

Bilingual Communicative Competence Development and Culture Learning

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Introduction:

In recent days, bilingualism is a very popular topic in the world. Parents like to send their kids to immersion school, schools provide different language courses, and adults learn their second language by going to language school or college. People learn their second language by different ways so they are able to read, write and speak in a second language. The most important part of being a bilingual is able to use a second language to communicate with people who use the same second language. But, when they use their second language to communicate with highly proficient speakers of the second language, their conversations could not flow fluently. Often time, there are also misunderstandings between each other, and highly proficient speakers feel they are talking to a machine which just produces sentences without any feeling expression. .

Byram (1994) mentioned that if bilinguals only use the lexicon and grammatical structure of the second language to communicate with others, they only translate their message from one language to another language which is like machine talking. One reason of this problem is lacking culture, the most important part of a language, of the second language. Valdes (1986) mentioned that culture was also a tool to help people to develop their second language skill. To improve the communicative competent skill of the second language, bilinguals need to learn the culture of their second language. In this paper, I would like to discuss the important role that culture plays in communication and importance of learning culture of the target language. It will help people to have a better understanding of the significant of learning the L2 culture for developing communicative competence in L2.

Culture in Language:

Language is a way to express culture. Cultures live inside languages, and it makes language alive and reality. Often time's people say if a language die, the culture of the language will disappear as well. Also if a language is spoken without culture, it is a dead language, and it loses the main purpose of language, communicate with people.

According to Lessard-Clouston (1997), "Culture and communication are inseparable because culture not only indicates who talks to whom, about what, how the communication proceeds, it also helps to determine how people encode messages, the meaning they have for messages, and the conditions and circumstance under which various messages may or may not be sent, noticed, or interpreted...culture... is the foundation of communication" (cited from Samovor, Porter, and Jain (1981) P. 12). When people of same culture communicate with each other, their culture could help them to use the language to deliver their message to others and to understand what the message that their partners try to send is. If a language without culture, people will not be able to deliver their message to others and people even cannot communicate with others because they do not understand what message that others try to send to them. It is important to have a culture inside a language to make this language alive and let it plays its role in communication.

Communicative learning and Culture Learning

However, when we talk about learning culture, we will need to think about what is culture in communication besides deliver message. Culture has many definitions, but when a culture is expressed in communication among people, the culture is "topic that they choose to talk, the way the present information, and the style which they interact"

(Kramsch 1998). For each single language, people have different way of using the languages to communicate with others because each single language represents each single culture. For example, many Chinese people like to use indirect language to communicate with others. In this way of communication, they find interests and keep the conversation flow. But, in America, many Americans like to use direct language to communicate with others because people can easily understand the purpose of the conversation. These are two ways to speech and express cultures. They show that the different method of communication and these are the significant part that language learners need to learn.

As a bilingual, a second language learner, learning the culture of the second language is learning the way to use the second language to communicate with others in a second language society. According to Roberts, Byram, Barro, Jordan, and Street (2001), when people learning a culture of a society, they also learn the way to communicate with others in the society. People learn how to speak with people in an appropriated way and express their opinion in a conversation by learning the culture of the society that they are living. When people learn a second language, they also need to pay attention the culture of the second language because it could be a very different way of speaking.

In order to learn the culture of the second language, bilinguals need to practice and learn the culture in their everyday life, which means that they need to live in an environment which contains the full culture of the second language in sufficient time. In Barro, Jordan and Roberts (1998)'s study, they putted students in a foreign country for one year study, and students learned the culture of the community that they were in, and then at the end they would see what is outcomes from students. In this study, they showed

that when a person exposed a community which contain full culture of the target language, the person would be able to build up a characterization of the community and understand the local meaning of the language context, and use it to communicative with others in the same community. It is necessary that to practice the culture of the second language community in every day. Also, Moran (2001) also mentioned people can learn a culture of second language from classroom, book and teacher, but the best way to learn the culture was to expose to the culture in their everyday life. Bilinguals meet people in their second language community every day, learn the way they speak and the culture that they have in the community. From learning the culture, bilingual could have a big improvement in their communicative skill and express them by using their communicative skill. Overall, to improve bilingual's communicative skill in their second language, the best way is to encounter people in their second language society and to learn the way that the people speak. By learning this, bilinguals will need to expose their second language in their everyday life and let the culture of their second language become a nature part of them.

Cultural teaching in Language Classroom

Since learning culture of a second language is important, teaching culture of a second language also become important for teachers and students. In reality, people cannot all go to their target language's community to learn the culture of the community and practice how to communicate with others because not all the people have enough money to do that. In order to help bilingual have culture awareness and learn the culture and their target language, it is important to teach them the culture of their second language in the second language classroom.

One way to teach students the culture of the second language is to teach the new culture from the original culture that they already have and gradually move to the new culture. According to Robinson (1985), “a more effective methodology would build a bridge between the old and the new by providing culturally familiar content as a point of departure for introducing culturally unfamiliar content at every level of instruction.” (p.17). Instead of introducing a new culture to students immediately and make students confuse, teachers can teach students from the culture that they are familiar with at the beginning and then gradually add the new culture into the lessons, and finally students able to understand and learn the new culture.

Identity in Cultures

When people are learning culture of the second language, they are creating a new identity for themselves. Learning a culture of a society and target language, learners need to change their mind and values from their original culture into the new culture (Fan 1989). As a person who learns two different languages, the person should be able to shift the identity from the original while he communicates with people of the target language. Creating a new identity is a part of culture learning. For example, I am a bilingual of Chinese and English and I learn American culture after I arrive to America. When I speak Chinese to my friends, I feel like I am a Chinese which is my original identity. But, when I speak English to my American friends, I feel like I am an American which is the identity that I create by learning American culture. After a person learn a new culture, the person’s identity will shift from one to another depend on which language the person is going to use in his communication with others.

Study

To understand the role of culture is an important part of developing communicative competence, researchers also did studies to see the study of second language culture whether could help second language learners to develop their communicative skill or not. Bilal and Bada (2005) did a study in this topic. In this study, 38 students took a 28-hour culture course for three months at English Language Teaching Department Cukurova University. After finish three months of cultural learning, they did a survey to see if the culture course is working or not. From this survey, 75% of students agree that learning the culture of the second language did improve their communicative competence. By seeing this result, Bilal and Bada (2005) stated “they also need to know how language is used by members of a speech community to accomplish their purposes “ (p. 79). To meet their needs in communication, second language learners need to learn how to use their second language in their communication and not just produce grammatical sentences. If a person can produce good grammatical sentences but do not know how to use in a communication with others, this person still could not be a person who can successfully communicate with other in his/ her second language and does not achieve the main goal of learning a second language.

Issue of biculturalism

When most people learn a new culture of the second language, they also will feel confuse because it is different from the original culture that they have. Sometimes, they could not find their identity inside the new culture and have conflict between two cultures. Scoffietti (1955) mentioned that the conflicts that they could have are “conflict between ways of life, beliefs, customs, value system and not necessarily one between

language systems” (p.225). When teachers teach students a new culture of second language, they also need to be aware of the conflicts that the students have and make adjustments in their lesson to help students have a better understanding of the new culture.

Research in Field

To see how learning a culture can help bilingual develop their communicative skill, I have interview with bilinguals. The bilinguals that I am going to interview are college students who have a high proficiency in English. They learned their first language in China, and then came to Hawaii for studying their majors. Basically, when they came to United State, they all have a high proficiency in English. In the interviews, the participants introduced how they learn English and how learning American culture did could help them do better in communication in English.

In this interview, I asked my participants questions that to show their stories of learning their second language and development of communicative competence by learning American culture. This paper, I will show the major questions that I ask my participants in our interview.

1. What was your motivation of learning English before you came to U.S?
2. Were you able to communicative with foreigners fluency before you came to U.S?
3. Have you found any difference between American culture and Chinese culture?

The first person to interview was Ling. She learned English when she was 1st grade student in China. After she attended college, she became an exchange student to United State. After she came to United State, she found out that there were differences between Chinese way to speak and American way to speak. The American way of speaking that she learned from her Chinese English teachers and books was very different from the way that a real American speaks. At the beginning, it led her had misunderstanding of what American people was trying to say to her because she could not understand the way they speak. After a couple months, she learned a little bit more American culture, started to understand what American people were trying to talk to her, and have a better skill in communication in English. She mentioned that, her speaking ability did not really improve by learning American culture, but learning American culture, her communicative competence is better than the first time she arrived America.

The second participant was Jin. She also started to learn her English while she was a first grade student in China. While she attended college in China, her major was English which meant that her English proficiency was high and in an academic level. The interview was in her second month arrived United State. The interesting thing in this interview was she thought that learning American culture was not an important part of developing English communicative competence. The reason that why she thinks in this way could be the time she exposed to American culture is too short. She might need a little bit more time to learn American culture.

The third participant was Yun. Same as Ling and Jin, he started to learn English while he was a first grade student in China. Before he came to America, he went to British to study English. He already had a high proficiency in English too. Also, he had a

very good speaking skill because of studying in British. After a year of studying in British, he came to United State. After he came to United State, he also started to learn American culture. He mentioned that because he learned American culture, his communicative competence was improved, and he can communicate with American better.

Overall, by looking at the interview results, culture did play an important role in developing communicative competence. The three participants are all exposed to American culture, and they do learn American culture in their daily life. But, by looking at the interview results, I think to learn a second language culture, second language learners or bilinguals need to spend long time to learn the culture. It is not just one day or two days learning, it needs long term learning.

Conclusion

Learning a culture of a second language is essential. Bilinguals learn their second language by different ways, but learn to be good communicators in their second language; culture is an unforgettable part of second language learning. By learning the culture, bilinguals can know how to react and response appropriately in a conversation in second language and let the conversation continue. Once bilinguals learn the culture, their communicative competence will improve, and the misunderstandings between the bilinguals and high proficient speakers of the second language will reduce.

Agar (1991) state that “culture or background knowledge or member’s resources are what make the different between the speechless master of L2 syntax and the L2 speaker who is communicatively competent in a nonnative world.” (p. 175).

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Questionnaires:

The questionnaires that I have made are showed as below,

1. When did you start to learn English?
2. What was your motivation of learning English before you came to U.S?
3. Were you able to communicative with foreigners fluency before you came to U.S?
4. How was your communicative skill before you came to U.S? (rate it from 1 to 4)
(1 is able to form sentence but able to speak out; 2 is able to use English to communicate with others but not fluently; 3 able to use English to communicate with other and fluently; 4 able to use English to communicate with others fluently and more tend to American speaking style)
5. Have you found any difference between American culture and Chinese culture?
6. Have you found you are English speaking way in China is different from the English speaking way in America?
7. What kind of difference did you find?
8. Did your communicative skill increase after you came to U.S?
(Rate your communicative skill after you came to U.S from 1 to 4.)
9. Have you use American culture to communicate with others in English?
10. What cause the increase of your communicative skill after you came to U.S?
Because your expose to American culture? Or something else?
11. Does the exposed of American culture effect your communicative skill? How?

