

A lesson in culture

Yueh-Hung Tseng

This paper argues for a new interpretation of culture which potentially challenges traditional views of culture common in discussions of foreign and second language learning. It also proposes ways to restructure curriculum around this new interpretation. Three different perspectives on culture are developed: first, culture creates differences and tension, both of which propel learning; second, culture is not a fact but a process in learning; third, culture can be used in a monolingual/monocultural and multilingual/multicultural setting. The theoretical perspective explained here is grounded on the premise that knowledge, or meaning generation, is constructed as the result of a transaction between an individual's conception of the world (individual culture) and the world outside the individual (social culture). From this standpoint, culture resides in, rather than being separate from, each individual. This progressive theory of culture allows us to restructure the curriculum in ways that highlight learner participation, the importance of social transaction, and the role of tension in promoting learning. After an explanation of this alternative interpretation of culture, suggestions for creating a classroom environment consistent with that interpretation are explored.

Introduction

This paper potentially challenges the ways in which traditionally existing perspectives view culture and its relationship to language learning. In what follows, the traditional views on the role of culture in foreign or second language learning and teaching will be discussed, and contrasted to a new interpretation of culture. Finally, the creation of an environment that supports learning, and which involves the introduction of classroom activities, will be suggested.

Culture is often neglected in EFL and ESL teaching/learning, or introduced as no more than a supplementary diversion to language instruction. Yet changes in linguistic and learning theory suggest that culture should be highlighted as an important element in language classrooms. Efforts linking culture and language learning are impelled by ideas originating in sociolinguistic theory and schema learning theory. Sociolinguistic theory focuses on the social and cultural aspects of language. From a sociolinguistic perspective, competence in language use is determined not only by the ability to use language with grammatical accuracy, but also to use language appropriate to particular

contexts. Thus, successful language learning requires language users to know the culture that underlies language.

The sociolinguists Swain and Canale provide one illustration of this shift to contextual use as the foundation of competency. Basing their theories on the work of several linguists, Swain and Canale divide communicative competence into four categories: grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic (Swain and Canale, as cited in Omaggio 1986: 7).

Grammatical competence refers to 'the degree to which the language user has mastered the linguistic code. It includes knowledge of vocabulary rules of pronunciation and spelling, word formation, and sentence structure' (ibid.). Sociolinguistic competence refers to the use of the appropriate linguistic codes in a context. In other words, it emphasizes the appropriate use of language in specific cultural contexts. Discourse competence 'involves the ability to combine ideas to achieve cohesion in form and coherence in thought' (ibid.). Strategic competence refers to the use of verbal and non-verbal communication strategies to compensate for gaps in communication. Given this explanation, communication involves not only linguistic knowledge but also sociolinguistic knowledge. Further, culture becomes an important element of the language classroom, because cultural knowledge lies behind sociolinguistic competence.

Applying rationales which are different from those used by sociolinguists, schema theorists also propose culture as key to language learning. Whereas sociolinguists think from the broader social point of view, schema theorists think from a cognitive perspective. In the field of reading, theorists such as Anderson and Sapiro and Montague (1977), suggest that a reader's cultural background impacts her ability to understand text. EFL studies have valued schema theory, as can be seen in discussions concerning the use and advantages/disadvantages of using culturally-familiar or unfamiliar EFL materials (Alptekin 1993). Common to both EFL and reading instruction is the premise that deficiencies in cultural background knowledge create learning difficulties. It follows that understanding the culture of the text is essential to successful language learning; without the appropriate cultural schema to aid understanding, what is learnt must necessarily be incomplete.

In addition to sociolinguistic and schema theory, cultivation theory also provides a rationale for addressing culture in a foreign language classroom. According to cultivation theory, culture effects changes in individual perception and is vital for expanding an individual's perspective of the world. Lorraine Strasheim, a leading proponent of this view, maintained that teaching and learning about the target culture can achieve at least two major goals:

- 1 'perspective consciousness, [in which a learner recognizes that] he or she has a view of the world which is not universally shared, that this view of the world has been and continues to be shaped by influences that often escape conscious detection, and that others have views of the world that are profoundly different from one's own', and

2 'cross-cultural awareness, [in which learners have] awareness of the diversity of ideas and practices to be found in human societies around the world, of how such ideas and practices compare, and including some limited recognition of how the ideas and ways of one's own society might be viewed from other vantage points' (Strasheim 1981: 6).

From this point of view (illustrated in Figure 1), learning about culture changes a person from a naive individual into one who understands the ways in which he is shaped by cultural forces, and is thus able to accept the diversity of those forces.

FIGURE 1

Culture → Changes in the person (cultivation)

Sociolinguistics, schema learning theory, and cultivation theory all recognize the importance of culture in foreign and second language learning, even though each theorizes the importance of culture in different ways. Success in language learning is conditional upon the acquisition of cultural knowledge: language learners acquire cultural background knowledge in order to communicate, and to increase their comprehension in the target language.

A new interpretation of culture

A new interpretation of culture, which focuses on culture as a process of learning rather than an external knowledge to be acquired incidental to the 'facts' of language, reconceptualizes our view toward culture in EFL. This reconceptualization helps us to reposition the role of culture in learning. Sociolinguistics, schema learning, and cultivation theories all focus on cultural knowledge as an essential component for gaining competence in learning second and foreign language.

Actually, what triggers learning is not culture but the process of meaning generation, and the differences and tensions that come from encountering various cultures. As valuable as sociolinguistics, schema, and cultivation theories are for pushing us into more effective ways of conceiving language learning, if we examine Peircian semiotics (1992), then these theories present several problems.

Peirce (1868: 210) wrote that 'no cognition not determined by a previous cognition, then, can be known'. In other words, we must use our inner, pre-existing cognition to make sense of the outer world, to detect and expand meaning. That inner text is formed through our multiple experiences with the world (Tseng 1994). As a result, each individual has his or her own uniqueness, and carries his or her own culture. Second, any meaning-making is a transaction between our own inner world and the external world (environment). Meaning is generated as a result of transactions between our conception of the world and our confrontation with that world. In other words, all knowledge is a dynamic construction orchestrated by language users. As an example, think of the differing concepts held by Americans of the words 'Michael Jordan', conceptions developed from previous experiences as consumers of news, television, or other entertainment media. When an American sees the words 'Michael Jordan' on a bulletin board, one may recall a Chicago Bulls

basketball game that he or she has watched, that brings to mind the grace in movement of a particular play, while another may recall some sporting shoes they purchased and which may be needing repair. Yet the bulletin board may refer to a wholly different context, such as an attack on the athlete for endorsing Nike shoes. In this way, any meaning we construct is a transaction between our own perspectives—developed from our past experiences in the world—and the reality of that present world.

We can infer from this meaning-making process an interpretation of culture. Every new perspective on culture is the transaction between each individual's culture (developed from a personal history of the world) and social culture (composed of the histories of others). An individual culture (IC) refers to each individual's conception, which becomes a culture in itself. The world outside the individual—other people and their environments—becomes the social culture (SC). When we apply these terms to the language classroom, SC will include not only people in the immediate society of the language learners, but also those who live in the target language culture (TC)—the culture of the second or foreign language being learned. Any knowledge or meaning that we generate is the result of transactions between IC and SC. As a consequence of the interaction between them, a new perspective on culture is developed through a process that is always incomplete, and continuously evolving. The triad relationship among these terms, which draws on Peirce's theory, is illustrated in Figure 2.

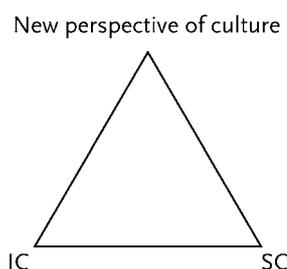


FIGURE 2

It is the differences between IC and SC that allow us to generate new meaning and knowledge and to gain new perspectives. The process is unlimited, however, because individuals have separate and unique cultures. That is, we can never duplicate the SC in our IC, nor are we in danger of doing so, because we never share identical histories. Each of us will always create our own unique meanings based on our differing experiences (Peirce 1992). For example, people may belong to the same social culture, but have different interpretations about the role of women in society, because each person's life trajectory will have assumed a different shape in relationship to ideas about women. This uniqueness creates an availability of alternatives, a rich bank of differing viewpoints which allow transactions between IC and SC to continually generate differences.

When a difference is beyond our understanding or expectation, an anomaly occurs. Characterized by ambiguity, difficulty, conflict, and

uncertainty, anomalies are unexpected situations which generally result in frustration, struggle, dissatisfaction, and surprise (Tseng 1994). While anomalies may occur in any setting, they are especially prevalent when speakers operate from different communication rules. Bodily contact, for example, can be very different between cultures, as is indicated by distinctions between contact cultures—those of the Middle East, Latin America, and Southern Europe—and those of the non-contact cultures, such as the United States and England (Argyle 1982; Archer 1986). Speakers interacting who come from a mixture of non-contact and contact cultures can find themselves irritated and frustrated by their conversational partners' apparent failure to understand. However, such a difference can also create a tension that actually propels learning. Tension increases when an anomaly occurs. Uncertainty forces us to rethink our experience, and to search until we find answers, or generate new thoughts for solving what puzzles us about unfamiliar situations. In this search, our thinking and meaning-making constantly moves forward (Bateson 1988; Short and Burke 1991; Tseng 1994).

Peircian semiotics lends credence to a new theory of culture, one in which culture is no longer a set body of information or 'facts' to be memorized, but a process for generating frameworks of perception, a value system, and a set of perspectives. It is a mistake to assume that knowledge is a static object 'out there' to be acquired by the first or second/foreign language learner. Changes in culture rely not on gaining 'knowledge products' but on the process of transaction.

We can draw on Peircian semiotics in explaining all learning from a perspective of cultural differences. Such anomalies will always have to be faced, whether in the foreign language (FL) classroom, where learners from the same country are learning a target language, or in the English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom, where learners from different countries are learning English. Cultural differences can exist between people from different cultures and within the same culture. However, individuals who share the same culture may encounter fewer differences than do individuals from differing cultures, because each person's interpretation is limited by the social group in which he or she resides (Peirce 1992). One may challenge someone else's interpretation of the role of women, for example, but it is always through the lens of the social culture in which he or she is embedded.

Creating an environment that supports learning
Integration of culture in the curriculum

If we define culture as knowledge apart from the individual, it is easy to consider it as a content, a body of knowledge that should be the focus of the curriculum. However, if culture or cultural differences are to be integral to the process of learning language, then the foundation of curriculum shifts from content to learning processes. A curriculum which views culture as a process rather than as a body of facts can be illustrated. These illustrations, however, will be clearer if the pedagogical premises are discussed in advance, since they draw on the theories mentioned in the previous section. If culture is viewed as a process of transaction, then students need opportunities to generate meaning in transaction. Therefore, classroom environments must allow and encourage students to recognize their own culture, to transact with

cultures (SC) outside their unique, individual cultures (IC), and to reflect on these transactions. The tension produced by the resultant anomalies can only be a useful learning tool if learners first recognize their own beliefs, conflicts, struggles, and difficulties. Recognition of this individual stance, however, is insufficient for growth; we must also encounter alternative perspectives by actively exploring meaning with others (Harste and Short with Burke 1988). In shared exploration, learners use others as vehicles to help them generate new tension, for 'it is in talking with others that we begin to be able to hear ourselves and to consider other perspectives' (Short and Burke 1991: 39). Thus, sharing individual meaning constructs with others, and reflecting upon those episodes of sharing, helps students to clarify and interrogate the assumptions which underlie those beliefs, while reflection allows them to rethink their meaning constructs. However, tension may occur during the process of rethinking because students may be critical of what they have come to know. In addition, 'this reflection leads to decisions about whether and how we will revise those constructions' (ibid.: 41). In such processes, we generate additional meaning and gain new perspectives that foster learning and change. A new perspective may allow us to arrive at a generalized understanding of our previous meaning or to take new action. In the face of such concepts we are required to define culture as an integral process of learning and thinking rather than as discrete facts.

Activities

There are many activities which may help students understand culture as continuous interactions between IC, SC, and TC through recognition, exploration, and reflection. The following scenarios offer a selection. Whereas some of the following activities may be familiar to readers, the structure of those activities and the beliefs behind them (respect for each individual's culture, reflection, and sharing) alter the messages students receive about the intent of the activity, as well as the ultimate results in student learning.

Activity 1: Who I am

To help learners recognize and share their individual cultures, each of them selects pictures that represent significant aspects of their life, and attaches them to a poster. During the next class session, each student presents his or her poster to the class. In preparing the posters, developing an explanation of them (in English), and responding to the questions of peers, students become aware of their own culture (IC). When these posters are shared, each class member transacts with the social culture (i.e. that of their classmates) and learns about new cultures. In an EFL class, learners may not only understand themselves (IC) better, but also learn about the individual cultures of other students (SC), and even about the target language culture (TC). Although ESL students are diverse in their individual cultures, so that the combined classroom culture is less homogeneous, they too will learn SC, as well as IC and TC. However divergent the classroom culture may be in ESL classrooms, human culture has broad and insistent commonalities that will even allow for the development of SC in ESL classrooms. Through these transactions with various cultural texts, new meanings are generated for

students as they learn more deeply about their own culture, each other's cultures, and the culture of the target language. In addition to the pictures on the posters, students can bring favourite objects, and share them with each other in the same way as they shared the pictures.

When my EFL students participated in 'Who I am', one student talked about her experiences with judo, and we all came to know more about this activity, and the role it plays in her individual culture, an effect that altered how we thought of ourselves in relation to our own interests and desires. Similarly, many students shared their experiences of traveling both within the country and abroad, so that the entire class became more familiar with cultures beyond their own. As other learners shared their traveling experiences in English-speaking countries, we learned more about the target language culture. In the ESL class, learners inevitably experience some aspect of the target culture in which they are living which is strange to them. By sharing their experiences with their new environment, all students begin to understand the target language culture in a deeper way than any of them would have done if they were alone. This transactive process allows learners to explore new meaning and perspectives about individual cultures, other people's social cultures, and the target language culture.

Activity 2: Family stories

Family stories are a second activity through which learners can understand their own and other people's cultures better. As described by Short and Burke (1991), family stories include the recollection of family events and the descriptions of family members. Learners may bring family pictures, and write stories or descriptions to accompany them. Learners may expand these observations and experiences into papers focusing on particular issues that highlight cultural differences. After they finish writing the learners form groups in order to share their writing in 'author's circles', where three or four students share their writing with each other (Harste and Short with Burke 1988). The author's circle is one of the ways that learners can transact with SC. After each learner reads, listeners comment on the writing and discuss its content and form. Frequently, authors ask the group for particular responses: a reaction to certain ideas, help with further inquiry, a sharing of experiences. The teacher may participate in these groups, sharing his or her own writing. After all the groups have finished, the whole class may come together to listen to each group's insights. A modified version of authors' circles includes responding to each other's work through writing rather than speaking: learners exchange their written work and respond to each other by writing back. Exchanges can continue indefinitely, with A responding to B, B responding back to A, and so on. These exchanges and responses may occur between members of the same class or between members of different classes. Family events or descriptions reveal the richness and uniqueness of cultures in a way difficult to achieve through other means.

Activity 3: Journaling into culture

The use of journals in the native language classroom as a means of self-expression and developing fluency in language use is an old technique

now, and is seldom used as a means for learning a language. However, because writing involves a student in a more precise formulation of thinking than might occur otherwise, its power for learning is easily understood. When used thoughtfully, writing in journals can help learners to develop a deeper sense of their own and other cultures. Learners can be asked by their teachers to keep journals in which they write about assigned topics. Journal entries may be in the form of reflections, language stories, or illustrative anecdotes. By creating journals in response to carefully selected prompts, ESL students are able to document characteristics of their native culture (SC), and record tensions or struggles that they encounter in the new culture (TC). To be a successful experience of learning about a new culture, teachers must not correct grammatical problems in student writing no matter what they write; even beginning language learners can try to document their thoughts through a mix of English and other language symbols. Learners may record their perceptions or questions about the target culture, or they may write about their encounter with foreigners or foreign events. Teachers as collaborators may do the same in the role of learner—writing in their own journal in class. Learners may also use a reflection journal to document their thoughts after they read articles or books. After they finish each entry they can share them with each other, reading aloud in small groups, or reading silently.

Example prompts might be: remember and write about a holiday; what does your mother or father do to help a child in your family learn to work? Who makes up your family, and why these people and not others to whom you are related? Describe a typical meal to a foreigner who knows nothing about your culture. Are there social classes in your culture, and how do you distinguish who is a member of what class? What marks the differences between childhood and adulthood in your culture? What sorts of things do people in your culture want in order to be happy, and is there a difference between what people *say* makes them happy and what they really want?

Any prompt that gets students to consider how their culture is organized, functions, distinguishes groups and ages, carries on rituals, and so on, will provide rich writing responses for conversation and learning.

Activity 4: Confronting taboos

Cultures tend to demonstrate their particular values most vividly in the prejudices and discriminations that are practised and condoned within the culture. Exploring those areas within the target culture, and comparing them with what is found in the student's own culture, can result in important understandings.

To explore an issue regarding racial discrimination between black and white in the United States, my class read a book titled *The Friendship, the Gold Cadillac*, written by Taylor (1996). Afterward, each student wrote a response in their reflection journal, before the class shared ideas in small groups. Part of that conversation involved considering whether there is racial discrimination between different groups in Taiwan. Students did identify problems in that country, and the conversation led

them to understand that some cultural differences only seem to be different.

We added to the experience with a process-drama, in order to explore issues of discrimination in our country. Four students were grouped together, and each group had to come up with one incident of discrimination in our society and present it using a pose. As each presented their 'still life', the other groups tried to guess the meaning of drama by using our target language, English. After all of them had been given a chance to guess, the group that was performing explained, again in English, what they were trying to depict. In this activity, through each group's performance, students began to understand more about their own culture. They showed job discrimination against pregnant women, against students who got bad grades, and even against those who are not beautiful. Previous to this activity, they had been quick to believe that what they heard about racial prejudice, and prejudice in general, was mostly true in the United States, but not in their own country.

Activity 5: Culture as eating

Cultural knowledge lies in the everyday habits and rituals of living, one of the most important of which is eating. In order to explore eating habits (or any other custom) of the target culture, students can be given articles and primary reading materials. In my class, students read articles in English about American restaurants and table manners. Students also viewed film segments in which Americans were eating or cooking. However, the focus was not on the cultural text, but on the process of transaction. Students responded to and reflected upon these articles and films in their journals. They then discussed their journal entries, focusing particularly on the anomalies they found between the target culture and their own culture. We all gained new knowledge through these transactions. One learner, for instance, noticed that Americans generally have a beverage glass in front of them when they eat. Since Taiwanese people generally drink soup with their meals, many Taiwanese students thought that this was a strange habit.

In another activity, students read some material about dining at home versus eating in a restaurant. In small groups, they drew pictures on posters reflecting what they were learning about eating in an American restaurant, then turned them in. Each group then chose one poster prepared by another group, and told a story to match the picture. Then the group that drew the first story had a final say. Each group developed various and differing interpretations of Western culture in terms of eating habits. The activity allowed them to understand the material better as the various interpretations were brought into play.

A variation of this exercise was to provide readings from culturally-authentic materials, such as food columns from newspapers, or articles from food magazines. Each of the students read the same text, and wrote about one or two issues that were introduced by the reading and that concerned them. This writing was done on index cards, on which the individual could also write quotes of particular significance to them. Learners could also engage in freewriting to document their thoughts

after reading (Elbow 1973), and then share these written insights and concerns with others.

Activity 6: Exploring culture through aesthetics

Rather than expecting the whole class to learn the same content, students can be grouped according to their interests. For example, in my own EFL class, learners worked on an inquiry project concerning art, dance, music, or drama of the target culture. Learners who had similar interests were grouped together, and they worked on the project for one month. Each week, groups spent time discussing their progress in class. At the month's end, each group gave an oral presentation and completed a final, graded project. In this way, learners gained new perspectives through their own inquiry, and through transactions with each other.

When learners begin with their own inquiry or interpretation, they are working on their own interests rather than what might interest their teacher. Collaborating is challenging for many students, primarily because they may have had few co-operative or collaborative experiences in their previous schooling. Nevertheless, many learners indicate that they come to understand that each person has something to contribute, and is therefore worthy of appreciation. Rather than just gaining cultural knowledge, they are learning to appreciate and grow through the different points of view expressed by their peers.

Conclusion

As represented in this paper, culture is not just a set body of facts to be acquired by learners, but something actively created by learners through interactions that focus on meaning-making. Such a view of culture requires a teaching model that encourages teachers to use cultural differences as a source of productive tension. The activities discussed here allow learners to recognize their individual cultures (IC), and to understand how those are embedded in the social cultures (SC) in which they and others live. The target culture (TC) can then be understood in terms of those expanded perspectives, an understanding which a plain definition of culture as content does not allow. Facilitating a learning environment that supports tension is the only way for teachers to ensure that culture can be learned as a process rather than as a collection of facts.

Final revised version received April 2000

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The author

Yueh-Hung Tseng is from Taipei, Taiwan. She has a Master's degree in Applied Linguistics and a Doctoral degree in Language Education from Indiana University. She is currently teaching in Hua-Lien Teachers' College. Her main academic interests include: semiotic theory in learning and teaching, the whole language approach in learning and teaching, and first and second learning and teaching.

Email: tseng@sparc2.nhltc.edu.tw