

Cultural Awareness in Foreign Language Teaching

LEE, Siu-lun and Wongtip Wisetpong

Abstract—This paper presents research on a group of foreign language learners who are learning Chinese as a second language (CSL) in Hong Kong and discusses the importance of cultural awareness of language learners. A survey research and semi-structured interviews are used to elicit the cultural needs of CSL learners. This paper discusses some suggestions on design of cultural immersion modules in foreign language teaching courses.

Index Terms—culture and language, cultural awareness, foreign language teaching, immersion programme, language learners' needs analysis

I. INTRODUCTION

There are developments and discussions in teaching methodology in the foreign language teaching field in the recent decades. Various language teaching approaches, such as, audio-lingual approach (Chao 1947, Whitaker 1954), functional-situational approach (Wilkins 1972), communicative approach (Widdowson 1978, Munby 1978, Canale & Swain 1980), task-based approaches (Ellis 2003, Nunan 2004, Pica 2005, Richards 2006) have been well-discussed in the literature (Richards & Theodore 2001). It has been generally agreed by scholars in teaching Chinese as a second language (CSL) field that the ultimate aim of language teaching is whether learners can use the language rather than how many vocabulary items and sentence patterns they have learnt (Zhao 2009). A language learner may say words clearly and use long, complex sentences with correct grammar, but still have a communication problem unless he or she has mastered the rules in pragmatics (Levinson 1983). That is to say, the ultimate aim of language teaching is to training students the abilities to use or to manipulate linguistic forms to communicate properly in real world situations.

If a language programme focuses on “use of language to communicate in real world situations”, “appropriate use” of language is a key phrase apart from linguistic accuracy and the issue of “culture” is inevitable to be discussed. In recent years, “culture as a component in language teaching” is one of the hot topics in most literature in the language teaching field and

“culture and language teaching” as a theme in a number of international conferences can be found. However looking at the literature in the field of foreign language teaching, the focus of “culture” seems to go into different directions. There are discussions about the “BIG C” and the “little c” in cross-cultural studies. In cross-cultural studies literature the two uses of the word culture are often distinguished, 1) the total way of life of a group of people, and 2) a refinement or sophistication within a society. The first use has been called “little c culture”; and the second, “BIG C culture.” “Little c” culture includes the routine aspects of life, such as how common people greet one another, what they wear, what they eat, and their myriad daily habits. To link culture with language proficiency, ACTFL 2012 proficiency guidelines have stated the link between “culture” and language teaching. ACTFL proficiency guidelines based on the 5Cs standard, namely “communications”, “cultures”, “connections”, “comparisons” and “communities”. Language programmes should be able to train students to acknowledge and understand the cultures that they are learning and using and, in fact, students cannot truly master the language until they have also mastered the cultural contexts in which the language occurs. Teachers’ role also include helping students develop insight into the nature of language and the concept of culture and realize that there are multiple ways of viewing the world. Assessment of learning outcomes aims at testing students’ abilities to communicate in multilingual communities in a variety of contexts and in culturally appropriate ways.

‘In the best language education happening today, the study of another language is synonymous with the study of another culture. The two are inextricably linked and long gone should be the days when anyone would suggest that language could be taught “on its own” as discrete grammar points with no sense of the cultural products, practices, and perspectives of native speakers.’ (Cutshall 2012, p. 32)

Some works related to culture and “cultural competence” are published (Byram 1989, Cortazzi 1990, Kamrach 1993). Kamrach (1993) discusses intercultural communication and Byram (1989) develops a term “intercultural competence”. Intercultural competence is the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with people of other cultures. Theoretical models on “culture” and its relation with language (Sapir 1921, 1929) and with language competence (Byram 1989, Kamrach 1993) are developed for many years. The focus of “language use in real world

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situations” becomes a current trend in CSL teaching (Jin 2006, Zhao 2009, and Lee & Chen 2013). This paper looks at the other side of the story, i.e. the story of learners and how they place “culture” in their language learning process. The information can throw some lights on the theoretical side and help curriculum planners to develop language courses.

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A questionnaire survey has been carried out. The questionnaire developed based on Lee’s (2005) study of CSL learners’ learning needs. The questionnaires are sent to 200 CSL learners at tertiary level in Hong Kong. Learners come from different parts of the world, such as America, England, Canada, France, Spain, Japan, and Korea, the Philippines, Indonesia, African countries and some other European and South American countries for CSL studies in Hong Kong. Learners come to Hong Kong for short term (the shortest 3 months) and for long term (the longest 2 years). At the end of the questionnaires, there is an invitation to casual semi-structural interviews focusing on “learners’ cultural needs”. Twenty learners shown their interest and they are randomly divided into four groups for interview. All interviews took place in students’ common room with slight snacks to create a relaxed and casual setting. The interviews are recorded for analysis.

III. RESULT OF QUESTIONNAIRE SURVEY AND SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW

98% questionnaire respondents (with 95% response rate) indicate that “culture” and “cultural elements” are important in language learning. Majority of the CSL learners at tertiary education in Hong Kong aware that “cultural knowledge”, “understanding culture” is important in the process of language learning, although there are still a few CSL learners (2%) view linguistic knowledge, such as phonology, syntax of the target language are more important. The result echoes with the socio-cultural theories about language teaching & learning approaches in language teaching field (Searle, 1969; Hymes, 1972; Gumperz, 1972; Widdowson, 1978; Vygotsky, 1986) with the assumption that languages are learnt for communication, for establishing social network and for accomplishing real life tasks. 96% of the questionnaire respondents think that the “BIG C”, such as understanding of history, literature and arts, etc, is helpful in their language learning. 89% of the respondents reply that “little c”, such as rules for communication, turn-taking, etc, is beneficial to their pursuit of a second or foreign language.

Data from semi-structured interview shows that CSL learners have needs to understand, general historical facts of the target area, major influential literary works, arts works and music (including contemporary and pop culture), influential movies and cinema, food and dining culture, religions, rituals & beliefs (especially related to human life), major festivals, customs & courtesy behaviours, social taboos, general

etiquette, as well as rules for appropriate communication, rules in turn-taking in conversation.

IV. DISCUSSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Both the questionnaire data and the semi-structured interview data verify that learners view “culture” as an important and inevitable element in their language learning process. The awareness learners have about “culture” indicates that the traditional grammatical approaches cannot satisfy the needs raised from learners. It also suggests that linguistic knowledge alone cannot suffice for the teaching and learning purposes. CSL learners ask for curriculum focusing on socio-cultural aspects and help them in applying the target language in real life situation becomes the dominant demand. The result echoes with language teaching theories about “communicative competence” (Hymes 1966, Canale & Swain 1980), “cultural competence” or “intercultural competence”, which focus on abilities to interact effectively with people of different cultures and socio-economic backgrounds discussed in the literature (Byram 1989, Cortazzi 1990, Kamrach 1993). Systematic research on the implementation of the theoretical framework into curriculum design, textbook preparation, and classroom activities is of great important from professional perspectives. There is a current trend in TESOL & foreign language teaching theory and pedagogy in Mainland China suggests learners to “learn while doing” (Zhao 2006, Wang 2010). This pedagogic movement tends to work well with the “cultural focuses” discussed in this paper.

The semi-structured interview data shows the CSL learners

TABLE I
CULTURAL THEMES DEVELOPED FROM THE STUDY

Cultural Themes
1. Food and dining behavior
2. History
3. Religions and customs
4. Village and urban life
5. Pop culture, music and arts
6. Social issues and taboos
7. Language games and songs

are asking for some cultural immersion modules in the language curriculum in addition to classroom teaching. The cultural immersion modules emphasize actual visit of culturally relevant sites and emphasize interaction with people speaking the target language (Shapson & Mellen 1996, Swain & Johnson 1997, Chen 2006). From the semi-structured interview data, the cultural themes (Table I) have been summarized in rank order.

Curriculum designer and materials developers can base on

the cultural themes to develop cultural immersion modules and implement to CSL learners (Lee & Wongtip 2013). The next research is to test the applicability and effectiveness of the curriculum design which emphasize culture in foreign language teaching.

V. CONCLUSION: CULTURAL THEORIES AND LANGUAGE LEARNING

Since Pierre Bourdieu, a famous French philosopher, used systematic research and started the discussions of “cultural capital” (in relation to “economic capital”) in the context of class distinction in sociology and anthropology, the theories of culture were continued to be discussed with different academic concerns. Various topics concerning “culture” were developed. A simple Google search can easily found topics like “pop-culture and sub culture”, “culture and community”, “cultural policies”, “culture and education”. Nowadays, there are abundant discussions of “culture and language” and both educators and students become aware that culture is an inseparable part in language curriculum. “Culture and language teaching” is one of the topics developed from the increasing awareness of “culture” in relation to other academic disciplines. At this stage, systematic elicitation of “cultural needs” from learners in this study can throw some lights to further empirical research and discussions in the field. When language teachers or curriculum designers put “language use” as the ultimate purpose and language courses include certain degree of “cultural elements” in the curriculum, in the teaching materials and in the language classroom, more systematic empirical research are needed to study the implementation of various teaching methods as well as to evaluate the effectiveness of various teaching methods and the various impacts to the foreign language learners.

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