Benefits of exploiting authentic materials for developing sociolinguistic competence

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Abstract

Being a competent user of a target language includes mastery of sociolinguistic appropriateness and cultural repertoire alongside linguistic and pragmatic competencies. The article is based on the results of an ongoing research project that seeks to explore the implications of communicative teaching at secondary schools in the local context. The article reports university students' findings related to the development of sociolinguistic competence, gained utilising excerpting examples of natural English. An analysis of the achieved results stimulated an insight into the real language and culture, which was later reflected in the students' performances. Contemporary literary prose offers enough authentic material to discover its benefits for developing sociolinguistic awareness and cultural repertoire. The article presents the findings that can encourage English teachers to use authentic materials in their English classes in case they have not discovered their relevance to language and culture acquisition.

Keywords: Communication, competence, cultural repertoire, English, sociolinguistic;

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1. Introduction

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001) has become famous due to a new classification of reference levels being introduced (Garcia Laborda et al., 2020; Kovalcikiene & Daukilas, 2018; Sornkam et al., 2018). This unification of proficiency levels for any language that is learned or acquired is received with an effort to situate national curricula and examinations concerning the CEFR. The number of scales presented for each mode of communication ensures that every country can select those areas of language education that are prioritised in local contexts and respect educational traditions in the country. Each of the three main levels is subdivided into two sublevels, complemented by three plus-levels (A2+, B1+ and B2+), which can be seen as a consequence of different approaches to language education and students can perform better due to their motivation and willingness to contribute. All the descriptors are positively stated to give value and worth to language learning.

However, the positively stated descriptors are not the only benefit of the document. As North (2014) states, one of the goals related to compiling the scales was to provide a common reference point for elaborating language curricula, examinations and textbooks across Europe. This stimulus for reflection on current practice is based on the concepts that are presented and language professionals did not pay enough attention to them from the beginning as they were more engaged in the levels and illustrative descriptors they offer (Karasheva et al., 2021; Kondrateva et al., 2018; Tezer, 2020).

1.1. Conceptual background

The framework supports communicative approaches and their development, which is enriched by some concepts concerning language. The CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001) established and supported the concepts such as learner-centredness, learner autonomy, an action-oriented approach, four modes of communication referring to communicative activities and the development of strategies. In consistency with communicative language competence concepts, the CEFR emphasises competencies such as linguistic, pragmatic, strategic and sociocultural, including sociolinguistic (Değirmenci Uysal & Yavuz, 2018; North, 2014). According to Richards and Schmidt (2002), sociolinguistic competence, also called sociocultural competence, refers to knowledge of the relationship between language and its non-linguistic context, knowing how to use and respond appropriately to different speech acts and which forms to use in communicating with different people or in different situations.

Field (2011) implies that sociolinguistic knowledge refers to an awareness of how language varies according to social variables (status and gender) and cultural variables of respect. According to Brumfit (2001), sociolinguistic competence seems to be negotiable because it is culture not languages that determines appropriateness and rules in terms of communicative competence which is commonly described as static. 'If it [communicative competence] centres on learners, it must become a far more dynamic concept than it often appears to be' (Brumfit, 2001, p. 53; Uzunboylu & Birinci, 2014).

The CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001) presents sociolinguistic competence as the knowledge and skills required to cope with the social dimension of language use. This competence embraces linguistic markers of social relations, politeness conventions, expressions of folk wisdom, register differences and dialect and accent. The former scale referring to sociolinguistic appropriateness was later elaborated and extended in the CEFR Companion Volume (Council of Europe, 2020). Contrasting them, it was possible to ascertain that the new illustrative descriptor enriched higher levels, with the start at level B2+. As far as level B2 is concerned, one change is apparent as the former descriptor was more relevant for a plus level

(Can with some effort keep up with and contribute to group discussion even when speech is fast and colloquial) and was replaced by a completely new one – *Can adjust their expression to make a distinction between formal and informal registers, but may not always do so appropriately.*

Concerning signing competencies, a new scale called *Sociolinguistic appropriateness and cultural repertoire* was introduced and subdivided into two categories concerning scales relevant to productive and receptive performances, which enables language users to distinguish the concepts that refer to abilities to recognise particular aspects such as different registers, and some more general elements of cultural and regional knowledge, for example, the ability to apply knowledge of the landmarks of local cultures or knowledge of sociocultural norms etc. On the other hand, the key concepts operationalising in the productive scale include applying knowledge of the world relevant to communication, which is reflected in the wording of descriptors, for example, *can express, can explain, can produce, can present*, in contrast with the former ones, formulated as *can judge, can infer, can indicate, can recognise.*

Based on the previously mentioned distinction, the CEFR illustrative descriptors for sociolinguistic appropriateness are presented at a particular level without an explicit classification. It requires reading the wording of the descriptors more carefully to understand which key concepts operationalised in the scale refer to the product usage and which ones are relevant for being aware of or recognising.

1.1.1. The role of authentic materials in language education

The goal of language learning oriented to the real world requires a simulation of authentic real-world context that is appropriate to the learners concerned. To expose learners to how English is used by native speakers, naturally occurring discourses in authentic materials appear to be useful. To facilitate the process of reading authentic texts, their selection is determined by several factors such as prior knowledge, cultural knowledge, language learners' interests in the topic, their experience etc. On the other hand, authentic materials raise cultural awareness and help develop learner autonomy.

The concept of authenticity refers to several aspects such as authentic texts and tasks in the learning setting or authentic data for compiling dictionaries and grammar. In addition, Thornbury (2006) introduces the idea of authentic interaction in the classroom, which reflects the structures of real talk and rejects conventional exchanges in contrast with traditional classroom talk.

In language education, authentic materials are supported to be used as they are expected to have the qualities of natural speech and writing. Language use is more realistic and natural. Although methodologically modified materials include language that is made accessible to learners and contains a high frequency of particular language items, they also include features of naturally occurring discourses (Cardinali & Barbeito, 2018; Carter, 1998). Despite balancing the use of authentic and inauthentic materials in English classes, some aspects must be taken into account when choosing any text for teaching purposes or language acquisition and its exploitability. The choice of authentic materials should be of potential interest to a wide range of learners, allowing for their language competence as well as their age. The materials should be potentially exploitable but challenging for learners as well. The relevance of authentic material is based on its multiple uses, such as enhancing learners' topic knowledge, improving their language, developing their reading skills and its potential for speaking and/or writing extension.

Based on Thaine's (2010) study, it can be agreed that the examples of real language used by native speakers allow learners to see how grammar and vocabulary behave in a natural discourse. In addition,

authentic materials are likely to embrace a lot of cultural information, which can bring knowledge and some interesting pieces of information from the outside world into English classes.

1.2. Purpose of the study

Literature has gained more importance in the past three to four decades. From the position of the explicit port of foreign language studies at the beginning of the 20th century, literature has become an authentic source at the end of the century (Kramsch & Kramsch, 2000). According to McKay (2014), literary texts exemplify the features of normal communication, and a writer has available various choices for conveying a message. Therefore, contemporary literary prose was exploited to provide some evidence related to features relevant to sociolinguistic competence.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Participants

The choice of students who were invited to participate in this study was based on the academic coordinator's experience with their teaching in their official teacher training practice. Observing their performances provided useful information about some problems with the use of appropriate language. It revealed shortcomings in university students' performances, as their classroom language was either rather formal when teaching young learners or rather informal while using the expressions like *gonna* and *wanna* in their instructions. To characterise participating students, it needs to be mentioned that they are master-degree students who had signed up for all the lectures and seminars on linguistically oriented courses, and English and American literature courses, all of which were designed to enable them to achieve proficiency level C1.

2.2. Data collection instrument

Although the winter semester offered lectures and seminars on campus, due to the lockdown (the COVID-19 pandemic) it was necessary to reorganise the way of teaching at universities and students started to be taught online after the first week of contact learning. The same procedures were followed in the primary and secondary educational institutions; the student-teachers were thus made to observe their supervisors' teaching and later perform their teaching online. These lessons taught by student-teachers were observed by local supervisors and an academic coordinator, the role of whom was to provide student-teachers with feedback and some recommendations. Online teaching and consultations significantly affected students' attention or active participation and problems that had never been noticed before started to appear.

2.3. Procedure

Before addressing students to participate in the study, all the steps and procedures were thoroughly planned. After being introduced to the concept of sociolinguistic competence, students were provided with one chapter taken from a book called *Long Road to Mercy* by Baldacci (2019), written in the 21st century, and labelled as contemporary literary prose. Chapter reading was accompanied by several tasks the students were expected to accomplish. The idea behind the study was to find out the extent of sociolinguistic knowledge as well as the ability of students to use language flexibly and effectively for different social purposes, being able to express themselves confidently, clearly and politely in a formal and informal register, appropriate to the situation and the persons concerned.

3. Results

Data achieved from students' analyses are presented in a classification introduced by the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001), supplemented by the descriptors taken from the CEFR Companion Volume (Council of Europe, 2020). After becoming familiar with the sociolinguistic appropriateness descriptors for level C1, students were asked to read Chapter 46 (pp. 308–313) and provide evidence of whether their performances can be linked to the proficiency level in question. Level C1 includes some descriptors for reception and some for production. The first descriptors discussed were those referring to reception.

Table 1

Sociolinguistic Appropriateness – Level C1 Descriptors (Council of Europe, 2020)

Receptive	Productive
Can recognise a wide range of idiomatic expressions and colloquialisms, appreciating register shifts, may, however, need to confirm occasional details, especially if the accent is unfamiliar.	Can use language flexibly and effectively for social purposes, including emotional, allusive and joking usage.
Can understand humour, irony and implicit cultural references and pick up nuances of meaning.	Can adjust their level of formality (register and style) to suit the social context: formal, informal or colloquial as appropriate, and maintain a consistent register.
	Can frame critical remarks or express strong disagreement diplomatically.

The third descriptor for receptive mode refers to watching a video and therefore it was not used in our research. The students individually presented examples of idiomatic expressions, such as *breathe a word* and *felt free as a bird*, or colloquialisms, such as *gals, cabbie, bucks, to show up* etc. The second band referring to humour and irony was represented by several examples. One was found in the speech of a taxi driver who was telling the ladies that he did not believe their reason for being driven by a taxi due to the price and distance – 'Hope you gals enjoy the *history*' (Baldacci, 2019, p. 310). Orthographically, the word history was written in italics.

To measure their sociolinguistic competence, the students were provided with a variety of dialogues. Their performances in pairs were observed by their colleagues, who had to take notes concerning the use of proper language based on the three descriptors taken from the productive mode of competence in question, presented above. They enjoyed their active participation in an analysis of the chapter, as it contained good examples of different registers and styles. Being exposed to several useful phrases and expressions while reading the chapter, students became familiar with them due to the context and later were able to use them in their dialogues.

4. Discussion

The second task was based on the CEFR classification, in which a variety of categories are presented. The students were provided with a list of these categories and were expected to find out examples relevant to the category description. The categories and some of the students' examples are presented below to have a picture of the students' answers.

Linguistic markers of social relations can be different in a variety of languages and cultures as they depend on factors such as relative status, the closeness of relation, register of discourse etc. This

category embraces the use and choice of greetings or addressing people, for example, *lady, ma'am, gals, honey* etc., and that of expletives in a sentence 'Oh, my God' (Baldacci, 2019, p. 311). Consulting the dictionary, the students were able to get complete information regarding a variety of addressing women, for example, *'Lady, you know this is Virginia,* right not *West* Virginia?' said the man (Baldacci, 2019, p. 309), addressing a woman in a way that is 'not polite as a form of address and is considered offensive by many women' in American English (McIntosh, 2013, p. 865) or old-fashioned in British English in contrast with 'Look, ma'am, the first thing is, I don't drive to West Virginia' (Baldacci, 2019, p. 309), used as a polite address of a woman. The third form of address was found in the sentence 'Good for you, honey…' (Baldacci, 2019, p. 310), in which the word *honey* is a form of address, mainly in American English and the context supported by the expression *matronly type in her sixties* enabled students to indicate it as a familiar address form.

The second category refers to politeness conventions, which are important for using diplomatic language, departing from straightforward communication, which usually varies from one language to another. In English, the expressions *thank you* and *please* are used commonly and more frequently than in other languages. However, the word *please* is used about twice as frequently (Biber et al., 1999, p. 1098). There are other ways, in which politeness can be expressed. The chapter included the use of hedges, for example, *I think it would be better if…* (Baldacci, 2019, p. 312).

The third category is related to the expressions of folk wisdom comprising commonly used fixed expressions such as idioms *to lie low* (to try not to be noticed) in the sentence 'Get a hotel room and lie low for a few days' (Baldacci, 2019, p. 312) or phrasal verbs *to live up to sth* (to act or be in accordance) in the sentence 'I'm going to live up to my promises' (Baldacci, 2019, p. 312).

The fourth category is associated with register differences. The term 'register' is used to concern systematic differences as the language is used in different contexts. The students found the informal register, e.g. 'How about you?' (Baldacci, 2019, p. 311) or the expression *there you go*, which is an informal expression referring to the phrase *there you are.* Examples concerning a familiar register encompass the sentence 'Okay, ladies, let's go' (Baldacci, 2019, p. 310).

The ability to recognise the linguistic markers of social classes, national origin and occupational groups is part of sociolinguistic competence and students presented examples in terms of the differences between the language of a taxi driver in the sentence 'You got no car?' (Baldacci, 2019, p. 309) and an FBI agent, or the differences between American English and British English either in orthography, for example, *checkered* (BrE chequered), lexicon such as *trunk* (BrE boot), *gas* (BrE petrol), or in grammar, e.g., *to meet with sb* (BrE meets sb).

Language is linked to the culture of people who use it as their mother tongue (Belinskaya et al., 2020; Jahangard et al., 2020; Joudi, 2019). The expressions of folk wisdom can be defined as syntagmatic, non-syntagmatic and clause phrasemes that have commonly meant that is fully or partially different from the meaning of single words. These meanings are based on beliefs traditional to or associated with the ordinary people of a particular country. In the excerpted pages, the students discovered the clause expression *The rule of law has gone out the window* (Baldacci, 2019, p. 115), which they analysed focusing on the expression of *the rule of law* (a set of principles, or ideals, for ensuing an orderly and just society) and figurativeness related to the process of personalisation. This expression was not included in any officially published dictionaries of idioms. However, it was possible to conclude that it was used in the book to reinforce common attitudes towards the deterioration of legal conception and universal values and it made a significant contribution to popular culture or present-day culture.

Proverbs, idioms and familiar quotations, as well as expressions of beliefs, attitudes and values, are components of the linguistic aspects of sociocultural competence.

Concerning managing learning and teaching, after the first stage of excerpting the samples referring to receptive mode, the students who had worked in three groups were divided into pairs and asked to work in their breakout rooms being provided with precisely formulated roles, in which they were expected to perform in different social situations. The students observed their peers' performances and discussed the relevance of the used language concerning three descriptors presented for level C1. Their contributions were concluded by some remarks concerning the difficulty of joking in a foreign language and the recognition of differences between openness in North American conversation and indirectness in communication typical for British speakers. Students highly appreciated the way of becoming familiar with the concept of sociolinguistic competence as well as the choice of the chapter, which was exploitable for their purposes, matched their interests and met their expectations.

5. Conclusion

People who belong to one speech community commonly share attitudes, beliefs and values, and these are reflected in their language use. Language is used to meet social needs. Communication can be based on a variety of topics and occurs in different social settings, which is reflected in the levels of formality and the choice of language its speakers use. Many societal behaviours and patterns are linguistic and the relationship between social structures and the language that is used within these structures. Therefore, language use is affected by contexts and changes according to them. People living in different countries have their peculiarities in language and culture, which are marked in those who live local lives and therefore correlate with social classes, occupations and educational backgrounds.

Verbal exchanges involve the cultural matrix of language. The members of each community use language to define their position in society and to express their experience in a style appropriate to the conventions of the group. Although English does not index distance or closeness as it is done in many other languages, social deixis express social positions by other forms of address like the use of the first name, Mr/Ms and the surname, Professor and the surname etc. In general, a particular linguistic form results from the influence of different linguistic and extra-linguistic variables, such as social class, age, gender etc. It is reasonable to focus on language use that is natural, appropriate and accurate. One of the sources that can help language learners develop a good command of a target language appears to be authentic materials.

Authentic materials provide learners with language samples that reflect a naturalness of form and appropriateness of cultural and situational context, characteristic of the language used by native speakers. These unmodified materials enable students to discover how language is used in the target community and improve their overall language proficiency. They can be both spoken and written materials produced for purposes of communication in the language community. The choice of authentic materials should reflect the interests of the learners and the content language teachers need to deal with as authentic materials are not written for teaching. Contemporary literary prose encompasses both the speech of a narrator and the speeches of characters and it thus provides readers with different forms of language used in a variety of contexts and social situations. This variability enables proficient language users to be exposed to natural language and recognise the infinity of language use.

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