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To commemorate the publication of Joan Rubin's seminal article in TESOL Quarterly (1975) and to acknowledge those who have contributed to the field since then

SECTION 1, CHAPTER 10 (pp. 108-117)

Culture and good language learners

Claudia Finkbeiner

This chapter will discuss the role of culture and language learning in the classroom. Variations in cultural, ethnic, and national characteristics within and among individual students affect classroom dynamics and therefore influence the decisions which teachers need to make in order to provide an optimal learning environment for all learners. Culture is not an easy concept to define, and is especially difficult to disentangle from concepts such as ethnicity and nationality. Individuals define and interpret these terms differently depending on the socio-cultural context they are situated in (Lantolf, 2000). There may be differences of the perceptions of self and others within a given socio-cultural context (Finkbeiner, 2006; Kramsch, 1993, 1998), while surface phenomena (such as skin colour) are often mistakenly related to categories such as ethnic, national or cultural belonging. Very frequently these categories are outdated and neither reflect “current racial/ethnic realities” (Kramsch, 1998, p.44) nor linguistic and cultural truths. In our globalizing world we cannot just glance at the surface and assume we understand others. We need to dive deep not only to understand others but also ourselves (Schmidt & Finkbeiner, 2006a, 2006b).

Many different metaphors have been used to describe culture: for example, culture has been referred to as an iceberg, where only about one-seventh is visible, while the rest

is under water and non-observable (Weaver, 1993). Brown (1994, p.163) describes culture as “‘glue’ that binds a group of people together”, whereas Hofstede (1997, p.4) has coined the definition of culture as the “software of the mind”. Individuals cannot be defined within one cultural category and as members of one group only; often they belong to many different sub-groups. It is not uncommon for individuals to have dual or even multiple cultural, ethnic and/or linguistic belongings as well as nationalities. This can change throughout a lifetime. It might therefore be useful to use the concept of *hybrid* cultures and personalities (Bhabha 1994, 1996). According to Bhabha (1994, p.7) “the very concepts of homogeneous national cultures, the consensual or contiguous transmission of historical traditions, or ‘organic’ ethnic communities – as the ground of cultural comparativism – are in a profound process of redefinition” and “there is overwhelming evidence for a more transnational or translational sense of the hybridity of imagined communities”.

Studies on the role of culture in language learning

When looking at studies on the role of culture in schooling it is important to remember that research into learning and teaching is inevitably culturally biased by the minds of those who develop the instruments and tests (Hofstede, 1997). This bias can be predicted, for example, when respondents from a non-Western background need to answer Western questions and vice versa (Hofstede, 1997; Elder, 1996). The bias is created by different underlying values, attitudes and beliefs about what is considered “good” behaviour and action. For example, filial piety is considered to be a typical Chinese value. It is strongly connected with honour for ancestors and with

full respect for, complete obedience to and financial support of parents. The bias is not just simply the Western versus non-Western dichotomy. It also needs to be considered on a more subtle, sub-cultural level, taking into account the diversity of ethnicity, culture, language, religion, political viewpoint, philosophical belief, sexual orientation, age and gender (Finkbeiner, 2006). Readers' subjective views determine how they interpret items in an instrument or test and how they construct meaning and thus, the "right" or "wrong" answer (Finkbeiner, 2005, pp.131-170). In some cultures, the answer to an item, such as "I want to achieve higher than my parents did", for example, might conflict with the value attributed to respect for elders.

In a review of research of the cultural context of language learning, Young (1987) looked at Chinese classrooms. Teaching and learning strategies were found to be highly different depending on the language community the language learner belonged to. Chinese learners seem to be used to a much more teacher-centered learning environment than Western learners. Young concludes that Western language teaching methods cannot be simply implemented within the Chinese context: teaching methods must be adapted to the specific learning style of different ethnic groups.

Differences according to whether learners originate from an oral or a written culture have been explored by Stavans and Oded (1993), who examined the reading comprehension gap that existed between an Israeli and an Ethiopian group learning English on the same level. It was hypothesized that, due to their oral communication tradition, the Ethiopian group would have more difficulties understanding written texts than the learners with a cultural background in written communication. Reading and comprehension strategies were examined. The result showed that there was not a

direct correlation between cultural differences and reading comprehension difficulties. Hansen-Strain (1989) on the other hand found group differences in the language development of university students who were from traditional oral and traditional written backgrounds. The students from traditional oral cultures tended to focus more on interpersonal involvement in their speaking and writing than students from traditional written cultures.

Banya and Cheng (1997) conducted a study with 23 Chinese and English teachers of English and 224 university students of English in South Taiwan. Their research interest was to investigate the interplay of students' beliefs about foreign language learning and of teachers' and students' beliefs across cultures. A special interest was to uncover similarities and differences between teachers' and students' beliefs through comparative analyses. There were interesting group differences, particularly when looking at gender as well as at the success of learning. The following aspects were found to be fundamental assets of good language learners irrespective of culture: low degree of anxiety, willingness to spend effort, perceived ease at learning foreign languages and frequent use of language learning strategies. Chinese students and teachers were found to share the same beliefs as to prior experience in language learning, difficulties in language learning, children's superiority, language aptitude, and the important role of practice. When the comparative analyses were carried out, the results indicated that Chinese and American teachers differ in their beliefs.

A study with 27 Japanese and 24 faculty as well as 34 American graduate students at Georgetown University (Lutz, 1990, p.144), showed how the role of expectations in instructional settings can lead to "classroom shock." "The survey revealed that, as

expected, Japanese and Americans differed sharply in their expressed appraisal of acceptable and desirable behaviour” (Lutz, 1990, p.150). The differences could be observed with respect to organization and participation within the classroom setting in general, and “perceptions of what constitutes good student and good teacher behaviour” (Lutz, 1990, p.148).

Investigating culture and reader response, Finkbeiner (2005) conducted two explorative intercultural studies with 77 high school students aged 16 in grades 9 and 10. As baseline data, American high school students in the USA were included in the survey. The studies were conducted between 1996 and 1997. They were situated within a complex study on the role of reading interest and reading strategies in understanding English texts (Finkbeiner, 1998, 2005). Text reading and follow-up interviews with immediate retrospections were conducted and polarity profiles were distributed to students of English in Taiwan and Germany. With the help of a polarity profile instrument (which allows assessment of readers’ text preferences), reader response was measured for three texts. Two extremes within one dimension are used. Several dimensions or indicators make up one main category. This study focused on the following main categories: (a) perception of text difficulty (b) reading interest and emotional text engagement (c) prior knowledge. There were indicators for each category, for example, the dimensions positive - negative, amusing - serious, engaging – indifferent were used as indicators for emotional text engagement. A seven-point response scale was employed to indicate the level of agreement at the two ends of the dimensions. The three texts were continuous texts: two were factual and covered the topics steam and zero gravity and one was literary and covered a school experience of a migrant child in New York City during the Cold War. Among all groups the

Taiwanese group had the highest emotional values with respect to the factual texts. The highest emotional values with respect to the literary text could be measured for the American students, probably because of prior knowledge and identification with the topic. These results show that reader response cannot be predicted as it depends on how the individual accesses the text, which is highly influenced by individual variables including culture.

Griffiths (2003) stated that the European students in her study appeared to be more effective learners of English than Asian students. This might not be surprising due to the similarity between English and certain European languages. Nevertheless, she also interviewed some highly successful Asian learners, and concluded that nationality was not, in itself, a barrier to language learning success. She suggested that the way students went about their learning, in particular the use of language learning strategies, might be a stronger influence on learning outcomes than culture.

What is the relationship between culture and language learning?

As Rubin (1975, p.49) pointed out, there might be considerable cultural differences in cognitive learning style. As she notes: “in some societies, listening until the entire code is absorbed and one can speak perfectly is a reported form of learning; in others successive approximation to native speech is used as a learning strategy; while in still others rote learning is the most common learning strategy” (p.49). With these examples, Rubin looks at institutional background knowledge as an important part of classroom culture, and, as she comments, good language learners may be able to make

insightful contributions to the reasons for their learning difficulties and to their preferences for particular methods.

. Here the focus is on a target language being taught and learned within a cultural background that might be different from the native culture. According to this good language learners know about the rules of the specific learning environment and behave accordingly.

It is important to consider different cultural values and beliefs attributed to learning in general and to plurilingualism and language learning in particular as they play a crucial role in how language learning is pursued. No matter where classrooms are situated in the world there is usually a tacit contract between teachers and learners.

This contract presupposes how classroom discourse and communication function and how students behave and act within the given framework (Finkbeiner, 2003, 2005).

Once learners migrate from X to Y and move from one educational setting into another, not only do they encounter different outer classroom settings but additionally, they have to quickly find out about the underlying rules, values and beliefs.

Affective factors are another critical area of culturally influenced learner variability (for instance, Schumann, 1975). According to Stern (1983), good language learners manage the emotional and motivational challenges of language learning effectively.

As Stern (1983, p.411-412) explains: “classroom learning as well as immersion in the target language environment each entail specific affective problems which have been characterized as language shock and stress, and as culture shock and stress”. Good language learners nevertheless approach the task positively, with energy and

persistence. They have positive attitudes towards themselves as language learners, towards language and language learning in general, and towards the language they are trying to learn, its speakers and its culture.

According to Stern (1983), language learning is a process that can be traumatic and lead to language shock and culture shock. According to Hofstede (1997, p.207) culture shock can be caused by the fact that appropriate behaviour, language, underlying beliefs, values and attitudes are questioned and need to be re-negotiated in a new cultural context: “In a way, the visitor in a foreign culture has to return to the mental stage of an infant, in which he or she has to learn the simplest things over again”. Kramsch (1993, p.205) points out the important fact that “a sphere of interculturality” has to be established in order to be able to relate one’s own culture and language (“C1”) with the new culture and language (“C2”) (Kramsch, 1993, pp.207-208). We might even go beyond the comparison of similarities and differences and think of the construction of something new, of a *third culture* or *third space* (Bhabha, 1994). It is possible to argue that parallel to Selinker’s (1972) interlanguage an interculture or “third space” (Finkbeiner, 2006, p.28) is developed. Third space is not a physical place. It is a highly active, cognitive and affective state, it is a “dynamic, fluid, fuzzy, and non-conforming as well as non-normative” construct which “questions existing beliefs, values and feelings about one’s own self and about who we are” (ibid.). It happens within or between individuals or groups and can be constructed on an intrapersonal or interpersonal level. Third space might help learners to situate themselves in a safe and non-threatening way in a new world which is created beyond their old and new linguistic and cultural worlds. Yet, we need not

romanticize third space; it might also be a hurting and harmful experience. This depends on issues of freedom of individual choice and deliberate action.

Acculturation is an ongoing process which is highly dynamic. It starts pre-natally and ends with death (Finkbeiner, 2006, pp.28-32). Ideally, third space construction and the development of cultural competence happen throughout the acculturation process (ibid.). This model of acculturation can help in analyzing the cultural processes to which language learning is connected. It regards language learners as cultural beings, and takes account of Piaget's (1954, 1969) and Vygotsky's (1962, 1978) work as a valuable theoretical basis since acculturation is both a highly individual and social process. It puts a strong emphasis on the self. This helps us understand the intercultural processes language learners have to cope with during their individual acculturation process. The acculturation process is influenced by the cultural and sub-cultural groups language learners belong to, but it must be understood as an idealized process. Critical incidents (such as loss of close relatives, social deprivation, war situations, divorce and so on) might lead to a non-linear acculturation growth. Finally, there are different phases in the acculturation process, which can be of different lengths. Some phases might be skipped and then re-appear at a later stage in life. Re-appearance of "earlier" acculturation processes that were important at the first stage does not imply regression. It only mirrors the dynamics of the acculturation process.

Good language learners are often believed not to have to face culture shock (Stern, 1983, pp.411-412). Does this imply that the good language learner is culturally more competent than learners who have to face this? The answer to this question is not as easy as we might think. We need to consider that the cultural competence construct is

highly complex and multi-faceted. It is dynamic, constantly changing and includes the affective and cognitive dimensions (Bhabha, 1994; Byram, 1997; Finkbeiner, 2006; Hofstede, 1997; Schmidt, 1998; Weaver, 1993). It is connected to cultural sensitivity, cultural awareness, and empathy, as well as the ability to change perspectives and put oneself into the other person's shoes. These qualities allow the good language learner to "navigate smoothly between different cultural and linguistic worlds" (Finkbeiner, 2006, p.28).

Implications for the teaching/learning situation

In order to successfully teach language to children and adults of different cultures, ethnicities and/or nationalities, teachers need to become familiar with various methods for teaching diverse populations and develop a strong knowledge of and empathy for the learners. This knowledge includes the learners' cultures and languages, their personality structures, their learning styles, their identities and their inner selves (Finkbeiner, 2006; Finkbeiner & Koplín, 2002; Schmidt & Finkbeiner, 2006a, 2006b; Wilden, 2006). Only then can adequate and appropriate learning and teaching decisions be made (International Reading Association, 1999). This implies that *good* methods and *good* textbooks cannot be simply imported and *good* language teachers cannot be simply transferred from one cultural context into the next and be expected to be just as successful in the new environment (Son, 2005). Quality of teaching and learning cannot be standardized across cultures, as it is relative (Byram, 1997; Hofstede, 1997).

It is clear that learning is highly influenced by culture. In settings where the teacher-student relationship is characterized by a high index in power distance (Hofstede, 1980), classroom communication, for example, might look very different compared to settings where the power distance index is low. This will influence the special characteristics of what *good* communication looks like. We must also be aware that this index may change over time. There are many factors that need to be considered in relation to good language learning. These factors belong to the *software of the mind* (Hofstede, 1997) or the *silent language* (Hall, 1959) and include learning attitudes, learning motivation, and values attributed to learning as well as values associated with learning and education in society. Furthermore, they entail attitudes towards a learning culture based on creative and autonomous learning on the one hand versus teacher-directed rote learning on the other.

Today we know that culture as well as other learner variables determine whether a language learner has a strong drive to communicate and to learn from communication or not. Culture influences whether learners are inhibited or not, whether and how much they practise and so on. The cultural factor also shapes attitudes towards the role of giftedness and aptitude in society, for instance, whether aptitude is seen merely as an individual factor with personal rights as opposed to a social factor connected to duties for the society. All of these factors may affect the way individual students behave in a learning situation and may require different approaches on the part of the teacher.

Questions for further research

From the research to date, it seems reasonable to generalise that learners from all cultural-ethnic-national backgrounds can be good language learners. It is important for teachers to remember that culture influences learner characteristics and behaviour such as prior knowledge and prior experience, learning style, beliefs, motivation, strategies, autonomy and attitudes towards a particular learning situation. Ongoing research is still required into the relationships among these multiple factors and how they can best be managed in a teaching/learning situation so that learners may derive maximum benefit.

Recent research shows that we have to re-think what we first thought was typical of good language learners. It is not enough to ask “What can the good language learner teach us?” First we must ask “What is a good language learner?” In this globalizing age the answer to this question is not as straightforward as we might once have thought. The characteristics of “good” and “successful” language learning have to be re-considered in the light of cultural values.

Conclusion

An “all-inclusive” (Crystal, 1997, p.75) package is not an option in language teaching and learning once we take personal and cultural diversity into account. There is neither one single method nor one theory that can predict students’ learning success in

a comprehensive way and still do justice to the miscellany of learners in our classrooms or other learning situations. Individual and cultural diversity influence language learning decisions and choices. They also affect the construct of learning success which needs to be defined according to the learners' socio-cultural backgrounds, their values, their attitudes to learning, the specific goals set and the methods applied. Much work remains to be done. The insights from studies may never have been gained if it had not been for the highly valuable discussion around the good language learner initiated by Rubin more than 30 years ago.

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