Sociocultural Factors in Second Language Acquisition

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Abstract: Since no language can exist in a cultural vacuum, and since no two cultures are exactly identical, second or foreign 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. This paper will draw on previous research in this arena as well as the author's personal knowledge to further explore the relationship between socioculture and second language acquisition from the perspectives of culture and language, cultural confrontation, and culture familiarization.

Key words: culture   acquisition   relationship   confrontation   familiarization

In the 1960s and 1970s, theorists of SLA (Second Language Acquisition) and practitioners of ESL (English as a Foreign Language) and EFL (English as a Foreign Language) tended to view second or foreign language learning from the perspective of formal qualities of language. Consequently, grammar and pronunciation of the target language claimed more time and attention in teaching and learning processes. Although much research had been done in those two decades, it mainly focused on methodology and less from enough emphasis was placed on other important factors that affected the final outcome of second or foreign language study, such as language distance, learners' diversity and cultural difference. By the 1980s and 1990s, research in this realm began to shift its focus to learning process and learning style.

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 study. They include: the relationship between culture and language, cultural confrontation, and culture familiarization.

1. The 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 socioculture, 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

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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.) Milton's *Paradise Lost* can serve as a quintessence of this case. To obtain a clear picture of the close relationship between language and culture, perhaps what one needs to know first is the real meaning of culture.

According to Briskin (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. The English phrase "read between lines" is an explicit demonstration of how context impacts semantics. It can further extended to how culture lies behind language. Samuel Johnson (cited in Lynn, 2000) once stated, "We know somewhat, and we imagine the rest". His statement also echoes the sounds of collision and of cohesion between language and culture.

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. Therefore, Mckay (2000), points out that by teaching a language, one is inevitably already teaching culture implicitly. 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. How will the cultural difference affect the final outcome of second language acquisition and how should language teachers and learners deal with it? These questions will be explored in the following sections.

2. 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. Sometimes, Plato could pretend to be Confucius by wearing the latter's clothes. Nevertheless, Plato could never be Confucius because of the discrepant and idiosyncratic cultures where they were raised. Perhaps the two great thinkers would have disdained each other's culture-related philosophies if they had met either in China or in Greece. Therefore, it is safe to say that there may be a universal grammar though parameters exist, and that one may find a universal culture, but cross-cultural variations persist forever.

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. For instance, much research shows that the learning period for French or German students to learn English is generally shorter than that experienced by East Asian learners (Tse, 2001). Although language distance is one of the reasons for the existence of this phenomenon, culture distance should also largely account for the difference in the length of time because East Asian students may encounter cultural shock in their learning processes to a certain degree, which is one of the hindrances in second language acquisition. (Cultural shock does not merely refer to the emotional stir suffered by the second or foreign language learners when they first enter the country where the target language is spoken.)

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 asset to any intellectual inquiry? These are the questions or the puzzles that often haunt

their minds. For some of them, a culture-based prejudicing assumption will be formed. They do not think highly of western writing style.

Language is used for communication, written or oral? We know that in ESL or EFL classes, students need to activate their motivations to speak so as to improve their communicative skills. Take Chinese EFL students as an example again. Although they all know the axiom that practice makes perfect, they do not really contribute much to the class discussion due to the impact of the traditional Confucianism. In fact, if one or two students are very active in class, others may assume that they just want to show off. In South Korea, an overwhelmingly male-dominant country where girls are taught to be quiet in public even when they are quite young, girl students lose many opportunities to practice their spoken English in their EFL classes. Additionally, for most foreign EFL teachers working in East Asian countries, they tend to conduct their class in an informal way, hoping to create a less tense atmosphere so that students could lower their anxiety filter. Contrary to their expectations, students in those countries often think otherwise, viewing their teachers lazy and their classes less organized, because they have been accustomed to the transmission-patterned lectures for a long time. Consequently, those foreign EFL teachers cannot reap the anticipated effect in their teaching activities if they do not know much about students' heritage culture.

3. 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. Perhaps language teachers should undertake this task or assume this responsibility. This concept aligns with Stem's statement that language conveys culture and a language teacher is also of necessity a teacher of culture (cited in Mohammed, 1999). But what, when, how, and to what extent should specific points of culture be introduced to learners in the classroom context? These are very touchy questions. The following suggestions may be helpful to the solution of them.

Initially, what a teacher needs to do is assist students to remove their cultural blinders. Since every person is brought up in a certain community, more often than not, he/she tend to be affiliated with other members of the community because they share the same cultural values or norms, and view other cultures as inferior. This is perhaps one of the reasons why in the United States, there exist so many ethnic communities, Chinatown for instance. By removing the cultural blinder, it means that teachers are supposed to correct students' misconceptions about a certain culture and help them cultivate the ideology of cultural pluralism. Secondly, the stereotype of a particular culture must be eradicated. For example, in the arena of EFL in China, the popular conception of American people is that they are industrious, punctual, and aggressive. The image may fit some Americans, but

cannot be culminated as a national trait. Thirdly, the amount of cultural information that needs presenting to learners should depend on the learners' various goals in learning the target language. For immigrants to the English speaking countries and for those who want to go there, language classes should be culture-oriented, while as to those who learn English just for the purpose of conducting basic reading in that language, such as some math majors in China, language-focused lessons should enjoy priority in the learning and teaching processes. Finally, multiculturalism should be promoted in classes, particularly in ESL/EFL classes. One reason is that it fits the concept of equality in the postmodern world. Another is that English has become an international language and that no country or nation can have an authoritative custody over it (Mckay, 2000). Therefore, learning English does not necessarily entail the acquisition of British, American or Canadian culture. Rather, learners only need to know about the language-related culture so as to foster cross-cultural awareness. This is why culture familiarization instead of cultural acquisition is employed as the subtitle of this section.

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.

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. To solve this problem, multiculturalism must be cultivated or nurtured in learners' minds, which implies that learners are supposed to be provided with an appropriate amount of non-discriminatory cultural information because it can help them better understand the second or foreign language, and establish proper attitudes toward it. Of course, although the final outcome of second language acquisition will be decided by many factors, sociocultural factors always count significantly. Therefore, language teachers should take them into account when developing curricula pertaining to second language acquisition.

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