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AUTHOR Little, Greta D.; Sanders, Sara L.
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ABSTRACT

Linguists have recognized the need for appropriateness, sincerity, non-obviousness, and cooperation between speakers in naturally occurring conversation. It is assumed that the speakers listen to each other and in some sense "care" about one another at the time of interaction. In the second language classroom such a sense of mutual concern may not exist. The concept of communicative competence has created a lively, communication-oriented style of language instruction, but a crucial difference between natural talk and classroom conversation has been overlooked. In natural talk, speakers enter the discourse because they want to and stay in it because they have some common ground with the other speaker. Language classrooms often lack such motivation, even when the activity meets the requirements of good communicative teaching. A comparison of experiences as ethnographic participant-observers in beginning French and German classes illustrates that a sense of classroom community is a crucial prerequisite to meaningful language practice. Teachers can provide a classroom environment conducive to eye contact in all exchanges, frequent use of student names, use of meaningful questions, reinforcement of all target language use, and reduction of individual competition. (Author/MSE)

Community: Prerequisite for Communication in Language Classes

Greta D. Little, University of South Carolina

Sara L. Sanders, Coastal Carolina College

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Linguists led by Grice have recognized the need for appropriateness, sincerity, non-obviousness, and cooperation between speakers in naturally occuring conversation. It is assumed that speakers listen to one another and in some sense "care" about one another at the time of the interaction. In the second language classroom such a sense of mutual concern may not exist. Hymes' concept of communicative competence has resulted in a lively, communication-oriented style of language instruction, but a crucial difference between natural talk and classroom conversations has been overlooked. In natural talk speakers enter the discourse because they want to and they stay in it because they have some common ground with the other speaker(s). Language classrooms often lack such motivation for speaking even when the activity meets the requirements of good communicative teaching.

Our insight came from comparing our experiences as ethnographic participant-observers in beginning French and German classes. Activities which were perceived as full of interest-ing information about class members in one class resulted in straight two-way exchanges between the teacher and a single student in the other. We saw that a sense of classroom community is a crucial prerequisite to meaningful language practice.

Our research shows that recognition and acceptance of common ground within the classroom is essential for communication. Without it, exercises, no matter how communicative in intent, will fail to produce communication. The depth of the dependency between communication and community is evident in their shared derivation from the IE word for <u>common.</u>

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Now that communicative competence has emerged as the preferred goal for language instruction, language teachers are making use of communicative activities, those involving "exchange and negotiation between speakers" (Canale, 1983). But is that the whole answer to achieving communication in the language classroom? Our experience as participant observers in beginning French and German classes suggests that it is not.

We found that activities are not in and of themselves communicative. They have potential for being communicative; only when a communitiy exists among participants do activities actually realize their potential for communication. It is this sense of community -- this sense of "caring" about the interaction -- which allows the communicative potential to be realized. Otherwise so-called communicative activities are merely language practice in another guise. Furthermore, once that sense of community is present, even activities with low communicative potential, such as pattern practice, can contribute to the shared experience and knowledge (Gumperz, 1984) which shapes and builds the community, providing a background for later

communication.

That such an intimate connection between communication and community exists should not be surprizing. The shared origin of both words in Latin communis -- com-, together and munis, bound -- meaning "fellowship, community of relations or feelings" could have alerted us to the importance of community in achieving real communication. But we were not thinking etymologically.

If we were looking for any one thing more than another in our research, it was learner strategies, and the notion of community did not emerge in our weekly fieldnote exchange and discussion sessions. In fact, it was much later, after considerable thought and review that we were able to recognize and formulate our insight that community is a prerequisite for communication in language classes. Consequently we did not even include specific reference to community in the questions we asked fellow students at the end of the semester.

We discovered the connection between communication and community while attempting to understand why two good language teachers using similar techniques achieved such different results. Both the French teacher and the German teacher included activities which had high potential for communication -- activities which required a student to respond by supplying information not previously known to the person asking the question, usually the instructor. We

noticed that in the German class students seemed to "get into" the activities more than in the French class. Interactions that were received as full of interesting, relevant information about fellow classmates in the German class elicited no particular attention in the French class. Students seemed to consider them strict two-way exchanges between the teacher and student, having no relation to them at all. We sought reasons to account for the difference in the reactions of the two classes.

Our initial guesses were very much in the classroom management mode without any coherent theoretical basis. The French class was larger; twenty-four students compared to fourteen in the German class. The German students sat in a circle facing one another while in the French class desks were arranged in long rows. Also there were more mature students in the German class. Six of the eleven German students who completed our questionnaire were over thirty. Only one French student (Little) was over thirty; four were between twenty-three and twenty-five, and the other sixteen were under twenty-three. However, none of these factors seemed a likely explanation for the success or failure of communicative exercises which would be useful to practicing language teachers. It may well be that older students are more motivated, but we can't limit our classes to students over thirty. So we continued seeking an answer. What were these German students doing that made the class work? As we talked about our classes and what happened in them, we came

to understand that the German students for whatever reasons had become a community. They listened to each other respond to the teacher's questions and built up a store of shared information that they could refer to in their own subsequent interactions.

In an exercise in the German class, "students responded to the instructor's question,'How many girlfriends do you have?' Robert, whose wife is also a student in the class, answered, 'Ich habe keine Freudin. Ich habe eine Frau.' His wife blushed and the students all laughed. The other fellows in the class all answered, 'Yes, I have a girlfriend.' Until Richard brought down the house with his response, 'Ich habe vieeele freudinen.' A week later when the vocabulary item 'lusthaben' was introduced, the class turned to Richard laughing and the teacher had to explain that word had nothing to with sex."

In the French class such questions resulted in a different sort of interaction. "We were to answer the teacher's questions truthfully, but several students didn't seem to realize that communication was the point. The question was 'How do you go to the university?' Kristy wanted to know about the correct order for the response, 'je vais a l'universite a pied.' Bobby wanted to know if you could just say "je vais a pied.' The teacher explained it was necessary to say 'j'y vais a pied.'" The German students focused on the information in the answers in a way

that the French students did not. They entered into the learning together in a way that the French students did not.

It was this attention to content and later drawing upon the shared experience which set the German class apart from the French class. To better understand exactly what we were looking at, we compared some special features of communication as it is most likely to occur in low-level language classes with communication as it occurs in natural conversation. We began with Grice's cooperative principle (1975) and its maxims concerning quantity, quality, relation and manner.

The factor governing how much talk beginning language students produce is frequently how much they are able to say, not what is required or even what they might desire to say. The truth of their statements is determined not in relation to facts, but by the limits of their vocabulary or their personal inclinations. For example, some students adopt personas for their classroom interactions. The manner of talk is often a matter of which structures have been most recently introduced or of which stuctures the speaker can control in the target language. Fluency and confidence are more likely to determine the dispatch with which a response is given than any sense of continuity or drama. Finally, since the form of the utterance is never far from surface consideration in the language classroom, responses to utterances are sometimes sensible only by recognizing that

one speaker is a learner. Students frequently produce apparently relevant utterances with question intonation ("Where do you live? I live in the dorm?") asking for confirmation as to the correctness of what they said, or they may interrupt a cohesive discourse to ask a question about the form of a certain phrase. This kind of classroom conversation thus stretches some of Grice's notions in ways which are directly related to the dual purpose for classroom conversation -- communication and language practice.

In an overview of Breen and Candlin (1980), Morrow (1977), and Widdowson (1978), Canale (1983:3-4) has outlined seven characteristics of communication, some of which are affected when one or more of the participants is a low-level language learner using the target language. For example, the unpredictability and creativity of both message and form are diminished when the speaker is working with a severely restricted inventory of vocabulary and grammatical structures. The limiting psychological conditions such as memory constraints, fatigue, etc. are more pervasive for low-level learners. But perhaps the most affected characteristic is that of purpose: communication "always has a purpose -- to establish social relations, to persuade, or to promise." However, beginning language learners, especially in the classroom, perceive the interaction as having two purposes. The first is the one appropriate to the social context as Canale says, but there is also a second purpose, practice in using the target language. A

major problem then for realizing the communicative potential in the classroom, it seems clear, is overcoming students' consciousness of this underlying purpose.

To diminish students' awareness of the classroom and the fact that they are practicing a language, they need to have a sense that they are engaged in a cooperative transaction. As Grice (1975:48) put it, "each party should, for the time being, identify himself with the transitory conversational interests of the other." In other words, they must be a community.

Social scientists have long struggled over the notion of community. At the end of the nineteenth century Ferdinand Toennies distinguished between gemeinschaft as a warm and personal, idealized notion of community and gesellschaft as a more fragmented, impersonal field for possible social interaction. All language classrooms are undoubtedly communities in the second sense. They are composed of people collected in one place for a period of time with the possibility for social interaction. However, they are not necessarily communities in the first, sense. The social interaction must in fact take place providing the basis for shared experiences to hold the group together. Developing this kind of community is first and foremost the responsibility of students. It is they who must create the community. But, how are they to do it? Our observations suggest the following: most important, they must listen to

one another. From each utterance come possible underpinnings of shared experience. The learners need to respond to the speaker. Their responses may be non-verbal, mere expressions of having heard, or they may involve actual responses elaborating, agreeing or disagreeing. The learners need to support each other and act collaboratively to construct meaningful utterances. It is important for them to see each other as comrades or cohorts, not competitors. Furthermore they need to study. Learners who are prepared for class are more confident, less anxious, better able to listen with understanding, participate, and interact.

What can teachers do to help to learners create this kind of community? Our research offers these suggestions: they can provide an environment conducive to building a community -- a classroom where eye-contact is possible for both student-teacher and student-student exchanges. In other words, the circular seating arrangement used in the German class. It is also important that sutdents' names be used frequently so that their identities can be established. When directing classroom interaction, teachers should ask meaningful questions which will elicit useful information that learners can cite in follow-up discussions. They need to recognize and encourage students' reference to previous information even when the form is not the targeted one. For example, instructors can praise students for their ingenuity in producing an alternative form even though the class may

be focused on a specific construction, such as "Habt ihr problem?" when "gibt es" is the targeted expression. Instructors need to respond to use of the target language even when it is being used to avoid answering a question. Students who respond "je ne sais pas" or "j'ai oublie" should not get the same treatment as those who use English to indicate their inability to perform. Teachers can also help by reducing individual competition among students. Graded exercises in pronunciation seemed to divide the French class more than it brought them together in their mutual stress. Non-graded German exercises which allowed students to display their control of material gave them a sense of security and achievement.

These are only suggestions which grew out of our observations. Additional studies will likely reveal other ways teachers and students can enhance the possibility for a community to develop in the classroom. For one thing, our research draws very little from student perceptions since we did not ask questions either directly or indirectly related to the existence of a community among them. It is entirely possible that the students are not really aware of its existence themselves. The most salient question for us was whether the information gained from any activity became part of the shared experience which class drew upon in later interaction. When that occurs learners can transcend the artificiality of the classroom situation and engage in real communication between members of a community which only

incidentally happens to exist in a language classroom.

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