

COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE AND PERSONALIZATION
ANOTHER SIDE OF THE COIN

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Current literature indicates a keen interest in teaching language students the target language in terms of its suitability or appropriateness in real-life situations. Communicative competence is the recently developed term used to define such classroom techniques. In addition, students are encouraged to talk about themselves and their own lives rather than to answer questions about third person characters who live only on the textbook page. This element of classroom procedure has been called personalization.

In our enthusiasm to make language learning relevant to the individual student, I wonder if we have considered the appropriateness of some of the questions or situations to which we expect students in the classroom to respond. Are we aware of the impact on his learning if, for one reason or another, he is unable to respond. This is particularly critical when a student's participation affects his final grade.

Reasons behind a student's inability to respond to personalized communicative competence activities may be varied, particularly in a school with a heterogenous student body or one in which there is a difference between the socio-economic-cultural background of the teacher and his students. An ambitious young man who works as a house-boy, whose father is a farmer and who comes to the city from a small village, fails an English course because he will not participate in group discussions. Nor does he respond to personalized questions. He later explains to his teacher that he would have been embarrassed to respond to personal questions before his classmates. He could have answered easily and comfortably a question about the number of pencils on the table, but "freezes" when the discussion becomes personal. "What does your father do?" becomes an

insensitive invasion of a private domain when the fathers of other students are doctors, salesmen, etc. In another classroom situation a woman bursts into tears when her turn comes to respond to the question, "What countries have you visited?". Many of her classmates have travelled extensively, while her life vision at the moment could include at best a trip to Taxco. Further examples are not needed. Many teachers with whom I have spoken have given numerous examples from their classrooms.

I am neither proposing that the problem is widespread nor that personalization or small groups should be discontinued because they are threatening situations for the insecure or timid student. They both serve essential purposes and are undoubtedly moving us in the direction of improved teaching for communication. I feel, however, that the same kinds of awareness that we expect our students to acquire about the culture of the target language, should be acquired by the teacher about the student's culture. In view of the fact that effective communication is one of our classroom objectives, and that inability to function in a communicative situation can result in course failure, it behooves us to investigate cases in which a student is not performing and to try to avoid situations which might result in tongue-tied embarrassment. More important still, we should give the student help in learning to deal with such situations, both in asking and responding to questions, or in suggesting themes or subjects that should or should not be discussed. Giving students the option of answering "truthfully" or "imaginatively" might be one possible solution. Informal discussions with teachers establish the fact that the situation is common enough to indicate that if a student is not participating in free conversation in class, the teacher might consider "invasion of a private domain" as a possible cause.

Andrew Cohen substantiates the need to direct our attention to the needs of the learner which may be indicated by lack of participation in the classroom. In an excellent review of research literature on successful second-language speakers he summarizes some of the tentative findings in the large-scale Ontario Institute for Studies in Education project, "The Good Language Learner." He cites the authors, Naiman et al., as attributing importance "to the learner's general attitude toward more specific classroom events, such as the extent to which the teacher interrupts the student's efforts at speaking in order to correct errors, the extent to which the teacher uses the learner's first language in the classroom, and so

forth." (Cohen 1977, vii). In conversation-interviews which I made with students studying English in language institutes, frequent references to the teacher's manner in dealing with the student's oral performance in class were noted. While there are some learners who are not dependent upon the teacher for reassurance and support, there are others whose success in the classroom depends upon it. Field dependent and field independent learners have been identified and studied and there is some evidence to indicate that they respond quite differently to the cognitive domain and the affective domain (Cohen 1977, viii; Ramirez and Castaneda). The teacher's willingness and capacity to empathize with students who need this support may, in many cases, be the key to their success in the learning process, whereas a teacher's hasty judgment based on what may be inaccurate and unfair early impressions of students may be one of the factors leading to their failure (Bailey and Galvan 59).

No teacher will be surprised by the evidence confirming what he already knows...that the student's attitude affects the student's learning and that the teacher's attitude affects the judgment of the student. What is surprising is that not only teachers, but laymen, administrators, parents and students are all too often unaware of the way that their attitudes affect what they do and how they do it. Happily, at least in the classroom, several studies show that a variety of techniques have been successful in modifying teacher attitudes that impede learning. All of these studies agree that a promising way of accomplishing this is "... to make teachers aware of their behavior in some way, and then to provide them with alternative behaviors" (Bailey and Galvan 63).

Hopefully if more attention is paid to mutual cultural familiarity and respect, and if hurtful as well as helpful classroom behavior is raised to the consciousness level, communicative competence will be a two-way street.

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