

CULTURAL LEARNING IS INDISPENSABLE WHEN IT COMES TO
LEARNING A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

Approved by Daniel E. Leitch

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Jiang Ting (Tina)

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Abstract

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Jiang Ting (Tina)

The problem presented in this paper was to explore the relationship between language and culture. Culture is very broad. Language is a part of culture and plays a very important role. Some social scientists consider language as the keystone of a culture. It is one of the most fundamental systems of culture and human society. Language is the product of a society. It is the carrier and mirror of the culture of the society. Different languages represent different cultural details. On the other hand, language is influenced and shaped by culture. Language itself is a part of spiritual culture, just like the habits and customs. The main idea of this research states that culture learning is one of the most important aspects when learning a foreign language, making it the topic to be analyzed here in.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

With the development of new technology, growth in the world's population, and shifts in the global economic arena, international contacts have become more and more significant and frequent. Therefore, more and more people devote themselves to the study of intercultural communication. More teachers, especially foreign language teachers, spend their time and energy in teaching the strategies of intercultural communication. The current mode of intercultural communication in foreign language teaching (FLT) is unilateral by nature. This fact, according to my observation and research, has long been the source of intercultural miscommunication. The mode of intercultural communication in FLT, therefore, needs an urgent improvement. This paper provides a report on intercultural communication in FLT with the aim of helping students to engage in future international contacts that are smooth and efficient.

To achieve proposing a new mode of intercultural communication in FLT entails a thorough understanding of the natures and relationship of the gearing elements of intercultural communication, i.e., language, culture and relationship of the gearing elements of intercultural communication.

Statement of the Problem

The problem addressed as a question is as follows:

What is the relationship between cultural learning and language in Chinese EFL courses at the college/university level?

Definition of Terms

Cultural learning: also called cultural transmission, is the way a group of people or animals within a society or culture tend to learn and pass on new information. Learning styles are greatly influenced by how a culture socializes with its children and young people.
([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cultural learning](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cultural_learning))

EFL: (English as a Foreign Language) indicates the learning of English for eventual use in a non-English-speaking region.

(www.startsurfing.com/encyclopedia/e/n/g/English_as_an_additional_language.html)

Delimitations of the Research

The research will be conducted in and through the Karmann Library at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville, over eighty-eight (88) days. Primary searches will be conducted via the Internet through EBSCO

with, Academic Search Elite and Google/Google Scholar as the primary sources. Key search topics included “cultural learning”, and “EFL”.

Method

A brief review of literature on the studies of cultural learning scholars will be conducted. The findings will be summarized and recommendations made.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Background of Cultural Learning

Some language theorists believe that culture and language cannot be taught in isolation of each other. For example, A. Curtis states, “Culture should be taught when we have students to teach”(Curtis, 2000). As stated in the abstract, language is the product of a society. As well as the carrier and mirror of the culture of the society. Different languages represent different cultural details. On the other hand, language is influenced and shaped by culture. Language itself is a part of culture, just like the habits and customs. A new language opens up a whole new culture. “A foreign language gives us access to another culture, and our lives take on a new dimension” (Savignon, 2002).

What is Cultural Learning?

The learning of cultural influence the way of thinking and talking. As Timmis (2002) said, “I also remember arduous efforts in meeting the discourse of the foreign culture, after imbibing into the striking speech of Martin Luther King, as well as the attractive analysis of the expressions and their original constructing as well as their way of formation.” Cultural learning is a spiritual entity, which spontaneously includes the very elements of the language and every filiations of it. However, one person’s perception often imparts other English learners’ intention with their methods in

acquiring the very integration or even worse, the utensils only, abandoning its precious and multifold implications. The two kinds of ostensibly different but substantially similar behaviors, i.e. the English learners are behaving in a way as if they had never been influenced by this culture which they have been sticking to, in one word, the elegance of the Anglo-Americans are of no relation to him; or at another extremity, he, who is a Chinese in the deepest dye, is now deeming his current identity to a blond-like and “westernized” soul. These perspectives should be remedied, otherwise it will tamper the goods and essence that English learning can bring to us and deteriorate the whole course of English study.”

Then what can be done with the formal structure of knowledge , experiences, traditions and even ethnocentrism with the burst of the seemingly strong or even overwhelming affections of the English culture and language? Submitting either of them is of no wit even of any primary consideration as an individual. The most feasible method is to obtain the congruity for both parties in a harmonizing way, i.e. hold a conversation between the two cultures, which is presented by the learner himself. This is a process of comparison, selection and acceptation. According to what J.Leloup has said, “mother culture is the prehistorically structure, which is the base of our comprehension and further construing of the words and sentences. So never abnegate our own culture, but to seize what is useful for us and utilize it in our further learnings” (Leloup, 2003).

They are the dominant of the very learning, from the commencement to the finality, though there is no ending for any learner. B. Sellami added that “the significance of culture itself will never be overemphasized in the course of learning, but it does mean that we are to quit the stance as a Chinese. Just as J. Jia (2003) has stated, “realizing primitive desire through the process of obtaining the English culture and its carrier. As a matter of utterly atman and egoistic practice, we have to link our inane recesses part of learning with every diversification befallen in the peripheral world, which can be of great value to the attitude and content that we are learning (Sellami, 2000).

A working definition of culture needs to be determined as the term culture itself can be confusing or very broad. Culture has been, and continues to be, defined in many ways. P. Shen has described culture as, “the accepted and patterned ways of behavior of a given people” and “as membership in a discourse community that shares a common social space and history, and common imaginings” (Shen, 2005). It is defined by Sysoyev as, “a system of symbols, meanings, and norms passed from one generation to the next, which differentiates groups of people united by certain characteristics such as origin, race, ethnicity, gender, religion, socioeconomic class, or political views (Savignon & Sysoyev, 2002). J. Jia stated very simply that culture is, “the total way of lives”. It is this latter definition which will be used for the purpose of this paper (Jia, 2003).

Culture learning helps to dispel myths or debunk stereotypes associated with the target culture's people (Jia, 2003). Teachers can ensure that the posters and regalia that cover the classroom walls are representative of variations in the target culture and do not reflect stereotypical representations only. For example, if the only depictions of the French male are beret-wearing, coffee-sipping, moustache-sporting men sitting at an open-air café and delicately nibbling a croissant, the stereotype that this is a typical Frenchman would be reinforced (Sellami, 2000).

What is Language?

Language is the way that people from different cultures interface. "Language is closely related to culture. Language expresses and embodies cultural reality. If we are in different countries, we must know their cultures, thus, we can use the language freely. On the other hand, language, as a product of culture, helps perpetuate the culture, and the changes in language uses reflect the culture changes in return" (Xiao, 2007).

S. Udin proposed some methods of proper English learning. He said that:

- *pay attention to the social environment in which language is used.*
- *pay attention to the social meaning of words.*
- *engage in situational activities in class*
- *read more materials. Fifth, learn modern technological means.*

(Udin, 2006)

Some social scientists consider it as the keystone of culture.

“Language is a part of culture and plays a very important role in it” (Xiao, 2007, p. 256). It is one of the most fundamental systems of culture and human society. In a broader sense, language is the symbolic representation of a people and it comprises their historical and cultural backgrounds as well as their approaches to life and their ways of living and thinking.

Therefore, language can help people express their understanding of the world and attitudes toward the world. Language can record the development of a nation and a society, and people can learn culture left behind by their ancestors through the acquisition of language. Therefore, “language becomes the embodiment of culture. Thus, anthropologists have suggested that making a transition from one language to another actually involves going from one culture to another”(Ofsted, 2003, p. 59).

The meaning of a word is conditioned by social conventions. Language is the perfect symbolism of experience, the full meaning of a word for an individual is the result of experience when he or she grows up. Due to the differences between cultures and the inter relationship between language and culture, it's difficult to establish exact equivalence between words or expressions in two languages.

As Jia thought that the meaning of a word or the thing a word refers to, depends greatly upon its corresponding culture. The English word "peasant" is a good example. "Peasant" can be translated into Chinese as“农

民” (pinyin: nong min) which is a name we call our rural people, and "poor peasant" and "rich peasant" are the terms referring to class status before liberation in China. But English word "peasant" does not have exactly the same meaning as the Chinese 农民(pinyin: nong min). Peasant refers to “a usually uneducated person of low social status,” or “an ill-bred person.” It has an obviously derogatory meaning. The difference in connotation between "peasant" and “农民 (pinyin: nong min)” mainly depends on the different cultures (Jia, 2003).

Both language and culture are changing and culture normally changes faster than language, so the meaning of a word is determined not only by contexts but also the cultural contexts. There is no language that is beyond cultural context.

Language is essentially rooted in the reality of culture, the tribal life; and customs of the people and it can't be explained without constant reference to these broader concepts of verbal utterance. “A language is embedded in the culture of a people and reflects the totality of beliefs and sentiments of the speech community” (Ann, 2005). Pufahl stated that “Every language has specific vocabulary items, the concepts of which are determined by respective culture and branded with cultural vestige” (Pufahl, 2000). For example, Chinese people sleep on a “炕 (pinyin: keng)” (a hearable brick bed), eat a stick of “冰糖葫芦 (pinyin: bing tang hu lu)” (candied haws on a stick); Westerners go to a "motel", and eat "hamburgers.”

The things that“炕 (pinyin: keng)” and“冰糖葫芦 (pinyin: bing tang hu lu),” “motel” and ‘hamburger’ stand for are distinctive cultural products and reflect cultural features.

Each nation lives and works in a certain natural environment which is reflected by its language. It's well known that Britain is a country surrounded by sea, so the words or terms related to sea or boat are rich, such as barge, baroque, boat, canoe, catamaran, ferry, meet freighter, ketch, punt, ship, skiff, steamer, trawler, yawl, smooth sailing, trim the sails, on the rocks, in the same boat, sail before the wind, give up the ship, and so on.

On the contrary, Chinese people have been living in the Asia inland for thousands of years and agriculture has a long history, so there are many terms deriving from farming such as 'Ku mu feng chun, shun teng mo gua, gua zhan cao chu gen, etc. Many Chinese characters have the radicals related to tree (木 pinyin: mu) or grass.

Language is the product of a society which reflects the culture of that society. Different languages represent different cultural details. On the other hand, language is influenced and shaped by culture. “Language itself is a part of spiritual culture, just like the habits and customs” (Lin, 2005, p. 48-54).

Culture is something to be learned, but not something one is born with. “Culture is passed along from generation to generation” (Marilyn, 2003). But what kind of culture one person has is not decided by his race, by the

cultural environment in which he is brought up.

People usually connect culture, language, and thoughts together. “Language is a kind of communicative tool and medium for transmitting information” (Sellami, 2000). However, the relation between language and thoughts is arbitrary. Language is just a set of symbols; the understanding of information expressed through language depends on one's cultural experience.

From the perspective of teaching and learning, one's cultural experience affects the effectiveness of learning. When one begins to learn a language, he is also learning the culture represented by the language. Therefore, target cultural details should be again part of teaching content in foreign language class.

From the perspective of language teaching and learning, to teach a language is to teach another culture; to learn a language is also to learn another culture. “Language is a part of culture and shaped by culture; it is also the carrier of culture and reflects cultural features of a community in which the language is spoken. Language and culture are closely related” (Abrams, 2002). The integration of culture and language have been emphasized, therefore, more and more teachers have come to realize that language teaching could not go smoothly without coming face to face with cultural factors, which had an indispensable bearing on language and language learning.

Language-teaching theorists repeatedly state that to learn about a country and its culture is one of the important purposes of language learning. They emphasize the importance of studying the target language's country, its culture and literature as one essential part of the study of a foreign or second language. According to S.D. Krashen in "Context and Culture in Language Teaching," the author states that cultural awareness and the learning of a second culture can aid the attaining of second language proficiency. Krashen indicates that teaching culture implicitly or explicitly permeates the teaching of social interaction, and the spoken and the written language (Krashen, 2000 pp.150-156).

Language is merely a part of culture. According to Jia stated in Cultural Anthropology and Linguistics a society's language is one aspect of the society's culture. The special feature is that language is the main tool to learn culture. People can acquire the whole culture in the process of learning and using language. From this, we can see that language and culture are closely connected; we can hardly understand and use language correctly if we know nothing about its culture. For example, foreigners usually say "thank you" when they are praised, while Chinese tend to express their modesty in that situation, or they would be considered as too proud (Jia, 2003).

As we all know, language is an intrinsic part of culture is impossible to learn English well without knowing Western culture. On the contrary, the

deeper we know one country's history, culture, customs, and traditions, etc., the better we can use its language. There is no culture that has no language as its part. Language and culture are not separable. "Human knowledge and experience are described and stored in language. Customs, habits and behavioral patterns can be described and analyzed in language. Social institutions, value systems, beliefs, world views can be described, analyzed and evaluated in language" (Ofsted, 2003). So to sum up, language can basically represent every aspect of culture.

Cultural Learning and Communication

A new language opens up a whole new culture. A foreign language gives us access to another culture, and our lives take on a new dimension. The great German poet, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe said, "Whoever is not acquainted with foreign languages knows nothing of his own." Being viewed that way, learning a language is almost comparable to a journey of discovery. Conversely, to lose a language is to lose a whole culture. This realization has led to determined efforts to preserve minority languages, including, for example, in Britain, with the renaissance of the Welsh and Gaelic languages. There are similar widespread efforts in Britain to promote community languages, for example, by providing application forms in Urdu or other languages. It is a fundamental truth that cultures define themselves through languages.

Language is a way of communication, and involves of meaning

production and meaning interpretation. “Due to the distinctive traits of different cultures and the nature of language to carry its relative culture, having only a good command of pronunciation, word spelling, grammar rules etc. will not guarantee a successful intercultural communication”(Shen, 2005). In the process of teaching and learning, a general knowledge about the cultural features of a language is necessary and helpful in developing language learners' cultural awareness and communicative competence.

Language is defined as a means of communication, but communication is not only the exchange of verbal expressions. “Communication is an on-going process of meaning production and meaning interpretation between the participants” (Thanasoulas, 2001, p. 66). In another words, it also involves the receiver’s successful interpretation of a speaker's intention in performing a linguistic act. Communication itself is a complex and psychological process. The sender emits signals and the receiver decodes them.

This is only the mechanical process of communicating. That is because “whether the words people use faithfully perform their intended communication function depends mainly on the subjective reactions that they elicit in the mental process of the listener” (Udin, 2006). If in decoding the signals, the receiver attaches the same meaning to the words as the speaker had in mind when he spoke them, the communication is successful”(Marilyn, 2003, p. 278-279). This is not easy to achieve because

“language is used to communicate; it also passes on cultural features” (Jia, 2003). Therefore, communication is often influenced by some degree of discrepancy between the cultural meanings attached to the words used by the sender and the receiver respectively. Such influence is more remarkable in intercultural communication. Intercultural communication is the communication of people from different cultural backgrounds. “During the procedure of intercultural communication both cultural and linguistic stimulations are involved. Language used in communication needs to be grammatically correct and culturally accepted. Native speakers of a language speak not only with their own individual voices, but also with the established knowledge of their native community and society, the stock of metaphors this community lives by, and the categories they use to represent their experience” (Lin, 2005, p. 39). This is why it is so difficult for non-native speakers to communicate with native speakers because they do not understand the native speaker’s culture.

There are many ways in which the phenomena of language and culture are intimately related. Both phenomena are unique to humans and have therefore been the subject of a great deal of anthropological, sociological, and even mimetic study. Language, of course, is determined by culture, though the extent to which that is true is now under debate. The converse is also true to some degree: culture is determined by language - or rather, “by the replicates that created both memes” (Krashen, 2000, p. 146).

Early anthropologists, following the theory that words determine thought, believed that language and its structure were entirely dependent on the cultural context in which they existed. Ponterio stated that this was a logical extension of what is termed the Standard Social Science Model, which views the human mind as an indefinitely malleable structure capable of absorbing any sort of culture without constraints from genetic or neurological factors (2005).

Anthropologist J. Leloup conducted a study in 2005, giving color samples to different American Indian tribes and asking them to give the names of the colors. He concluded that the spectrum we see as “green,” “yellow,” etc. was an entirely arbitrary division, and each culture divided the spectrum separately. According to this hypothesis, the divisions seen between colors are a consequence of the language we learn, and do not correspond to divisions in the natural world. A similar hypothesis is upheld in the extremely popular meme of Eskimo words for snow common stories vary from 50 to upwards of 200.

However extreme cultural relativism of this type has now been clearly refuted. “Eskimos use at most twelve different words for snow” (Abrams, 2002), which is not many more than English speakers and should be expected since they exist in a cold climate. The color-relativity hypothesis has now been completely debunked by more careful, thorough, and systematic studies which show a remarkable similarity between the ways in

which different cultures divide the spectrum.

Of course, there are ways in which culture really does determine language, or at least certain facets thereof. Obviously, “the ancient Romans did not have words for radios, televisions, or computers because these items were simply not part of their cultural context. In the same vein, uncivilized tribes living in Europe in the time of the Romans did not have words for tribunes, praetors, or any other trapping of Roman government because Roman law was not part of their culture” (Timmis, 2002, p. 245).

Our culture does, at times, restrict what we can think about efficiently in our own language. For example, “some languages have only three color terms equivalent to black, white, and red; a native speaker of this language would have a difficult time expressing the concept of ‘purple’ efficiently” (Timmis, 2002, p.389). Some languages are also more expressive about certain topics. For example, it is commonly acknowledged that Yiddish is a linguistic champion, with an amazing number of words referring to the simpleminded.

According to the mimetic theorist Pufahl, language developed as a result of mimetic evolution and is an example of memes providing a selection pressure on genes themselves. The definition of a culture in mimetic theory is an aggregate of many different sets shared by the majority of a population. Using mimetic reasoning, it can be seen that language - itself created by memes and for memes - is the principal medium used for

spreading memes from one person to another.

The memes result is language. As Pufahl states in “memes were born when humans began to imitate each other.” According to her theory, this event preceded indeed, had to precede the development of language. When imitation became widespread, producing selection pressure on genes for successful imitation, memes began to exploit verbalizations for better and more frequent transmission. The end result of this complex process was language, and the anatomical alterations needed for its successful use (Pufahl, 2000).

Today, the vast majority of memes are transmitted via language, through direct speech, written communication, radio or television, and internet. “Language, created by memes as a mechanism for ensuring better mimetic propagation, has certainly been a success” (Krashen, 2000, p. 159). “Relatively few memes are transmitted in a non-linguistic way, and those that are have very specific, localized purposes, such as artwork and photography. Even these media, though nonlinguistic in themselves, assume language and very rarely appear without some sort of linguistic commentary” (Krashen, 2000, p. 146). This might take the form of a critical analysis of an artwork, a caption for a photograph, a voice-over for a video, etc.

For many people, language is not just the medium of culture but also is a part of culture. It is quite common for immigrants to a new country to

retain their old customs and to speak their first language amid fellow immigrants, even if all present are comfortable in their new language. This occurs because the immigrants are eager to preserve their own heritage, which includes not only customs and traditions but also language. As Diaz-Greenberg points out, “in many Jewish communities, especially in older members: Yiddish is commonly spoken because it is seen as a part of Jewish culture” (2003, p.142).

Linguistic differences are also often seen as the mark of another culture, and they very commonly create divisiveness among neighboring peoples or even among different groups of the same nation. A good example of this is, “in Canada, where French-speaking natives of Quebec clash with the English-speaking majority. This sort of conflict is also common in areas with a great deal of tribal warfare. It is even becoming an issue in America as speakers of standard American English - mainly whites and educated minorities - observe the growing number of speakers of Black English vernacular” (Diaz-Greenberg, 2003, p.144). Debates are common over whether it is proper to use “Ebonics” in schools, while its speakers continue to assert that the dialect is a fundamental part of the ‘black culture’.

CHAPTER III

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this paper is to explore the relationship between language and culture. A look at why, when and how to teach cultural questions are central to the focus of this paper. Culture is very broad. Therefore, it is necessary to determine how culture teaching can be approached by current L2 (English as the second language) and FL (English as foreign language) teachers. Practical strategies that language practitioners can employ, and the benefits of using these strategies, are essential for complete comprehension and effectiveness. It is also imperative to determine the benefits of teaching culture at the same time. Focus on culture can impact on language students' abilities.

The teaching of culture can and does raise a cultural awareness, appreciation, and acceptance of other cultures, and has also been shown to increase an awareness of one's own culture as well. By having language students put themselves in the position of native speaker through role playing or by having students interact directly with native speakers through participation in ethnographic interviews, language teachers are opening up doors for language students that otherwise remain closed

without the introduction and exploration of the target culture. Establishing a tolerant classroom atmosphere in which all cultures are celebrated, and explicitly teaching about the target culture, enables language teachers to affect student attitudes towards the target language and culture in a positive way. The goal of cultural education is to foster an intercultural competence that language students can take with them when the language classes are over so that students will be communicative challenges, of speaking a L2 or a FL and of interacting with the target language peoples.

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