How Issues of Cross-Cultural Communication Might Affect Contemporary English Language Teaching

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Abstract

English is spoken worldwide by people of different cultures, and distinctions in their cultural behaviors might cause breakdowns in communication. This paper aims to investigate how discourse analysis can provide cross-cultural insights that help improve English language teaching and learning. A literature review suggests how cross-cultural issues, more specifically, paralanguage and politeness, can and should be integrated into the language classroom. It is concluded that English teachers should raise cultural awareness in order to improve students' communicative competence, as well as prepare them for different cultural contexts where English is spoken.

Keywords: Culture, Discourse Analysis, Paralanguage, Politeness, English Language Teaching

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Introduction

Discourse Analysis has provided valuable insights that have contributed to a better understanding of cross-cultural communication and, consequently, language teaching and learning. This paper will discuss various aspects involving culture in the English classroom, with a greater focus on two of them: paralanguage and politeness principles. The main goals of this paper will be to show the importance of studying cultural aspects of language and reflect on theories and their practical use to raise teachers' awareness on the subject, as well as what students should learn to become more proficient speakers.

In order to discuss the implications of dealing with culture in a language classroom, it is important to understand this elusive term. Many authors from different areas of study have tried to define culture. Kramsch (1993) argued that culture is more complex than just food, fairs, folklore, and statistical facts. Zhua Hua (2013, p. 01) briefly defined culture as "a system of values and practices of a group or community of people." Even though culture might include aspects related to gender, age, social status, and many other areas of human life, in this article, the focus will be on the values and practices of people of different nationalities.

Culture in the English Classroom

With the development of faster means of transportation and the increasing use of the internet and social networks in today's globalized world, people from different countries and cultures are closer than ever. As a result, people are more motivated to learn a new language (Hua, 2013). The English classroom is frequently filled with students of different nationalities. For the most part, these students decided to study abroad hoping that immersion in a country where English is spoken as a first language would improve their language skills. In such cases, cultural adaptation might pose a challenge for the students. When moving abroad, students may experience "cultural shock," which is caused by what Zhua Hua (2013, p. 77) described as "loss of familiar signs, communication breakdown, and differences between cultural and social practices." Therefore, one of the reasons why culture should be dealt with in the classroom is to reduce this shock and ease the student's adaptation process.

A second example of the importance of studying culture is the fact that culture and language are intrinsically linked to each other (Hinkel, 1999). The theory of linguistic relativity supports this point and states that "language *influences* thought and worldviews, and therefore differences among languages *cause* differences in the thought of their speakers" (Hua, 2013, p. 176, emphasis from the original). A research conducted by Kay and Kempton (1984 in Hua, 2013) strengthened this theory when it showed that speakers of different languages, English and Tarahumara (language spoken by Native American people of northwestern Mexico), perceived color terms differently. With regards to teaching, Byram (1989 in Hinkel, 1999, p. 06) emphasized the importance of this connection between language and culture when he argued that "language teaching can rarely take place without implicitly teaching the culture of its speakers because language invariably refers to their knowledge and perceptions of the world."

According to Zhu Hua (2013), two other reasons teachers focus on cultural awareness are (a) to promote the learner's interest in the language and (b) to help with contextualization. She gave four examples of techniques to include culture in the classroom. The first one focused on encouraging students to explicitly discuss the differences between their culture and the culture of the target language with visual illustrations to facilitate the process. In the second example, a scenario that showed a communication breakdown is created. Then, students were asked to choose the correct explanation from a range of possible reasons for the misunderstanding. The third example aimed to raise cultural awareness by decorating the classroom with pictures or anything that would remind students of the target language culture. Finally, Zhu Hua suggested having students act out intercultural interactions, and then discuss solutions to possible misunderstandings.

The usefulness of having students learn the target language culture has become clear. In addition to being beneficial to students of a new language, cultural awareness is advantageous for teachers, as well. Since learning can be viewed as a social activity, the way people learn might depend on their culture (Hua, 2013). If teachers understand their students' culture, it is more likely that they will understand students' learning styles and behavior in class and, consequently, avoid many misunderstandings. For example, students in Brazil often address their teachers by their first name, or even by a nickname. Such behavior might be

viewed as disrespectful in other cultures, such as in the USA, where students usually address teachers by their last name.

A student's participation in class might also be explained by his/her culture. As Zhu Hua (2013) pointed out, "active" participation of students is often regarded as the optimal learning condition, whereas "passive" participation, i.e., "quietness," is seen as problematic and usually attributed to lack of willingness to participate. However, an extensive list of factors may influence students' participation, such as linguistic proficiency, language learning anxiety, personalities, and many others. Zhu Hua argued that the culture of learning is also a key factor, and people of distinct cultural backgrounds might behave differently in situations such as disagreeing with someone, expressing one's opinion, interacting with the teacher, and so on.

After looking at the importance of approaching culture in the classroom for both teachers and students, it is essential to analyze certain theories regarding intercultural learning and teaching. The first one is Allport's Contact Theory (1954), which asserts that interaction with members of other cultures might reduce prejudice. This theory reinforces the relevance of exchange programs and studying abroad. The next one is the Experiential Learning Theory, which states that the best way to learn is by direct participation. Kolb (1984) adopted this theory to create a well-known model in which students first have a concrete experience, then make observations, come up with abstract concepts, and finally, test these concepts and restart the cycle. The third one is the Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1997), which complements the Experiential Learning Theory by showing how reflecting on experience might change one's beliefs and behaviors. Finally, there is the use of reflective learning journals. Students are encouraged to keep a journal in which they can record cultural incidents, debate intercultural differences, reflect on their learning, and connect thoughts and action.

The next section of the article will look at classroom applications of paralanguage and politeness principles and their importance to language learning. These two topics are often intertwined with cross-cultural communication. Therefore, by studying them, teachers will raise their own cultural awareness, as well as the students'.

Paralanguage

Before presenting the relevance of paralanguage for English teaching and learning, it is essential to clarify its definition. In 1958, Trager coined the term *paralanguage* in relation to categories of voices that could be used in different contexts (voice set, voice qualities, and vocalization). From then on, many authors (Smith, 1979; Woolfolk and Brooks, 1983) began to use the term as part of a range of nonverbal types of communication that referred to speech, such as pitch, tempo, silent pauses, volume, rhythm, etc. Later, anthropologists Hall (1976) and Birdwhistell (1970) developed studies on the fields of proxemics and kinesics, respectively. In short, proxemics deals with personal space, while kinesics with body movement. Eventually, paralanguage became part of a set of subsystems used to study an overall communicative competence. However, in this paper, paralanguage will be treated as the umbrella term, as suggested by Pennycook (1985), to refer to all aspects of nonverbal communication, which includes proxemics, kinesics, and the characteristics associated with speech, also described by Pennycook as paraverbal features. Even though paralanguage might cover other aspects of nonverbal communication, given the limited scope of the article, some of them will not be discussed here, such as environment, tactility, dress, and material.

When interacting with someone from another cultural background, there are different degrees of linguistic proficiency that may cause embarrassment, misunderstanding, or other kinds of communication breakdowns. However, it is not only verbal communication that can be problematic in situations as such. Nonverbal and verbal features are performed simultaneously whenever two people interact (Negi, 2009). In fact, based on many researchers, such as Mehrabian (1968 in Smith, 1979), paralanguage features are even more important to convey meaning. Mehrabian's study concluded that the importance value of verbal communication in an interaction is only 7%, while vocal is 38% and facial 55%. Consequently, it is essential for students of a second language to study different behaviors in paralanguage. This importance is also emphasized by the wide range of functions that paralanguage can have in communication, such as indicating liking or disliking, being persuasive, influencing the other's performance, showing difference of status of participants, revealing emotions, and supplementing, reinforcing, or regulating verbal exchanges (Woolfolk and Brooks, 1983).

Proxemics, the first category of paralanguage to be discussed here, is defined by Smith (1979, p. 639) as "the use and perception of one's social and personal space, such as in

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seating or spatial arrangements, territoriality, and conversational distance and orientation." In other words, the study of proxemics aims at explaining why people from different cultures might stand too close or too far from other people, and what this distance might represent. For example, Hall (1966) identified Arab, Latin American, Greek, and Turkish to be cultures with "high-contact," whereas North European, North American, and Japanese are "low-contact" cultures.

Raising awareness of proxemics is important for both students and teachers. When moving to a country of different culture, students should know how close is appropriate to interact with someone else. For example, if a Japanese student went to England and accidentally touched a stranger while walking in a public space, it is likely, given his own culture, that he would not feel the need to apologize, and consequently risk being seen as rude by an English person (Earley and Ang, 2003). Another example is if someone from Mexico were to stand too close to a Japanese person while talking. The person from the "low-contact" culture might feel uncomfortable, since being too close might indicate pushiness or aggressiveness, whereas the person from the "high-contact" culture would see this behavior as harmless (ibid.).

With the importance of paralanguage for communication in mind, it is necessary for teachers to be aware of how the nonverbal messages they send students are being received. Understanding proxemics from diverse cultures might be helpful for their relationships with students, and may even affect the seating arrangement of the classroom. For example, it might be unadvisable to have a contact student pairing up in the same desk of a non-contact student (Hall and Hall, 1977). Watson (1974 in Pennycook, 1985) also claimed that fixed seating plans might hinder communication possibilities for students. In order to provide a stress-free environment for learners, teachers should know how close they can be to students of distinct cultures, as well as if touching a student would be acceptable or problematic.

The second category of paralanguage, kinesics, is described by Pennycook (1985, p. 260) as "gestures and other body movements, including facial expression, eye movement, and posture." Von Raffler-Engle (1976 in Pennycook, 1985) stated that kinesics is more related to culture than language. Therefore, one might know the foreign language, but his or her body movement might send different messages from what is being verbally spoken. For example, a head node in North America might be used to show agreement, while in some parts of India, it

expresses disagreement, and in some other cultures, it might simply mean continued attention (Earley and Ang, 2003). Understanding the body language of the other culture is important to avoid not only communication breakdowns, but also accidental insults. An example of that is the palm-back "V" sign. It simply means the number two in many cultures, but in England, it can represent an offensive sign.

Teachers should be aware of the importance of kinesics to improve the quality of their teaching. In Negi's article (2009, p. 107), a research study conducted on 10 teachers and 80 students gave some insights into how teachers' body language is viewed by students. The results concluded that 100% of the students interviewed liked teachers' smiles, 91.25% paid more attention when teachers made eye contact with them, 100% were more motivated to teachers with attractive personalities, and 90% were kept more active by teachers' movement in class. Wolfgang (1977, p. 148) performed a similar study, and his observations showed that good teachers gestured for emphasis, were more enthusiastic, smiled more often, showed attention by keeping eye contact, and varied their facial expressions.

Teachers should also be aware of the body language of students from different cultures than their own in order to avoid the risk of misunderstanding behavior in class. Eye contact, for example, which plays a significant role in communication, has different meanings in many cultures (Pennycook, 1985). Wolfgang (1977, p. 147) exemplified this by citing an incident in a Toronto high school during which a teacher was disciplining a Jamaican student who avoided eye contact. Influenced by Canadian culture, the teacher interpreted the lack of eye contact as a sign of disrespect. However, for the student, this meant the exact opposite; in Jamaica, avoiding eye contact tends to be a sign of respect when being reprimanded by teachers.

In order to foster students' awareness of distinct body language, there are many activities teachers could consider. Teachers might try to (a) overtly explain some cultural differences through reading and lectures, (b) promote exercises in which students can actively participate, and/or (c) show films or other types of real situations for discussion in class (Knapp, 1971). A list of more specific activities found in Pennycook (1985) included dialogues created by the students with contradictory use of language and paralanguage, guessing the words from blanked-out cartoons, guessing the dialogue in muted videos, and trying to portrait emotions through body gestures for other students to guess.

The third category of paralanguage refers to paraverbal features, i.e., characteristics associated with speech, which include nonlexical aspects of speech communication, such as tone of voice, pitch, pause, and the role of silence (Pennycook, 1985). These characteristics can be divided into voice quality, voice qualifiers, and vocalization (Earley and Ang, 2003). Voice quality includes resonance and power. While these characteristics are revered in some cultures, they might be seen as a sign of arrogance in others. Voice qualifiers refer to overall intonation and the role of silence. In western culture, for example, silence is usually undesirable, as it indicates a lack of communication or unwillingness to participate (Poyatos, 2002). However, in countries such as China, silence is preferred, for it might represent a sign of respect or contemplation (Earley and Ang, 2003). Finally, vocalization refers to nonwords sounds, such as "psst," "uh," "uh huh," "er," and many others. For example, different languages use different sounds for time fillers. In English, "er" or "uh" might be used in such cases, whereas in Portuguese, "hã" or "é" are more common.

Paraverbal features contribute significantly in the classroom. If teachers are aware of how some cultures, such as the Japanese, treat silence, they may have a better chance of understanding what could be viewed by a western teacher as lack of participation. Silence may also indicate disagreement, since in some cultures, disagreeing directly with someone might seem rude (Pennycook, 1985). Teachers should also practice different paraverbal features with students in class. One exercise proposed by Pennycook (1985) is to have students guess the meaning of hummed sentences based solely on intonation patterns. Another one is to ask students to mirror the movements that the speaker of the L2 makes, so they can improve their chances of assimilating the rhythm of the language.

Politeness Principle

Another source of valuable insights on cross-culture communication is the pragmatic theory of politeness principle. Even though politeness is a universal phenomenon, its manifestations vary from cultures, i.e., what might be seen as polite in one culture can be impolite in another (Huang, 2008). Therefore, in order to show an intention to start, maintain, or mend a friendly relationship with someone else, it is important to understand the cultural differences regarding politeness.

Lakoff (1973) first attempted to explain linguistic politeness when she created the "rules of politeness," which consisted of (a) do not impose, (b) give options, and (c) make the addressee feel good – be friendly. With these rules, Lakoff claimed that politeness might supersede clarity in a conversation. For example, one might say, "It's hot in here" as an attempt to get someone else to open the windows, instead of directly asking the hearer to do so. In this case, the first rule (Do not impose) prevailed over clarity. Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 61) further developed this theory by introducing the notion of face, which refers to "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself." Face can be divided into positive face, or the desire to be approved by others, and negative face, the desire to have one's action be unimpeded by others. Even though highly influential, Brown and Levinson's notion of face has been criticized by authors such as Sachiko Ide and Richard Watts (Watts *et al*, 2005), who claimed that different cultural contexts do not perceive face the same way.

Some of the differences in cultural values that affect politeness include privacy, individualism, and taboos, as well as simple social practices such as praising, greeting and thanking. Huang (2008) gave some examples of how American and Chinese cultures might differently affect one's performance. When expressing thanks, Americans tend to be more direct, whereas people from China usually prefer to minimize themselves. Privacy in America is regarded as more important than in China. For two Chinese people who have just met, it is common for their conversation to include age, family, occupation, and income, as this would be a sign of politeness for showing concern for the other person. However, such topics might be perceived as invasive for Americans, so more intimacy would be required between the speakers to discuss these issues.

Politeness is also intertwined with the concept of directness and indirectness. Directness, described by Blum-Kulka *et al.* (1989, in Marti, 2006, p. 1841) as "the degree to which the speaker's illocutionary intent is apparent from the locution," has been closely related to politeness, and many authors have addressed this issue in their research. Hua (2013), being one of them, gave three examples of languages and their levels of directness. First, Hua mentions the *dugri* talk, an Israeli style of directness. The *dugri* talk gives the speaker an opportunity to be direct to the addressee, who is supposed to accept the approach in good spirit. The second example is in the context of a Chinese gift offering and accepting. In this case, both the speaker and the hearer must enact a sequence of offering and decline

until the gift is finally accepted. This sequence might include moves from the receiver, such as complaining about the gift being too much, pointing out the already existing close relationship, and rejecting the offering more than once, whereas for the speaker, it is common to depreciate the worth of the gift. The third example refers to the use of Quranic verses among Muslims. In this context, the speaker utters the phrase *Insha' Allah* ("God willing"), which implies that God is in control of the outcome. By using this phrase, the speaker mitigates his or her commitment, so s/he does not have to reject a request or invitation directly.

The level of (in)directness of a speech act might also be affected by the size of imposition. According to Thomas (1983), some goods are considered "free" or "nearly free," but their perception might change cross-culturally. For example, in Russia, cigarettes are considered virtually "free" (or at least they were during Thomas's publication), so only a minimal level of politeness would be required to ask for one, and a sentence in the imperative would be perfectly appropriate. (In)directness in the Russian context has also been investigated by Ogiermann (2009), who criticized Brown and Levinson for associating indirectness with politeness. According to Ogiermann, Brown and Levinson reflect mostly Anglo-Saxon values and do not account for other cultures, such as Russian culture, that interpret directness as a sign of frankness and not an imposition; therefore, the hearer would not have his or her face threatened when a direct request is performed.

Different cultures have their own way of performing speech acts (actions performed through language), such as requests, apologies, suggestions, etc. Koike (1994), for example, analyzed negation in requests and suggestions in the Spanish language. Koike criticized Leech's and Brown and Levinson's claims that negation in suggestions is used to mitigate the face-threat. That may be true in English, as the speaker can choose if s/he wishes to use the negative or affirmative form. However, in Spanish, the speaker does not have this freedom of choice; all suggestions are performed in the negative form. Therefore, in Spanish, it is not more or less polite to use negation in suggestions. The same principle can be applied for Spanish requests. Mitigation in Spanish requests and suggestions are usually obtained not through negation, but by using intonation or certain lexical items, such as the if-clause. Koike's research is another example of shortcomings in Brown and Levinson's work.

of activities given earlier in this article were meant to be implemented in multicultural classes or in any case where students might be exposed to diverse cultures. It is by emphasizing culture in class that students will become culturally intelligent individuals (Earley and Ang, 2003) and be able to perceive and manage appropriate impressions across cultures. Thus, it is imperative to improve the communicative competence of students by exposing them to cross-cultural differences.

It is also important to point out that, in order to successfully promote learning of different cultural aspects, teachers need to be well prepared. Culturally flexible teachers are more likely to understand their students and, consequently, improve the quality of their teaching. For that reason, teacher training courses should focus on the implications of culture on language teaching and learning. By doing so, teachers will be aware and better prepared on how to handle cross-cultural communication in the classroom.

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