



A Reflection on Discourse: Semantic Voids and their Challenges

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ABSTRACT

Effective communication is a fundamental aspect of human relationships and a key interpersonal skill to be considered and developed at an EFL Teacher Education Program. Yet, a variety of challenges are posed for those in the process of becoming (proficient) users of English in an environment where Spanish is the main means of communication. Our contribution, as ELT practitioners, will focus on one aspect of our discourse that we observe requires reflection: lexical gaps emerging from administrative aspects of our reality as an English-centered Section inserted in a Spanish speaking academic setting. Two strategies that are usually implemented in the Program to fill these semantic voids will also be discussed.

INTRODUCTION

As ELT practitioners in an EFL Teacher Education Program (TEP from now onwards), it is rather usual for us to have come across discourse produced by our students that we identify as not necessarily conforming to our target language. The reasons behind this may lie in the developing nature of the learners' interlanguage, or in aspects related to their own trajectory and history in the process of becoming (proficient) users of the language, to mention some. Though the extent of this "misuse" of the resources of the language may encompass a variety of levels -phonetic, phonological, grammatical, pragmatic...- our reflection focuses on lexical gaps, specifically those connected to our reality as a degree course inserted in a Spanish speaking academic environment. A phenomenon observable in different institutions (cf. Percara 2019), we have decided to restrict our present work to instances emerging from administrative aspects of our reality as an English-centered Teacher Education Section inserted in a Spanish speaking academic medium.

Context: The TEP as a speech community

Groups -understood as whole societies or as sections with specific ties within those societies (cf. Bakhtin, 1986)- tend to present a linguistic profile that, while created and modified by their members, also marks such members as belonging to said groups (Coupland, 2007; Jackson, 2007 for instance), and our TEP is no exception. Our students and current staff are non-native speakers of English (NNSE). In our midst, there is no outer community in which English is the usual means of communication for all purposes; we have become (proficient)

users of the language through formal education. For the TEP members, English becomes the language of interaction in (almost) all communication in the academic setting. It is the language of instruction in many of the curricular spaces within the Program, and it is customarily the preferred medium between staff and learners - and, especially in classroom interaction, among students themselves.

The TEP is then a small bilingual speech community in which there is a common L1 and the L2 is both the means and the object of study. The Program is also part of an institution with its own reality, one of which is its jargon - needless to say, in Spanish. The existence of a specific academic jargon is part of our institutional identity. Members of all Programs at our university have been faced with the need to incorporate new elements to their repertoire, to be able to adequately engage in interaction in, for instance, academic housekeeping-related topics. Concepts such as *promoción directa*, *alumno regular*, *turnos*, *llamados*, well-known for the habitual users of such institutional lexicon, may result confusing for outsiders. Even new students -regardless their intended degree course- find it rather hard to apply these concepts efficiently at the beginning of their studies.

Effective communication and lexical gaps

The picture gains further complexity in the case of our specific speech community. As hinted before, so as to maximize the opportunities to interact in the target language, the use of English is highly encouraged. This, however, may prove rather complicated from time to time - for instance, when the matter at hand is connected precisely to those aspects of academic housekeeping which, naturally in our context, have their linguistic realisation in Spanish.

Lunenburg (2010) stresses the importance of studying communication since it is part of every administrative function or activity. Effective communication, he adds, yields common understanding and it is fundamental to “develop a shared vision and clarity of goals” (p. 3). A case in point that may pose obstacles to communicating effectively is the way in which the academic system designates student status in terms of the requirements they (are required to) have fulfilled. The labels used, though common in the Argentinian university system, may become a significant stumbling block to new students: an obstacle which tends to disappear as they become more acquainted with those aspects of university life in our midst. For the purpose of addressing this issue - lexical gaps, how the void is filled, what consequences there are for successful communication and with whom-, the field of translation may offer clarifying viewpoints.

Bell (1991) states that translation is “the expression in another language (or target language) of what has been expressed in another, source language, preserving semantic and stylistic equivalences” (p. 5). When communicating in the target language, therefore, finding equivalents that preserve the meanings conveyed in the original language is portrayed as an obligation. The problem resides, however, in that the source and target languages, as expression systems, display differences that manifest not only in the structure of sentences and phrases but also in words (Priyono, 2005). In interaction, Dagut (1981, as cited in Gouws & Prinsloo, 2008) proposes the concept of *referential gaps*, those emerging from extra-linguistic, culture-specific factors, and which result in the L2 user’s inability to find an equivalent in the target language for the concept existing in the source language. Referential gaps “typically occur when a source language form is a culturally bound lexical item and the speakers of the target language do not share in that culture” (Gouws & Prinsloo, 2008, p. 870).

Two (preferred) strategies to fill lexical gaps

In our context, the convergence of the deeply ingrained aim of maximising the opportunities to use English for real communication, and the specific academic context in which we are immersed, has led to the application of a variety of strategies to find L2 equivalents for lexical items culturally bound to our L1. Heidari Tabrizi and Pezeshki (2015) mention calque, also known as loan translation, which involves translating an expression or structure literally. An instance we have documented along the years is *Alumno Libre* (observed as **Free Student* in both learners and some teachers). As a culturally bound item, it makes reference to a learner status not found in the university systems of the anglophone societies most familiar to us (namely, the U.K. and the U.S.). An *Alumno Libre* is student who either has decided not to attend lessons in a specific curricular space but to take an examination at the times scheduled by the university, or did not fulfill the minimum requirements of the curricular space and takes the chance of sitting the examination mentioned. (N.B. It is to be noted that this same category goes under a different label in other higher education institutions in our region. Cf. Percara, 2019). *Alumno Libre* can be then considered a culturally bound lexical item, and one which causes a lexical gap in English. As noted, in our TEP, most members (educators and learners), when faced with the need to refer to this category, before a lexical void in the L2, and in the flow of discourse, tend to resort to loan translation - thus coining the expression *Free Student* to mean *Alumno Libre*. However, according to Gows and Prinsloo (2008), loan translation is not sufficient in the case of referential gaps, because the speakers of the target language are not familiar with what the term in the source language represents. On the other hand, communication within our speech community is perfectly served - except maybe for university-inexperienced newcomers, the meaning intended by *Free Student* is evident to our members. And yet, the question remains whether it is advisable to foster this type of linguistic choices at the time of solving lexical gaps, since the reality designated by the expression *Free Student* has a very specific nature for our TEP speech community, which it does not in the anglophone cultures and probably for users of English other than us around the world.

Another linguistic option to approach lexical voids can be considered the opposite - that is, one not tying the user to the L2. There are times when “speakers interject single words or word phrases from one language in the speech of another language” (Kistler, 2005, p. 86). This process, code-switching, is sometimes employed at our TEP. It appears that resorting to our L1 and inserting the corresponding lexical item in Spanish when there is no English equivalent is the most direct approach, and in terms of efficiency, it may be considered the most expedient, to avoid misunderstandings and to allow the flow of communication. Nacey and Graedler (2013, as cited in De Cock, 2015) regard code-switching as a highly effective strategy that contributes to successful communication provided the interactants’ shared understanding of their L1. The same example as before (*Alumno Libre*) has been observed, especially among staff, as an option preferred to *Free Student*. It could be argued that, if we aspire to prepare future teachers to interact beyond their local surroundings and with the wider English-speaking world, avoiding the use of their L1 appears to be sensible. In addition, discouraging code switching is part of a long-standing tradition in our TEP and, as pointed out before, the use of the L2 is highly favored. Our small speech community acts as a language immersion setting for all its members and provides them with a unique opportunity to develop and practice the target language while living in a Spanish speaking country. Not surprisingly, then, a common reaction among learners when faced with an instructor code-switching just to deal with lexical gaps is to look amazed, and even aggravated. Again, a point to ponder is why reject code-switching in the presence of a *referential* lexical gap, and one which, if filled by the alternative **Free Student* described before, will probably lead English users non-members of this specific speech community to wonder why a learner may not be a free student.

Calque and code-switching under the magnifying glass

Two seemingly opposite strategies to fill referential lexical gaps have been identified and discussed. Analyzing their efficacy in terms of communication, the question of who the interlocutor is gains paramount significance, and may assist educators at the time of promoting or discouraging one or the other - or both, as there are other strategies to fill lexical voids which are not reflected upon in the present work.

As stated above, code-switching has been described as facilitating effective communication among users of the same L1. If the aim then is to transmit a message, and the interactants find themselves unable to do so because of insufficient knowledge of the target language, or because the L2 lacks an equivalent expression, then turning to the common language cannot but be seen as advantageous, even if the participants are (future) English teachers. However, if the interlocutors do not have an alternative language in common to which to turn, then communication will be impeded. Finally, in situations such as that of pre-service teachers, in which the aim is for them to develop a high level of proficiency in the target language, code-switching may be considered as a valid possibility, though also as the last resort, and other strategies (such as circumlocution and approximation, cf. for instance Oxford 1990, 1994; Hismanoglu, 2000; Hassan et al. 2005) might be offered as more likely to contribute to L2 development and effective communication.

Regarding the use of calque or loan translation to overcome lexical gaps, the technique appears to contribute to successful communication provided the word for word translation elicits the same associations for all interactants. As previously mentioned, this may be possible in our Program, whose members share the same L1, have common linguistic norms and are acquainted with the institutional lexicon. When communication takes place beyond the boundaries of the TEP, however, with speakers of English that are not aware of the implied meaning in our speech community, translating an expression or structure literally may be imprecise and lead to confusion as well as misunderstanding. Raising awareness of this fact may contribute not only to a more proficient use of the possibilities of the target language to achieve communication beyond our own academic reality, but also it would prevent the risk of graduates naturalizing calques for referential lexical gaps as actual part of the lexicon of the target language.

Suggestions for further research

It is possible to identify a number of areas for future research if our goal is to contribute to the effective communication among (future) English language professionals. Further work could be undertaken to recognize other instances of lexical gaps, different from the ones mentioned in this contribution, which may affect interactions within the same academic speech community as well as with other speakers around the world. It would also be of interest to compare the lexical gap-filling mechanisms applied by Programs from diverse socio-cultural contexts where English is not the L1 and to evaluate how the strategies impact the communication process. Also, it would be relevant to consider not only the administrative jargon but also other aspects of institutional lexicon. The findings obtained may shed light towards the development of a sustainable course of action to overcome some of the barriers to achieve successful interaction.

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