

CULTURAL TRANSFER AND THE CROSS-CULTURAL IMPACT OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES

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Abstract

Cross-culture communication is a subject concerning a multitude of other topics. Cross-cultural communication is a field of study that looks at how people from differing cultural backgrounds communicate, in similar and different ways among themselves, and how they endeavor to communicate across various cultures. Cultural transfer of first language is the most influential element on cross-cultural communication. This article is a debate concerning the impact of cultural transfer on cross-cultural communication by means of foreign languages.

Keywords: *cross-cultural communication, foreign languages, cultural transfer*

Motto:

"In the beginning was the Word. And the Word was made flesh. It was so in the beginning and it is so today. The language, the Word, carries within it the history, the culture, the traditions, the very life of a people, the flesh. Language is people. We cannot even conceive of a people without a language, or a language without a people. The two are one and the same.

To know one is to know the other. "

- Dr. Sabine Reyes Ulibarri,
contemporary American poet

A different language is a different vision of life. The title of Valdes's paper, "The inevitability of teaching and learning culture in a foreign language course," now reflects an axiom.

In the past decades, there has been an increasing pressure for universities across the world to incorporate intercultural and international understanding and knowledge into the education of their students. International literacy and cross-cultural understanding have become critical to a country's cultural, technological, economic, and political health. It has become essential for universities to educate, or more importantly, "transform", to function effectively

and comfortably in a world characterized by close multi-faceted relationships and permeable borders. Students must possess a certain level of global competence to understand the world they live in and how they fit into this world. This level of global competence starts at ground level- the university and its faculty- with how they generate and transmit cross-cultural knowledge and information to students.²

Upon a brief analysis, the early pattern is evident: people learned a second or foreign language in order to read and study its literature. Allen has summarized it: "...prior to the 1960s, the lines between language and culture were carefully drawn. The primary reason for second language study in the earlier part of this century was access to the great literary masterpieces of civilization"¹. As Flewelling notes: "it was through reading that students learned of the civilization associated with the target language"¹². Thus, Nostrand's paper on "describing and teaching the socio-cultural context of a foreign language and literature" presented something of a challenge by suggesting two educational purposes of foreign language teaching: 'cross-cultural communication and understanding'. Concurrently, the development of the social sciences resulted in an increased focus on the disciplines of anthropology and sociology, and a more widespread understanding of culture. The sixties were also the height of the audio-lingual era in language teaching, and the time when Brooks "emphasized the importance of culture not for the study of literature but for language learning". Communication began to take centre stage, along with spoken rather than written language, and what is often termed 'small culture'²⁰.

In our society, we all take the book of Hall, the „Silent Language” as the beginning of cross-cultural communication. From then on, anthropology, sociology, psychology and linguistics started to do research on cross-cultural communication and gave their own ideas on it. Hence, the study of cross-cultural communication became more and more popular.

Therefore, the “trans-textual dimension of literature”, the “practical functions of language”, the “supplementary dimension of linguistic structure”, the “plurality of significances”, the “double aspect of literature: language and meta-language” are more and more discussed.

Cross-cultural communication, as in many scholarly domains, is a combination of many other fields among which anthropology, cultural studies, psychology and communication. The topic has also moved both toward the treatment of interethnic relations, and toward the study of communication strategies used by co-cultural populations, i.e., communication strategies used to deal with majority or mainstream populations.

The study of languages other than one’s own can not only serve to help us understand what we as human beings have in common, but also assists us in understanding the diversity which lies beyond not only our language, but also our ways of constructing and organizing knowledge, and the many different realities in which we all live and interact. Such understanding has profound implications with respect to developing a critical awareness of social relationships. Understanding social relationships and the way other cultures work is the groundwork of successful globalization business efforts.³

Language socialization can be broadly defined as “an investigation of how language both presupposes and creates anew, social relations in the cultural context”. It is imperative that the speaker understands the grammar of a language, as well as how elements of language are socially situated in order to reach communicative competence. Human experience is culturally relevant, so elements of language are also culturally relevant. One must carefully consider semiotics and the evaluation of sign systems to compare cross-cultural norms of

communication. There are several potential problems that come with language socialization, however. Sometimes people can over-generalize or label cultures with stereotypical and subjective characterizations. Another primary concern with documenting alternative cultural norms revolves around the fact that no social actor uses language in ways that perfectly match normative characterizations. A methodology for investigating how an individual uses language and other semiotic activity to create and use new models of conduct and how this varies from the cultural norm should be incorporated into the study of language socialization.¹⁸

LANGUAGE TEACHING IS CULTURE TEACHING

When learning a foreign language, students learn about the culture of that language, whether or not it is overtly included in the curriculum. This point was made by McLeod some years ago: “by teaching a language...one is inevitably already teaching culture implicitly”¹⁵. Sociolinguistics reveals why. In an article on discourse, for example, Brown questions whether or not language may be value-free or independent of cultural background. She concludes: “there are values, presuppositions, about the nature of life and what is good and bad in it, to be found in any normal use of language”⁴. Such normal language use is exactly what most foreign language instructors aim to teach.

Let us see now several reasons why “language and culture are from the start inseparably connected”⁵:

- language acquisition does not follow a universal sequence, but differs across cultures;
- the process of becoming a competent member of society is realized through exchanges of language in particular social situations;
- every society orchestrates the ways in which children participate in particular situations, and this, in turn, affects the form, the function and the content of children’s utterances;

- caregivers' primary concern is not with grammatical input, but with the transmission of socio-cultural knowledge;
- the native learner, in addition to language, acquires also the paralinguistic patterns and the kinesics of his or her culture⁵.

Having outlined these findings, Buttjes cautions readers that "as in the case of first vs. second language acquisition research, first and second culture acquisition differ in many respects". Two of his further observations also explain just how language teaching is culture teaching:

- language codes cannot be taught in isolation because processes of socio-cultural transmission are bound to be at work on many levels, e.g. the contents of language exercises, the cultural discourse of textbooks, and teacher's attitudes towards the target culture;
- in their role of "secondary care givers", language teachers need to go beyond monitoring linguistic production in the classroom and become aware of the complex and numerous processes of intercultural mediation that any foreign language learner undergoes...⁵.

Thus, from this evidence and that provided by Valdes in the paper referred to above, it is clear that language teaching is indeed culture teaching. Such a perspective is evident outside of the fields of applied linguistics and second language education as well, in writings on intercultural communication. Let us consider the following view:

*"Culture and communication are inseparable because culture not only dictates who talks to whom, about what, and how the communication proceeds, it 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... Culture...is the foundation of communication."*¹⁹

Under the trend of globalization, culture is becoming a „melting pot“, so the purpose for people to study a language is to communicate with others freely and correctly. A successful

communication not only requires a good mastery of foreign languages, but also the knowledge of the differences of different cultures and the practice of the knowledge. Therefore, the corresponding culture of language is what the learners should learn if they want to study language. Next, we will discuss culture transfer, which plays an important role in both the foreign language study and the language itself.

Culture transfer is the cultural interference caused by cultural difference. Practically, it means that, in culture communication, people use their own culture rules and value to guide their words and their deeds, even thoughts, and they also use them as standards to judge the words and deeds of others.

One may ask why cultural transfer is the biggest barrier in cross-cultural communication - this is mainly because the national culture is so deeply imprinted in the heart of people in that nation. Ever since they were born, they received national culture influence and, no matter what they did, they were guided by the national culture. And people all take their own culture as the center, so they believe that only doing things as people around do is correct, or the action will be wrong and unacceptable. This opinion can help national union on one hand but, on the other hand, it will cause misunderstandings in cross-cultural communication.

There are a lot of research on cultural transfer and the relationship between culture and foreign language learning. In 1940, American linguists C.C. Feris and Robert Lado advocated paying more attention to culture in the teaching of foreign language and they asked learners to understand the cultural differences and do cultural comparison.

THE FORM OF CULTURAL TRANSFER

Scholars of both linguistics and sociology did a lot of research on cultural transfer. Generally speaking, they divided cultural transfer into two forms: surface-structure transfer and deep-structure transfer.

1. Surface-structure transfer

The research on surface-structure transfer includes two parts: first, research on the culture of language forms; then, research on communicative matter and linguistic words and deeds.

Research on the culture of language forms mainly discusses the culture of vocabulary, which can be classified into five parts.

- a. there are no corresponding words in another language. For example, the expression „martisor” in Romanian, though it can be translated into „symbol of spring”, also needs explanation or foreign people cannot understand it.
- b. The words have very strong historical or social implications, such as the meaning of the word „cowboy” to American people.
- c. Idioms. Because these expressions come from ancient legends, region or historical stories, they are the most difficult to understand.
- d. Proverbs. They are popular among the common people.
- e. Formulae and euphemisms. These expressions are different in different societies.

The five aspects do exist in real life. In fact, learners use the vocabulary unconsciously and this action can be regarded as an instinct. At the same time, their knowledge of the second or foreign language is limited and the practice of the vocabulary is also not sufficient. As a result, the transfer of the first language vocabulary to the foreign language vocabulary is unavoidable for most learners.

According to Lado’s theory, at least three instances can bring cultural transfer: same meaning, different form; different meaning, same form; same meaning, same form, but different distribution. Whichever the situation, the only way to avoid misunderstanding in cross-cultural communication is to do a comparison between different cultures and try to know the connotation of the word according to the corresponding culture.

2. Deep-structure transfer

The deep-structure transfer is on the psychological level, so the impact of the life

values and thought patterns are clear in a specific dialogue, except for when the speakers are all very familiar with the two cultures. This is why there are misunderstandings in communication, while the speakers are confused. Moreover, all these are caused by long-term habits and thoughts that are difficult to overcome.

Most Latin and Oriental languages speaking people, for example, like to express things in more complicated phrases, allowing the interlocutor to guess some of the meaning of the words they use, while Saxon-languages (English included) speaking people prefer speaking things more directly. Therefore, even some sophisticated English users cannot communicate properly and successfully in a business relation, for instance, because of the deep-surface transfer manifested, regardless of the surface-transfer that can be conveyed by a good knowledge of the language.

Oral and written communication is generally easier to learn, adapt and deal with in the business world, for the simple fact that each language is unique. The one difficulty that comes into play is Paralanguage, “Language refers to what is said, Paralanguage refers to how it is said. Even though, logically, the same words should convey the same meaning the volume, rate, and emphasis placed on those words can change the meaning of the phrase. The example given by Huseman took the sentence “I would like to help you” and simply by placing the emphases on the words I, Like, Help, You in four different sentences changes the meaning of the phrase.¹²

Beyond what is currently being taught is the issue of research on how to best teach culture. As mentioned earlier, numerous techniques have been suggested, but just what methods work best, with whom, and in what contexts? How integrated are these techniques into the foreign language curriculum? In addition, what assessment techniques are most effective for culture learning and teaching? Do such evaluation methods transfer easily to other classes or language learning contexts?

Above all, universities need to make sure that they are open and responsive to changes in the

outside environment. For a fully effective internationalization, the university (including all staff, students, curriculum, and activities) needs to be current with cultural changes, and willing to adapt to these changes.⁹ As stated by Ellingboe, internationalization "is an ongoing, future-oriented, multidimensional, interdisciplinary, leadership-driven vision that involves many stakeholders working to change the internal dynamics of an institution to respond and adapt appropriately to an increasingly diverse, globally focused, ever-changing external environment".¹⁰ New distance learning technologies, such as interactive teleconferencing, enable students located thousands of miles apart to communicate and interact in a virtual classroom.¹¹

Research has indicated that certain themes and images, such as children, animals, life cycles, relationships, and sports can transcend cultural differences, and may be used in international settings, such as traditional and online university classrooms, to create common ground among diverse cultures.²⁴

INCORPORATION INTO COLLEGE PROGRAMS

With the increasing pressures and opportunities of globalization, the incorporation of international networking alliances has become an "essential mechanism for the internationalization of higher education".⁵ Many universities all around the world have taken great strides to increase intercultural understanding through processes of organizational change and innovations. In general, university processes revolve around four major dimensions which include: organizational change, curriculum innovation, staff development, and student mobility.¹⁷ Ellingboe emphasizes these four major dimensions with his own specifications for the internationalization process. His specifications include:

- college leadership;
- faculty members' international involvement in activities with colleagues, research sites, and institutions worldwide;

- the availability, affordability, accessibility, and transferability of study abroad programs for students;
- the presence and integration of international students, scholars, and visiting faculty into campus life; and
- international co-curricular units (residence halls, conference planning centers, student unions, career centers, cultural immersion and language houses, student activities, and student organizations).¹⁰

Thus, a new style is to be promoted, the "intercultural style", a unique development in which speakers fully competent in two languages will create a novel style of speaking and thinking that is both related to and distinct from the styles prevalent in the two substrata. They rely on this style regardless of the language being used. Interculturality is rapidly becoming one of the most important educational objectives of current foreign language assimilation. This framework can help develop both cross-cultural and communicative competence, which only for the sake of clarity can be mentioned as two different elements of language assimilation. The real challenge of foreign language teaching and learning is to make interculturality and communication a whole. That is our challenge and our responsibility.

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