

Cultural Perspectives Toward Language Learning

Li-Li Lin

Alliant International University

October 8, 2008

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	3
STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM.....	4
LITERATURE REVIEW.....	5
Definition of Culture.....	5
The Role of Cultural Context in Language learning.....	6
Cultural Awareness and Language Learning.....	8
Techniques to Develop Students' Cultural Awareness.....	10
Teacher's Role in Teaching Culture and Language.....	11
CONCLUSION.....	13
RECOMMENDATION.....	13
REFERENCES.....	15

Abstract

Cultural conflicts may be derived from using inappropriate language. Appropriate linguistic-pragmatic competence may also be produced by providing various and multicultural backgrounds. Culture and language are linked together naturally, unconsciously, and closely in daily social lives. Culture affects language and language affects culture through daily behavior and conversation. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the relationship between language and culture in order to develop students' cultural awareness and to prepare teachers to teach foreign language effectively through cultural cognition in diverse classrooms.

Introduction

Cultural issues have become an increasingly important part of second language acquisition. There is no doubt that culture and language are inseparably linked, which means that concepts of culture play a predominant role in understanding a language, especially a second language. While conflicts about cultural issues are inevitable, one strategy for solving culture conflicts is to use language communication to effectively create a "double-win" situation. In other words, we not only create a peaceful and harmonious global world, but also acquire language naturally and profoundly through learning the foreign culture. Kuang (2007) supported this idea by stating that "Learning a foreign language not only simply learned its pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary, but also learning of its culture" (p.74).

To be more specific, cultural learning and teaching obviously influence linguistic knowledge, especially in foreign language expression. In fact, if educators only focus on teaching linguistic knowledge, it is not easy to achieve successful interactions with the native speakers who are from different cultures. Moreover, cultural misunderstanding or cultural shock may have a greater impact than linguistic learning because they may cause miscommunication

between native and foreign speakers. As culture is knowledge which is shared and linked with people, it also refers to the rules and behavior which influence people who live in one nation. Kuang (2007) mentioned that language is a tool for communicating as well as a predominant aspect of anthropological phrase of culture, and the two aspects of language and culture can never be separated. Therefore, the purpose of this proposal is generally to discuss the relationship between culture and foreign language, to develop students' cultural awareness, and to highlight the teacher's role in teaching foreign language through cultural participation.

Statement of the Problem

Traditional EFL teaching focuses on teaching linguistic competence such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Most EFL teachers emphasize the process of how to teach English, how to effectively use grammar in writing composition, and how to translate from Chinese to English. Educators in Taiwan tend to overemphasize the function of language, but ignore teaching the related culture (Kuang, 2007). Generally, one cannot learn a foreign language broadly and profoundly without also understanding the meaning of culture. Additionally, cultural misunderstanding and misjudgment actually do lead to failures of language communication. For example, Chinese people are likely to say "senior citizen" or "elderly citizen" instead of "old people" because most Chinese people are more sensitive to their age. They carefully avoid using "old" when talking about age and appearance. Similarly, when they are talking about the term "lover" or "wife", these two concepts are totally different; a Chinese man frequently calls his wife "lover", which could be misunderstood by those from another culture (Muir, 2007). Based on the above example, it is obvious to see that cultural learning does play an important role in communicating with people. Before communicating with people who are from different countries, understanding their cultural constraints is an essential consideration in maintaining a

good friendship with these diverse people. Therefore, the link between understanding culture and language is crucial.

Literature Review

This Literature Review illustrates the implications of the inclusion of culture in EFL teaching and learning. It not only investigates the interconnection between culture and language, but also explores the cultural awareness of students and teachers in second language acquisition in Taiwan. The main concepts of this study consist of: a) Definition of culture; b) The Role of cultural context in language learning; c) Cultural awareness and language learning; d) Techniques to develop students' cultural awareness; and e) Teachers' roles in teaching culture and language.

Definition of Culture

Goodenough (1997, as cited in Kuang, 2007) defines culture as consisting of “whatever it is one has to know or to believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members. Culture is not a natural phenomenon; it does not consist of things, people’s behavior or emotion. It is rather an organization of these things. It is the form of things that people have in mind, their models of perceiving, relating and interpreting them.” (p.75). Rivers (1981) stated that culture involves “Children growing up in a social group [learning] ways of doing things, ways of expressing themselves, ways of looking at things, what things they should value and what things they should despise of or avoid, what is expected to them and what they may have expected of others. These attitudes, reactions, and unspoken assumptions become part of their way of life without their being conscious of them.” (p. 316).

Pu (2002, as cited in Muir, 2007) also divides culture into the following three levels:

- (1) High culture, including politics, philosophy, education, literature, art, etc.

- (2) Deep culture, including sense of value, mode of thinking, code of conduct, religious beliefs, criterion of morality, etc.
- (3) Popular culture, including the patterns of customs, ceremony and propriety of social contact, way of life, family patterns, and even concrete catering culture, tea culture, football culture, etc (p. 38).

In fact, culture is the predominant part of our life; it is not only related to our living experiences, but also influences communication while we are growing up and learning to use language in encounters with different people. Kuang (2007) indicated that “Language is the carrier of culture and culture is the content of language. There is no language without culture content” (p.75). Moreover, Brown (2007) also mentioned that “A language is part of culture, and a culture is a part of a language” (p.133). Thus, knowing the relationship between culture and language will help remind both teachers and students the importance of the role of cultural context in foreign language learning.

The Role of Cultural Context in Language Learning

Teachers’ inadequate cultural knowledge is a big barrier when teaching a foreign language. Most teachers in Taiwan lack appropriate information and knowledge to incorporate cultural context in language teaching. Instead of teaching foreign culture, most EFL teachers only focus on their language teaching in grammar patterns, structures, functions, and the use of vocabulary (Muir, 2007). Unfortunately, there are no cultural orientations, cultural training programs, or cultural identity courses for teachers to learn before teaching a foreign language. Additionally, few teachers incorporate cultural awareness into their curriculum design; therefore, students will probably not have enough appropriate opportunities to learn culture through learning a foreign language. Generally speaking, the educational systems in Asian countries like Japan, Taiwan, and Korea, students respect teachers by not asking any questions rather than challenging the

teachers' authority in class. Most students just sit quietly and take notes while listening to the teachers' lectures. Unlike American students, few EFL students raise their hands to ask questions directly. Asian students regard teachers as an authoritative representative and always ask questions politely after class, which is seen as a virtue in traditional Asian countries (Lai, 2007). Lai also indicates that there are some strategies that EFL teachers in Asia may adopt such as using meaningful and applicable materials, creating a harmonious classroom atmosphere, and designing different cultural activities to help students understand more about cultural context in language learning. In other words, language teachers have the predominant responsibility not only to equip students with the knowledge of cultural background but also to improve students' intercultural communicative skills in learning a foreign language. Overall, teachers must not only help students increase their linguistic ability, but also strengthen their cultural awareness and respect for culture in language teaching.

Brown (2007) suggested the following guidelines regarding cultural context in classroom teaching (p.133):

- (1) A student's cultural identity is often a deeply seated bundle of emotions. Practice empathy as you relate to your students in cultural matters: behavior patterns and expectations; expected relationship to authority, family, and peers; ambiguity, tolerance, and openness to new ideas and ways of thinking; students' attitudes toward their own and the L2 culture; their view of individualism versus collectivism; linguistic conventions of politeness, formality, and other socio-pragmatic factors.
- (2) Recognize the cultural connotations and nuances of English and of the first language of your students. Capitalize on them in your teaching.
- (3) Use your classroom as an opportunity to educate your students about other cultures and help them to see that no one culture is "better" than another.

(4) As cultural differences emerge, help your students to appreciate and celebrate diversity.

Especially in an ESL context where students in the same class may represent many different cultures, try to make your classroom a model of openness, tolerance, and respect.

Since language and culture are deeply connected, and every language is deeply rooted in its culture, it is extremely important and necessary to involve cultural context in language teaching and learning. Cultural context also plays an important role in helping students overcome their difficulties in understanding culture, enhance their cultural awareness, and lower their cultural shock when immersing in different countries and contacting diverse people.

Cultural Awareness and Language Learning

Cultural awareness has become an important issue in education. With increasing diversity, interactions and communications among people from different cultures are becoming more frequent and inevitable. Hanvey (1975) proposed four stages for measuring cross-cultural awareness which will be described as follows: (as cited in Roh, 2001, p.42)

Table 1: Four Stages for Measuring Cross-Cultural Awareness

Level	Information	Mode	Interpretation
I	Awareness of superficial or very visible cultural traits: stereotypes	Tourism, textbooks, National Geographic	Unbelievable, i.e., exotic, bizarre
II	Awareness of significant and subtle cultural traits that contrast markedly with one's own	Culture conflict situations	Unbelievable, i.e., frustrating, irrational
III	Awareness of significant and subtle cultural traits that contrast markedly with one's own	Intellectual analysis	Believable, cognitively

IV	Awareness of how another culture feels from the standpoint of the insider	Cultural immersion: living the culture	Believable because of subjective familiarity
----	---	--	--

At the first level, students regard culture with an unaccepting, and superficial attitude through such activities as reading textbooks, seeing movies, reading magazines and watching TV programs and commercial advertisements. They stereotype culture in their own way, and may sometimes regard the exotic culture as unbelievable and ignore cultural differences. For example, in traditional Asian countries like Taiwan, China, or Japan, men generally are not allowed to cry in public. Men are regarded as symbols of strength and authority. Thus, they need to hide their emotions such as sorrow, frustration, and sadness by smiling or pretending that nothing is wrong in public; whereas Western people like Americans may feel freer to express their feelings and are willing to share their emotions with their friends and family more easily.

At level two, students are able to compare the target culture with their own culture. They are aware of significant and subtle expressions of culture and become more frustrated and depressed when they are unable to be involved in the environment of the target culture. Therefore, cultural conflicts usually happen at this level. For example, Chinese and western people view “friendship” with different perspectives. As Zhang (2007) stated, Chinese people seem to value friendship as a lifelong relationship. They are more likely to give assistance to one another, such as finding jobs for friends, supporting financial problems, and spending much more time with friends; whereas western people seem to be more independent, and may like to change “best friends” several times over the years (p. 27).

At level three, students become willing to immerse and involve themselves in the target culture, and their attitudes change to be more understanding and accepting of the new culture.

Finally, at level four, students have achieved an empathy level, and recognized that they have to live with the target culture, and the best way to immerse in this environment is to live, to think, to become involved with, and to love the culture. At this stage, students are consciously aware that the culture has become a part of their lives, and it also influences their behaviors and daily lives in a real-world situation. According to Hanvey (1975), level four (acculturation) may be a perfect stage for foreign students who are studying abroad. Whereas, for those students who are still in level two, it is obvious to see how dealing with their frustration and depression will also be the most challenging issue in their learning process.

Unfortunately, if students cannot effectively cope with their negative emotions associated with cultural differences, it may also lead them to fail to adopt or immerse in other cultures. Meanwhile, a teacher's role in the learning culture process will provide a significant key to help students overcome their obstacles and difficulties in language learning and cultural learning.

Techniques to Develop Students' Cultural Awareness

Kuang (2007) indicated various teaching strategies to help teachers design curricula integrating multiple cultures into their language teaching. First, Kuang mentioned that a well-prepared lesson plan, an appropriate material selection, and an organic framework of the syllabus will be the fundamental elements to conduct a good cross-cultural course which relates to foreign language learning. In addition, Kuang mentioned that applicable and feasible strategies also need to be implemented in the language teaching through various activities or cooperative learning. Such strategies include: a) discussing and contrasting exotic cultures, b) playing dramas related to culture in and out of class, c) displaying cultural photos, d) teaching different English songs of different culture, e) using authentic materials, and f) using audio-visual media to present diverse culture. Finally, to better cultivate students to be equipped with global perspectives and a broader multicultural spirit and to inspire students to maintain adequate cultural interest in

language learning, language teachers will also need to consider these important strategies while designing effective curriculum.

Teacher's Role in Teaching Culture and Language

Teachers are “ambassadors of culture” (Nayar, 1986, as cited in Muir, 2007). A successful language teacher plays an essential role in establishing a link between culture and language. Jin and Cortazzi (1998, as cited in Watkins, 2000) examine the cultural difference of British and Chinese secondary school students by defining a “good” teacher. They indicate:

The British students characterized a good teacher as one who is able to arouse the students' interest, explains clearly, use effective instructional methods, and organize a range of activities: these are very much the teaching skills taught in typical Western teacher education method courses. The Chinese students preferred the teacher to have deep knowledge, be able to answer questions, and be a good moral model (p. 168).

In other words, the British students like their teachers to be organized, and value students' needs, whereas the Chinese students regard their teacher as an information giver, guide, and solver of all problems they encounter in the curriculum. The above examples indicate that these two cultures (the British and the Chinese) have definitely different cultural expectations of teachers. Hofstede (1986, as cited in Brown, 2007) also depicted the different cultural expectations between Western and Eastern teachers as follows: (p. 252)

<i>Western Culture</i>	<i>Eastern Culture</i>
1. Teachers are allowed to say “I don't know.”	1. Teachers are expected to have all the answers.
2. Teachers are allowed to express emotions.	2. Teachers are expected to suppress emotions.

3. Teachers interpret intellectual disagreement as a stimulating exercise.	3. Teachers interpret intellectual disagreement as personal disloyalty.
4. Teachers reward students for innovative approaches to problem solving.	4. Teachers reward students for accuracy in problem solving.
5. Students admire friendliness in teachers.	5. Students admire brilliance in teachers.
6. Students are encouraged to volunteer their thoughts.	6. Students should speak in class only when called on by the teacher.
7. Teachers can admit when they are wrong and still maintain students' respect.	7. Teachers should never lose face; to do so lose the respect of students.
8. Teachers expect students to find their own way.	8. Students expect the teacher to show them "the way."

From the above table, it is obvious to see that different cultures represent different perspectives and attitudes toward cultural expectation about teachers. In fact, teachers do play a very important role in educating the next generation. In the educational system in Taiwan, teachers are representatives of authority; they are expected to know everything, to give everything, and to manage everything. By contrast, the western educational system regards teachers as advisors, friends, and counselors to discuss and share not only linguistic knowledge in and out of the class, but also non-linguistic needs in the society. In sum, if the language teachers can both combine the advantages of western and eastern expectations of culture, and address the weaknesses of western and eastern expectations of culture, the students will also obtain benefits from their language learning. Therefore, a teacher's responsibility is to find a positive and balanced way to involve culture in language teaching that not only helps teachers

and students in second language acquisition but also develops a specific and unique curriculum to establish their global perspectives in facing any kinds of challenges in the future.

Conclusion

Considering that the EFL context is a homogeneous language learning environment, most language teachers and learners seem to lack knowledge of multicultural backgrounds and experiences. Hopefully, this paper can benefit some EFL teachers, the directors of language department, and even for the policy makers in Taiwan whose responsibilities will directly influence potentially millions of future EFL students. In such a multicultural society, as the one found in America. Language learning without cultural awareness is not adequate anymore for an increasing number of diverse people. As educators, effectively and successfully involving culture in teaching language and applying language in culture are already important missions and responsibilities.

Recommendations

With the increasing interrelationships with the other countries, educators not only need to educate the students to step abroad and across borders, but also need to train them to adapt to the different challenges in this multicultural world. Establishing an international perspective is not an easy thing, especially in an EFL context like Taiwan. In order to equip the students to be prepared to face this multicultural society, some recommendations will be proposed to suggest foreign language teachers to rethink their curriculum design. First, design multiple curricula that include resources like international videos, books, TV programs, the Internet, magazines, and newspapers to help students better understand cultural differences and inspire their cultural awareness. Second, incorporate different aspects of cultural contexts such as exotic cuisine, international holidays, and unique customs into the language curriculum to introduce various aspects of cultures. Third, design activities to ask students to present the characteristics of

different cultures in paired groups and share their reflections in class. Fourth, create a cultural-identity day to encourage students to role play, to perform their representative culture on that day and to videotape their performances to share with other students who are interested in specific cultures at school. Finally, invite different guest speakers who represent different cultures to interact with students in class to help them more broadly understand the importance of different cultures and show respect in the future.

References

- Brown, H. D. (2007). *Teaching by principles: An interactive approach to language pedagogy*. (3rd ed). NY: Pearson Education.
- Sowden, C. (2007). Culture and the good teacher in the English language classroom. *ELT Journal*, 61(4), 304-310.
- Kuang, J. F. (2007). Developing students' cultural awareness through foreign language teaching. *Sino-US English Teaching*, 4(12), 74-81.
- Lai, J. C. (2007). *Teaching culture as metaphor to adult learners in English as a foreign language curriculum*. Doctoral dissertation, University of Louisville.
- Li, J. (2006). *Teaching and learning culture in the EFL classroom*. Retrieved March 3rd, 2008, from <http://by107w.bay107.mail.live.com/mailPrintShell.aspx?type=message&cpids>.
- Morgan, B. (1996). Promoting and assessing critical language awareness. *TESOL Journal*, 5(2), 10-14.
- Muir, P. (2007). Toward Culture: Some basic elements of culture-based instruction in China's high schools. *Sino-US English Teaching*, 4(4), 38-43.
- Rivers, W. M. (1981). *Teaching foreign language skills*. (2nd ed). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Roh, S. B. (2001). *Toward a reconceptualization of the integration of culture and language in the Korean EFL classroom*. Doctoral dissertation, Louisiana State University.
- Tang, Y. (2006). Beyond behavior: Goals of cultural learning in the second language classroom. *The Modern Language Journal*, 90(1), 86-99.
- Watkins, D. (2000). Learning and Teaching: A cross-cultural perspective. *School Leadership & Management*, 20(2), 161-173.

Zhang, Y. L. (2007). Critique on the four levels of cross-cultural awareness. *Sino-US English Teaching*, 4(12), 26-28.