Attaining "proficiency" in a foreign language

—— The importance of acquiring social and cultural values
of the target language community ——

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Abstract

The teaching and learning of foreign languages seem to place a great deal of importance on acquiring knowledge of the lexico-grammar aspects of the target language. For instance, when searching for materials in language acquisition and/or language teaching, one often stumbles upon an array of different resources focused on teaching and/or learning the linguistics of the target language. Accordingly, these materials would help/make the learner attain proficiency in the target language.

What does proficiency in a foreign language actually imply? Would one's profound knowledge of the lexico-grammar of the foreign language alone mean the attainment of proficiency in that language? Some argue that having social as well as cultural competence of the target language community is a very important factor when aiming to achieve proficiency in a foreign language.

This paper will present some thoughts as well as some evidence that support the view of the importance of learners acquiring sociolinguistic knowledge, social and cultural values, of the target language community when studying a foreign language, in order to attain proficiency in that

foreign language.   Japanese will be used, in this paper, as an example of a target language.

My interest in sociopragmatics has developed after the occurrence of the encounter that I am going to describe below, which took place about ten years ago while I was teaching at a junior college in Japan.   A student of mine who had been absent from school for the entire semester suddenly showed up for the final exam.   Without any explanations, she approached a seat and sat there matter-of-factly ready to take the exam.   I, being amazed at suddenly seeing her there acting with such naturalness, asked her:

"Doshite sonna nagaku yasumimashita ka?"

(Why were you absent for such a long time?)

The student, looking rather embarrassed, answered:

"Chotto..."

(A little...), "a little..." is a literal translation of "chotto...".

Upon hearing the answer "chotto..." I actually expected she would explain the reason for her long absence.   Rather, as I waited for a plausible explanation, the student, who, as time passed, seemed to grow more uncomfortable with the situation, uttered just another "chotto...".   And that was all I managed to get from the student.   Recalling that encounter now, I imagine she did think she had given me an explanation, as she went back to her seat and took the exam.

At first, being puzzled by the answer, I took it as the student lacking respect for me as an instructor.   Subsequently, as I discussed that particular encounter with a number of people, I came to understand that the student's reply to my question is commonly used in Japan.   Furthermore, I also came to know that the student probably meant to say that, for some

particular reason she would not share with me, she would rather not talk about it.

I was also quite surprised to realize that that particular expression "chotto..." is routinely used in Japan when one tries to avoid forwarding clear information in situations where, for different reasons, people would rather not speak explicitly. Donahue (1998: 24) illustrates the use of indirectness in Japanese well when he mentions that "perceived vagueness is often a matter of Japanese social norms...". From that time on, interestingly enough, I have come to see and understand how vaguely the Japanese communicate among themselves. It now sounds ironic when I hear foreign speakers of Japanese complain about the Japanese being so vague. Nakagawa also sheds light on the use of indirectness in social encounters in Japan when he points out that "Vague expressions used every day in Japan have been created out of necessity in the Japanese culture" (1998: 86).

It was only then that I came to realize that only having linguistic knowledge of a language per se does not necessarily mean having communicative competence in that language. I did know sufficient Japanese, at that time, to converse in the language without great difficulties, however I surely lacked sociolinguistic knowledge of Japanese. My lack of knowledge of cultural and social values of Japanese not only hindered my communication with the student, it also caused me to misunderstand the student. Had I known better, the whole situation might have turned out differently.

Acquiring sufficient sociolinguistic knowledge of the target language community does seem to play a very important role in language acquisition. Park and Nakano (1999: 1) do call attention to that matter with their claim that "linguistic competence of the target language cannot guarantee the sociolinguistic competence of the target language community". They also

point out that language learners are expected to acquire sociocultural and sociolinguistic proficiency of the target language community. Furthermore, Park and Nakano also mention that learning how to interact in target language environments is essential so it does not cause miscommunication or pragmatic failure.

The importance of acquiring sociocultural and sociolinguistic knowledge of the target language community when learning a foreign language has also been approached by others. For instance, Cohen and Olshtain (1981) define sociocultural competence, the knowledge of rules of appropriate use, as the ability to react in a culturally acceptable way in a context and to choose appropriate forms for the context. Namba (1989: 118) explains that learners need to know "how an expression is actually used in a culture in which the language is spoken". Namba further goes on to claim that to communicate in another language, people need to know not only what is used for the communication (linguistic rules) but how it is pragmatically used in the culture (sociocultural rules).

Hirose is yet another one to support the view of the importance of one's acquisition of cultural and knowledge of the language being learned. In her research of how idiomatic expressions are connected to cultural backgrounds, she claims that idiomatic expressions are representatives of cultural elements such as norms, social structure, and history. Hirose further states that "Learning idiomatic expressions without any reflection on cultural elements will lead to misunderstanding and possibly to mistreatment among speakers" (1998: 92). Hirose also points out that if speech acts are closely connected to cultural background knowledge, then "learning the cultural background knowledge of the target language will greatly assist in learning the target language" (1998: 93).

Yamada (1997) brings forth a very interesting and illuminating exam-

ple of how competence of the cultural background of a language community seems to be indeed indispensable in order to attain communication competence in that language.. The following is an excerpt from a business meeting which took place in Japan.

> Igarashi asks Maeda to comment on a proposal. Maeda responds only with: "Sore wa chotto..." which means "That's a little...". But Igarashi, sensing Maeda's reluctance to comment, immediately guesses that Maeda disagrees with the proposal. In a later meeting, he tells another colleague about Maeda's negative position, and even goes on to infer why Maeda disagreed. Igarashi's guesswork is noteworthy since Maeda's position on the proposal was only represented by "Sore wa chotto..." (That's a little...) (Yamada 1997: 37-38).

The above example by Yamada can also be explained according to Ramsey's claim that in Japan dissension or difference of opinion must not appear in the open because the group's harmony might seem to be damaged. She also states that from the Japanese perspective, "the direct and clear statement of opinion or intention feels invasive and pushy" (Ramsey 1998: 124-125). In her paper "Interactions between North Americans and Japanese: Considerations of Communication Style" Ramsey (1998) presents some interesting and very illuminating examples of how Japanese and foreigners' reactions to each other, of which I have selected two to present here:

> "Foreigners' Reactions to Japanese: It is irritating and a waste of time that they don't say yes or no or what they really think, clearly and directly. They seem immature and cowardly..."

> "Japanese Reactions to Foreigners: They seem childish and unpolished when they pay little attention to others' feelings and say too directly what they think."

The quotes above by Ramsey apparently indicate a lack of understanding, by the two groups, of each other's cultural and social values. The way the Japanese are seen by foreigners could be well explained by the "tatemae", "honne" and "omoiyari" concepts mentioned below in this paper. The foreigners, therefore, do not seem to have sociocultural knowledge of Japanese. The Japanese as well seem to be ignorant of foreigners' cultural and social values by just assuming them to be "childish" and "unpolished".

The same excerpt above by Yamada can also be explained by Toyama who states that "if vagueness is not good, outsponkenness is even worse. It is better to use words so as not to hurt the other person even though there would be a risk of being misunderstood" (Toyama 1996: 12). Toyama's words are a clear confirmation that the use of vagueness in Japanese is not a linguistic related imposition, but rather a social rule. His statement above can also be explained by the "omoiyari" (empathy) concept. Yamada, Donahue, Morimoto, and Nakagawa describe Japan as a culture of "omoiyari". Toyama defines "omoiyari" with the quote "We tend to be mindful of the feelings of others when we are talking to them. To use plain and direct words is to pay no attention to the other person's feelings and is more provocative than calling a spade a spade" (1996: 16).

The smoothness that seems to be generally present in communication in Japan can be well illustrated by the "omoiyari" concept described above and by these other concepts known as "honne" (real intention) and "tatemae" (frontal expression), also known as "ura" (rear) and "omote" (front), cf. Mathur (1985), Shioiri (1996), Morimoto (1995). These concepts play a central role in communication and socialization in Japan. "Honne" or "ura" which means "The real feeling one has" is supposed to be suppressed in public and give way to "tatemae" or "omote", which is the behavior that is expected by the other members in the social encounter

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taking place, so as "to harmonize with the surroundings" (Shioiri 1996: 64). Having knowledge of these cultural traits is extremely important when aiming at success in communication with the Japanese.

The misunderstanding in the conversation between the teacher and the student mentioned in the beginning of this paper can also be interpreted as a case of pragmalinguistic failure committed by the teacher. The teacher, who may have been well versed in the Japanese language, apparently did not have sufficient knowledge of the idiosyncracies of Japanese culture and society to be able to interpret the ambiguous "chotto..." uttered by the student. Thomas (1983: 102) defines pragmalinguistic failure as "the inappropriate transference of speech act strategies from L1 to L2". The teacher seemingly interpreted "chotto..." in its literal meaning (a little...), not being aware of its particular meaning in that kind of situation, and thus committed pragmalinguistic failure.

Kudo (2001) presents a very interesting example of how the lack of knowledge of the cultural and social traits of the target language community may affect communication in that language by a foreign speaker. The following is an excerpt from a conversation between a native and a foreign speaker of Japanese. The foreign speaker who, at the time spoke Japanese fluently, apparently did not have sufficient sociolinguistic competence of the language.

> F—Kono gengo wa honto ni ichiban muzukashii to omoimasu.
>
> (I really think that this is the most difficult language.)
>
> J—So desu ka?
>
> (Is that so?)
>
> F—So desu. Watashi wa ah... supeingo to furansugo to igirisu mo
> ah jouzu ni hanashimasu, keredo nihongo wa honto ni muzukashii.
>
> (That's right. I ah... speak Spanish, French, and English well,

but Japanese is really difficult.)

The foreigner seemed to have committed social pragmalinguistic failure with the statement "jouzu ni hanashimasu" (I speak... well). Whereas in the West it may be common for a person to say "I (do something) well", in Japan people would probably not say that, but rather make use of "tatemae" (frontal expression) and say that they are "not good at that". The foreigner, in this particular instance, seemed to have spoken Japanese as if she were speaking English in the West, thus failing to notice, or not being aware that in Japanese society people do not usually praise themselves. It should be noted that the foreigner worked, at the time, at an international school in Japan and she said that she had almost no contact with Japanese society. This is a case where, probably, the lack of knowledge of cultural and social values of Japanese caused the pragmalinguistic failure to occur.

In concluding, the question stated at the beginning of this paper seems to have been thoroughly discussed, taking into consideration the length of this article. There seems to be sufficient evidence to support the view that acquiring cultural and social knowledge of the target language community is a very important fact when aiming at attaining proficiency in a foreign language.

What seems to be greatly important is for one to acquaint themselves with particular aspects of the target language community such as the Japanese "honne", "tatemae", and "omoiyari" concepts mentioned above. The evidence presented in the cited examples supports the view that having cultural and social knowledge of the target language community would greatly assist one in attaining communicative competence in the target language.

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