for analysis: L1/L2 use, the assumption of truthfulness, and voice. First, there was a clear contradiction between my statements about maximizing L2 use and the degree to which I actually did. Second, though I assumed that all classroom communication would be truthful, I did

not realize that the veracity of the information exchanged would be necessarily tied to learners' L2 ability; in other words, the truthfulness of learners' communication depended upon, and may have been restricted by, their L2 skills. Finally, my belief in being student-centered and insuring that learners have a voice was not always reflected in our classroom communication. Ironically, in some instances students' self-expression was contingent upon the linguistic resources that I supplied. Each of these aspects of classroom communication will be explored separately.

L1/L2 Use

As noted earlier, I began the semester by trying to communicate my intention "to use a lot of Spanish" and attempted to build students' confidence in the merits of that approach through an L2 listening activity. Though I never actually stated that Spanish would be the primary language of instruction or indicated how much L1 or L2 I would speak, I hoped to use Spanish 90% to 95% of the time. The transcripts indicate, however, that I was not entirely successful in following through with my goal. Over the course of the semester, approximately 23% of my communication took place in English (Edstrom, 2006), and students clearly had opportunities, whether in collective or individual exchanges, to rely on the L1.[1] Rather than focus on the legitimacy of such L1 use, this analysis explores the disassociation between my beliefs about language use and my actual practice.

Journal data indicate internal tension between what I felt I should do and what I did, as seen in the following excerpts:

> Journal: February 28 (Day 13)
>
> At the end of class I asked them to write a riddle incorporating the vocabulary and grammar that we've just studied. I had a model on a transparency but didn't have instructions indicating that I wanted them to do the same thing. I ended up giving those instructions in English. I wish I had written it out ahead of time because I would have preferred using Spanish.
>
> Journal: March 21 (Day 17)
>
> I remember cracking a joke, making a sarcastic remark at one point during class today. At the moment I did it I remember thinking consciously that I had used English. I was aware that the comment wasn't even necessary.
>
> Journal: March 26 (Day 18)
>
> I don't feel like feeling guilty any more about my language choice....I'm using as much Spanish as I can.
>
> Journal: April 16 (Day 24)
>
> I feel bad about my use of English today. I think I used it more than necessary....

References to what "I wish I had" done or "would have preferred" and to using English for a comment that I recognized as unnecessary communicate dissatisfaction

with my own teaching practices, specifically with my choice of language. Other comments about "feeling guilty" or "bad" reveal an even deeper level of internal tension between what I felt I should do and what I actually did.

Finally, the quiz data also provide evidence of mixed messages. My commitment to using the L2 and emphasizing communication clearly broke down on Quiz 2, the instructions for which follow:

> Quiz 2 (10 pts.)
>
> Choose 10 of the following words and write them in Spanish. Spelling and accents count. If the word is a noun, you should include the *el* or *la*.

Though this was the only quiz on which I asked students to translate directly, I felt guilty about its format. I recognized the mismatch between this form of assessment and my pedagogical beliefs, but chose to use it anyway, as confirmed by my journal entry: the quiz "was horribly mechanical and non-communicative" (Journal, January 29, Day 5). This format was quite different from Quiz 1, also a vocabulary quiz, in which I asked students to provide examples of university courses that fit into categories like arts or social sciences and to indicate what school supplies professors and/or students need.

Taking a step back from the more immediate reflections of the journal, I now question to what extent the translation activity actually contradicted my pedagogical beliefs. My journal entry after giving Quiz 1 reveals what was on my mind when I prepared Quiz 2:

> Journal: January 22 (Day 3)
>
> I am not happy with their preparation for the quiz today [Quiz 1]. From what I saw they didn't do well. I'm not going to grade them extra-tough but I'm not going to be easy either. They've got to get the idea that this is serious. The quiz was easy and if they aren't taking studying seriously now, they're going to be really lost in a week or two.

I was clearly concerned about student performance and seemed to view quizzes as the means to motivate, or force, my students to study. My comments in English at the beginning of the class session between Quizzes 1 and 2 clarify what I meant by "they didn't do well":

> Transcript: January 24 (Day 4)
>
> About the quiz [Quiz 1], as I said, they were ok for the most part, but some of you need to work on details. Shh. So, we're going to give it another run on Wednesday.... And so for this quiz [Quiz 2] on Wednesday, I'll tell you exactly what to expect. I will lift ten words off of these two pages and I will write them in English and I will ask you to write them in Spanish. That's it, but you need to spell them right. You need to know if it's an *el* or a *la*. If it's got an accent, the accent needs to be there. So, if it's not spelled right, credit off. Um, why? Why I am torturing you when I could decipher 'biology' out of all the 'i's and 'o's and 'l's in your word? Because you'll never survive the semester and you

> will never survive Spanish II if you don't start being more careful now. So, well it's still manageable, learn to spell these words.

These remarks provide a unique window into my pedagogical beliefs. First, my emphasis on details like spelling establishes accuracy as a priority equal to that of successfully communicating one's message. In fact, these transcript data suggest that I do not consider a written message to have been adequately relayed, even if I can "decipher" it, unless it is spelled correctly. Second, recurring comments about students not surviving the current semester, or the next, reveal a particular sensitivity to the snowballing nature of traditional language learning. Perhaps this concern was sincere, motivated by my own experiences with confused second-semester students, or, perhaps it was a manipulative appeal to students' practical concerns about academic success as a front for pushing accuracy. Nevertheless, once again, I shifted any blame to students' non-existent future Spanish teacher. Finally this excerpt from the transcript sheds light on why I used a format that I myself described as "horribly mechanical and non-communicative." I seemed to associate rigor with the mastery of detail. Thus, though translation activities per se do not reflect my pedagogical beliefs about communication and its central role in L2 learning, I did associate such activities with rigorous study and considered them an appropriate, if not necessary, tool to push students to the level and type of achievement I wanted. Ironically, but not surprisingly, the quizzes did not produce the rigor or thoroughness I had hoped for.

In short, it appears that, in some cases, my reported concern over accuracy and "rigorous" preparation for future semesters overcame my commitment to maximizing the target language for communicative purposes. Though from a student's perspective, my use of Spanish 77% of the time may have seemed consistent with the first day expectations I established, I was not satisfied. Given the strength of my personal commitment to nearly exclusive use of Spanish, my L1 use struck me as hypocritical and disappointing.

The Assumption of Truthfulness

A second discrepancy in my approach to communication involves the assumption of truthfulness. During class students had many opportunities to make meaning in the L2 by describing themselves, their families, daily activities, school schedules, etc. When communicating about such topics, students might have described their real activities, but it was also possible that they made up answers using vocabulary that was more familiar or information that was easier to express. These contexts raised the issue of truthfulness.

Jackson, Boostrom, and Hansen (1993) made the following observations about the assumption of truthfulness in the typical classroom: "Teachers the world over are expected to speak the truth when addressing their students, and students are expected to do the same when speaking up in class... The expectation that both teachers and students speak the truth is absolutely essential to the conduct of instruction" (p. 17). They add, "instruction can only proceed smoothly and properly

when everyone involved is telling the truth or something close to it" (p. 17); they highlight the hypothetical example of a teacher who deliberately misleads students about historical facts in addition to the difficulty a teacher faces in trying to help students if they misrepresent what they actually know.

This assumption plays out differently, however, in the second language classroom, a setting in which "right" or "wrong" answers have been traditionally defined by the grammaticality of their expression rather than their content. Even within communicative and proficiency-based approaches, the veracity of the personal information that students supply is often unrelated to the assessment process.

Returning to the Spanish 101 context, we see evidence of the assumption of truthfulness from the very first day of class. Students likely assumed, and rightly so, that the activities and interests I mentioned in the listening exercise were pastimes that I really do enjoy. Likewise, there was little doubt that when asked, "¿Cómo te llamas?" ('What's your name?') and "¿De dónde eres?" ('Where are you from?'), all members of the classroom community responded truthfully.

As the semester progressed, however, I sent very mixed messages about the role of truthfulness in our classroom communication. Such messages appeared as early as the third week of class. To review the numbers we had already learned, I asked students to tell me their phone numbers in Spanish, and in response to their nervous hesitation assured them, "I'm not going to know if you're right or wrong" (Transcript, January 31, Day 6). Though my comment was intended to alleviate students' anxiety and encourage participation, I sent a strong message that the truthfulness of what they said was unimportant. In fact, there is no reason that students could not have invented telephone numbers, avoiding all numerals that they could not remember or did not want to pronounce in Spanish. Like a language teacher cited by Johnston (2003), my message was "'Just say anything,' implying that it is the making of language that matters, not its content" (p. 29).

Similar incidents suggest that I devalued content on multiple occasions during the semester. One example surfaced when I gave students some performance tips to help them do well on tests and quizzes. I stated, "When you're taking a test in here or a quiz and I ask you a question like 'what does your brother do?' and your brother is a microbiologist, you say, 'mi hermano es medico,' he's a doctor or he's a teacher. I mean, be as honest as you can. It's important, I mean I don't want you to lie, but don't set yourself up [for complex vocabulary]." Though on one hand, such advice may be quite appropriate from the test-taking perspective, it implies that I really didn't care what their brother did. I did not encourage students to try, using strategies and circumlocution, to communicate that he was a microbiologist; rather, I indicated that they would be rewarded for accurately and successfully reporting a simpler piece of lexical information.

In many cases, it was the students who opened my eyes to the real messages I was sending. For instance, they pointed out, by humorously imitating me when they answered a question in class, that I often used the expression "blah, blah, blah" when giving a model. Consider this example:

Transcript: March 21 (Day 17)

Bueno, número uno es muy fácil. ¿De dónde eres? Soy de blah blah blah. ('Okay, number one is very easy. Where are you from? I'm from blah, blah, blah.')

I seemed to use this odd expression to speed things along when reviewing material that students should have already known. Because I was in a hurry, I did not make the mental effort to complete a phrase with actual content. In doing so, I modeled sloppy work habits, eliminated the essential vocabulary that would have reminded students what ¿de dónde eres? means, and, in cases like this, communicated the message that verb conjugations and prepositions (soy de) are more important than their accompanying content. I later reflected on the students' observation in my journal:

Journal: March 21 (Day 17)

We all laughed and I told students that 'blah, blah, blah' was reserved for me. I was the one who could say that but they needed to say more... It made me aware that I say 'blah, blah, blah' all the time when I'm modeling activities. I give a brief answer and then say that. Wow... Maybe I should model more seriously for them what they have to do, putting in the same effort that I expect from them.

In spite of my inconsistencies, I was surprised and disturbed when students handled communication in a similarly careless manner or when they suggested that a truthful answer was not important. For instance, early in the term we were talking about families. I asked a student how many siblings he had and, later, followed up by asking what those siblings did. I had offered a few possibilities such as "¿trabaja?" ('Does he work?') and "¿estudia?" ('Does he study?') when classmates suggested that this student simply answer affirmatively, just for the sake of responding. My reaction was immediate, yet in jest. I played along in a teasing way, yet indicating that I got the point of the class's suggestion, as seen in the following excerpt from the transcript:

Transcript: February 19 (Day 10)

Just to get it over with, you know lie to me right? Alright, we'll make something up. What do you want to make up about your brother? He does what? Lie to me.

Students laughed at my exaggerated response, but the incident had a rather serious impact on me. It was still on my mind after class when I wrote the following entry in my journal:

Journal: February 19 (Day 10)

A very strange thing happened in class. I asked a student what his brother does, trying to elicit some verb practice. I [offered] a possible answer but [the student] indicated that he didn't do that particular activity. At that moment

> [another student suggested] that [his classmate] should say yes to my prompt, presumably just to move things along. Interesting. The perception that content isn't really the focus. Maybe students were just teasing. Maybe they just wanted to get to the next activity. But, it is possible that they were communicated [sic] the message that if you get the verb right, who cares what you are saying.

This incident confirms that the assumption of truthfulness did not always underlie communication in our classroom community though the degree to which my mixed messages influenced students' assumptions and behavior is difficult to prove. Ironically, it is possible that my joking response to this incident may have further suggested that I really did not expect the truth in certain contexts. Of course, the consequences of a student saying that his brother is a lawyer rather than an architect, because we had learned the former word but not the latter, are not in and of themselves terribly important. Nevertheless, such incidents do raise pedagogical issues. Were students trying to pacify me with their responses so I would "move along" to another student or another activity? To what extent were students learning how to describe their real lives and prepare for possible opportunities to use Spanish in an authentic way outside the classroom?

The assumption of truthfulness is also relevant to assessment, including grammar-based activities. As part of the communicative approach, teachers are encouraged to contextualize grammar instruction and evaluation; thus, instead of simply asking students to mechanically conjugate present tense verbs, students may use present tense verbs to describe the daily activities of their friends or family members. Sometimes, contextualizing involves putting students in a hypothetical situation (i.e. Imagine that you are going to take a trip to Venezuela. Write a list of the activities that you want to do and the items you need to bring.)

In this Spanish 101 class, Quiz 8 was contextualized. Students were asked to help their friend "Jason" who was going to Puerto Rico for the first time by completing the following types of tasks:

> A. Tu amigo, Jason, está en Puerto Rico y necesita hacer las siguientes diligencias. Completa cada frase con la palabra más apropiada de la lista abajo. (5 pts.)
>
> *(Your friend, Jason, is in Puerto Rico and needs to do the following errands. Complete each phrase with the most appropriate word from the list below.)*
>
> B. Jason viaja mucho y necesita recomendaciones sobre los mejores (best) medios de transporte. Marque con un círculo la respuesta correcta. (2 pts.)
>
> *(Jason travels a lot and needs recommendations for the best means of transportation. Circle the correct answer.)*
>
> C. Jason es malo para los mapas. Siga las indicaciones y escriba el nombre del edificio correcto. (3 pts.)
>
> *(Jason is bad with maps. Follow the directions and write the name of the correct building.)*

This quiz corresponded closely to the personalized activities we did in class and represented an attempt to assess students' vocabulary and grammar skills in a communicative way, though in reality, this contextualization merely disguised multiple choice and fill-in-the-blank exercises: Part A on the quiz is, in essence, a fill-in-the-blank exercise based on running errands and Part B is a multiple choice activity that incorporates the imperative with vocabulary about transportation.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore the merits of performance-based and authentic assessment, but they both offer promising formats through which the assumption of truthfulness can be preserved. It is true that even some of those "real life" assessments require a temporary suspension of reality, as in the case of Quiz 8. Students did not really have a friend named Jason who visited Puerto Rico. Pushing that hypothetical scenario to its logical end, if students really had a friend named Jason who needed help, he probably would have preferred to communicate with them in English. Nevertheless, given the fact that assessment and language learning in a classroom setting are almost always contrived to a certain degree, the quiz format is acceptable, but inconsistencies do surface when the contextualized nature of the exercises is equated with real-life or truthful communication.

In sum, these data indicate that I devalued content in my communication with language students. Even when I was sincerely interested in what they were saying, they sensed that simply giving an answer would move things along. Furthermore, my attempts to incorporate content into assessment merely disguised traditional testing formats.

Voice

A third, related area of classroom communication in which I sent mixed messages is that of voice. Just as I suggested that students avoid difficult vocabulary (i.e. do not say that your brother is a microbiologist), I showed myself to be a controlling force by interfering with the messages students actually wanted to send and ignoring their real communicative needs. For instance, students did a series of activities using the Internet as part of an imaginary trip to Puerto Rico. Among other tasks, they had to find a hotel, and a restaurant, using an online map of Old San Juan, choose a meeting place where they would connect with a friend. They also had to list the activities they were interested in doing while on the island. When a student asked me how to express in Spanish an activity that we had not learned, I responded, "Well, stick to stuff you know how to say... You can go to the beach, you can eat in restaurants, you can go to the museum, you can do swimming" (Transcript, March 28, Day 13). It is ironic that when a student was truly motivated to make meaning in Spanish, perhaps to describe a real hobby or pastime of his, I denied him the opportunity.

Not only did I encourage students to limit themselves to what they already knew, I set up their classmates' knowledge as a boundary. For example, during one class period students practiced question formation by preparing a list of questions they would use to interview me. When a student asked how to form a question

using a grammatical tense we had not studied, I responded, "I prefer you to use something the whole class will be able to [understand], but it's '¿dónde estudiaste?'" (Transcript, April 4, Day 21). Though in this case, I did supply the answer, I discouraged the student from asking what she really wanted to know (a question that required the past tense) reportedly for the sake of her classmates. Granted, students do get confused when a more informed peer uses unfamiliar language or complex structures; nevertheless, my response was shortsighted.

I also exercised my authority in determining what vocabulary students should learn to say in Spanish and what could be expressed in English. Early in the semester, students were describing their class schedules to each other. As I monitored pair work, several students asked me how to say the names of particular courses in Spanish. At times, I translated the course into Spanish, as in the case of "Problemas Sociales" (Social Problems), "Salud" (Health), "Estudios Femeninos" (Women's Studies) and "Administración" (Management). In one case, I translated the course into Spanish but then, perhaps due to the North American nature of the subject, stated, "'Freshman Experience' está bien." (Transcript, January 22, Day 3). Though I saw no need for using or remembering a rather awkward translation, my behavior may have been difficult to interpret from a student perspective. How did they know what vocabulary they could express in English?

Further complicating the issue were the instances when I did not know how to say a word in Spanish. During one lesson on ethnicity, students were identifying their nationalities. When asked to supply a nationality that was not on the list, I replied, "I don't know how to say that in Spanish. I'll let you know on Friday." This incident highlights the inconsistency of my practice. Why did I require the L2 for nationalities and courses such as "Problemas Sociales" but left similar phrases like "Freshman Experience" in the L1? Furthermore, what made some words so important that I investigated outside of class to be sure students could access them in Spanish while other concepts could simply be expressed in the L1? Such inconsistencies have problematic implications for the issue of voice. I had the right to make decisions about how I would express myself. Students, on the other hand, did not have the authority to decide what vocabulary must be expressed in Spanish or what could be communicated in the L1.

In like fashion, the quizzes I created that semester did not take voice into account but rather reflected my authoritative role. In contrast to alternative forms of assessment such as portfolios in which students have a role in determining how they are evaluated, the quizzes analyzed for the present study were teacher-centered and allowed for little or no self-expression. Their format was based in large part on discrete point responses and did not include open-ended sections in which students had freedom to create with the language. Though students had the opportunity to express themselves more freely on short composition assignments, the quizzes constituted the one component of the course that I, not the coordinator of the language program, designed.

In short, my approach to issues of communication over the course of the

semester did not reflect the standards I touted on the first day of class. I sent mixed messages about target and native language use, the assumption of truthfulness, and voice. This analysis suggests that the contradictions in my pedagogical practice run deeper than mere actions and words and may reflect ambiguity in my beliefs about language teaching. One specific example is the approach I took in attempting to justify L2 use to my students. I question whether I was unable to articulate a clear rationale or whether I was actually unwilling. While I certainly have not abandoned the belief that the L2 should be maximized, my once-settled conviction that I should never use the L1 has softened both in response to developments in research on language acquisition and due to the confidence I have gained over time as a teacher. Though one might expect teachers to become more set in their ways over time, my experience suggests that it is never too late to re-evaluate one of my most basic beliefs about language teaching and learning.

Final Observations

Having reflected on my pedagogical practice, what can I learn from these observations about classroom communication, and how can I use them to further my own growth? What implications might my experience have for other teachers? I will highlight several applications of this analysis, beginning with the most personal.

First, I must take active steps to affirm not just the accuracy but also the content of students' messages. As Swaffar (2006) notes, "communication needs to be evaluated in terms of success or misfire, neither of which can be assessed without attending to both the content to be communicated and the communicative situation" (p. 249). While some students may enter the class predisposed to focus on accuracy over meaning due to past experience or their own conceptualization of language learning, all students can easily reach the conclusion that grammatical form is a teacher's priority. To counteract this tendency, I might incorporate authentic texts or other content-based materials into the lesson, implement more information gap activities that require students to use the content they exchange, and follow up on students' responses by giving feedback that encourages elaboration and stimulates dialogue. In my case, slowing down the pace of the class and taking time to give complete models (as opposed to partial examples that end with "blah, blah, blah") is also important.

Second, I must structure the course around students' interests and create opportunities for them to access L2 vocabulary and structures they need for communicating their messages. I noted the following in my journal:

> Journal: March 26 (Day 18)
>
> I'm constantly telling them to use words they know, keep it simple, etc. But isn't it good that they want to know how to say other things? That's creating with the language in a sense. I guess the problem is that I spend a whole lot of time feeding them vocabulary (or they spend time looking up words) that they're not going to remember anyway. I should find a way to incorporate the

> words they want to learn into the course.
>
> Perhaps a component of the language course should be the creation of personalized dictionaries so that all students leave the class at least partially equipped with vocabulary, phrases, or expressions relevant to their own lives and interests.

Third, I should balance opportunities for creating with language in imaginative contexts and in activities that resemble real life tasks with opportunities to focus on language learning as a skill. As Walsh (2003) notes,

> In their haste to be 'communicative,' it seems that language teachers have overlooked the simple fact that the L2 classroom is a social context in its own right. Instead of trying to make that context more like the 'real, outside world,' teachers' time might be better spent trying to understand the interactional processes which create the 'real, inside world' of the L2 classroom (p. 125).

In spite of my attempts to contextualize language practice, students were always well aware that we were in a classroom and, at times, seemed to grow tired of pretending that they were preparing for a trip, striking up a dialogue with a stranger on the street, or helping an imaginary exchange student with her class schedule. They also enjoyed doing activities that focused openly on the fact that they were language learners. I commented on one such activity in my journal:

> Journal: February 28 (Day 13)
>
> Today's class was fun. There was a lot of laughter and joking. I had a good time, and I think the students did too... We started out with a vocabulary activity in which students had to describe, in Spanish, a word to their partner who tried to guess it. At the end of the activity I wrote the word circumlocution on the board and talked about the activity as an example of it. We dissected the word and came to the meaning "to talk around something." I gave the example from when I lived in Honduras and the toilet stopped working. I demonstrated my negotiation around the word I didn't know (toilet) and suggested that this skill is important and frequently used. They laughed at my example,but I think it made the point.

Finally, this study underscores the need for teachers like me to engage in a continual process of reflection and self-analysis. The benefits of research that takes a collaborative approach to reflective self-analysis (Lazaraton & Ishihara, 2005; Oskoz & Liskin-Gasparro, 2001) have been clearly demonstrated. Though such collaboration is ideal and greatly increases the benefits of reflection, the findings of the present study suggest that teachers who do not have access to co-researchers and for one reason or another undertake a reflective analysis alone can also gain great insights into their own teaching, provided that their reflections are based on data that capture what actually takes place in the classroom.

In general, the transcript data from the present study confirmed the accuracy of

my perceptions, as recorded in the journal, of what had taken place in the classroom. However, one clear exception was my underestimation of how much I had used the L1 over the course of the semester. Journal data alone would not have facilitated meaningful reflection on this issue. As Lazaraton and Ishihara (2005) note, much previous research on language teacher beliefs and practices has overlooked the actual discourse produced in the classroom, an important factor in assessing any potential mismatch: "Close examination of classroom discourse recorded precisely as it happens not only allows detailed analyses of classroom practices, but can also validate or provide counterevidence to the self-reflection provided by the teacher" (p. 529). My findings, particularly in regard to L2 use, support this observation.

Though journal data is clearly useful, its value hinges to a certain extent on teachers' ability to recall and recount accurately the classroom events on which they reflect. In the present study, it was the audio recording that enabled me to evaluate the relationship between my beliefs, perceptions, and teaching practices. The mismatches I identified stirred feelings of self-consciousness (Burns, 1996) and have even prompted a re-evaluation of some my pedagogical beliefs. Interestingly, it was often student comments or interjections in the recorded data that opened my eyes to the contradictory messages I had sent (Edstrom, 2003).

Though the present data confirm that there were many instances of communication throughout the semester, the nature of that communication must also be taken into account. All teachers can benefit from analyzing their classroom practices as well as revisiting the beliefs that underlie it. Such informed, thoughtful reflection is a first step toward minimizing the gap between what we believe and what we actually do.

NOTE

[1] This figure does not only refer to teacher talk during whole class activities but also includes one-on-one communication with students during periods of individual or group work.

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