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Culture and Second Language Acquisition

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Culture is to humans what water is to fish–that which surrounds us and that we are only aware of when it is gone. This is not an especially good analogy but this is appropriate since culture is so difficult to define. Brown (2007, p. 380) defines culture succinctly and overly generally as "the ideas, customs, skills, arts, and tools that characterize a given group of people in a given period of time." Díaz-Rico and Weed (2006) looked at six definitions and needed a paragraph to define culture as

> the explicit and implicit patterns for living, the dynamic system of commonly agreed-upon symbols and meanings, knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs, behaviors, traditions, and/or habits that are shared and make up the total way of life of a people, as negotiated by individuals in the process of constructing a personal identity.
> (pp. 232-233)

An advantage of Díaz-Rico and Weed's (2006) definition is that it specifically views culture as a process, not a static list of facts to be memorized nor a set of situational skits encoding behavior. Robinson-Stuart and Nocon (1996) likewise stress the importance of the fact that culture is an active, ongoing process, lived by those who make up the culture: "culture is not only located in cultural products and forms, but in the active lives of those who share those forms" (Robinson-Stuart & Nocon, Author abstract section, para 5).

Culture as a process undermines the idea that culture can be learned through superficial aspects like food, costume, and holidays. It is experienced though language, however because language is inseparable from culture. Learning a second language requires learning the linguistic aspects of the target culture. Second language acquisition is second culture acquisition.

This is true even if the culture in which the learners are studying is not the culture of the target language. Even students learning English as a foreign language in Japan still requires some

sort of English cultural underpinning. Obviously this applies to Japanese learners of English as a second language as well. There are several linguistic ways that differences between British Commonwealth/American English culture and Japanese culture differ. For example, Japanese culture is hierarchical and the language reflects this. There is no word corresponding to the English for "brother." Rather, Japanese has four words for "brother," used to distinguish between older and younger brothers as well as in different situations: addressing the brother requires one form, and talking about the brother with someone else requires a different form.

The Japanese language contains many other examples of language that does not translate culturally into English. Names, for example, are often not used in Japanese if there is some way to avoid it. Relationships or occupations are frequently used to refer to people instead. A Japanese learner of English in America may experience culture shock at the idea of calling a teacher by his or her name rather than just calling that person "teacher." These can be seen as cultural manifestations of the Whorfian Hypothesis (as described in Brown, 2007, pp. 211-213). Culture and language are bound together so tightly that learning a new language requires learning a new culture and thus a new way of viewing the world.

Interestingly, some English teachers in Japan do not use these English cultural norms in class, believing that exposing the students to a different culture will cause them culture shock. Thus, "brother" is taught as a word in combination with "elder/older" and "younger," after which "brother" by itself may be encountered less frequently than phrases that match the Japanese cultural norm (i.e. "elder brother") even though in American English "brother" by itself would be far more common.

Learning a new language while living in the culture involves coming to terms with the new ocean you are swimming in. This is acculturation, which can have two meanings. The general meaning is just the process or act of adjusting to a new culture. Brown (1980) and

Schumann (1986) seem to be using the term acculturation in this way when talking about the Optimal Distance Model and the Acculturation Model, respectively. Díaz-Rico and Weed (2007) give another, more specific definition of acculturation as a specific way of adjusting to a new culture: "[t]o acculturate is to adapt to a second culture without necessarily giving up one's first culture" (p. 246). This is distinct from other ways such as assimilation–being totally absorbed into the new culture, with the native culture ultimately disappearing (pp. 245-246) –or accommodation–where both cultures adapt to each other (pp. 246-247).

Motivation is often described as instrumental or integrative (Schumann, 1986). Learners who want language ability for their job or other specific task are instrumentally motivated. This would include, for example, the legions of EFL learners in Japan for whom English is just another section on school entrance exams. These learners need English for a specific purpose and are not trying to integrate into an English speaking culture or to be like an English native speaker they admire. Integrative motivation is, almost be definition, associated with acculturation but motivation is complex and involves many other factors as well. Schumann (1986) gives the example of successful English learners in the American Southwest who have anti-integrative motivations. Thus, motivation, while of course an important aspect of learners' language acquisition, does not correlate with learners' attitudes toward acculturation.

Brown's Optimal Distance Model

The critical period hypothesis suggests that age, and accompanying changes in the brain, place a natural limit on second language acquisition (Brown, 2007). Brown (1980) reformulated the critical period hypothesis to make acculturation, rather than age, the major factor defining the critical period. This is the Optimal Distance Model, and as the name implies, Schumann's social distance is one of the elements of the model, in the form of Acton's perceived social distance. According to Brown (1980, 2007), second language learners are optimally suited to learn the

second language when certain conditions of acculturation are met. Specifically, the optimal period is when learners are in the third stage of acculturation and also see themselves as outside of both their native culture and the second culture.

Acculturation takes place in four stages (Brown, 1980). The first is the honeymoon period, when everything is new and interesting. Next is the culture shock period. Third is a long period of slow recovery. By recovering, or mostly recovering, from the culture shock and adjusting to the new culture, the learner enters the fourth stage.

An important element of the third period is a feeling of anomie, which Brown (1980) describes as the feeling of being between cultures but not a member of either. The learner thus has a perceived social distance between him- or herself and both cultures. Brown claims that this often occurs early in the third stage of acculturation (p. 159), as the learner is starting to recover from culture shock. This stage is also associated with the beginnings of mastery of the learner's second language. Perhaps the learner is capable enough with the new language that he or she begins to feel distant, or different, from his or her native culture but can see how far he or she is from the natives of the new culture.

Thus, the third period of acculturation is very important for second language acquisition–it is the critical time for optimal learning. As Brown (1980, p. 161) phrases it, "[s]tage three may provide not only the optimal distance, but the optimal cognitive and affective tension to produce the necessary pressure to acquire the language". If learners fails to master the second language during the third period of acculturation, they may never acquire it to a high level successfully.

There are several other conclusions that can be drawn from the Optimal Distance Model. One that Brown (1980, p. 161) discusses is that failure to synchronize acculturation and language learning could be a major reason for a learner's failure to master the second language. This

suggests that second language programs would have better results if they include acculturation support as part of or in addition to language training.

If acculturation–culture shock and recovery–is required for second language mastery, does that mean that foreign language learners studying in their native cultures can never master the language they are studying? Brown (1980, p. 162) specifically excludes foreign language learning from the model. However, he also hypothesizes (p. 161) that people who master a language without going through stage three (as could be the case with advanced foreign-language learners) could possibly find it difficult to progress through stage three into full acculturation, should they one day live in the culture.

O'Neal Cooper (2003), however, identifies mono- and bi-cultural bilinguals in Korea who show symptoms of anomie and may need acculturation support. He attributes this in part to the hybrid EFL/ESL learning situation in Korea and thus it is not strictly a foreign language situation. Considering that Japan, China, and possibly other Asian countries have similar hybrid educational programs, which employ native speakers from overseas to assist with teaching, it is possible that this situation is not unique to Korea. Further, O'Neal Cooper concludes that the learners' situation is exactly that expected under the Optimal Distance Model: the learners' language learning and their acculturation were not synchronized. "[A] lack of acculturation may be a more important factor in the subject's [*sic*] failure to achieve communicative competence" (O'Neal Cooper, p. 110).

An interesting aspect of O'Neal Cooper's (2003) research is that the bilinguals were bilingual in writing and reading much more strongly than they were in speaking. This is partly a result of the educational system in Korea and the system in Japan is similar. As mentioned above, Japanese teachers of English often do not address the English linguistic cultural elements, resulting in very little exposure to the culture of the target language and thus little opportunity for

any acculturation. This is anecdotal but the similarities suggest that further research on this question would be useful.

Schumann (1986, p. 379) defined acculturation as "the social and psychological integration of the learner with the target language (TL) group." He argues that "the learner will acquire the language only to the extent that he [*sic*] acculturates (p. 379)" and that "the degree to which a learner acculturates to the TL group will control the degree to which he [*sic*] acquires the second language (p. 385)." This Acculturation Model is stronger than Brown's Optimal Distance Model but the focus is similarly on the importance of the level of learner acculturation. Insufficient acculturation results in less second language acquisition.

This brings up another issue with Brown's model: whether it applies only in the case of acculturation. Díaz-Rico and Weed (2006, pp. 245-247) discuss acculturation as only one possible goal of the learner. What if a second language learner does not wish to acculturate to the new culture but instead remain separate from it, adopting a pluralist goal? Or, what if the learner is, voluntarily or otherwise, partially culturally isolated from the mainstream culture (for example, a student living in an immigrant community but attending a mainstream school), making full acculturation problematic? In these cases, is it possible to move through stage three? Obviously the individual learners still experience culture shock but will they still experience the optimal learning period? Is the Optimal Distance Model all or nothing, or could O'Neal Cooper's Korean bilinguals benefit from some amount of acculturation support, even without living in the second culture? These are areas where further research would be beneficial.

Classroom Applications

The Optimal Distance Model does not explain how language is learned, it just hypothesizes the optimal conditions for learning to take place. The Acculturation Model also describes a limiting factor on learners' acquisition. However, the focus in both models on

acculturation and thus experience in the second culture makes a constructivist approach a natural

fit. Language is acquired through realistic situations and interactions with native speakers in the

target culture. Without stretching too far, Ausubel's focus on meaningful learning and the

creation of new mental constructs through the use of previously existing constructs (Brown,

1980, pp. 91-94) can also be applied to insights from acculturation research. In this case

however, it seems plausible that acculturation would involve the modification or evolution of

previously existing mental constructs (elements of culture) into new forms appropriate for the

new culture.

Unfortunately, introductory inter-cultural advice for teachers, like that in Brown (2007)

and Díaz-Rico and Weed (2006) focuses almost entirely on respecting the learners' cultures and

avoiding cultural bias in class and in language activities. The acculturation of the student to the

new culture is not stressed and the relationship between acculturation and language acquisition is

not addressed outside of Brown's discussion of his model (Brown, 2007, pp. 198-199).

Awareness of learner's L1 culture is, of course, important but it is just one aspect of the issue.

Brown's Optimal Distance Model (1980) suggests that a failure to properly synchronize

language study with acculturation can result in fossilization of grammar forms in the second

language. Similarly, Schumann (1986) says in his discussion of the Acculturation Model suggest

that learners can only become proficient to the extent that they acculturate. Thus, acculturation

support at the classroom or at least at the school level would help maximize learners' mastery of

the new language. Such instruction may also help learners get through the most difficult phase of

acculturation, and further research in that area might be fruitful.

One area where there is active research on target culture in the classroom is foreign

language teaching. Tang (2006) argues that culture-as-facts, and culture-as-behavior approaches

are insufficient and that to truly understand a culture, students need to understand the common

underlying themes in the culture. One way to practice this in the classroom, is to "perform" the culture. Second culture students are likely already doing this as they are living in the culture, but "performing" realistic scenarios in the classroom and thinking about the underlying meanings of the actions/reactions could be very useful for second culture acquisition as well as language acquisition.

Robinson-Stuart and Nocon (1996) provide a brief look at cultural acquisition theories before explaining a research experiment involving the use of ethnographic interviews. The goal of the experiment was to see if foreign-language learners' attitudes toward the target culture would be affected by interviewing a member of the target culture. University students in California studying the Spanish language interviewed native Spanish speakers. Conducting the interviews and doing related assignments such as journal keeping, was shown to have a positive effect on students' attitudes toward Spanish speakers. Motivation to study Spanish also increased (Robinson-Stuart & Nocon, 1996, Findings section).

One goal of the interview experience is to get the students to see themselves as cultural beings. "Learners are made aware of their roles as cultural beings involved in cross-cultural interaction. More than just a cognitive process, the use of ethnographic interviewing techniques to interview live target language speakers engages the learner affectively as well as cognitively" (Robinson-Stuart & Nocon, 1996, Integration into the classroom section, para 2).

Students in a study by Byon (2007), formulated their own hypotheses about Korean culture and then over the semester investigated those hypotheses. Students did so through methods such as library research and interviews with Koreans (p. 6). This was similar to the work done by Robinson-Stuart and Nocon (1996). As with that work, Byon's results were positive, because

students gained insights into a particular aspect of L2 culture (e.g. Korean), by modifying their own stereotypical impressions of L2 culture and people through the project. Students improved cross-cultural awareness and their understanding of the dynamic nature of culture. They recognised the impacts their perspectives had on interpreting and learning L2 culture, and thereby became more aware of their culture (Byon, pp. 13-14).

It would not be difficult to do similar activities with ESL students in America, and it would be useful to see what effect such activities had on learner acculturation and their views of the second culture.

Altman (2005) gives a series of brief lesson plans for teachers to do in class to help students acculturate to the second language classroom. Especially important here is that Altman's plans teach learning strategies and study strategies explicitly (p. 946, lesson four). This sort of orientation and direct instruction should be easily usable in many second language classrooms.

O'Brien and Levy (2008) use virtual reality (VR) to give German language students in Canada a chance to solve a mystery in a German setting. A computer game perhaps, but one with well-defined learning goals. When asked about the elements of the VR world they experienced, it is perhaps not surprising that most of the students commented on the cultural aspects such as building materials, the similarities and differences between Canadian and German cities. Some students picked up on linguistic culture norms, such as people stopping to ask directions when unsure of how to get somewhere (pp. 676-677). When asked the point of the activity, the largest number of students answered about the goal of the game itself (finding the mayor's lost daughter) and not a linguistic or cultural goal (pp. 674-675). This might be good as it indicates that the students were immersed in the game sufficiently to perhaps temporarily overlook the fact that they were practicing German. Further research on computer assisted culture learning would be

beneficial because of the convenience (i.e. time shifting, repetition, progressing at the learner's speed) computer learning offers for learners and teachers.

Culture is an important part of language and for that reason alone should be an important part of the language classroom. As the Optimal Distance Model and the Acculturation Model show, acculturation can be an important factor in successful second language acquisition. This makes it all the more important that learners encounter culture and learn acculturation strategies so that they can maximize their ability to acquire a second language and a second culture. The sample of classroom activities outlined here shows that it is possible to do this is a wide variety of settings.

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