The role of noticing in developing intercultural communicative competence

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Abstract

This paper expands Schmidt's (1990) concept of "noticing" and adapts it to the development of intercultural communicative competence (ICC), an especially relevant goal of language teaching given increased communication across cultures and the role of English as a lingua franca. Schmidt's conceptualization of noticing is presented and readjusted in light of two premises. The first is the validity of a communication model that ascribes importance to context and the negotiation of meaning and identity within that context. This view of communication, as well as the global functions of English, is congruent with the second premise, namely, the suitability of employing a culture-general approach to develop ICC as defined in this paper. What needs to be noticed in developing ICC will be identified as well as ways in which this noticing can be effected in the language classroom.

1. Introduction

The concept of "noticing" has established itself as a significant concept within the field of second language acquisition (SLA) since its introduction and continued explication by Richard Schmidt (e.g., 1990, 1993, 1994, 1995, 2001, 2003). Schmidt (1993) depicted noticing as "attended processing" (p. 35), that is, a conscious registering of the occurrence of a stimulus. Schmidt (1995) further explained that noticing refers to "surface level phenomena and item learning" (p. 29), distinguishing between noticing as lower level awareness and understanding as higher level awareness. He maintained that unless a linguistic form is noticed, it will not become intake (Schmidt, 1993), that is, it will not be encoded in memory. Noticing was thus linked to memory storage and enabled Schmidt to assert that "more noticing leads to more learning" (Schmidt, 1994, p. 18). Noticing has also assumed various roles in SLA hypotheses such as Long's (1996) "interaction hypothesis," and Swain's (1985, 1995)

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"output hypothesis," as well as in the process of "scaffolding" (see e.g., Mitchell & Myles, 2004). The concept of noticing, its related hypotheses, and the research they gave impetus to have generally assumed a goal of attaining something akin to "native-speaker" competence, whereby noticing is the first step in the process of the formation of underlying principles that represent this competence. Many studies, in fact, have supported Schmidt's claim for the benefits of noticing, demonstrating that noticing, as a result of interaction or output, was facilitative in learning lexical, morphological, or syntactic features of a target language (e.g., R. Ellis & He, 1999; Izumi & Bigelow, 2000; Nobuyoshi & R. Ellis, 1993). Noticing was additionally found to contribute to the effectiveness of feedback in the form of recasts (Doughty & Varela, 1998).

Schmidt (1993) also considered noticing to be necessary for "learning the principles of discourse and pragmatics" (p. 21) and identified the frequency of co-occurrence of form, function, and contextual features as the objects of such noticing. Although such an encoding of co-occurrences was ascribed to the realm of noticing, reasons underlying the co-occurrences (e.g., cultural values and beliefs) were not, being assigned instead to the higher level awareness of understanding. In the area of pragmatics, investigations of noticing were generally directed at ascertaining the benefits of metapragmatic discussion or of deductive instruction over mere exposure (see e.g., Félix-Brasdefer, 2006; Rose & Ng, 2001; Takahashi, 2001). Again, the pedagogical goal appeared to be an emulation of a native speaker, who followed certain pragmatic "rules." Studies addressing noticing in the area of pragmatics that did not assume native-speaker competence as their goal were virtually nonexistent. This represents serious neglect of an important type of competence, namely, intercultural communicative competence (ICC), which focuses on abilities especially pertinent to effective communication between those of different cultural backgrounds, abilities that do not include "learning" fixed rules. Given the widespread use of English as a lingua franca and increased communication across cultures, developing ICC is of special import and accordingly, has been receiving increased attention.

It is the purpose of this paper to consider how the concept of noticing can be construed and applied in the development of ICC. It will be argued that, in language pedagogy, this points to a culture-general approach (see e.g., Meier, 2003). Such an approach, while applicable to culture-specific contexts, does not have that context with its frequent goal of native-speaker competence, as its object. Rather, a culture-general approach focuses on an awareness of contextual variables informing linguistic behavior. This necessitates a readjustment of noticing in terms of its conceptualization and its targets. The first section below will address the ambiguous cornucopia of terms and descriptors surrounding noticing. The second section will provide a depiction of ICC as it relates to a constructionist model of communication, which leads to a proposed, expanded version of noticing. In light of the latter, a culture-general approach to the development of ICC will be advocated. The subsequent section will identify the targets of noticing compatible with such an approach in developing ICC. The final section will explore ways in which such noticing can be effected in a language classroom.

2. Noticing, awareness, attention, and memory

'Noticing', 'awareness', and 'attention' have, in their various forms, been interwoven in the fabric of discussions on noticing. In 1990, for example, Schmidt asserted that "noticing is the basic sense in which we commonly say that we are aware of something" (p. 132) and equated noticing with others' terms such as "focal awareness" (Atkinson & Shiffrin, 1968; Kihlstrom, 1984), "episodic awareness" (Allport, 1979), and "apperceived input" (Gass, 1988) (see also Schmidt, 1993, p. 24). Awareness is also invoked in Schmidt's (1995) distinction between lower level awareness (i.e., "surface level phenomena and item learning," p. 29), which constitutes noticing and which "is nearly isomorphic with attention" (p. 1), and higher level awareness, which is synonymous with understanding (i.e., "abstract rules or principles," p. 5). In 1993, he asserted that noticing presupposes "allocation of attentional resources" (p. 24) and that "attention is subjectively experienced as noticing" (p. 35). In his 1995 presentation of four major issues in the "conscious/unconscious controversy in foreign language learning" (p. 5), he appears to make a clear distinction between attention and noticing in posing two separate questions: i) "Can there be learning without attention?" ii) "Can there be learning without noticing?" (p. 5). In 2001, Schmidt again refers to noticing as the "subjective correlate" of attention while simultaneously equating noticing with "becoming aware of" (p. 5) and attending to ["attend to"] (p. 29). He further observes that "it is probably impossible to separate attention and awareness completely" because of: i) "the common assumption that attention and awareness are two sides of the same coin," ii) "the emphasis in psychology on attention as the mechanism that controls access to awareness," and iii) "the reliance in many experimental studies, on verbal reports as a method of assessing the allocation of attention" (p. 5).

An issue related to that of attention and noticing concerns memory storage. Based on Baddeley's 1986 model (see e.g., Baddeley & Hitch, 1994), working memory is a step above short term memory, so to speak, in that it entails the manipulation and organization of material; it is described as the attentional aspect of short-term memory and is also depicted as the problem-solving venue. If Schmidt equates noticing with attention, working memory might then be an important venue for noticing. However, if this is the case, it would then appear that noticing is elevated to a somewhat higher level of awareness than Schmidt appeared to assign it to, since he explicitly stated in 1990 that problem solving belongs to the level of understanding.

While the above (which does not even address the complex issue of conscious vs. unconscious noticing) might well leave one feeling somewhat confused and in agreement with those that find Schmidt's depictions of noticing to be problematic (e.g., Truscott, 1998), I do not believe that discarding the concept of noticing is warranted in terms of addressing actual pedagogical issues. Indeed, its retention may well have utility in identifying what is beneficial for learners to notice, thereby helping teachers identify critical pedagogical goals and ways to achieve them via enhancement of particular aspects. So, although I do not eschew the importance of

definitional and terminological issues, it is beyond the scope and relevance of this paper to become mired down in such matters. Instead, I would like to attempt to explain how noticing (and the terms that, for practical purposes, are mirrors or synonyms of it) might be usefully conceived of in the context of developing intercultural communicative competence (ICC). For the purposes of this paper, the connection between noticing and ICC focuses on an awareness of and attention to that which will enhance the likelihood of effective communication between those with different cultural backgrounds. A conceptualization of ICC as presented in the next section provides a basis for exploring the role of noticing in its development.

3. Intercultural communicative competence as negotiation: The role of noticing

The communication model that forms the basis of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) as it is construed in this paper can be viewed as a (social) constructionist model. Such a view of communication has been aptly summarized by Lustig and Koester (2005) as "a symbolic, interpretive, transactional, contextual process in which people create shared meanings" (p. 10). This is thus a less than normative view of communication, involving significantly more than production and reception of utterances generated by acquired rules. Instead it is process-oriented, which stands in contrast to communication models in which meaning resides solely in a linguistic form that is encoded and decoded. In other words, communication is a matter of negotiation. Also negotiated are one's identities and self, which is congruent with Goffman's (1967) view of self as a social construction.[1] The extent to which one must invest time and effort in the negotiation of meaning and identity will at least partially depend on the sharedness of the cultural backgrounds of the interactants. As described by Meier (2004, 2010), it is interactants' underlying cultural values and beliefs that inform perceptions of contextual variables within varied communication domains (e.g., education, home, work, religion), which perceptions, in turn, inform communicative behavior (e.g., speech act realization, address forms, turn-taking procedures). Since cultural values and beliefs may vary across cultures, perceptions of contextual variables, such as age, gender, and social class, can also vary, as can what is considered to be contextually appropriate communicative behavior. The context is thus a mediator of sorts between culture and linguistic behavior. It should also be noted that at least part of the context is dynamic and constitutive (e.g., Goodwin & Duranti, 1992; Kramsch, 2000) in that the meaning of what has been said becomes part of the context of the subsequent interaction, an on-line creation of context that can alter interlocutors' communicative strategies (e.g., Locher, 2004). Context additionally encompasses socio-historical factors that affect interactants' willingness to negotiate meaning (Meeuwis, 1994).

Negotiation therefore lies at the core of ICC. Negotiation indicates a need for both awareness (i.e., noticing) and skills to interact effectively with those different from oneself. Negotiation skills will, however, not likely be put into operation (and especially not effectively so) unless there is an on-line sensitivity to meaning

differences and possible causes. Such a view of ICC can be found in Meyer's (1991) definition of intercultural competence as "the ability of a person to behave adequately and in a flexible manner when confronted with actions, attitudes and expectations of representatives of foreign cultures" (p. 137).[2] Meyer further explains that "adequacy and flexibility imply an awareness of the cultural differences between one's own and the foreign culture and the ability to handle cross-cultural problems which result from these differences" (p. 137). Furthermore, ICC not only plays a role in handling problems in intercultural communication after they occur but is also involved in planning that may prevent a problem from occurring, or at least attenuate it (cf. Cohen, 1996; FitzGerald, 2003; Liddicoat & Crozet, 2001). Problems might include inappropriateness resulting in misunderstandings that interfere with achieving immediate communicative goals as well as overall personal, social or professional goals. Flexibility in addressing such problems would presume some sort of ability to "consider a new set of relationships and expectations" (Goodwin & Duranti, 1992, p. 31), recognizing the legitimacy of perceptions other than one's own. This would, initially, require a certain "open-mindedness," which Bruner (1990) defines as the "willingness to construe knowledge and values from multiple perspectives without the loss of commitment to one's own values" (pp. 31, 32). Being mindful of the possible parameters along which such perspectives could vary provides a basis for noticing as one is alert to the ways in which contextual variables might be differently perceived in terms of affecting linguistic behavior.

In light of the above, ICC might be viewed in terms of noticing or awareness as involving at least the following broad, interrelated and overlapping components: i) language-culture awareness, of both one's own and others' languages and cultures, ii) awareness of relevant contextual variables, iii) awareness of difference (i.e., of others' perspectives and of varied meanings assigned to relevant contextual features, which translates into an emic perspective) (cf. Alptekin, 2002), and iv) an awareness of interactional strategies (cf. Meier, 2003). Noticing plays an especially important role in regard to these components because the role of cultural values and beliefs in one's assessment of context and linguistic behavior generally remains at the unconscious level. Learners thus need to become "smart and selective noticers," being cognizant of what to notice. A first step is generally noticing incongruence with one's communicative expectations. A second and critical step is responding in a way that negotiates or resolves the incongruence. Thus, if noticing is to be an effective component in developing ICC, it clearly involves something other than discrete item learning, which was the object of noticing as initially conceived. The object of noticing also transcends a fixed co-occurrence of form, function, and contextual features. If noticing is to have value in ICC development it must entail more dimensions in dynamic interaction than its initial conceptualization did, a conceptualization that emerged within a somewhat different understanding of communication and the goals of second and foreign language learning.

The goal of ICC development is thus not a matter of attaining some illusory native speaker proficiency consisting of a canon of acquired, unconscious rules that result

from an initial noticing of particular forms, often represented by chapter titles in language learning textbooks. Instead, due to its foundation within a constructionist view of communication, the targets of noticing for ICC are not typically identified in language learning textbooks and perhaps also even lie beyond the awareness of many teachers. An important part of ICC also includes associations between underlying values and the way in which they inform various communicative behavior in a variety contexts, which, following Agar (1994), can be termed "rich points" (p. 100). This, one might argue, borders on Schmidt's higher level awareness of understanding. However, it is not a rule or principle that is being "acquired" but rather a noticing of associations between particular underlying values and linguistic behavior that can serve as a basis for working hypotheses (as opposed to fixed "rules") in a myriad of unique situations. In fact, this accords with descriptions of working memory as a problem-solving venue (see above). Indeed, the line between noticing and understanding appears to be quite tenuous (i.e., measured according to level of awareness) (see e.g., Truscott, 1998). Additionally, although short memory may be a necessary first step of noticing, it may not be sufficient to account for the type of noticing required for the development of ICC. It is unclear, however, the extent to which such distinctions and resultant controversies are of utility in addressing practical pedagogical issues. Therefore, I would like to suggest an expansion of the concept of noticing, applying it to a conscious awareness of aspects of intercultural communication that are especially relevant in the development of ICC and which are encompassed by the four ICC components identified above. This means that noticing goes beyond attending to discrete surface level features of a native speaker with a goal of acquiring the rules underlying those features. Instead the goal is to develop in learners an awareness of what needs to be attended to in order to interact effectively in a variety of situations in which the interactants lack shared underlying values and beliefs. So viewed, noticing is the basis of negotiation skills and what calls them into action. This points to a culture general approach (see Meier, 2003), which has application to both foreign and second language use as well as to the use of a language as a lingua franca. What should be targeted for noticing in developing ICC, according to such an approach, will be discussed in the next section.

4. Targets of noticing

One target of noticing involves the nature of communication and how one's own culture might inform one's communicative behavior. This is repeatedly identified as a prerequisite to an awareness of the same in others (e.g., Byram, 1993; Cortazzi & Jin, 1999; Kramsch, 1993). Such awareness can be facilitated by bringing learners' attention to cultural dimensions and orientations (e.g., Hall, 1983; Hofstede, 1980, 1991) that provide heuristic tools for noticing ways in which cultural norms may differ and their potential influence on communicative behavior. Individualism and collectivism, for example, have been demonstrated to play an important role in speech act performance across cultures, as have different orientations to power distance (Meier, 2010). Different communication styles (e.g., Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2005) and

conflict management styles (e.g., Ting-Toomey, 2000) as informed by underlying values and beliefs are likewise important aspects to attend to. Likely areas of breakdown can be signaled on the basis of such cultural orientations. Also important is attention to others' assignments of meaning that might be different from one's own (i.e., developing an emic perspective), which might also aid in the detection of potential or real miscommunication and an awareness of the need for reframing intended meanings (see e.g., Blommaert, 1991, for an example of such reframing). The distinction between description, interpretation, and evaluation (Gudykunst, 1998) is relevant in this regard as learners need to notice or be aware of how readily one leaps to interpretation and evaluation, employing only the measuring stick of one's own culture rather than considering alternative meanings based on others' differing values and perceptions of contextual variables such as age, gender, or social class. A "sophisticated" level of this type of noticing also involves an awareness of aspects of one's own and others' identity that may be more salient or less salient in particular situationalized self-presentation. For example, if one's identity as a female assumes relatively more importance in a particular context, that will likely influence communicative style and other linguistic choices.

The existence of interactional strategies, their possible differences across cultures, and possible reasons underlying these differences constitute additional targets of noticing. These may, for example, involve different communication styles (e.g., linear) or turn-taking expectations. The nature and potential use of communication strategies that are most effective given a particular interlocutor also represent an important aspect of noticing for the intercultural communicator. For example, a direct "I do not understand" as an indication of lack of understanding may work well with some, whereas with others, a more indirect approach, such as a puzzled expression, might be a preferred method of communication.

Noticing both similarities and differences will facilitate capitalizing on similarities and handling differences. However, it is critical that learners are also aware of the difference between generalizations and stereotypes and avoid deterministic categorization of their own languaculture or that of others. If interactants remain unaware of and do not attend to relevant aspects of intercultural communication, they may overlook intended meanings, making them vulnerable to damaging judgments at the personal level that can lead to equally or even more damaging national stereotypes. It thus appears that noticing is self-perpetuating: If learners are initially made aware of ways cultures might vary and the latter's relationship to communicative behavior and of contextual variables that inform certain communicative behavior, they are more likely to notice these in future interactions, and thus, be in a better position to negotiate meaning. Noticing thus also serves the goals of greater learner autonomy and leads to practice of negotiation skills that should themselves be a target of noticing. How one might facilitate the type of noticing relevant to the development of ICC will be explored in the next section.

5. Facilitating noticing for ICC in the language classroom

The suggested activities for developing ICC cited in this section are compatible with a culture-general approach discussed earlier; the role of specific cultures is viewed chiefly as a vehicle or tool for providing examples of the broader scope of intercultural communication. Specific speech behavior involved in such activities is likewise not viewed in terms of fixed formal patterns to be emulated and internalized. The activities and tasks suggested below are also based on the assumption that learner engagement (e.g., cognitive, emotional) enhances attention and thus, sustains noticing. Furthermore, the ways to encourage learner noticing cited below move away from a transmission-based mode of teaching and involve learner engagement that goes beyond presentation and practice of rules to the realms of reflection and problem-solving. Neither the purpose nor scope of this paper allows for detailed descriptions of pedagogical tasks or activities, and thus, the suggestions presented in this section are of a general ilk. Detailed descriptions of a wide variety of activities can be found in source books and publications targeted for teachers (e.g., Fantini, 1997; Fowler & Mumford, 1999; Holliday et al., 2004; Pedersen, 2004; Storti, 1994; Thiagarajan, 2005; Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2004; Utley, 2004), the number of which is too large to cite more than a few exemplary works.

One way to effect noticing is to draw on ethnographic methods and include activities such as questionnaires, observation, interviews, or surveys. (see e.g., Bateman, 2002; Byram & Fleming, 1998; Quinn, 2000). Questionnaires, for example, can encourage self-reflection, evoking awareness of one's own values, beliefs, identity, and linguistic behavior. Observation (e.g., how a particular speech act is carried out in a particular context or contexts) can help the learner notice both linguistic behavior and the effect of contextual features. Interviews also encourage the learner to listen to others as they engage the learner in face-to-face interaction. Surveys, while distancing the learner from the respondents, have the advantage of yielding a large number of responses to consider and compare. Questionnaires and surveys might address topics such as family traditions, religious traditions, educational issues, or expectations regarding marriage or profession. Discussion based on the results of activities such as the above further draw learners' attention to different ways of construing reality and can capitalize on personal engagement. Films, both commercial and didactic, represent another resource for observation, reflection, and discussion. Roell (2010), in addition to providing a list of possible films containing culturally-related issues (e.g., racism, stereotypes, intergenerational conflict), discusses ways to exploit them in the classroom (e.g., pre-viewing and post-viewing activities, projects). Strategic questions on the part of the teacher in all of the above play an important role in promoting noticing by prompting learners to focus on salient features of the communication situation.

Cultural dimensions and orientations (e.g., collectivism vs. individualism; high context vs. low context) (Hall, 1983; Hofstede, 1980, 1991) can be useful tools in raising awareness of the ways cultures might differ and provide vocabulary for

talking about such differences and considering their role in interactions. They also thus play a role in problem-solving tasks such as critical incidents, case studies, or dialogues exhibiting different culturally-related assumptions. Scenarios from published scholarly studies on speech acts can likewise serve as a springboard to elicit learners' response to the scenarios and stimulate discussion regarding how these responses would vary in light of different contextual variables and different cultural perspectives.

Simulations and role-plays represent another type of activity that engages learners, focusing on communication styles and providing opportunities to employ a variety of communication skills. One simulation, namely, the time-honored "Albatross" (Batchelder & Warner, 1977), is especially well-suited to demonstrate the distinction between description, interpretation, and evaluation, as the audience of a silent mini-drama assign meaning to what they see. The equally venerable "Barnga" (Thiagarajan & Steinwachs, 1990) is a card game simulating communication barriers, conflict, and different ways of dealing with these barriers and consequent conflict. Drama too has been employed to raise cultural awareness and has, for example, received attention in an entire section of a book by Byram and Fleming (1998).

In considering any pedagogical activities, materials or approaches, it must be recognized that specific types of activities or materials will themselves contain cultural biases that make them more or less suitable for a particular group of learners (Meier, 2007). Hence, teachers themselves must possess an awareness of relevant aspects of intercultural communication and must themselves have a relatively sophisticated level of ICC in order to be sensitive to such potential biases and to exercise flexibility in adapting activities and materials to their own particular teaching context and learners. A good starting point for this might be a teacher education book by DeCapua and Wintergerst (2004), which seeks to develop cultural awareness and demonstrate the language-culture relationship. (See also Meier, 2005, for an outline of a teacher preparation seminar on language and culture.)

A conceptualization of noticing that is useful for identifying targets relevant to ICC may well lead to demands being placed on the teacher that are quite different from those of vocabulary or pronunciation instruction. The development of ICC may thus ask educators (and researchers) "to venture out from the relative 'safety' of disciplinary boundaries and traditions to embrace methodologies, approaches and insights that take us beyond our comfort zone" (Yates, 2010, p. 302). Teachers must, however, expand their horizons to meet the needs of their students' expanding horizons and facilitate the noticing of what lies below the surface.

6. Conclusion

It is important for ICC to be part of language teaching goals. Noticing plays as an important role in the development of ICC as it is purported to do for other aspects of language. Development of aspects of ICC, however, requires a somewhat different and expanded view of Schmidt's noticing, the targets of which are not some relatively

discrete surface forms or categorical relationships between certain forms and certain contexts at the level of short term memory that are viewed to culminate in native-speaker competence. Such targets of noticing neglect the goal of ICC. An expanded view of noticing is helpful in identifying what learners need to attend to in their development of ICC. It is not a noticing that ultimately leads to rule formation but a noticing that represents a tool in communication, which necessitates a good deal of negotiation of meaning. Although the lack of clear-cut "rules" in ICC may produce feelings of uncertainty in both learners and teachers, ICC is not only a worthwhile goal but also a necessary one for becoming a productive member of an ever-growing global community. It is time to raise our awareness and attend to noticing within the context of ICC development.

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Footnotes

[1] The self viewed as interactional has even earlier origins in Cooley's (1902/1922) "looking glass self," for example.

[2] It should be noted that "foreign" should not be limited to different nation-states or alleged ethnic groups. In fact, a preferable wording would be "other cultures."

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