

A Reflective Report on the Study of Intercultural Communication in Language Teaching

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Abstract

Language and culture depend on each other. This article reports a cross-cultural study journey and reflects its importance to language teaching from three aspects: belief, attitudes and skills. It also helps the author predict the communicative behavior with people from different cultural backgrounds, and offers some reference for the problems in intercultural communication.

Key Words: Reflective journal; Intercultural communication; Language teaching

1.Introduction

The author has been a second language teacher for about 20 years. In her teaching career, language teaching and application have been set as the first teaching aims when she planned the teaching objectives. As to cultural, cross-cultural and intercultural elements, she occasionally put them into her teaching plans unless the teaching contents includes some cultural contrast materials. For a long time, many Chinese language teachers also think that learning language is to learn language forms. Learning some grammar and vocabulary regulations means surely to be able to use this language for communication. However, in the actual cross-cultural communication activities, with a lot of vocabulary and grammar knowledge, the students still encounter a lot of difficulties and mistakes when they use it. This is mainly manifested in the inappropriate sentence words. And it is enough to show what learning a language requires is not only to master its linguistic form and rules, but also to learn its specific application in its cultural background, namely, learning a different culture. The author starts to realize the importance of cultural communication (both cross-cultural and intercultural) and language teaching, and gradually builds her own CSA (Cultural Self-awareness), although this kind of awareness is still on the way.

2.Intercultural Belief

Because of globalizing forces, internationalization, transportation and technological advances, changing demographics and conflict situations, ethical intercultural communication is now more important than at any other time in the history. "We need to learn how to adapt and thrive in unfamiliar environments, and contribute to our planet in a constructive, peaceful manner" (Jackson, 2014: 4). Language and culture depend on each other, and it is impossible to exist independently from the other. In this sense, to teach a language is to teach a culture, and language teaching and culture learning is inseparable. Without the soil of culture, it is almost impossible to grasp the language of a certain nation in a comprehensive and correct way. For example, Chinese and English are derived from different geographical, historical and social cultures. Chinese students, from a primary school to a university, have learned English for more than 10 years. Most time of their learning is spent on grammar and words. And they think that the rest part of language can be solved by common sense and habits as long as

they learn a foreign language knowledge. However, common sense is not universal. In the context of Chinese culture, this kind of common-sense behavior may become uncommon behavior in English speaking countries. It inevitably leads to communication failure.

Cultural traditions, social customs and habits vary from place to place. Each cultural or ethnic group has its own history, culture, values, life and moral standards, and these practice and behavior all suppressed by its unique traditional values of the society. People from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds might be reluctant to communicate when they feel uncomfortable with difference or under the threat. They might be reluctant to response when hard to decide what is right and wrong from the both sides, and they might be hesitant to communicate when they doubt the appropriateness of language use. As an international student, the author is also approved of above views and experience from Ayumi (a Japanese classmate). All of us should make a difference, but we do have potential to enrich ourselves and the world around us, and then to enhance cultural self-awareness, more understanding and acceptance of other cultural and linguistic practice.

Most of cultural and intercultural knowledge is acquired through school education, and some is naturally learned in the context of family and society. However, for the majority of human being, values, attitudes, beliefs, knowledge of worldviews, customs and behavior patterns are not conscious, or are taken for granted. Even members of different cultural groups who speak the same language may have different worldview and values. They may associate different meaning with the same verbal and nonverbal symbols and this, of course, affects the communication process. The barriers to communication between people from different cultures cannot be completely overcome. Because language is just one of many codes involved in daily lives and language code is only a part of the cultural symbol system, different cultural orientations, values, social norms, thinking modes still exist. Jackson (2014) examines and defines culture from seven dimensions (culture as learned; culture as shared, as in group membership; culture as relative; culture as dynamic and mediated; culture as individual, fragmentary and imaginary; culture as contested; and culture as communication). The author realizes that culture is impossible limited in one nation. It may become international and open to all human beings. With economic and cultural globalization, the blending of different cultures has become a necessary trend of the times. For example, a large number of people from different nations have been pouring into one nation, and at the same time people from this nation are also exposed to different foreign cultures when they go abroad. In this way, people from various nations in the world will be able to acquire better understanding of each other. Although many cross-cultural studies have used nations as the units of analysis, the concept of national culture has been challenged on various grounds. There may be significant diversity within some countries and similarities across national borders, compromising the concept of national culture.

3.Intercultural Attitudes

As a language teacher and learner, the chapters the author read in ICC area make her reflect on her attitude and then reconsider her teaching and learning practice. Combining the basic theories of intercultural competence with the skills of ICC provides a set of teaching objectives that can guide cooperation across the curriculum and particularly allow foreign language teachers to include in their teaching aims the encouragement of international political activity among their learners. With this guidance, the author learned the knowledge of intercultural communication and understood some differences between Chinese and other cultures in various fields. They helped the author compare and think about different cultures, improve her intercultural understanding and also make her re-examine her own culture. Consequently, it is recognized that Chinese culture is one of the four ancient civilizations in the world, and it has entered the full-blown civilization as early as 4200 years ago. From the author's point of view, the good things are unique in Chinese culture and full of popularity which lasted for

thousands of years. In summary, there are three courses:

1). gentleman personality patterns; 2). behavior patterns of etiquette; and 3). thinking modes of golden mean.

The first one is the personality model, the second one is the behavior pattern and the third is the thinking mode. These three models are closely linked with clear logic and formed a system, which has become a unique advantage of Chinese culture. Nevertheless, what we inherit from our culture are not always good. The shortcomings of Chinese culture are mainly three deficiencies: the lack of public awareness, the lack of legal awareness, and the lack of empirical awareness. Historically, Chinese culture is lack of research and thinking on public space. Ancestor worship is the main belief of Chinese people. Most of them do not understand the vast public space between the family and the society. This kind of nationalism often tends to cause the extreme corruption of legal consciousness. It is probably because of the long glorious history that we are always holding Sinology, or calling for ancient; strength moving forward and creative thinking lead to serious lack of empirical awareness, which to a certain extent makes Chinese culture in a quagmire of right or wrong, but not true or false. And it is also what calls for the need of our repentance.

Samovar (2001) notes that culture includes all the products of human society. It includes not only material things such as cities, organizations, schools, but also non-material things such as thoughts, habits, family patterns, languages and so on. In a word, culture refers to the whole way of life in a society, "the whole way of a nation" (Samovar, 2001). On the psychological side, learning the knowledge of intercultural communication is that the author can find new fun and feel a different sense of satisfaction with ICC (Intercultural Communication Competence). It also helps the author predict the communicative behavior with people from different cultural backgrounds, and solve the problems in communication. The author absolutely agrees with Frederico Fellini (1920–1993) that 'a different language is a different vision of life'. Learning a new language can be a powerful catalyst in creating a different perspective of life. To be fluent in another language would be helpful in second language learning and teaching context. Better understanding and appreciation would definitely lead to efficient communication and effective teaching result.

Recently when the author read newspapers, she saw such a statement: if words were invented to conceal the thoughts, newspapers are a great improvement on the bad invention. It is an interesting point of view, and the author suddenly associates with Wittgenstein (1889–1951, a British philosopher). When language is expressed, it is often very poor. But Wittgenstein, in his constant deconstruction of language, excavated and explored the new meaning of language itself. The "Language game" is one of the key concepts in Wittgenstein's later philosophy. Languages are not isolated and static descriptive symbols, and with their own expression, their various forms embody the subjective initiative forms of people's life. In human language games, there are a variety of life forms, body languages, language expressions and the subconscious languages. These forms of language communicate but exist independently. By observing the actual use of these languages, we can study the individual diversity of language, and find different forms of life. Language is not an edge topic in people's life, and it is also not a used "tool", but we understand this is the key to the world, Wittgenstein has given us a new perspective. The author likes the idea that "imagining a language means imagining a form of life" (Bang & Trampe, 2014: 81-93). It's fun to explore and understand different forms of language, to observe and feel the kinds of language games we can learn, and to understand the nature of human existence.

Second language teaching belongs to language education, and language education is cultural education to a great extent. Because language and culture are part of the relationship with the whole, language is a part of culture and plays an important role in culture. And language is influenced by culture and reflects culture. It can be said that language reflects the characteristics of a nation. It contains not only the historical and cultural background of the nation, but also the nation's view of life, life style and way of thinking. Language and culture

interact with each other. Understanding language must be associated with understanding culture, and vice versa. Byram (1997) emphasizes that knowing a language is knowing about a country and knowing how to interact with people with different ways of thinking, believing and behaving. Now the author realizes that there are at least two systemic rules in language: one is structural rules, that is, speech, vocabulary, grammar, etc. The other is to decide whether language is used properly or not. A completely grammatical language used in inappropriate occasions does not match the identity of speaker, or even violates the local social customs and habits in that context. So it cannot achieve the purpose of communication, and sometimes even cause unexpected consequences. Thus, Byram and Zarate (1997) suggest intercultural speakers should develop the critical cultural awareness so that they can judge the views and events of their own culture and other cultures or countries from a multicultural perspective. It also reminds the author, as a language teacher and learner, of the educational aims and objectives of language teaching and learning.

4. Intercultural Skills

According to Davis, Cho and Hagenon (2005), achieving IC through intercultural learning is a major goal that complements the development of students' language competence. Learning a foreign language is not only to master the pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and idioms, but also to learn how to communicate, how to observe the world, how to use this language to reflect our thoughts, habits and behavior, and to understand the social culture of target language. In this way, intercultural communication can be carried out smoothly. In language teaching, teachers should guide their students to learn with careful contrastive observation, and make them understand the interference of native culture on the target language in intercultural communication from different social customs, ways of thinking, attitudes, values and culture of non-verbal communication. The purpose of including ICC is to ensure that those teaching foreign languages can take it into consideration in a systematically planned approach to teaching and learning.

Studying IC (Intercultural Communication) skills is important in her present and future teaching context. Before coming to APU (Asuza Pacific University, the U.S.), the author had been teaching Chinese for international students from the southeast Asian countries, such as Vietnam, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka. Usually, the most challenging part in the classroom was not about linguistic knowledge or problems on how to teach, but about those cross-cultural conflicts between multicultural connotations and multi-language forms. With the students from different cultures, it is inevitable to face these cultural barriers when teaching occurs. And with good ICC, these barriers and conflicts can be better avoided. In a word, teaching a second language is closely related to cross-cultural and intercultural communication.

ICC skills are a critical tool in a language teacher's repertoire to create a safe and welcoming environment in the classroom. When working in the international class with a mix of different languages and cultures, it is important to have an appreciation for how those cultures have interacted and influenced one another in the past, and how current political and social strains could penetrate the classroom naturally. Because the course the author teaches is, after all, a second language class, not a total cultural class. The author still needs to use language teaching methods, that is, the primary problem is to improve students' language competence, and to infiltrate some cultural knowledge on this basis, so as to improve students' cultural sensitivity and enhance their intercultural communication ability, rather than simply transplant other countries' cultures. Meanwhile, in-depth understanding and cognition is very important for the cultivation of students' ICC. Second language teachers usually tend to compare foreign cultures with their own cultures. Through comparative observation and intercultural critical thinking, both teachers and students can have a deeper understanding of their own culture, better appreciate the culture of other countries and ethnic groups, and at the same time, conversely promote their

teaching and learning of target language. Moreover, Jackson (2014) suggests effective language communicators should bear in mind that miscommunication may be due to language barriers rather than cultural difference and vice versa. This means that language teachers should plan their teaching to include objectives, materials, and methods that develop the specific elements of IC. Teachers of language need to become teachers of language and culture.

Therefore, only by grasping the necessary intercultural knowledge and ability can we eliminate the negative effect from mother tongue in second language acquisition, correct deviations and errors in language understanding, and then cultivate target language thinking and develop practical communicative competence. From this point of view, it can be said that intercultural communication education is the most important part of language teaching and learning. As a second language teacher, the author combines the training of intercultural communicative competence with language teaching. This kind of language teaching should be a two-way process of communication and acquisition of cross-cultural/intercultural knowledge. In the process of language teaching, teachers should cultivate students' awareness of intercultural communication and carry out intercultural communication teaching based on multi-level consideration to enhance students' sensitivity and tolerance to cultural differences, the flexibility and adaptability. The kind of critical awareness of intercultural communication is equal to the "knocking brick" and the "bond" to understand the own and other's cultures in a systematic way. We still face the same choices that will shape the selves that we become. So, we may choose when we set ourselves up against the world and recognize nothing outsider our horizons.

We can still find that there exist some intercultural conflicts between different cultures in global communication, but what behind these conflicts is a world-wide trend of cultural development – international communication and integration. Political and economic globalization intensifies the cultural globalization. International cultural relationships among different groups and countries become more complicated. The characteristic quality and frequency of national and regional communication are improved, and the global diversity has been expanded. It can be said that the future development of the intercultural environment will be harmonious and healthy. In the process of inter-communication between different cultures, it is necessary to abandon the narrow stereotyping, discrimination, prejudice resulted from ethnocentrism and hegemonism. Just as Peale (2007: 233) says “changing your thoughts and you change your world”. All of us can take steps towards a more ethno-relative perspective and reap the benefits with more positive intercultural interactions.

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Biography

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