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The Language of Negotiation in Management Training

Abstract

In this paper teaching Negotiation in a foreign language is seen as teaching ‘the language of Negotiation’ rather than teaching Negotiation techniques. One teaching project in a Norwegian firm is described. Method and content in the course are based on research using Negotiation data and on an ‘on-line’ needs analysis. Two teaching units are focused on: questions and ‘meta-labels’.

0. Introduction

This paper is on content and method of negotiation training in a foreign language (FL). The method follows current practices. The content in the present case focuses on two phenomena, ‘questions/intonation’ and ‘metalinguage/argumentation’, fields where linguistic and negotiation research have worked independently. Consequently we touch the question, whether we teach ‘the language of negotiation’ or negotiation strategies. Being aware that the two are intertwined, as a linguist I still choose the linguistic approach. This is in line with Mulholland (1991) who, to my knowledge, has written the first handbook to try a comprehensive introduction to Negotiation from a linguistic point of view. Within linguistics, the pragmatic perspective makes an interdisciplinary outlook necessary. One good example is Lampi (1986). She studies negotiation strategy on the basis of non-linguistic research and then investigates linguistic data for realisation of those strategies.

The project described in this paper is based on research carried out on simulated and authentic negotiations between Germans and Norwegians.

1. Objectives in FL teaching

When asked to run a three day in-company training seminar called “German for Negotiation” the question arises, whether this is to be a seminar on German, on Negotiation, on German and Negotiation, or on something else altogether? With my approach it is first and foremost a **FL teaching event**. I have a feeling that we do not always have a clear objecti-

ve and thus open up for remarks from outsiders, like: “How can YOU, being a FL tutor, teach Negotiation?” In this paper I shall give some arguments in reply.

2. From Negotiation to FL

When the Harvard Negotiation Project was first started, its goal was to improve Negotiation practices in politics, business and everyday life (Fisher & Ury 1981). Since then conferences and classes on Negotiation have mushroomed. There are in-company and external management seminars, and Negotiation classes are on the curricula of colleges and universities around the world. From my Scandinavian viewpoint I venture a guess that the lingua franca of Negotiation seminars everywhere is English.

For many university students in Europe English is a second language (**SL**), in the sense that they know it well enough to communicate on the international academic scene. Others may take Negotiation seminars in order to practise their English. Others again want to improve their **FL** English. Thus, Negotiation has found its way into FL teaching. The popularity of Negotiation classes on FL programmes has also been explained by the fact that the teaching method using simulated Negotiations is related to the communicative approach in language teaching. Negotiation scenarios induce students to speak, thus stimulating their productive and creative skills. In the case of French, German, Spanish and other FLs, the participants’ language difficulties may be so large that negotiation skills are no longer the main objective but rather the content of a FL scheme.

3. The language teaching concept

What then is the language teaching concept of Negotiation seminars? I think one has to make up one’s mind on the nature of the **proficiency or competence** to be achieved, and the **method or process** of getting there.

(1) Stern (1983, 356) lists several **proficiency models**. The traditional 4-skills-model ‘listening, speaking, reading, writing’ obviously does not apply in our case, a communicative and furthermore purely oral event. Canale & Swain’s three proficiencies: ‘grammatical competence, socio-linguistic competence and strategic competence’ (Canale & Swain 1980, 27) are a communicative approach, although I would like to extend their ‘strategic competence’ as I have done before (Neumann 1990, 283).

Canale et al restrict it to purely linguistic use, “to be used when there is a breakdown in one of the other competences” (ibid), whereas I would suggest it to cover all kinds of communication strategies in the pragmatic or ‘speech-act’ sense of knowing how to ‘do things with words’. This is of special importance for the language used in Negotiation. When you have strategic competence in this sense, you know how to act in order to arrive at your negotiation goal and also how to realize your action in language.

2) For the communicative **learning process** there is Krashen’s discussion of whether the learner arrives at his proficiency by FL **acquisition** or FL **learning** (Stern 1983, 506). For our purpose this implies finding the right balance between Negotiation games and other activities, ‘acquisition’, and the cognitive approach in intellectual activities and exercises, ‘learning’.

4. The needs analysis

The **objectives** for the seminar were developed on the basis of the above concept and on ‘on-line’ needs analysis rather than ‘pretraining needs analysis’. In this I follow the reasoning in Carter (1991, 63). My data were as follows:

- the instructions given to me by the company
- an interview within the teaching programme
- the analysis of a videotaped Negotiation game
- assessments after sessions one and two, arranged by the firm
- discussions with the participants during and after classes.

4.1. The instructions

The company asked me to plan and run a German for Negotiation seminar. I was given the following key words about the participants:

- management level
- small group
- ‘advanced’ level of FL German
- experience talking to German business partners
- difficulties attending regularly.

We planned three six-hour, one-day sessions. There would be at least a fortnight between sessions for study and preparation. I decided to spend the first session interviewing people about their needs and goals and letting them play a Negotiation game (Groth n.y.) that was video-recorded.

This would ideally furnish me with enough relevant data.

4.2. The interview

At the beginning of the first session the participants were asked to talk about their backgrounds and experiences. Four questions were put:

(1) What is your background in **German**?

Answers: None of them had had less than 2 years of German at secondary schools. One of them had spoken very little German, the others had done so more or less regularly during their employment in the firm.

(2) What is your background in **cross-cultural Negotiation and Negotiation theory**?

All had some experience, none of them had been given responsibilities in major negotiations with Germans.

One participant had given classes on Negotiation himself. Most of them had read very little Negotiation theory.

(3) Have you experienced any difficulties in business contacts with Germans that might have their origin in different **cultural backgrounds**?

All were aware of differences between the German and Norwegian ways of talking business. The answers were:

- The German mentality differs from the Norwegian mentality
- Germans speak a lot
- They articulate indistinctly
- They are more formal
- They are more polite
- They go much more into detail, asking for documentation and quantification
- They want to have everything confirmed in the written form
- They are geared towards the internal German market. This phenomenon was said to have changed during the last few years.

Difficulties because of cultural differences seemed to be an important point for the participants. Training the awareness of cross-cultural differences and the nature of cultural stereotypes seems to be a real need.

(4) Participants' own **goals**

They all unambiguously wanted to improve their **German**. Negotiation as an objective was mentioned as a marginal goal.

4.3. The video

The video was very productive. I went through the half-hour recording, listing data on grammar, idiom, pronunciation, intonation, syntax, and points to be made on the pragmatic use of the language, negotiation techniques, body language and cross-cultural matters, enough for a comprehensive teaching programme. A selection would have to be made. I chose to make a written list of the data for the participants to study on their own. Data of importance for the seminar objective were integrated in the objectives hierarchy (fig. 1) and realized in exercises and activities in the programme.

4.4. The assessments

The company's assessment form has open questions. This has the advantage of eliciting data relevant or important to the learners themselves and the drawback that some of the teacher's questions may stay un-answered. I arranged the preferred skills and activities according to the number of appearances in the assessment forms, which means that one participant may have mentioned the same point several times. This gave the following 'assessment table':

Fig. 1 The assessment table

It is interesting to note that preferences concerning **method** top the list. **Language** features take the second place: vocabulary, grammar, ‘metalanguage’ etc., pronunciation. On the whole this assessment table is not very helpful. I think this has to do with miscommunication between supplier and receiver of FL tuition. Haegeman (1991, 151) similarly sees a “gap between what they (students; my comment) say they need and what they really need”. Ad hoc talks with participants were less elusive.

5. The real need - and the objectives for the seminar

Then I changed focus. Combining the assessment table, oral remarks from the learners and a total picture of the video and interview data made me conclude that the real need was not to improve isolated skills, but to avoid **anxiety** and a feeling of **inferiority** in cross-cultural encounters. Studies on the psychology of Negotiation, e.g. Birkenbihl (1989) and Rubin & Brown (1975) confirm the importance of interpersonal relations. The question is if anxiety and the feeling of inferiority correlate in any degree with bargaining behaviour. Rubin & Brown refer to research indicating correlation between low self-esteem and behaving more aggressively and competitively in Negotiations. The tendency in the research results was “that competitive bargaining behaviour was most likely to emerge among individuals who were high in anxiety” (Rubin et al 1975, 178). As low self-esteem and anxiety correlate with low general competence, low FL competence is likely to affect bargaining behaviour as well. From this we conclude that language teaching for Negotiation purposes will gain from concentrating on skills that increase negotiators’ self-esteem, thus improving their bargaining behaviour automatically.

The **objective** for this seminar would consequently be to help everybody make the most of their present skills, or to improve their tools to do so. We put it like this to the participants:

IN THE SEMINAR YOU WILL USE YOUR GERMAN LANGUAGE IN ORDER TO GAIN MORE CONFIDENCE WHEN SPEAKING GERMAN IN NEGOTIATIONS WITH GERMANS. THIS WILL MAKE YOU A BETTER NEGOTIATOR.

Fig. 2 The main objective for the seminar

6. The programme

We planned the programme according to an ‘objectives-hierarchy’. In the (fig. 3) hierarchy the top level is the **main objective** (fig. 2). To attain that objective implies taking decisions on **content** and **method** (level 2). Following our reasoning, the optimal content meets a number of **requirement criteria** (level 3):

- making the most of learners’ existing repertoire, before adding detailed knowledge
- it takes consideration of preferred skills according to the assessment table (fig. 1)
- language skills should be related to Negotiation skills
- it comprises cross-cultural awareness training.

As to methods, those satisfying preferences in the assessment table are given priority.

The actual exercises (level 4) were chosen as to their ability to meet the requirements of level 3. In the following I shall elaborate on the teaching units ‘Questions/Intonation’ and ‘Metalanguage/Argumentation’. ‘Holding the Floor’ has been treated elsewhere (Neumann 1991, 1992).

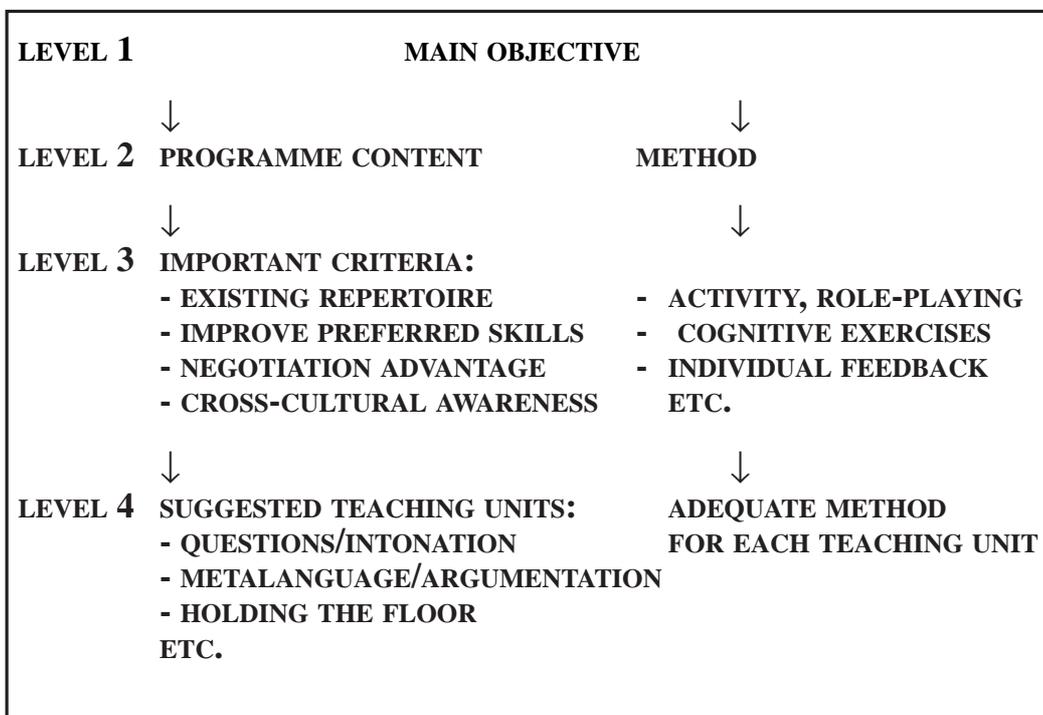


Fig. 3 The objectives hierarchy

Activities and exercises:

- Watching the video, we discussed where in the negotiation questions might be adequate.
Questions that might be misunderstood, either because they were of the wrong kind or had the wrong intonation, were highlighted and discussed.
- German intonation was practised with the participants moving around, partly to music, repeating the intonation tunes, making up their own questions etc. This was a very popular exercise.
- We touched on the topic of what questions were appropriate under what social circumstances in Norway and Germany.
- A new Negotiation exercise with a scenario to elicit questions, ended the session.

This teaching unit satisfies the criteria in the objectives hierarchy. The same applies to the next teaching unit.

6.2. Metalanguage/argumentation

In order to avoid misunderstanding, you can ‘label’ your questions, saying:

6 *MEINE FRAGE IST: Was ist der Preisunterschied?*
‘My question is: what is the price difference’

The label (*MEINE FRAGE IST*) signals the following or preceding speech act. It is metalanguage. I suggest ‘meta-label’ for the phenomenon. This labelling seems to be more common with German speakers than with Norwegians in intercultural situations. Authentic taped material indicates this. If that is the case we have still the question whether that is due to **cross-cultural differences** or to the **intercultural setting**. Here are some examples from an authentic audiotaped negotiation:

German: *JA DA WÜRD ICH VORSCHLAGEN: gehn wir mal die einzelnen Artikelgruppen durch.* ‘I would suggest: let us go through the different product groups’.

German: *JA DESWEGEN SPRECH ICH DAS THEMA AN: wir haben die gleiche <Produkt> für dreißig Mark.* ‘Therefore I want to touch the topic: we have the same product for thirty marks’.

German: *WAS ICH NOCH DAZU SAGEN MÖCHTE: der Trend geht zur <Produkt>.* ‘What I would like to add is: the trend is for this product’.

The question is also whether meta-labels are more common in professional than in everyday dialogue. They certainly have the function to structure speech and help to avoid ambiguity and I would claim that they indicate **strategic competence** in the sense mentioned above (3). The FL speaker can build up a repertoire of meta-labels for all sorts of speech-acts. This helps her or him to get a few seconds' respite to phrase the actual act and it has prepared the partner for what is coming. 'Meta-labels' can also signal topic change: *Ich möchte noch ein anderes Thema ansprechen - und zwar ...* 'I would like to take up another question - namely...'. Meta-labels can help you in a heated bargaining phase, when you have word finding difficulties and would rather say nothing. With a meta-label at hand you have better chances to make your partner stop and wait for you to formulate your argument.

Activities and exercises:

- Passages from the video were shown, where the arguments were ambiguous or incoherent. We discussed why and found that poor command of a language easily makes your arguments go wrong.
- A list of 'meta-labels' was presented in an exercise to improve ambiguous arguments in the video. It proved that the participants actually had a lot of German labels in their repertoire. Now they became aware of their function and will obviously use them more often. We also discussed whether Germans used labels a lot.
- A typical argumentation chain was trained. Negotiator A suggested a solution to a problem or a price from a given list, Negotiator B objected and A in his turn replied with an argument. In all steps 'meta-labels' were expected before the actual speech-act. Examples:

A Suggestion: *DANN WÜRDE ICH VORSCHLAGEN: Sie liefern uns die ersten 300 Stück am 15 Mai.* 'I would suggest: you deliver the first 300 pieces on May 15th'.

B Objection: *DA MUSS ICH ABER EINSPRUCH ERHEBEN, HERR OHM: Wir hatten uns doch auf den 1. Juni geeinigt.* 'I have to object: We already agreed on June 1st'.

A Argument: *DARF ICH SIE VIELLEICHT ERINNERN/BERICHTIGEN, HERR KNOPF?: Die Hauptbestellung gilt für den 1. Juni, das ist ganz richtig. Aber wir waren uns doch einig, daß Sie 300 Stück im voraus liefern.* 'May I remind/correct you: the main order is for June 1st. You are quite right there, but we agreed on 300 pieces in advance'.

7. Concluding remarks

In this paper it is argued that teaching Negotiation in a foreign language is teaching 'the language of Negotiation' rather than teaching Negotiation techniques. Recent research has made us aware of certain linguistic phenomena that are also important criteria of Negotiation per se. I have concentrated on describing two such phenomena in the teaching process: questions and 'meta-labels'.

I have had the privilege to present my project to professional opinion. The phenomenon 'meta-label' has been discussed among a group of management trainers and, on another occasion, among scholars of linguistics. Two critical questions made on these occasions deserve special attention: (1) Should one teach such phenomena as 'meta-labels' at all or do they belong to the parts of speech that come intuitively? (2) Are 'meta-labels' in fact identical with 'gambits' or, in some instances, 'hedges' and thus to be attributed not to the language of negotiation but to discourse in general?

Looking at authentic negotiation data, I have the strong impression that 'meta-labels' have the force to structure speech, signal content, avoid ambiguity etc. (cf 6.2). These functions all have some degree of the strategic dimension attributed to Negotiation. There are still many questions concerning their use and frequency as discussed above in 6.2. and I feel encouraged to look further into the matter.

There is an additional didactic point to be made: questions and meta-labels have a transfer function. They can be used in many contexts. This improves learners' general command of the language and thus makes them more secure and consequently better FL Negotiators.

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FL teaching tools and objectives mentioned by participants in their assessments	number of times mentioned	type of skill or objective
Practising the language, activity, role-playing	9	method
Feedback, correcting individual errors, individual attention	8	method
Negotiation	6	negotiation
Vocabulary	4	linguistic
Grammar	3	linguistic
Culture, foreign mentality	3	culture
Metalanguage, structure of speech,		
Pronunciation	2	linguistic
Material	2	material