영어어문교육 제2호 1996

Atmosphere and the Foreign Language Classroom

Tom Wilson
(Foreign Language Education)

Tom Wilson, (1996). Atmosphere and the Foreign Language Classroom. ***English Language and Literature Teaching 2,***

In writing this paper, it is my hope that I might be able to provide the Korean foreign language teacher with a unique perspective; specifically, the approach taken by one native speaker of English when teaching Korean foreign language students. Although I will briefly touch upon one language theory, this paper is not intended to be theorotical. Neither is it reseach heavy. It is not my aim to compile and rephrase the words of fifty other academic scholars or language theorists, both living and dead. This paper is intended to raise awareness, provide insight, and open avenues of discussion and debate, by way of my own personal teaching pxperience. In other words, this paper is meant to be accessible, practical and, above all, similar in style to my teaching approach--user friendly.

As I must constrain myself in this paper, let me limit my subject matter to one aspect of language teaching which I consider to be of the utmost importance, but

Copyright (C) 2002 Nuri Media Co., Ltd.

which I suspect is often overlooked and neglected, if it is given any consideration at all--classroom atmosphere. Or, more appropriately, the teacher's role in creating a classroom atmosphere that is more conducive to language acquisition. The reason I feel that classroom atmosphere is often neglected is because it is rather intangible, unlike the other more "concrete" (and hence more relevant, atleast in the teacher's eyes) teaching obligations such as lesson plans, grading, testing, etc. These are all things that can be seen, quantified, or have measurable results. But how does one measure or quantify atmosphere, much less go about "creating" it? Precisely because it is so intangible, rather elusive, the tendency may be to render it insignificant. At best, atmosphere can only be measured subjectively, relying on the opinion and impressions of students and teacher. But the impressions and opinions of the students are highly relevant. If the students feel comfortable, then they are more willing participants.

Recognition

But what exactly is classroom atmosphere, and how does the instructor go about creating it? I think that before answers such as these can truly be derived, the acknowledgement that the foreign language student is faced with certain hardships is in order. In effect,

Copyright (C) 2002 Nuri Media Co., Ltd.

atmosphere can not be defined prior to recognizing that a central problem is associated with language learning and is ingerent to the foreign language environment. Namely, it must be recognized that the foreign language environment is one of great stress and anxiety for a vast majority of students. While I hope that this is self-evident, I think that problems arise if the instructor simply accepts this as just "par for the course", i.e. that anxiety in my classroom. In my view then, the creation of a classroom atmosphere in which the student feels as comfortable as possible, one free (as much as possible) of learning inhibitors--self-consciousness, stress, anxiety--is just as essential and intergral as lesson plans, etc. To neglect talking calculated measures to create a more student friendly atmosphere is akin to reducing my effectiveness as a teacher.

Why create Atmosphere?

As it is, perhaps idealistically, the goal of any language instructor to try to maximize student potential, or, more properly, create the most optimal enviroment conducive to language acquisition, barriers that, in turn, interfere with learning must be minimized. If a great many of these barriers are psychological in nature--student fear, anxiety, self-consciousness, inhibition--then psychlolgical strategies are in order to reduce them.

The conscious attempt to create an atmosphere in

Copyright (C) 2002 Nuri Media Co., Ltd.

which the student feels comfortable is, in my opinion, the best method lying within the instructor's means to counteract these learning ingibitors. Any attempt then at creating atmosphere is, at its root, the calculated attempt to enact strategies within the classroom that are psychological in natrue. In other words, a pimary abjective of any activity that is designed to create a better learning atmosphere is to bring about a corresponding psychological change in the student by reducing his/her level of anxiety, stress, and inhibition, thereby, increasing his/her receptivity to the language. It goes without saying that the less ingibited or less anxious student is a more willing participant. Since command and mastery of a language can only be gained by utilizing it, the student who has engaged the language is the student who will acquire and retain more of it. This is why creating an atmosphere that is conducive to language acquistion is so essential to the language classroom. In my opinion, it is not only an integral component but an indispensable one.

In discussing atmosphere, a definition arises: Classroom atmosphere is a student friendly environment that is as externally stress free as possible. It should be empathetic, supportive, and non-threaterning. It attempts to reduce those factors that interfere with language acquisition.

Copyright (C) 2002 Nuri Media Co., Ltd.

Background-parallels From My Past Teaching Experience

Any dicussion expounding upon my approach to foreign language teaching would not be complete without drawing upon some vital analogies from my past experience. Having taught English composition at the university level in the United States, in which aspects of the speech communication class were incorporated, I was struck, as I think anyone with a simlar background would be, by the immediate parallels between an American academic icon, the speech communication class, endemic to most, if not all, universities in the United States, and the foreign language conversation class as offered at the Korean National University level. Unlike most courses offered at U.S. academic institutions, the speech communication class is exceptional in that it requires the student, foremost and primarily, to engage in oral communication, not written. It is on this basis that the student is evaluated. Both the foreign language conversation class and the speech communication class have as their chief modes of discourse oral communication. Each requires oral discourse in a manner that can be uncomfortable to the student; public speaking in the American case. Speaking in a foreign language in the other. While speaking should be automatic, essentially unconscious, especially in the case

Copyright (C) 2002 Nuri Media Co., Ltd.

of the native speaker, in actuality it often becames quite labored, even stunted, as self-consciousness becomes the norm in an environment that is psychologically threatening. Instead of confidence, the native speaker is often confronted by doubts and anxiety. In the case of the non-native speaker, the feedback I get from my students is that another, but no less inhibiting, type of self-consiousness is provoked; a 'language consciousness' that can best be defined as arising from the natural tendency to compare one's fluency and command of the native alnguage with the second language. Inadequacy develops, leading to anxiety. Given such cirumstances, it is hardlay surprisiong that Curran, in his studies of language students, found that many of them exhibited the same kinds of anxieties and fears as clients in psychotherapy.

In drawing this analogy, what I hope to illustrate is that, given two admittedly unique teaching situations, there wrer, surprisingly, many parallels. Of glaring import to me in the past, as well as in my present teaching circumstance was the amount of anxiety confronting my students. The applicability of strategises that I used in the past to create atmosphere were in many ways just as relevant and just an necessary to my present teaching ciercumstance. Anxiety is not culturally endemic.

Copyright (C) 2002 Nuri Media Co., Ltd.

The Theoretical Model

Let me introduce the theoretical model because it only serves to reinforce the necessity of creating classroom atmosphere:

According to Dulay and Burt's Affective Filter hypothesis, as summarized by Long and Richards, acquirers in a less than optimal affective state will have a filter, or mental block, preventing them from utilizing input fully for further language acquisition. If they are anxious, on the defensive, or not motivated, they may understnad the input, but the input will not enter the "language acquisition device." Given performers with identical comprehensible input, the one with the lower filter will go faster and farther.

How I Create Atmosphere-The Four Integral Aspects

Initial Anxiety

The beginning of any class period will often find individual and collective anxiety at its peak. The reason for this is twofold:

1. The student is as yet unfamiliar with that day's lesson.
2. The time factor.

Bacause the student is as yet unfamiliar with that

Copyright (C) 2002 Nuri Media Co., Ltd.

lesson, doubts are raised as to what the student may be called upon to do and whether he/she will be able to perform adequately. The unknown is alway a source of anxiety. The second reason is relatively straight forward. When an entire class period looms ahead of the student, it can be mentally distressing. There is simply more time to confront and, hence, greater room for error, miscomprehension, potential embarrassment, etc. What foreign language instructor hasm't abserved t he difference between class attitudes at the beginning of class as opposed to the last ten minute of class? More often than not, it is a move- ment from tension or reservation to relief, realxation, even restless energy. Therefore, I view the first few minutes of class as a very crucial time, and in an effort to curb initial anxiety, I always start each class period with a collective activity that does not single anyone out and can easily be performed by even the less advanced student, and is, above all, meant to put the student at ease. I have found that songs, in addition to having multi-faceted instructional value, nicely fit this criteria. I also feel that a song in any language can transcend cultural barriers. By starting each class with a song one other objective is accomplished. The student feels secure in the familiarity of one small routine. I also adopt a class motto for every class designed to put the student at ease. My class motto is, "Don't worry. Be happy." I make it a point to tell my student that, yes, learning a second language is difficult and, of course,

Copyright (C) 2002 Nuri Media Co., Ltd.

you will make mistakes, but don't worry about mistakes. It is importnat to just try your best and be happy. I have used this approach to counter the initial anxiety during the critical first two weeks of class.

Bonding

Perhaps the single greatest dynamic within the classroom is the students themselves, the relationship between any one indiviual to his peers, and the overall class personality. In the language setting especially, I think it is impeative to try to mold a tight, cohesive group that, while remaining sensitive to and promoting individual differences, is collectively unified. By collectively unified I mean united in objective, so support for one another under admittedly difficult curcumstances naturally ensues. As it is necessary for the instructor to be supportive, so too is it necessary for the students to be supportive of one another. Since the peer group itself can be a source of anxiety (no student wants to appear foolish in front of his peers), and such tensions will only be exacerbated if there is a lack of familiarity between students, I make it a priority to incorporate several bonding exercies in the first two weeks of class in an effort to create greater intimacy, and, ultimately, empathy and support. Individual introductions are necessary in the group setting, but in my view, only a first step. I like to follow this inital exercise (these

Copyright (C) 2002 Nuri Media Co., Ltd.

bonding eercises all serve to promote conversational skills) with another that actually requires the student physically move about classroom and introduce himself to his fellow students, asking/answering introductory conversational questions. By the second week, I like to incorporate an activity that, in order to be successfully completed, demands that the student engage other students in conversation. As the student makes a more personal connection with his fellow students, the class atmosphere becomes one of greater intimacy though the bonds that are formed. Hence, individual inhibition and self-consciousness are reduced, leading, overall, to a mor interactive class.

Physical Space Considerations

Although this is something that the instructor may have little control over (often a source of frustration for me personally), it must be mentioned because it too is an integral aspect of a student friendly atmosphere. The actual physical space between students, their positions relative to one another, and any physical objects (desks, tables, chairs, etc.) in the room can and do influence atmosphere. From my experience, having taught in various settings, a room with long oval table around which all the students can be seated is the most effective coversational language setting. Such a setting reduces the space between students, bringing them

Copyright (C) 2002 Nuri Media Co., Ltd.

physically, and most importantly, psychically closer together. Nonverbal language is enhanced. Eye contact increases. In the very least, I can maintain peripheral eye contact with all students when seated at the end of table which makes me a more effective communicator. Since the students are all seated around and must share the same table, it becomes somewhat akin to a communal object. Not only does a room with such a layout induce conversation, but it also keeps interest levels high because each student has more "neighbors." To draw upon an analogy, I am reminded of American comedy clubs which always seat their patrons as close together as possible because laughter is contagious. Well, so too is conversation. Factors such as these can prompt a student to speak out, incrementally contributing to his/her language development. In my opinion, the physical layout of the classroom can be the difference between a successful class and an unsuccessful one. Logic dictates that a setting in which the students must converse from across the room, or are separated by any barrier--desk, booths, etc.--is not an ideal environment. In creating a more ideal atmosphere, the oftentimes cold, impersonal lecture hall needs to be avoided.

Otherness

In literary terms "other" or "otherness" can be defined

Copyright (C) 2002 Nuri Media Co., Ltd.

as separate or distinct from oneself, alien in some way to one's own status, mode of living, culture, experience, etc. One concession I make as a foreign language instructor, which is only compounded by the fact that I am a foreigner, is that in relation to the students I am "other", separate and distinct in many ways. But I think this is a healthy and realistic concession to make, and is readily applicable to any teaching environment. Numbers alone illustrate this concept. The student to teacher ratio in any classroom will probable be 15:1 at a minimum. Obviously, the instructor is numerically set apart. So too, is the instructor distinguished from the students by his/her extensive grasp of the language. The very role of the instructor as evaluator in contrast to the students role as evaluatees also disthinguishes him/her as different. (I would continue to expound upon differences, but I think the point is evident.) What I am rejecting then, by illustrating this, is the romantic notion that the roles of teacher and student are natural, harmonious, and perfectly complement one another. In actuality, the very nature of the teacher's role distingurshes him/her as other, and is potentially one of friction, a source of stress, even alienation. By acknowledging this, I hope to minimize such potential negative consequences as student anxiety, inhibition, and self-consiousness that my presence, my role, and mmy extensive grasp of the language (to name just three factors) may arouse. How then do I minimize otherness? My approach is relatively straightforward. In

Copyright (C) 2002 Nuri Media Co., Ltd.

accordance with a student friendly atmosphere, I try at all times to bring humanistic values to the classroom. I try at all times to bring humanistic values to the classroom. I start by insisting that my students refer to me by my first name, knowing that titles--professor, doctor, mister, teacher--contribute to needless psychic distance. In truth, I feel that recognition is the instructor's best ally in minimizing otherness because, personally, I do not feel that most instructors realize that this 'psychic mechanism' operates within the classroom. After all, how can one confront that which one is unaware?

Conclusion

Although the foreign language instructor may be teaching English under different circumstances than mine, I think that the main theme of this paper is still relevant and holds value. If the instructor in interested in maximizing student potential then no aspect of language teaching should be overlooked. If such is the case, creating an atmosphere that is mor conducive to language acquisition should be a strong consideration. Although it may not be necessary to implement the strategies to the degree outlined in this paper, nor may a particular strategy prove uniformly applicable to every teaching situation, perhaps they will serve to inspire the foreign language instructor to implement strategies of his/her own.

Copyright (C) 2002 Nuri Media Co., Ltd.