

The Impact of Personality and Culture on Teaching a Second or Foreign Language

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The purpose of this paper is to consolidate information from studies focusing on the impact of personality, culture, and identity on second language acquisition (SLA). Just as the first language (L1) has been shown to impact learning a second language (L2), the cultural background of a student can also influence their ability to learn an L2 by affecting factors such as motivation and learning styles. Taking students' personality and cultural backgrounds into consideration, culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) can help teachers understand the socio-academic expectations of students.

CRP is a method to teaching that prepares pre-service teachers for the diversity of the student populations in the classroom and for the need to accommodate people of all cultures and learning styles. While this method is generally used for mainstream classrooms with students of mixed cultures and backgrounds, it also has a place in SLA. Gay (2000) writes:

Teaching is a contextual and situational process. As such, it is most effective when ecological factors, such as prior experiences, community settings, cultural backgrounds, and ethnic identities of teachers and students, are included in its implementation...Individuals who subscribe to [the belief that good teachers anywhere are good teachers everywhere] fail to realize that their standards of "goodness" in teaching and learning are culturally determined and are not the same for all ethnic groups. (pp. 21-22)

Gay argues that what is considered good pedagogy is not the same in every setting, and that it is up to us as educators to modify our instruction and expectations to match those of the target student culture.

Even with a lack of consensus of what the term “culture” actually means, it has been documented by many researchers that cultural beliefs affect students’ ability to acquire an L2. Bell (1995) for instance found that her own L1 literacy beliefs had an influence on her success in acquiring literacy in an L2.

A study by Hinenoya and Gatbonton (2000) on ethnocentrism is a good example of a more focused study of culture and ethnocentrism, homing in on one specific aspect and its effects on SLA. Hinenoya and Gatbonton set out to investigate the factors that cause difficulty for Japanese to learn English. The factors they explored were those relating to the Japanese attitude “towards their own group and language as reflected in their beliefs, myths, and valorization of certain aspects of Japanese culture” (p.227). Hinenoya and Gatbonton chose to look at ethnocentrism because it had already been attributed by other researchers to be a factor affecting L2 acquisition for Japanese learners specifically.

Hinenoya and Gatbonton studied three groups of Japanese adults living in Montreal, Canada. The first group was made up of 39 Japanese housewives who were taking care of their home while their Japanese husbands worked. The second group consisted of 42 Japanese ESL students who were attending either a continuing education institute, or a university. The third group was 17 Japanese Graduate students enrolled in a Montreal English University. The researchers hypothesized that the higher the subjects’ levels of general ethnocentrism, Japanese ethnospecificity, and language ethnospecificity, the lower their scores on the language proficiency measures would be. In the results, there was indeed a negative correlation between the subjects’ belief in morals and teachings of Japanese myths (inwardness, shyness, groupism), and their ability to learn English. That is, the more the subjects believed in Japanese values, the lower their English ability.

This is what culturally responsive pedagogy is designed to confront. When the socio-academic expectations of the learner conflicts with those of the instructor, it is partially the job of the instructor to make concessions in planning their lessons.

It is probably fair to assume that students of most MA TESOL programs are taught to look at the influence of a student’s L1 when planning language lessons. To put it more concretely, simply knowing that their students are native Japanese speakers, EFL teachers can expect certain linguistic features to be more problematic than others (e.g. L & R minimal pairs, articles, etc.) and can base their lesson plan around those features. What Gay and the other pioneers of CRP argue is that it is not enough to apply our own principles of good pedagogy to teach these linguistic features. Along with the content of the lesson, the *nature* of the activity must also cater to the students’ culture. For instance, some cultures may

find small group work to be unproductive in class, preferring teacher-fronted lectures instead. This preference may run counter to what the teacher has experienced in their home country and counter to what the instructor may believe to be “good pedagogy”.

Barratt and Kontra (2000) give many recommendations to teacher educators and prospective EFL teachers planning on teaching in a foreign country. Their recommendations for accepting a foreign country's academic culture are based on surveys that were administered to two groups of foreign university students and teachers; one in Hungary, and one in China. The survey asked the students and teachers to make comments on the negative and positive aspects of every native speaking English teacher they have ever known. Many of the students' complaints referenced the native English speakers' lack of knowledge of Hungarian and Chinese culture. These complaints were evidenced by statements like “the students' needs were not met”, “[the teacher] was too lenient”, and that “[the teacher] talks too much” (p. 21). All of these complaints can be referenced back to issues in comparing the personalities and academic cultures of the students in a foreign country and America.

New EFL teachers should learn about and accept the language learning methodologies of their host countries, but they should also be aware of individual differences that exist between members of the same culture. While we should be culturally responsive in the way we teach, we also run the risk of combining all students of a single nationality into a single cultural unit. As Atkinson (1999) put it, “it is difficult to envision people as simply members of homogenous, unified cultural groups” (p. 633). He goes on to use the example of the label “woman academic.” The label “hardly begins to describe the multiplex, interacting and conflicting social identities and subjectivities that make up any single individual” (p. 633). He then says that women academics also come from particular class, ethnic, religious, political, educational, geographical, national, sexual, and experiential backgrounds. In the end, no one category is specific enough to contain more than one person at a time because the multitude of cultural variables make every person unique.

Many empirical studies have failed to shed light on the issue of culture in the classroom for this very reason. Take Sullivan's (1996) report on an ethnographic study of a Vietnamese university classroom for example. She concluded that because Vietnamese students are “used to a style of interaction in which overlapping and simultaneous talk are the norm,” they would be “shocked” if they were moved to a silent US classroom (p. 34). The problem is that a generalization for *all* Vietnamese students might not apply to a single student joining a silent classroom in the US. Studying cultural norms in large groups may be useful for

gaining a general understanding of how groups interact internally. However, such studies are less valuable when trying to predict behavioral patterns of individual learners.

This can be seen in an example where one student broke free of her socio-academic stereotype. Shi (2010) provided a detailed account of the interference one student faced from her first culture in trying to adapt to a second. Cai, an international student from China studying in the US, was having difficulty adapting to the “win-win” principles of American classrooms where students work together to negotiate solutions. According to Shi, the academic culture in which Cai grew up valued putting one’s self before others. The highly competitive nature of Cai’s first academic culture (China) clashed with that of her second (America). Shi argued that Cai’s journey to assuage this conflict involved “confrontation, negotiation, and gradual integration of multiple socio-cultural norms and systems” (p.2485). In this example, Cai came from a very different socio-academic background. But, rather than conform to the label Sullivan might want to thrust upon her, Cai was able to adjust to new classroom norms. As Atkinson (1999) puts it, many researchers, Sullivan included, tend to think of culture in terms of “geographically distinct identities” and as “relatively unchanging and homogenous” (p. 626).

The need for the reform of western teaching styles when teaching students from other cultures, especially in EFL settings, does not only end with the need to cater to the students’ culture. In many countries, English is taught by non-native English speakers (NNS). Western teaching methodologies would possibly not be seen as useful because they are teaching in their home countries, often in their L1, and often using the same instructional styles they were taught when they were young. But as Xiyan (1988) points out in an investigation of TESOL methodology use, “[in China], the study of methods for teaching English to speakers of other languages has never been highly valued, even in teacher training programs” (p. 71). Because of this, devoted teachers travel to English speaking countries in order to learn proper TESOL methodologies. But learning methodology from a Western MA TESOL program may not be all that useful to the NNS teacher when she returns to her home country to apply her new knowledge. Western methodologies do not always mesh with those of the foreign culture. Over a decade after Xiyan’s article, Wu (2001) reported that, the Chinese Ministry of Education had finally begun creating EFL teacher training programs of their own, limiting the need for native Chinese EFL teachers to study methods from overseas.

While China has begun their own EFL training programs, the same cannot be said for most other countries. Some theorists call upon western MA

TESOL programs to shoulder the burden of training NNS English teachers in order to fit the needs and expectations of the NNS TESOL students. This preparation for NNS teachers to adapt western TESOL methodologies to their own countries would also be beneficial for NS teachers. Kamhi-Stein (2000) provides a list of nine “activities” that should aid in reforming TESOL programs to make them more accessible for NNS. The first is that MA TESOL students should explore *beliefs* as teachers and learners. By this she means that TESOL students should be taught to incorporate “external factors” (e.g., school/district policies, class size, host country’s culture) as well as “internal factors” (e.g., teacher’s personality, beliefs about language teaching) when planning their teaching strategies (p. 11).

The input of these NNS teachers into Western MA TESOL classes is greatly needed in order to understand the needs of and for adapting teaching methodologies to specific cultures. Also, NNS teachers educated in TESOL MA programs abroad puts them in a position to compare the methodologies they were taught with those they actually use in their countries. They have a unique point of view because they are members of the culture they are teaching and are prime candidates for thinking about how best to apply CRP to their settings.

So it is possible that the simplest solution to ending problems with the NS teacher’s culture clashing with the students’ (in the EFL setting at least) would be to use instructors that hail from the same culture as the students. They are certainly more prepared to know what is best for their classroom than a NS teacher after all. Burnaby and Sun (1989) conducted a survey of Chinese teachers of English who were teaching EFL in China. They were curious about the teachers’ reactions to the suggestion of using the communicative approach in Chinese schools. Jones (1995) remarks that Chinese prefer a more teacher-fronted approach to classroom learning than the communicative approach (an approach that uses a lot of student-talk). It may cause problems because of the differences in the definitions of student and teacher roles between China and the West (p. 12). The results were that many of the respondents reported that they would use the communicative approach for those students planning to come to a Western country later on in their studies. Burnaby and Sun conclude their survey with a warning that even though communicative approaches to language teaching work in America, countries eager to try it abroad should do so initially with caution and skepticism. Foreign countries should think about the similarities between theirs and Western settings before adopting the method (p. 236).

Of course the implications are different for EFL and ESL settings when looking at the influence of culture on SLA. In ESL, it would be difficult to cater instruction to the cultural influences of the students because of the variety of

different cultures in any given classroom. However, in an ESL classroom in an English-speaking country, there is often increased motivation to acculturate into the society in the first place, making the level of motivation of the students very high. In an EFL setting abroad, the classrooms are usually mono-cultural. The students will also be much less motivated to learn about native English-speaking culture and less likely to glean much from communicative approaches. These students are oftentimes taking classes as a requirement either for graduation from college or high school. It is in these EFL classes that consideration of the impact of the C1 is needed.

One of the key factors in the ability of a student to learn a L2 is their motivation. Of all the elements that make up the category of “motivation”, one very important component is the student’s level of willingness to acculturate into the L2 society. It has been widely accepted that those students more anxious to fit/blend into native English-speaking society will be better at acquiring English from members of the native English-speaking society. As researchers and teachers of ESL/EFL, we are oftentimes so focused on catering our classroom instruction to meet the needs of our students’ as dictated by their L1, that we have largely ignored the fact that their personalities and cultures may play important roles in the *way* they should be taught.

There is much more research that needs to be done in this area. More studies need to be done focusing on one cultural group at a time. In Hinenoya and Gatbonton (2000), three different groups of Japanese were studied; housewives, ESL students, and graduate students. When performing the study, the researchers were careful to keep the data from the three groups separate. Hinenoya and Gatbonton realized that there were different cultures present among the three groups. This example of Atkinson’s (1999) suggestion for the redefinition of “culture” is a good model for future studies to follow. Since the subjects are from a variety of backgrounds, they must be separated in order for the data to be more reliable. Even though Hinenoya and Gatbonton’s article focused on ethnocentrism’s influence on SLA, other more personal cultural and personality factors might influence their L2 proficiency. Keeping similar subjects grouped together will help decrease the amount of variety of the cultural influences.

Also of importance are socio-cultural influences on strategy usage. As Cortazzi and Jin (1996) point out, “In current literature there is little discussion of cultural factors in learning strategies, or of gaps between teachers’ and learners’ perceptions of which strategies are appropriate” (p.171). If future research shows that strategy use *is* influenced by culture, we will then have a deeper understanding of the reason for students’ preference for certain strategies.

ESL/EFL teachers can then teach more effectively by catering to the strategies of the culture of the students they are teaching.

Something else that must be changed in future research is expanded use of ethnographic methods in language classroom research. Watson-Gegeo (1998) discusses the implications of using ethnography in ESL research: "The promise of ethnography for ESL research, teacher training, and classroom practices lies in its emphasis on holistic, richly detailed descriptions and analyses of teacher-learner interactions and the multilevel contexts in which these interactions occur" (pp. 558-559). And although the number of ethnographic articles on this topic has been increasing, it is still a very small percentage of the research being published. Even so, many of the current ethnographic studies are on topics other than culture (yet they do provide good examples of how the research method can be used in SLA, see Atkinson & Ramanathan (1995)).

Holliday (1996) also encourages the use of ethnographic research in studying about the sociocultural influences on students' learning styles. Holliday examined the impact of importing teaching styles from the west and implementing them in Egyptian University classrooms. He determined that, as an outsider to Egyptian culture and the social contexts that form the Egyptian academic culture, he would need ethnography to understand the possible impact of western teaching strategies. He chose an ethnographic approach to the research because "it looks only at a small aspect of the social context" (p.89). He also chose it because of its interpretive, qualitative nature. But ethnography is not limited to being used by outsiders attempting to understand certain aspects of a foreign culture. It is also helpful for native speakers/researchers to gain an understanding of their own classroom cultures.

Lastly, Yoshioka (1990) says in her conclusion that

those teachers who can demonstrate an understanding of the cultural frictions that are likely to confuse students will overcome potential frustrations and succeed in generating the attitudes desired and needed for functioning both inter-culturally and in English (p. 65).

I believe that these teachers Yoshioka is envisioning are the NNS English teachers who are teaching in their home countries. Of great import to future knowledge will be the analysis of changes that NNS English teachers make in their methodologies when teaching groups of students from the teacher's own culture.

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