

# Linguistics across Cultures: The Impact of Culture on Second Language Learning

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### Abstract:

The purpose of this article is to discuss the inseparable relation between culture and language and the implementation of instructional strategies for teaching second language through culture to enhance students' linguistic comprehension. Language is not only the product of culture, but also is the symbol of culture (Gleason, 1961). Culture must be incorporated outright as an essential component of second language learning and teaching. Only after cultural issues become an inherent part of the language curriculum and instruction, can students be successful in their target language learning. Second language teachers, therefore, should pay more attentions to the diversities of cultures, identify key cultural items in every aspect when they design a language curriculum, and apply appropriate teaching strategies to learning activities in order to help students to bridge the culture gaps.

The purpose of this article is to discuss the inseparability of culture and language and to propose ways of implementing instructional strategies for teaching second language through culture to enhance students' linguistic comprehension. People who live in different areas of the world have different cultural backgrounds and use different languages. Language and culture appear on the surface to be two distinct fields, but they have an intertwined relationship and affect each other mutually. Gleason (1961) indicated that languages are not only the products of cultures, but also are the symbols of cultures. The development of a language frequently affects its associated culture, and cultural patterns of cognition and custom are often explicitly coded in language.

Furthermore, language is also a social institution, both shaping and being shaped by society (Armour-Thomas & Gopaul-McNicol, 1998). This means that language is not an independent construct but social practice both creating and being created by the structures and forces of social institutions within which we live and function. Certainly, language cannot exist in a vacuum and there is an inevitable kind of "transfusion" at work between language and culture (Fairclough, 1989). It follows, then, that learning a new language will also involve grappling with the notion of culture in relation to language.

### **Definition of Culture**

According to Condon (1973), culture can be defined as a way of life. No matter where

people live, their behaviors and thoughts follow and are generally based on their own cultures. Culture has many different dimensions. It includes ideas, customs, skills, arts and tools that characterize a group of people in a given period of time; it is also the beliefs, values, and material objects that create our way of life. Culture establishes a context of cognitive and affective behavior for each person. It influences individual estimation and attitudes, and can also have an effect on practical aspects of life such as hobbies.

Culture is also a matter of habit, and it is habit that becomes tradition and tradition that gives rise to culture. Local people begin with habitual actions and go on to create common stereotypes. Condon further explained that stereotypes assign group characteristics to individual purely on the basis of their cultural membership. The cultural stereotypes affect how people think, speak, act, and interact with one another. Samovar, Porter, and Jain (1981) also stated that culture and communication are inseparable because culture not only dictates who talks to whom, about what, and how the communication proceeds, but also helps to determine how people encode messages, the meanings they have for messages, and the conditions and circumstances under which various messages may or may not be sent, noticed, or interpreted. In a word, culture is the foundation of communication.

Without culture, we can not understand the lives and motivations of others and connect with their concerns and interests. Culture is inherent in our being and a powerful human tool to develop our society, add to our knowledge, and establish the relationships between

people. However, culture is fragile. The traits of culture are constantly changing and easily lost. If we do not value it, we will lose it eventually.

## What is Linguistics?

Linguistics is the scientific study of language. It is a foundational discipline in the sense that it bridges the social sciences, the natural sciences, and the humanities (Harris, 1951). Linguistics is an exciting field, not only because of its own achievements, but also because of its contributions to other fields. In the language domain, the study of linguistics endeavors to answer many questions, one of which is: What is language and how is it represented in the mind? Linguists focus on describing and explaining language. It is a discipline concerned with how languages are similar to and different from one another. In addition, linguistics is also a social science that shares common ground with other social sciences such as psychology, anthropology, sociology, and archaeology. For this reason, to understand the changing nature of language, we have to look at psychological issues, such as learning ability and perception, and social factors. We need to understand the structures and functions of languages which play a part in our social activities in order to be a successful use of language.

### Structure of Language

Language is a system of symbols and rules that is used for meaningful communica-

tion. In many ways the structure of language reflects the structure of how our minds process the world. According to Douglas (2000), there are four different dimensions of language. There are: competence and performance; comprehension and production; nature and nurture; and universal grammars. Three questions need be considered before analyzing the structure of a language:

1. What are the rules or principles that predict how sounds are made and how are they used (phonology-patterning of sounds)?
2. How do sound sequences convey meaning and how are meaningful sound sequences strung together to form words (morphology-patterning of sound sequences and words)?
3. How are words strung together to form phrases and sentences (patterning of phrases and sentences)?

Understanding a language should first involve understanding its patterns of sound. All languages have definite patterns in the sounds that the speaker use, how those sounds are combined to form symbols, and how those symbols are organized into meaningful sentences. Douglas (2000) further indicated that each language structure consists of four different areas: phonology (the basis of speech sound), semantics (word meanings and organization of concept), grammar (include Morphology and Syntax), and pragmatics (the use of language in contexts). In fact, some languages have similar structural patterns while others are totally different. One of the

reasons why some people have difficulty learning another language is often related to language structures. For instance, Chinese and English languages have unique and totally different structures.

However, the structure of a language can be learned because human beings have a natural and inherent competence to acquire languages. According to language acquisition theory, language learners usually need a transformational period when they are learning a new language. They must apply and compare the structures of their mother tongue to the new language in order to understand its patterns. A good example of this is in bilingual education. The theories of bilingual education believe that when new second language learners encounter an unfamiliar language in the first time, they are often confused and disoriented. But, after becoming familiar with the structure of the language, they eventually discover its rules and how the various parts are interrelated (Krashen, 1994).

### Functions of Language

Language is a system of signals, including voice sounds, gestures or written symbols which encodes and decodes information. The goal of language is to communicate meaning. When we begin to develop our language abilities, the main purpose is to communicate or interact with others. Halliday (1973, p. 10) suggests that the functions of language can be separated in seven areas, included:

1. Instrumental function: when language is used to manipulate the en-

vironment, to cause certain events to happen.

2. Regulatory function: when language controls events. The regulations may encounter the approval or disapproval of the listener.
3. Representational function: when language is used to make statements, convey facts and knowledge, explain or report.
4. Interactive function: when language serves to ensure social maintenance, this implies knowledge of slang, jargon, jokes, folklore, cultural mores, politeness, and formality expectations in social exchange.
5. Personal function: when language expresses feelings, emotions, and personality.
6. Heuristic function: when language is used to acquire knowledge and to learn.
7. Imaginative function: when language is used to create tales, write a novel, poetry, tongue twisters, and etc.

All functions of language lead back to the three elements that are indispensable to the formation of a proposition: the subject, the predicate, and the link between them. Each function has its objective to help us to deal with the necessities of daily life.

### The Relationship between Linguistics and Culture

Language and culture are intertwined, and one will affect the other. Language and

culture have a kind of deep and symbolic relationship. Language stands for the whole culture because language represents culture in the minds of its speakers. Conversely, culture also symbolizes language and is summed in the economic, religions, and philosophical systems of a country.

### **Language Affects Culture**

Language is formed to present our ideas or concepts; these can change depending on which cultural elements are dominant at any given moment. Whenever language expands, the culture changes. An obvious advantage of human language as a learned symbolic communication system is that language has infinite flexibility. This means that the meaning of a word can be changed, and then a new symbolism is created. For example, the English word “Nice” now generally means pleasing, agreeable, polite, and kind. But, in 15th century “Nice” meant foolish, wanton, lascivious, and even wicked. This simple example reveals that languages can evolve in response to the changing historical and social conditions. As we know, the culture of the United States is made up of many different cultures and languages. Each of these individual cultures is impacting on, shaping, and redefining the American culture. Many new words are being added normal American daily speech. For example, the sentence “long time no see” is not standard English. It was translated from Chinese; others like sushi and tofu also appear in American society. People accept and understand them because these adaptations have already become a part of the “lo-

cal” culture and blended into people’s lives (Allison & Vining, 1999).

### **Culture Affects Language**

Culture can be defined as a learned system of values, beliefs and/or norms among a group of people (Greey, 1994). Broad definitions of culture include ethnic background, nationality, gender, disability, race, sexual orientation, and religion. Culture not only changes people’s values and habits, but also affects people’s language and behaviors. Cultural knowledge is crucial in achieving linguistic proficiency, and the culture of a society can be changed depending upon the language used. For instance, some old words remain even when they are no longer used cultural. New words emerge as they become identified with particular cultural activities. The slang words used by our parents were very likely different from those we use today. Different eras often have differing “pop languages”. These languages are mostly likely to be influenced by TV programs, politics or music, and little by little they create their own cultural trend. Examples of this can be seen with the Beatles and most recently in Hop Pop music. In brief, language is always cultural in some respects. Language should be conceptualized an integrated as part of a society and its culture.

### **Second Language Learning is Cultural Learning**

According to the National Standards for Foreign Language Education project (1996),

students cannot truly master new language until they have mastered the cultural context in which the new language occurs. This means that understanding a new culture is an important element in achieving the success in second language acquisition. In fact, the learning of language and the learning of culture can be compared with a child's first experiences with the family into which he or she is born, the community to which he or she belongs and the environment in which he or she lives (Lu, 1998). When we are infants, we acquire our first language in a natural way because our society, our environment, and our culture continually feed us. Similarly, when we acquire a new language, we also need to ingest the new culture's nutrients.

The perception that teachers have of a student's culture may have a positive or negative effect in the learning process of a second language (Stevick, 1982). To be a second language or bilingual teacher, cultural perception and intercultural training is very important. If children are given cultural knowledge, immersed in a culturally rich environment, and exposed to culturally basic material, they may learn the second language with more ease because their background knowledge about the second-language culture will make comprehension less difficult.

As Lado (1957) mentions in his book *Linguistics across Cultures*, if certain elements of a second language differ greatly from the student's native language, that student is likely encounter difficulties. It can be assumed from this that the learning of second language is facilitated whenever there are similarities between that language and the learner's

mother tongue because languages usually have differences of syntax, pronunciation, and structure. It is perhaps through cultural support and understanding that the diversities of languages can be resolved and students' learning stresses can be reduced.

### **Six Recommendations as Instructional Strategies for Teaching Second Language within a Cultural Framework**

Second language learning involves a number of different dimensions, including grammatical competence, communicative competence, language proficiency, and cultural understanding (Thanasoulas, 2001). Teaching second language is not simply about giving speeches about syntactic structures or learning new vocabulary, but should incorporate cultural elements. Cultural activities and objectives should be carefully organized and incorporated into second language lesson plans to enrich the teaching context content. Six proposals for strategies to include cultural items in the second language classrooms are described in the following section.

#### **Strategy I: Provide Culturally Learning Materials**

The use of appropriate materials can help students engage in real cultural experiences. These materials can include films, news broadcasts, television shows, Web sites, magazines, newspapers, menus, and other printed matters. Teachers can adapt their use

of cultural materials to suit the age and language proficiency level of the students. For example, beginning language students can watch and listen to video clips taken from a television show in the target language and focus on such cultural conventions as greetings. The teacher might supply students with a detailed translation or give them a chart, diagram, or outline to complete while they listen to a dialogue or watch a video. Using appropriate audiovisual resources can strengthen students' images of the target culture and enhance their second language learning.

### **Strategy II: Using Common Proverbs as Transferred Tool**

A discussion of common proverbs in the target language can help students to understand how the proverbs are different from or similar to proverbs in their mother tongues. This can also help them to understand how differences might underscore the historical and cultural background of a country (Cicarelli, 1996). Using proverbs as a transferred tool to explore two different cultures can guide students to analyze the similarities and dissimilarities of cultures. It is also a good method for students to explore the values that are often represented in the proverbs of both the target culture and their own.

### **Strategy III: Apply the Role Play as Sociocultural Approach**

Role play is also a useful instructional technique in a sociocultural approach. A sociocultural approach is the most useful method

currently applied in second language instructions (Wertsch, 1991). The major objective of a sociocultural approach is to prepare learners for intercultural communication and dialogue between cultures. According to Savignon (1997), sociocultural strategies can be seen as one of the most efficient ways for learners to achieve sociocultural competence within second language communicative competence. Tomalin and Stempleski (1993) further indicated that role play activities can examine cultural behavior and patterns of communication. For example, in one of these role plays, students can dramatize an incident that happened to them and caused cross-cultural misunderstanding. In this way, it will enable them to develop communicative strategies to overcome similar problems in real second language communication.

### **Strategy IV: Encourage Students Search and Present through the Culture Capsules**

The use of culture capsules is one of the best-established and best-known methods for teaching culture (Jerrilou, 1979). The concept of cultural capsules was developed by Taylor and Sorenson in 1961. It is a brief description of some aspects of the target language culture alongside contrasting information from the students' native language cultures. The contrasting information can be provided by the teacher, but it is usually more effective to have the students themselves point out the contrasts. Taylor and Sorenson further suggest that students can be presented with objects or images that originate from the target culture. The students are then responsible for finding informa-

tion about the item in question, either by conducting research or by being given clues to investigate. They can either write a brief summary or make an oral presentation to the class about the cultural relevance of the item. In fact, Brigham Young University has already published culture capsules entitled “Culturgrams” for 100 different countries. Each Culturgram is divided into sections on family lifestyle, attitudes, customs and courtesies, and history. Through the practice of Culturgrams, students can compare and contrast the customs and traditions of other cultures with their own.

#### **Strategy V: View Students as Cultural Resources**

Currently, second language classrooms are more culturally and ethnically diverse than they have ever been. Teachers can utilize the resources this provides. Teachers can invite exchange students, immigrant students, or international students into the classroom as expert sources to present aspects of their own cultures. In this learning activity, students not only learn the diversity of cultures, but also have opportunities to organize and make connect between their native culture and target language culture through these presentations.

#### **Strategy VI: Use Computer Technology to Help Student Gain Cultural Information**

Educators (Salaberry, 1999; Rost, 2002) indicate that the current computer technology has many advantages for second language and cultural learning. A computer and its attached

language learning programs can provide second language learners with more independence in the classrooms and allow learners the option of working on their learning materials at any time of the day. Second language students usually come from different countries and have different cultural backgrounds. It is difficult to create a large variety of different learning environments due to the limited space in a normal classroom. The use of computer technology can provide multicultural interactivities without students having to the classroom. It is easy to use computers to create various virtual spaces in order to meet each learner’s needs. Today, the communications of 580 million network users and the information of 4 billion websites operate as a big library. Through the computers and the Internet, second language learners can link to anywhere and at anytime to access to appropriate material and information on learning. The World Wide Web can provide instantaneous access to websites in other countries. Learners can find resources written in the target language and learn about other countries’ cultures. Those websites cover a variety of topics including news, sports, entertainment, and health, etc. They provide various cultural learning opportunities for students to pursue their cultural understanding and practice their reading and vocabulary skills.

#### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this article is to discuss the inseparable relation between culture and language and to purpose ways to implement



instructional strategies for teaching second language through culture to enhance students' linguistic comprehension. Cultural learning helps us to discover that there are a multitude of ways of viewing the world. Understanding the relationship between culture and linguistics will help us to develop instructional strategies and pedagogies for teaching second languages. In the information driven world, language ability gradually becomes an essential skill. According to Kramsch (1993), culture in language learning is not an expendable skill. For achieving true linguistic comprehension, culture and language should be learned together. After all, the more cultural concepts we learn, the more language abilities we gain; the more language we gain, the more competitiveness we have.

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