

Developing intercultural communicative competence in language teaching

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Abstract: Language and culture are closely connected and many linguistic phenomena reflect the influences of culture on language. Moreover, learners of a language cannot be competent in that language solely by their language skills. This paper approaches the nature of language and language learning from the sociocultural perspective and explores how language teachers can foster learners' intercultural communicative competence. The findings are hoped to have implications for teaching and learning.

Key words: intercultural communicative competence; culture's role; language teaching

1 Introduction

Sociolinguistics, studying the relationship between language and society, is helpful for language instructors to have a better understanding of the nature of language and cultivate learners' communicative competence from more comprehensive perspectives.

English language teaching has a long history of focusing on only linguistic knowledge. With the introduction of sociolinguistic competence, English language teaching has begun to cultivate learners' communicative competence. However, many pedagogic models adopt the concept of native speaker-based notion of communicative competence and neglect the social as well as cultural variables in real situations. In the context of global English teaching and learning, language contact and culture contact have become common, and traditional teaching methods focusing on NS model communicative competence cannot meet the multilingual and multicultural needs. To address the problem, we should cultivate learners' intercultural communicative competence.

In this article, the author will first discuss the property of language and language learning from sociocultural perspectives. In particular, it focuses on the essence of culture and its role in language teaching. Through analyzing the problems in traditional communicative competence pedagogies, it is argued that English language teaching should underscore intercultural competence. The last session is about how language teachers foster learners' intercultural sensitivity by changing their attitudes to cultural diversity.

2 Language and language learning in sociolinguistics

2.1 Nature of language in sociolinguistics

Language is not an abstract and separated subject existing in the individual, but a "social and cultural phenomenon". Language is not only used to convey meaning, but also to maintain social relationship and convey social identity.

When talking separately to friends and people with higher social status, we talk differently. Due to the different social relationships and identities in our conversations, we use different styles to address different registers. As Wardhaugh and Fuller claim, "no one speaks the same way all the time, and people constantly exploit variation within the language they speak for a wide variety of purposes". This allegation also reflects Trudgill's opinion on the nature and functions of language. Language, influenced by many variables, such as social and cultural factors, is not fixed or context independent, but multiple, dynamic, contextual, and changing over time and space.

2.2 Language learning in sociolinguistics

Concerning the nature of language in social contexts, language learning is also a social activity, which is different from cognitive linguists' view of language learning. In their opinion, language learning is an internalized and individualized process. From sociocultural perspectives, language learning is interwoven with society and culture. Lantolf claims that language learning is a mediated process, through which we "establish an indirect, or mediated relationship between ourselves and the world" [1]. Language socialization theories declare that language learners learn to be capable members in socially, culturally and politically shaped communities. Since language is closely connected with sociohistorical, sociopolitical, and sociocultural structure, language learning is constructing social identity and relationship in "community of practice" by understanding historical and practical conditions of language use and by appropriating utterances [2]. Therefore, language learning and language use are influenced by the use of linguistic forms in social contexts, such as social identity and relationships as well as historical and practical conditions of language use [3].

In terms of its social nature, language teaching cannot be independent of social and cultural contexts since every utterance we produce reveals our attitude and social relationship in social interaction. Language learners need to know "who speaks (or writes) what language (or what language variant) to whom and when to speak and for what purpose" [4]. Therefore, language teaching should comprehensively consider various factors and pay attention to the cultivation of communicative ability. What's more, language teaching should be positioned in social and cultural contexts. Culture, permeating in all areas of society, is significantly important for language teaching.

3 Language and culture

3.1 Understanding culture

Language is a mirror to reflect a nation's culture, ranging from big C culture literature (history, philosophy, and politics) to little c culture (how the native speakers behave, eat, talk, dwell) [5]. Michael Byram refers to culture as "shared belief, values and behaviors of a social group" [6]. Culture is an abstract and autonomous cognitive system, or a discursively mediated, context-sensitive and context-shaping social action [7]. It is also prescriptive and normative, or emergent, interpretative and process-oriented. In terms of the nature of culture, different scholars have different views on the social structure/rationalism and discursive constructivism of culture.

From sociostructural views, macrostructural forces and internalized social norms determine social action and language use. According to rationalist theories, social actions are conceptualized as cognitively based and goal-ended action. Despite their different focuses, both approaches regard culture as unitary, static, stable, cognitive, and context-independent. Both believe that cultural identity dominates other identities, actions and participation, as well as discourse practices. Hence, cultural diversity is considered hazardous and a source of miscommunication. On the contrary, discursive-constructionist approaches reject essentialism and determinism views of social phenomena in sociostructural and rationalist theories. By positioning cultural identity from individual to the social, discursive-constructionism alleges that identities are constructed through participants' social and discursive activities and hence, contingent upon contexts and social practices [8]. From this point of view, identities are what people do instead of what they possess. They may come and go during an event.

Culture is a property of human beings, which is externally distinctive and internally homogeneous. Human beings share some common moral values and world views despite cultural differences among nations and states. In the meantime, owing to the internal diversity of communities, "sub-culture" exists within the "generalized culture". The diverse and discursive nature of culture is particularly salient in the global English backgrounds, where multilingualism and multiculturalism can be seen everywhere.

3.2 Culture in language teaching

The role culture plays in language teaching varies greatly, from culture that is "inseparable from language" to culture that is "dispensable icing on the cake". It is generally agreed that language and culture are inalienable. Language is an integrated part of culture and the carrier of culture, while culture is the source of language. Therefore, language cannot be taught successfully without the teaching of culture, as we cannot teach a foreign language in a cultural vacuum. In language teaching, both language output and cultural introduction are indispensable parts of education. It is difficult for educators to obtain better educational results if they only pay attention to the input of language theory and ignore the penetration of language-related cultural knowledge.

Traditionally, teachers separate language teaching from culture teaching. They teach language and culture, or culture in language, but not language as culture. Although Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) brings emphasis on sociolinguistic competence, it regards culture as static, stable, and context independent. Foreign language learning is regarded as "enculturation". By adopting "native speaker" model, CLT holds the belief that language learners should obtain accurate forms of the target language and "learn how to use these forms in specific social environment in the target language context". The model's goal requires learners to become English speakers, different from those native speakers, and even exhibit the same body language, intonation, and outlook on life as English speakers.

From the perspective of English as a lingua franca, the concept of communicative competence is "utopian, unrealistic, and restrictive". On the one hand, it neglects the fact that English have several dialects, even in inner-circle countries like Britain and the U.S. In addition, it overlooks English variations and other English-related cultures developed through localization and nativization in outer-circle countries like India and Nigeria. By claiming that there is one right and suitable way of using English, the model imposes superiority on certain English patterns over the others. And in fact, it is a deculturization practice of language learning and teaching. From another point of view, it neglects the roles of learners' own culture in language learning, denies learners' selves as well as their cultural identities, and may easily bring anxiety and negative attitudes to new languages. When people speaking different languages or from different countries have social interactions, their knowledge about their own country and the others is brought to the situation. Language learners, as social actors, are related to the language they are learning in a specific way. The sociopolitical circumstances where they live would determine the relationships. Meanwhile, as human beings, language learners would bring emotions and identities to language learning. Therefore, language teachers should respect learners' own culture and accept their identities in language classrooms. To meet globalization demands, language teacher should develop students' intercultural communicative competence.

4 How to cultivate students' intercultural communicative competence

In the context of globalizations, with the increasing frequency of cultural contact, the nature and the role of culture in language teaching have changed [9]. Culture is neither stable nor static. Instead, it is emergent, contingent, and constructed through social interaction. To help learners effectively and successfully communicate with speakers of other languages and people from different cultural backgrounds, language teachers should cultivate learners' intercultural communicative

competence. Intercultural communicative competence refers to the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on personal intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes.

Deardorff's pyramid model divides intercultural communication skills into four levels: attitude, knowledge, skills, internal and external consequences goals [10]. Kim Young Yun divided intercultural communication competence into three parts, namely, cognitive part, emotional part, and operational part [11]. In his view, in order to acquire sufficient intercultural communication skills, it is necessary to have a good understanding of language and be able to grasp its practicality. Byram proposed a model of intercultural communicative competence based on the relationship between language teaching and cultural teaching, which aims to improve foreign language learners' intercultural communicative competence in terms of knowledge, awareness, attitude, and skills [12]. He held that in order to communicate with people from different cultures, it was necessary to have relevant cultural knowledge. Secondly, successful communication depends on the positive attitude and flexible cultural adaptability displayed in communication. Compared to other models, Byram's model has a significant advantage in setting clear goals. Although different scholars have different descriptions of the elements of intercultural competence, some common components can be summarized from their perspectives, namely, the three dimensions of the competence: knowledge (cognition), attitude (emotion), and behavior (skills).

In the knowledge dimension, in addition to general cultural knowledge, communicators should not only be familiar with culture of their own countries, but also be familiar with the cultural background of other countries in terms of humanities, geography, history, politics, economy, customs, literature, religion, and other aspects. In terms of attitude and emotion, it involves the communicators' sensitivity to cultural differences, inclusiveness to different cultures, and their respect for different cultures based on their understanding of their own culture. The dimension of behavioral skills includes aspects such as the verbal and nonverbal abilities of the communicators (such as the ability to handle interpersonal relationships, and the ability to adapt to foreign cultural environments). In intercultural competence, which are intertwined together and contribute to the formation of intercultural competence. None of these elements alone is sufficient to constitute intercultural competence. In the cultivation of intercultural competence, it is obvious that these elements must be combined comprehensively in order to achieve this goal.

Understanding various definitions can help us understand the components of intercultural competence as well as their intertwined relationships. On the one hand, learners should possess the knowledge of themselves and others, which can be acquired through skills like discovering, interacting, interpreting and relating. On the other hand, learners should develop positive attitudes to relativize themselves and evaluate others through contrast and comparison. Furthermore, learners should foster their critical cultural awareness and cultural sensitivity. Thus, language teaching should aim to develop learners' awareness of cultural diversity as well as critical cultural awareness, and nurture their intercultural sensitivity.

4.1 Attitudes: being inclusive to language variations

Language teachers should help students better use the language by understanding the culture contained in it. A cultural value is conveyed through language in its core structure, which constructs and reflects culture. The development of language is influenced by the sociopolitical, sociocultural, and sociohistorical circumstances in which it evolves. Language use, as a social behavior, is affected by social, cultural, and historical indicators. Thus, the use of lexical items and grammar reflects the culture of a social group and the identity of its members. Holme suggests that language teachers should lead students to discover the cultural factors underpinned and help them to manipulate the semantic system successfully [13]. We must explore the culture behind language use, because no language is culture free.

Furthermore, language teachers should develop their inclusive attitude towards language variations. During the process of localization and nativization, English has drew on the lexical and syntactical knowledge from local languages,

established specific, stable and comprehensive linguistic system, and developed many variations in outer and expanding-circle countries to meet the social needs. Kortmann lists varieties of English in terms of phonology, morphology, and syntax in the British Isles, the Americas and the Caribbean, the Pacific and Australasia, as well as in Africa, South and Southeast Asia [14]. Knowing the variations is important for successful communication in countries and regions where English is used as a lingua franca. Therefore, language teachers should adopt inclusive attitudes to English variations. They should not only teach standard English, but also expose students to varieties of English and focus on accommodation strategies to promote successful and effective communication in multilingual environment.

4.2 Attitudes: being inclusive to cultural identities

In classrooms with highly diverse student populations, language teachers should validate students' cultural identities and encourage active participation. How the teacher treats learners' cultural identity ascription directly influences their classroom participation and academic performance. Research has demonstrated that traditional monocultural identities, denying that culture is diverse, dynamic, and discursive, will bring about detrimental consequences. For example, locating students with immigration backgrounds as representatives of their original culture has produced resistance in educational settings and may "set educationally undesirable trajectories in motion". Students categorized as cultural others would curtail their classroom participation and terminate with academic unsuccess in the long run. In addition, Duff's research shows that teachers' treating students with multicultural identities (such immigration students) as "inherently dilemmatic" also causes problems [15]. Therefore, language teachers should alter their perceptions on students' cultural identities and create multiculturalism in the classroom. To address this, some researchers recommend practices of multicultural education and culturally responsive teaching. Teachers may apply "multimodal literacy" to encourage students' participation, for instance, assimilating diverse ranges of learning sources, or allowing students to bring their own familiar materials into classroom. It is advocated that the teacher shares the power with students and build cultural community in foreign language curriculum to foster meaningful communication among all group members.

4.3 Knowledge: exploring diverse cultural contents

Language teachers should expand their cultural and geographical scope and introduce a diversity of cultural knowledge from different English-speaking countries, apart from British and American cultures. As a broad term, culture not only covers aspects such as literature, technology, art, and science, but also reflects a certain culture in a person's lifestyle, behavior, clothing, food, housing, and transportation. Unfortunately, instructional efforts to cultivate students' understanding of cultural differences are often limited to "a superficial focus on heroes, holidays, customs and food", which delivers "a concept of culture as a static corpus of values and beliefs, and a conflation of country, culture, language, nationality and identity" [16]. The narrow focus on current cultural involvement goes against the complexity and diversity of multilingualism and multiculturalism and might cause communication failure and cultural misunderstanding. Cultures of various countries are incorporated into EFL classrooms to diversify learners' cultural exposure.

With globalization, English has been used as a language of contact between interlocutors of different languages. Participants may come from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds with multilingual and multicultural settings. In intercultural communication, people from different cultures and countries need to apply members' knowledge in another culture. Teachers should help students understand the role of culture in language learning and communication. In addition, they should develop an awareness of "plurality" of cultural identity by exploring the diversity and complexity of different local and national cultures and help students understand their own and others' culturally based norms, beliefs, and behaviors. Language teachers should accept and utilize shared cultural resources from diverse student populations, and promote their understanding of sameness and otherness in the globalization era.

4.4 Skills: nurturing learners' intercultural sensitivity and critical cultural awareness

In multilingual classrooms, language learners come from different cultures and may not have the same goals and values. Under the circumstances, ELF communication is considered urgent, with common characteristics of participants, and culture is also diverse, dynamic, emergent, and co-constructed through interaction [17]. To nurture intercultural sensitivity and critical cultural awareness, language teachers should develop learners' ability to articulate their own and others' "culturally induced behaviors, values, and beliefs", and make comparison between them. In addition, they should help students to transcend "cultural stereotypes or generalization" to "negotiate and mediate between different emergent socioculturally grounded communication modes". In this way, teachers can develop students' ability to make critical evaluation of perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures and countries. In addition, they should develop learners' capability to utilize linguistic and other communicative resources, such as accommodation, consultation, as well as mediation skills.

Learners can better understand foreign cultures by analyzing, comparing, and evaluating their own cultures and the new one, because language learners "learn who they are through contact with others". Through the self and other dialogism, cultural and personal identities get constructed [18]. In the "third place", where learners' own culture comes into contact with others', learners see themselves both internally and externally. Therefore, learning a foreign language does not mean accepting a new culture at the expense of denying learners' own original culture. Instead, accepting individual identity and culture would help learners understand new cultures better. The contact between learners' own culture and that of target language helps better understand self and others and foster their intercultural sensitivity and critical cultural consciousness. Thus, language teachers should develop students' competence to relativize their own cultural values, beliefs and behaviours to discover different norms between themselves and otherness [19], and put more emphasis on the changing and emerging "third place" of the language learners to develop intercultural communicative competence. In a word, intercultural communicative competence is the goal of foreign language teaching and learning.

To address multilingualism and multiculturalism in classrooms and develop learners' intercultural communicative competence, language teachers should cultivate learners' understanding of language and culture through long-term efforts. Teachers can strive to conduct a second classroom with flexible means and diverse forms, encouraging learners to watch foreign language movies, songs, magazines, periodicals, or listen to radios, communicate with foreigners. Teachers need to pay more attention to the cultural identity education in the mother tongue to cultivate students' firm cultural self-confidence.

5 Conclusion

Language is closely correlated with culture and society. Language is used to communicate ideas, establish social relationships, and indicate social identities. To understand the meanings of utterances, we should consider not only the contexts in which they are located, but also the influence that the historical development and culture has produced on a language. Therefore, language teaching should be positioned into sociopolitical, sociocultural, and sociohistorical contexts. In the era of globalization, multilingual and multicultural communication takes place frequently, and culture is emergent, discursive, and contingent upon contexts.

To develop students' linguistic and cultural accommodation skills, language teachers should change their attitudes to English variations and introduce a diversity of English patterns as well as cultural sources into the classroom. Cultural contents should extend its sphere to include more English-speaking countries, such as outer-circle and expanding-circle countries. Foreign language teaching is not only about the imparting of language knowledge, but also about the acquisition of values, attitudes and beliefs, which is part of a person's entire educational process. As language teachers, we should be dedicated to cultivating learners' intercultural communication competence to satisfy the needs of multilingual and

multicultural communication. Therefore, language teachers should help learners broaden their cultural knowledge scope and develop intercultural sensitivity. In short, the best teachers are those who provide students with an in-depth understanding of how their own culture and other cultures are connected, and stimulate their curiosity about cultural differences.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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