

University of Macau Linguistics Seminar

Title: “Intercultural interaction: Teacher and Student Roles in the Classroom of Portuguese as a Foreign Language in Macau, China”

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Time: 18.00

Venue: HG01

Abstract

The Asian tertiary educational context is a learning environment usually characterised as being different from Western learning contexts (Grosso, 2007; Watkins & Biggs, 2001; Scollon, 1999; Stephens, 1997), both in terms of teacher and learner roles. What seems to be at stake in this statement of “difference” regarding the Asian learning context is the cultural background. From a Western perspective, Chinese students are usually viewed as passive (Grosso, 2007; Cheng, 2000). However, this perspective is on the one hand culturally biased and on the other hand does not consider that in the classroom of foreign languages the linguistic and cultural identities of both teachers and students with different cultural backgrounds are in a process of negotiation (Gumperz, 1982a, 1982b; Goffman, 1959). From our experience, once requested, the Chinese students not only interact, but also show that, during class, they can be motivated, interested and stimulated. Stephens (1997:122) mentions a similar experience: “It is my experience that Chinese students will participate freely and independently where they understand the language that is being used, and where the ground rules for the expression of the ideas are made clear.” We believe that to consider cultural traits as determinants for students and teachers’ behaviors is to forget that we exist, create and recreate ourselves in language. Interactions build and occur in a space of cultural, religious, ethnic, age, linguistic, social class, gender, power diversity (Teixeira e Silva, 2009). Therefore, taking those traits into account, our investigation draws on the principles of Interactional Sociolinguistics (IS) (Gumperz, 2008, 2001; Teixeira e Silva, 2008, 2004; Ribeiro e Garcez, 2002; Schiffrin, 1994, 1996; Gumperz, 1982, 1991; Goffman, 1959, 1967, 1974). In terms of language and education, IS can be used both as a methodology to understand what is happening in the interactions in classroom, and as a theoretical orientation in order to plan and organize the teaching-learning process.

Within the context of language teaching, especially in the past decades, the concept of culture has become an important and integral part of second and foreign language teaching. The communicative approaches to language learning and teaching have emphasized the importance of culture for communication. Not only is the knowledge about the culture one learns vital for the learning process but also that knowledge has to be built through interaction. This construction of cultural and linguistic knowledge is vital in the process of L2 learning, since it strengthens and (re)shapes the beliefs and attitudes about the other culture and language, simultaneously fostering confidence in one’s language abilities (Clément et al., 2006). The concept of culture is broad (Cortazzi et al., 1999:197; Hinkel, 1999:01), since it deals not only with the cultural beliefs of those who learn, but also with the cultural beliefs of those who teach. Furthermore, the concept of ‘target culture’ has also become a focus of most L2 syllabi. But if the teaching of the target culture can be viewed as a positive aspect of L2 teaching and learning, cultural values and beliefs, including learning cultures and beliefs (Nae-Dong, 1999:515), can pose problems to the participants in the process, whenever they are considered to be at odds.

This mismatch, according to Cortazzi et al. (ibid.:213) “(...) can be improved if the teacher understands the students’ culture of learning”. Nevertheless, this is only part of the picture, since from an interactional sociolinguistic approach the classroom context creates the conditions for role and identity reconstruction of both teachers and students.