

Basic Issues in Teaching Foreign Language in the US: A Case Study of Cross-Cultural Communications

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Cultural factors influence the communication and success potential of teaching foreign languages. Cultural awareness shapes foreign language instructors behavior in cross-culturally reflected education environment. Cultural factors may act as invisible barriers in foreign language classroom communications. Understanding cultural differences is one of the most significant skills of foreign language instructors for effectively teaching. This paper probes some key elements of cross-cultural issues in teaching Americans learning Mandarin Chinese and provides a framework for creating a more positive and friendly environment to teach Americans learning Mandarin Chinese.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last few years, the number of American college students learning Mandarin Chinese as a foreign or the second foreign language has kept growing. Instruction of Chinese at secondary schools has also developed rapidly since the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation provided generous grants to 60 high schools to teach Chinese in the 1980s. In the middle of first decade of 21st century, the Chinese Language Association for Secondary-Elementary Schools conducted a survey, and the 163 schools that responded reported a total enrollment of 16,091 students. The latest research suggests that there are more than 160,000 students attend weekend Chinese language schools in the United States (Tseng 2007).

Most of those students have grown up in the United States and therefore have limited knowledge about Chinese culture. While most Mandarin Chinese language instructors are trained in China with limited knowledge about the American culture, the different teaching approaches in Chinese and Western cultures have created difficulties in classrooms for American students in learning Chinese (Custer 2010, Lombardi 2008). Based on the author's observation, most problems facing both American students and Chinese teachers in a culturally diverse classroom can be traceable to cultural differences.

In 2007, the College Board started offering Advanced Placement exams in Chinese for high school students. Almost 5,000 students took the exam in 2010, which is more than double the number from just four years earlier. To facilitate dialogue and coordination in the rapidly growing field of Mandarin Chinese language education in the US, the College Board and Asia Society have established the National Chinese Language Conference. The 2010 conference brought together U.S. and international leaders with nearly 1,000 participants from across K-16 education (College Board, 2012).

Hofstede (1986) indicates that interactions between teachers and learners from different cultures are fundamentally problematic and cross-cultural misunderstandings often occur because classroom interaction is an archetypal human phenomenon that is deeply rooted in the culture of a society. Accordingly, it is necessary for the Chinese language instructors to call upon cross-cultural awareness, appropriate pedagogical practice and intercultural communication skills to support the learning process. Communication is one of the most important functions to master in order for any instructors to succeed in today's increasingly interactively classroom environment, particularly for those who teach language cross culturally (Tian & Borges 2011).

Cultural identity is an individual's sense of self-derived from formal or informal membership in groups that transmit and inculcate knowledge, beliefs, values, attitudes, traditions, and ways of life. According to Daphne Jameson, cultural identity changes over time and evokes emotions. It is intertwined with power and privilege, affected by close relationships, and negotiated through communication. To complement past emphasis on understanding other cultures, the field of intercultural communication needs a stronger focus on understanding oneself. For Jameson a broad conception of cultural identity should not privilege nationality but instead should balance components related to vocation, class, geography, philosophy, language, and the social aspects of biology. The model of cultural identity suggested by Jameson highlights components directly related to business world, such as economic class and professional affiliation, and demonstrates how culture not only connects people but also defines them as unique individuals. This model can expand research and enrich teaching in intercultural communication (Jameson 2007).

CULTURAL IMPACT ON TEACHING AND LEARNING CHINESE

Anthropologists suggest that the continuum of culture runs from tradition-based to modern-based. This classification incorporates the related dimensions of economic and cultural boundaries. African, Asian, and Middle Eastern societies are categorized as tradition-based, being centralized, cooperative, agrarian, pre-industrialized systems. Economically, modern-based cultures are characterized as market-driven, competitive, post-industrialized economic systems. The United States, Canada, and other Western societies are examples of modern-based cultures. Regarding cultural boundaries, tradition-based cultures emphasize their history, traditions, and established conventions. By contrast, modern-based cultures have weaker ties to their history and traditions. Conventions are ever-shifting (Bandyopadhyay & Robicheaux 1993, Harris & Moran 1987).

The cultural differences often function as barriers for cross-cultural communications. Education is a valuable tool for intercultural communication but it can just as easily lead to frustration and disillusionment if one is not careful. However, as Custer (2010b) indicates, while teaching Chinese to Americans might well lead to more trouble than teaching some other random subject. Most Americans would perceive that there is something ineffable about Chinese that makes it impossible for average people to learn. This type of perception exists even among students who are learning Chinese and have memorized characters or distinguished tones successfully in the past. In Custer's scant year of teaching Chinese, she has had multiple students tell her that they are not physically capable of reproducing characters. They have functional hands and no problems with Chinese writing, so the suggestion is obviously preposterous, but it seems possible to them. After all, it is Chinese, some people, probably even most people, simply cannot do it.

The field of teaching and learning Chinese as a second language has come a long way. During the seventeenth to early twentieth century, it was mostly Western Christian missionaries who wanted to learn Chinese. According to A. Ronald Walton (1997): The initial wave of intense national interest in Chinese happened in World War II, as American's rather modest and haphazard dealings with China moved toward more pressing pragmatic concerns. The new wave arose during the 1980s after the normalization of relations between the People's Republic of China and the United States. Apparently, the third wave structured in recent years due to the fast growing of national economies in China.

Expertise in Chinese language and culture is vitally important as China becomes ever more influential in world affairs. The increasing number of students learning Chinese at all levels reflects a general recognition of the importance of acquiring Chinese language skills and cultural competence in order to enhance cross-cultural understanding and effective communication in the global community. By the end of last century, Timothy Light made a prediction that the coming century will be at least in part the “Chinese Century” if for no other reason than the sheer size of the economy of China and the influence that the enormous economic energy will have on all of the rest of the world (Light 1999). Today, we all have to agree that the prediction Light made has become true.

The Mandarin Chinese classroom is not simply a language-training site but also a place where different cultures meet and interact. In the United States, the intent of these classrooms is to teach Chinese, and as experts in Chinese conversation, native Chinese speakers often take positions as teachers. As cultural beings, they take into their classrooms assumptions and values regarding what make good teachers and good students. However, native speakers’ values are not necessarily congruent with the assumptions and values brought into the classroom by their students. Communication barriers make it difficult for language students and teachers to identify these value differences, yet their affect on classroom interaction is persistent. The famous cultural expert Hofstede (1986 and 1991) offers a means of objectively quantifying and defining cultural attributes and their underlying values. An analysis of his definitions yields a rich framework that illustrates assumptions students and teachers have when they enter the Chinese classroom, and offers a foundation from which cultural understanding gaps can be bridged.

Some international business experts suggest that values, norms, and characteristics embedded in advertising messages appear in various cultures to a greater or lesser degree (Mueller 1993). Therefore understanding the importance of cultural values in advertising has great practical value in business communication. Determining differences in cultural values should guide the formulation of international business communication strategies. Ignoring the cultural meaning embedded in advertising could lead to a misinterpretation of the firm's intended message. Such miscommunication is responsible for main businesses failing in international markets. What these international business experts discussed is fully applicable to language teaching and learning (Emery & Tian 2003).

In the author’s opinion, teaching and learning Mandarin Chinese in the United States, in fact, is more than a language issue but the cultural interaction between the students and the instructor. It is in these classrooms that Chinese culture and the US culture come into contact, and according to Peter Newmark (1988), when cultures come into contact; words often borrowed from one language to another. This is true for the modern Chinese language, which has borrowed many American English words. For instance, Yuxiang Li (2005) identifies that there are many new words in modern Chinese borrowed the words and expressions from American English. These borrowed words or expressions ranged from daily life to politics, for instances:

托福 is the expression of TOEFL, 雅思 refers to IELTS (International English Language Testing System), 丁克家庭 means DINK (double-income, no-kid family), 迷你裙 means miniskirt, 买当劳 is from McDonald, T 恤衫 is the expression of V-neck shirts, 卡拉 OK is directly from karaoke, 雷射 means laser, 伊妹儿 refers to e-mail, 旧瓶装新酒 is the expression of new wine in old bottle, 挤得像罐头沙丁鱼 means packed like sardines, and so on. At same time, American English has adopted many examples which show Chinese flavors, such as: Zhongshan suits comes from 中山装, Mao Zedong suits means 毛泽东装, Gongfu refers to 功夫, Taiji means 太极, Qigong refers to 气功, Koutou means 叩头, to lose face is the expression of 丢脸, 失面子, and the list could be very long.

Moreover, Li suggests that cultural diffusion is an important factor in vocabulary developing for languages, by borrowing from others will be able to enrich the target language. It is clear that cultural diffusion can make great contributions to cultural exchange by introducing new coinage or using synonym of native words to describe the cultural phenomenon. In addition, cultural diffusion could also

help establish some linguistic equivalence for each other language, and thus help to provide more common grounds for cross-cultural communications. Therefore, cultural diffusion helps people from different cultures can bring better communication outcomes and make people from various cultures know each other better. This type of cultural diffusion apparently will bring a more productive outcome for teaching and learning foreign languages (Li 2005).

TEACHING MANDARIN WITHIN THE CHINESE CULTURAL CONTENT

For many western businesspersons learning to speak Mandarin means more business opportunities because China is fast becoming a central global business hub. Among the public in China such as taxi drivers, at the airport or in restaurants it is not easy to find someone who speaks English. Therefore, speaking Mandarin for daily use is important in China, as it is in these basic conversations that “*guanxi*” (personal relationships or connections) occurs, which plays a crucial role when dealing with Chinese business people. However, it is very difficult, if not impossible for the Americans understand the meaning of “*guanxi*” without the Chinese cultural content. To anthropologists human beings are socio-cultural animals acquiring our social behaviors through learning (Tian 2000b). Culture is a deeply ingrained part of the very fiber of our being. Language is the basic means of communication among members of a culture and the most visible reflection of the culture. From this perspective, it is safe to say that to the process of teaching and learning a foreign language is the process of teaching and learning a foreign culture.

Language is one of the significant factors of culture. Various languages reflect the difference of cultures they belong to. Taking food culture as an example, Li (2005) indicates that some Chinese flavors are blank in English, such as:

“饺子” cannot find an exact equivalent in English. Although there are similar words in English like “dumpling” and “ravioli”, yet “dumpling” refers to “汤团”, “ravioli” refers to “有馅的包子”, both are somewhat different from the famous Chinese food “饺子”. Other examples Li indicates including “旗袍”, “牛棚”, “麻将”, “气功”, “乌纱帽”, “穿小鞋”,

are all difficult to find exactly the same in English. Li suggests that one effective way to solve this problem is through cultural diffusion, borrowing. One culture-language can absorb exotic flavors of another culture-language, enriching itself and making later cross-cultural communication easier. It is interesting to find out that learning about Chinese culture can help students to understand their own society and that of others better.

One of the authors has been a Mandarin teacher at various institutes in both Canada and the US, her basic purpose has been to design an effective Mandarin learning program for college students and others who need to speak Mandarin. An effective Mandarin learning program needs several key elements in order to achieve this goal. These elements include an easy method to pronounce Chinese sounds that are unfamiliar in English; an understanding of the way time is represented and how hierarchy is manifested in Chinese language and therefore culture. The author has designed some environment and events, such as Chinese New Year Celebration Party, to train her students learning Mandarin through doing things in the Chinese way. Her students learn to interact in Chinese through oral or written activities. By playing different roles in real life, for instance let some students play the role as parents and others as children, and then let them communicate in Mandarin, in this way the students will be able to practice vocabulary and build their language skills more efficiently.

The authors share the same experience with Joy Wang, a Mandarin teacher at Seaholm High School, Birmingham, Michigan, that group role-playing is designed to create the Chinese social cultural content so that the students are able to present stories and reports about their personal experiences and events, which provide the students opportunities to express themselves in a meaningful Chinese way. The

instructor often Ask students to narrate past and future events based on visual cues gives them the cultural context to use hypothetical speech.

The students participate in activities to learn about traditional and contemporary Chinese cultural practices, such as comparing the themes of different festivals and food, exploring the perspectives on Chinese culture presented in Chinese painting, retelling Chinese folk tales, and learning a popular Chinese song and analyzing its lyrics. It is through those Chinese cultural content the students are able to connect their Chinese language study with other disciplines by learning about Chinese history, geography, science, literature, arts, and math. Activities could include writing a research paper on famous Chinese and American historical figures and their contributions, creating a map depicting the major cities and products in China, or presenting other reports on topics of personal interest. To expand the students' awareness of Chinese culture and society, the instructor encourages them to follow and gather news about current events in China (recorded in Tseng 2007:28).

CONCLUSION

In today's world, more and more non-Chinese people are interested in learning Mandarin because of the increasingly expanding power of China through its fast economic growth in the world. The purpose that people learn Mandarin is for communication. As social animals, communication is very important for human beings, however no human communication can take place in a social vacuum but in a social environment that is culturally bounded. It is highly suggested that we cannot separate communication from culture; in fact communication is culture, while culture is communication. Teaching and learning Mandarin Chinese is in fact a cross-cultural communication, which refers to the contacts and interaction of different cultural backgrounds. People may not be able to decode appropriately messages encoded in one language-culture into another language-culture. Problems, such as cultural shock, misunderstandings, failure or breakdown may occur in cross-cultural communication often are beyond language itself. The ultimate purpose of teaching Mandarin is to train the students to be able to communicate successfully in Mandarin in cross-cultural situations.

Mandarin Chinese teachers in the US should provide more opportunities of culture training for the students to cultivate their cross-cultural awareness and improve their cross-cultural communication ability. We shall learn to teach a foreign language in its social-cultural background, including the social rules of language use. Through social cultural content, students are able to learn about the differences and similarities between a foreign language and society and their own, and thus will be able to learn the language that they are learning better. Although there are many different effective ways in teaching students learning a foreign language the author suggest that to teach a foreign language within the culture frame of that culture is the most effective way to be adopted.

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