Developing Sociolinguistic Skills in Foreign Language Teaching

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In recent years the study of foreign languages has become sensitive to such issues as culture, context or sociolinguistic competence. The aim of this paper is to present the ways in which medical students become familiar and acquire all these skills in their foreign language classes. In the context of globalization, sociolinguistic competences should become a systematic part of medical students' instruction especially because all these skills seem to have been neglected in the process of studying a foreign language for specific purposes.

As foreign language teachers, especially when teaching a foreign language for specific purposes, we have to become aware that the teaching process has become more complex than it was twenty years ago or so. Teaching a foreign language has come closer to the idea of the student's ability not only to master the language's grammar and vocabulary but rather to know how to use the language correctly in the context in which that foreign language is used. The role of the ESP teacher (English for Specific Purposes – our main references will be to the study of English in the context of a medical school) has broadened because of some factors that have become determinant in the process of teaching a foreign language. Nowadays students no longer study a foreign language for the sake of speaking that language, but rather for more practical purposes (nowadays some of them take into account the possibility of carrying out their profession in a different cultural context). There are rare cases of students at the "Gr.T. Popa" University of Medicine and Pharmacy in Iaşi who choose to start up studying a foreign language as a beginner in the 1st year[1], their choice, thus, by and large, being dictated by some other reasons, for instance, that of wanting to apply for a scholarship in a country where that language is spoken, or even to carry out their medical profession abroad. Undoubtedly students will benefit more if they join advanced groups, as this thing will enable them to acquire more skills that will fulfill their academic purposes. A first step in

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[1] At the "Gr.T. Popa" University of Medicine and Pharmacy, students have the possibility to choose the foreign language they want to study – their possible choices are English, German and French; foreign languages are part of their academic curricula during their first two years of students' medical training.

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broadening this perspective upon the idea of teaching English for academic purposes to medical students is that of including such concepts as cultural norms, cultural expectations and even context during the English language classes. All these have in view the students' possibility to see how language and society influence each other. Sociolinguists is nothing but the study of the relationship that is established between language and society. Once students become aware of the importance of seeing the language as part of the culture and society in which it is spoken, we can go further and try to better explain what sociolinguistic competence refers to.

As we have already said, most of the medical students have an upper intermediate to advanced level in the English language so they undoubtedly master enough vocabulary and grammar to be able to communicate in the English language. However, the question is how many of them would really be competent in establishing an effective dialogue with an English native speaker[2]. Once our students find themselves in the foreign cultural contexts, they will have to be able to develop meaningful relationships with the members of the society. Details on behavior norms are always important and students will have to be able to recognize them. Thus the teacher/trainer has to be sensitive to all these sociolinguistic considerations. Nonetheless, as compared to 25 years ago, things have become more accessible up to a certain extent. Nobody denies the importance of the teacher to be fully prepared to deal with all these modern aspects related to the idea of teaching a foreign language, but let us not forget that nowadays many of the students have traveled abroad and have become aware of cultural differences. Some of them have already been exposed to other cultural backgrounds and out of these direct contacts it is easier for them to understand all these things. During seminars and discussions students who have traveled abroad should be encouraged to share experiences that prove the importance of knowing how to deal with these conventions in a different cultural background.

Another good method that might be used during class is that of watching films together (students may watch movies which are representative either for the American or British culture and civilization, *i.e.* films that depict certain aspects of the society in order to give an idea to the learner whether he/she would be able to cope with or relate to such a reality/environment). Likewise, students may also read and discuss books, magazines, listen to music or have conversations with native speakers online. Thus, students will learn how to appropriately use language in various contexts. In this new perspective, the foreign language teacher may be seen as a culturally responsive individual who can easily make sociocultural and historical connections with his/her students. Undoubtedly all these connections will influence their interactions (Edwards, Peasants 1998: 49). Troy McConachy also develops an interesting way of looking at the language in context by designing some classroom activities meant to stand for an aspect of context that is thought to

[2] Another important question to ask is whether to teach British or American culture and civilization – when asked such a question, the majority of students will be in favor of the British culture, one immediate reason for their choice being the greater accessibility they may have to this culture and civilization; nonetheless, these things being said, we can also see how important it is nowadays for teachers/trainers to develop themselves as skilled individuals who are familiar with the cultural background in which the language they are teaching is spoken.

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influence the construction and interpretation of meanings (the study contains a description of an activity meant to illustrate how some concepts such as the setting – understood as physical circumstances – has its pedagogical application, i.e. to develop awareness of the effect of the setting as influencing what is said or not said in a conversation) (McConachy 2009: 120).

As the teaching of a foreign language has become a complex process, we can see how the old perspective of focusing on vocabulary and grammar has been gradually replaced by the sensitivity to sociocultural aspects of the language. Throughout this complex process of learning a foreign language as part of the culture it belongs to, it is important for the teacher to keep himself/herself as neuter as possible, trying not to impose his/her perspective in the process of education:

> The general aim of foreign language education goes beyond acquisition of linguistic, non-linguistic, cultural information and knowledge towards a fundamental transformation of the participants' action and thoughts at a personal and social level (Chen 2005: 22).

Undoubtedly, medicine is a very important context in which to study all these issues, as doctors nowadays will have to deal with culturally diverse populations. Consequently communication becomes very important. Without fully understanding his/her patients, doctors will not be able to establish correct diagnoses. Globalization has brought about this whole new perspective even upon the medical act, so doctors have to understand their profession in this new light. No matter whether they are going to carry out their profession in Romania or abroad, doctors will have to deal, quite frequently, with patients coming from various cultural backgrounds. Besides the language barrier they may be confronted with in the beginning (understanding different accents or dialects), doctors will have to be aware of a more complex problem. This refers to the fact that, in order to avoid any possible breakdown in the communication process, doctors will have to see patients as individuals who belong to a distinctive culture. Recognizing the concept of culture as an influencing factor, doctors will learn how to behave towards their patients, as their identities will always influence or even dictate their health choices. Failing to recognize all these, doctors will not be able to establish correct diagnoses and consequently the treatment will be inappropriate:

> The significance of cultural factors in foreign language education is reflected in the notion of "in-betweenness", which refers to the locality of culture, i.e. the immediate adaption of one's performance or identity to one's textual, sociocultural and physical surroundings. We live and participate in multiple worlds simultaneously. These worlds include the home, the community, the school, the club, the church and many others. Through them we enact different aspects of our identities which are reflected in the choices we make in different facets of our lives on a daily basis (Porto 2010: 47).

Trying to focus on all these problems in the process of teaching a foreign language for specific purposes will definitively lead to better outcomes. All these will help students acquire better communicative competences. In order to achieve good communication skills in the context of medicine, teachers also have to pay attention to such details as verbal, non-verbal communication, active listening or

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cultural awareness. Developing verbal communication skills refers to the student's ability to understand what the patient says. In order to be able to fully understand their patients, students need to become familiar with the vocabulary that might be used by some age categories (children or the elderly) or even by some social groups. Non-verbal communication is as important especially when dealing with patients whose cultural backgrounds may differ from that of the doctor. Students need to understand the importance of knowing how to interpret patients' non-verbal messages (they usually show the patient's physical or emotional signs), but also to be aware of the fact that by means of the same non-verbal communication, they may also send messages that might be misinterpreted by their patients. Developing active listening skills refers to the ability of the doctor to understand all the information given by the patient and to establish a correct diagnosis based on this information. Eventually, though we have already emphasized upon this problem, cultural awareness refers to the effective communication with the patient coming from a different cultural background (patients may bring to the clinical encounter models of health and illness that may be different from those of the doctor).

In conclusion we may say that the foreign language teacher has to raise students' sociocultural awareness and prepare them to be ready to deal with all these new situations. To achieve that, the teacher has to have the ability to choose those elements that are relevant in the context in which a specific foreign language is taught.

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