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SOCIO CULTURAL FACTORS IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

Dr. Indira A. Budhe
Assistant Professor, S.S. Girls' College,
Gondia, Dist. Gondia (M.S)

Abstract

Culture is an amazingly complex matrix as it involves many ingredients, such as religion, gender, social customs, and so on. In the learning process, a learner will inevitably encounter confrontations between his/her native culture and the one related to the target language. The present paper attempts to explore the relationship between socio cultural factors and second language learning from the perspectives of culture and language, cultural confrontation, and culture familiarization.

Keywords*: Culture, collision, relationship, confrontation, familiarization*

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Introduction

In the process of learning a second or foreign language, learners will inevitably encounter internal and external obstacles. Internal factors involve personality, self-esteem or personal attitude while external ones refer to all social and cultural conditions associated with the entire environment in which language study takes place. Like those that constrain the acquisition of knowledge in any academic arena, internal and external elements also play a pivotal role in deciding the final outcome of the second or foreign language study. This article will mainly address some of the external factors that exert both positive and negative impact on a learner's achievement in his/her second or foreign language learning. They include: the relationship between language and culture, cultural confrontation, and culture familiarization.

Relationship between Language and Culture

Many linguists agree upon the concept that language is an innate faculty with human race and that it is not an artifact (Pinker, 1994). This statement is correct only in terms of human's natural language skills. But so far as the field of pragmatics is concerned, one cannot safely say that language can be isolated from sociocultural, as cultural factors are always reflected in our daily and professional communication. For instance, in countries where Christianity is traditionally prevalent, the expressions, such as "Oh, my God" or "My Lord" can be frequently heard. If turning our focus to great literary works, it is not difficult for readers to find that many British and American writers absorb a large amount of nutrients from the Bible, which is one of the three columns that support the canopy of western culture. (The other two are Greek civilization and Roman law.) To obtain a clear picture of the close relationship between language and culture, perhaps what one needs to know first is the real meaning ofculture.

According to Brislin (cited in Linda, 2001), culture is an attribute of individuals, of small groups, of organizations, and of nations; a single person can belong to a multiplicity of cultures, any one of which may be important at any given time. What implies in this definition is that culture may comprise macro-culture, such as the national or large communal one, and micro-culture, as can be observed even in the individual culture. It also denotes that culture is changing all the time. However, the most important implication that can be drawn from Brislin's definition is that culture is not monolithic, for it can consist of different layers of content and should be analyzed from various perspectives, such as age, gender, religion, ethnicity,etc.

Nevertheless, how does a person know or understand a culture, and in what way a person maintain his/her cultural identity? Despite the multiple means, language is probably the most common method by which a person can achieve these goals. This is because

human's thought or ideology is an important component of culture and because language is a medium to convey thought. Therefore, language cannot be isolated from culture. Based on this relation between language and culture, it is easy to understand why a person who knows thousands of words of another language may still finds it difficult to communicate with people of that language.

In fact, many scholars have analyzed and commented the relationship between language and culture. Brown (cited in Jiang, 1999), describes their relationship as following: "A language is part of a culture and a culture is part of a language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate them without losing the significance of either language or culture." A large number of other social scientists hold almost the same views as Brown that language and culture are inseparable and that language simultaneously reflects culture, and is influenced and shaped by it. This is also one of the reasons why we call the conversation between people from different cultures cross-cultural communication.

To further demonstrate the close relationship between culture and language, Jiang, a Chinese scholar, made a survey of native English speakers and native Chinese speakers on what items they usually associate with the word "food" in 1999. The results exactly indicate the inseparability between language and culture. When the Chinese group came into face with the word "food", they often thought of steamed bun or rice while the English group tended to come up with steak and bread, or even their related cooking processes. Truly, language is deeply rooted in the culture where it operates. In addition to "food", numerous other examples are frequently employed by English teachers in China to illustrate the difference between these two languages and their relevant cultures. For example, "dog" is not a word that often conveys a derogatory connotation in western societies whereas "a lucky dog" in China is rarely used. And "to look like a wet rat" can be converted to "to look like a wet chicken" in Chinese cultural settings.

The above discussions can explicitly attest to the inseparability between language and culture. Therefore, when learning a second or foreign language, one will inevitably encounter a new culture. The target culture may bear some similarities to the source one. But on the most part, they vary from each other.

Cultural Confrontation

As discussed above, there exist both similarities and dissimilarities across all the cultures in the world. Reading *Exodus* perhaps can remind a Chinese student of numerous peasant rebellions in the long history of China; changing the names of the hero and heroine in *Gone with the Wind* may arouse a Russian student's memory of another similar romantic story that took place during the Second World War; Freud's concepts of id, ego and superego may help to explain the behaviors of most people because human acts are controlled by their conscious, unconscious and subconscious streams of thought. The Freudian psychoanalysis theory sounds partially alike to Chomsky's argument of universal grammar.

Given the difference in culture, it is impossible to learn a second or foreign language without studying the culture of the people it represents, their customs, traditions and behaviors, all of which are reflected in the language. If the source culture and the target one are similar, it will be comparatively easier for a learner to acquire the second or foreign language, for he/she may feel at ease with the target culture.

Many cases have shown that cultural confrontation often arises in the process of second language acquisition. Take writing as an example. It is very salient that each culture has its own distinctly idiosyncratic rhetorical pattern. In America, people tend to think and write in ways that are linear. In other words, they admire the writing that goes to the point, and expect writers to be straight with them. However, in East Asian countries, such as China, writers often digress. In fact, the more elaborately and more cleverly one can digress; the more respect is given to his/her prose. A metaphor of Chinese way of thinking is that a writer might walk

around and around an idea, observing it from many angles, getting closer and closer to the subject in every circle, without even really "nailing it", and leaving readers to wonder and to draw conclusions by themselves. Consequently, when Chinese students start to learn English with native English speakers in China or come to the United States to pursue advanced academic study, they may feel confused about writing in English. Why should a topic be nailed? And why aren't digressions a valuable as set to any intellectual inquiry? These are the questions or the puzzles that often haunt their minds.

Culture Familiarization

The preceding paragraphs indicate the side effects on learners in their second or foreign language study on account of the difference between the target culture and the source one. To acquire another language, does it mean that one should abdicate his/her native culture and adopt a new one? The answer is definitely "no". As is well known, first language is the starting point of learning a second language. The first language can provide the basic linguistic knowledge on which learners can draw to analyze the second one. Meanwhile, language is embedded in culture, and logically the first language also equips learners with the knowledge for them to develop cross-cultural consciousness. Furthermore, if the first language is undervalued or propagandized as inferior to the target one, learners' self-esteem will surely be undermined, which is a formidable obstacle that prevents learners from achieving academic success, in this case, attaining the goal of high proficiency in the target language.Moreover, since one cannot separate language from culture, to grasp a second or foreign language, students must undergo not just training in language, but also a socializing process.

Let's borrow Gulliver's words to make a conclusion of this paper. In the novel of *Gulliver's Travel*, the hero says, "…I placed all my words with their interpretations in alphabetic order. And thus in a few days, by the help of a very faithful memory, I got some

insight into their language" (Swift, cited in Fromkin et al., 2003). Actually, Gulliver made a wrong statement regarding second language acquisition, because though the knowledge of morphology, syntax and phonology of the target language can not be ignored in the learning process, to really acquire another language, one need to understand the target culture. This is due to the inseparability between language and culture.

Conclusion

Since no language can exist in a cultural vacuum, and since no two cultures are exactly identical, second language learners will inevitably encounter cultural confrontations on their learning route. However, it does not mean that learners must abandon their own culture in order to avoid the potential cultural collision. What they need to do is to accumulate the knowledge pertaining to the target culture so as to develop cross-cultural awareness.Of course, the final outcome of second language learning will be decided by many factors but socio cultural factors always count significantly.

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