

From Linguistic Knowledge to Cultural Awareness

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In cross-cultural communication, many Chinese learners of English tend to base their understanding of the messages sent and received solely on their linguistic knowledge. Consequently, communication breaks down due to pragmatic differences in ways of thinking and rules of speaking. In fact, language, as a tool of communication, is inextricably tied to culture, and cultural competence is an integral part of communicative competence. Chinese learners of English ought to attach great importance to cultural competence so that they can overcome what Thomas (1983) terms “pragmatic failure,” which is a greater offence in cross-cultural communication than pure linguistic errors. Through an analysis of how politeness is achieved in specific social behaviors, we intend to discover differences of politeness strategies between English and Chinese cultures, and to find out differences in cultural values that lie underneath the two languages. Regarding the results of this analysis as reference, Chinese learners of English may develop their cross-cultural awareness and seek to enhance their cultural competence.

Robert Lado (1964) explains the goal of learning a foreign language as “the ability to use it, understanding its meanings and connotations in terms of the target language and culture, and the ability to understand the speech and writing of natives of the target culture in terms of their meanings as well as their great ideas and achievements” (Lado, 1964, p.25). He argues that this goal involves both the need to understand what a native speaker means when s/he says something in a particular way, and the need to know what interpretation the native speaker will make when s/he hears something told in a particular way.

However, many Chinese learners of English seldom know how to converse and what to expect when communicating with a native English speaker. They tend to make mistakes in cultural respects, greeting an English speaker with “Have you eaten your meal?” Asking such questions as: “How much does your bag cost?”; “How old are you?”; or “What is your salary for each month?” When they are praised by an English speaker, they deny it by saying, “No, no, I’m not that good at all.”

In a broad sense, making mistakes cannot be more universal in language learning, but that is not a sufficient excuse for cultural mistakes. Mistakes of this kind derive from learners’ lack of knowledge about their target culture. In interacting with foreigners, native speakers tend to be rather tolerant of errors of pronunciation and grammar. In contrast, they are unlikely to be aware of the potential cultural differences, and may interpret violations of rules of speaking as bad manners. Ill feelings are then created.

We can thus see that language learning is often culture-learning and that cultural competence is an integral part of communicative competence. Chinese learners of English, whose home culture differs sharply from the target culture, should undoubtedly place priority on this aspect. Cultural awareness is the first step in this learning process, leading to a high level of communicative competence.

This paper aims to heighten Chinese learners' cultural awareness of both their own culture and their target culture and focuses its latter part on a few aspects of politeness strategies adopted by Chinese and English native speakers, as such strategies are major vehicles of cultural communication that determine people's lifestyles and behavior.

Culture and Communication

H.D. Brown (1980) defines culture as: "the ideas, customs, skills, arts, and tools which characterize a given people in a given period of time" (p.123-124). The link between culture and communication is crucial to the understanding of cross-cultural communication because "culture not only dictates who talks with whom, about what, and how the communication proceeds, it also helps to determine how people encode messages, the meanings they have for messages, and the conditions and circumstances under which various messages may or may not be sent, noticed, or interpreted... Culture...is the foundation of communication" (Samovar & Porter, 1981, p. 24). Diverse cultural backgrounds influence communication in subtle and profound ways: our cultural perceptions and experiences help determine how we send and receive messages.

We cannot go about learning a foreign language without offering some insights into its speakers' culture. By the same token, we cannot go about fostering communicative competence without taking into account the different views and perspectives of people in different cultures. Communication requires understanding, and understanding requires stepping into the shoes of the foreigner.

Language and Culture

To speak means to choose a particular way of entering the world and a particular way of sustaining relationships with those we come in contact with. It is often through language that we become members of a community of ideas and practices. Thus, as a link between thought and behavior, language is an integral part of culture. Wilhelm von Humboldt, an eminent diplomat and scholar, once wrote:

The spiritual traits and the structure of the language of a people are so intimately blended that, given either of the two, one should be able to derive the other from it to the fullest extent... Language is the outward manifestation of the spirit of people: their language is their spirit, and their spirit is their language; it is difficult to imagine any two things more identical (Humboldt, cited in Salzmann, 1998, p. 39).

Indisputably, language is the primary vehicle by which a culture transmits its beliefs, values, and norms. On the other hand, language is influenced by culture. People of a culture value certain things and do them in a certain way, so they come to use their language unconsciously in ways that reflect what they do and value. Cultural requirements influence how a language is used and determine why certain linguistic expressions are the way they are. In short, language and culture are intertwined: the understanding of one requires the understanding of the other.

Pragmatic Failure in Cross-cultural Communication

Pragmatic failure was first proposed by Thomas (1983, p. 91) to refer to the inability to understand what is meant by what is said. In cross-cultural communication people from different cultures speak the same language. But cultural difference drives different choices of words. If the intended meaning does not match what the listener perceived, then meanings that were taken for granted are suddenly questioned and problematized. Communication breaks down due to pragmatic differences in ways of thinking, rules of speaking, social values, lexical connotations, and other factors.

As stated earlier, cultural mistakes are often worse than linguistic ones and tend to create ill feelings between native speakers and Chinese speakers of English. As Thomas (1983) points out, "A speaker who is not operating according to the standard grammatical code is at worst condemned as 'speaking badly'; the person who operates according to different formulated pragmatic principles may well be censured as behaving badly, as being an untruthful, deceitful, or insincere person" (1983, p. 107). How to communicate is often as important as what to communicate.

The next part of this paper involves a further study of the causes of pragmatic failure which will raise our Chinese speaker awareness of the importance of being sensitive to cross-cultural pragmatic difference.

A Comparative Study of English and Chinese Politeness Strategies

The major reason why we focus our view on politeness when discussing cultural difference is that politeness is a universal phenomenon in human interaction and is an important element for successful communication.

Chinese civilization has a 5,000-year history and is famous for its etiquette. However, if a Chinese hearer of English has insufficient cultural knowledge of his or her target language, s/he is doomed to find the experience "bewildering, confusing, depressing, anxiety-provoking, humiliating, embarrassing and generally stressful in nature" (Bochner, 1982, p. 171).

The following are studies on how politeness is achieved in social circumstances (greeting, thanking, offering, and leave-taking). We not only expect to discover differences of politeness strategies between English and Chinese cultures but also to find out differences of cultural values underlying the two languages. This analysis can serve as a reference for Chinese learners of English to enhance and enrich their cultural competence.

Greeting. Greetings are words used to initiate an everyday communicative interaction or to acknowledge the presence of others. They may serve no purpose of conveying information. The basic linguistic structure of greeting is stereotyped within each culture.

When English speakers use "How are you?" they are actually not really inquiring about the other person's health condition. The politeness is simply expressed by way of questioning. Similarly in Chinese, an inquiry like "Where are you going?" or "Have you eaten supper?" is not a real question but a friendly way of breaking silence.

English and Chinese ways of questioning have seldom been identical. A Chinese utterance meant to convey a polite intention may be offensive to the English speaker. A case

in point is an English speaker's confusion caused by the typical greetings he overheard between two Chinese persons:

A Chinese man comes across his neighboring woman at the gate to their apartments. He smilingly greets her, "Hello, Sister Liu, where are you going?" She replies readily, "Oh, it's you, Xiao Wang. I'm going out." She leaves in a hurry. And he enters the building without much thought about her reply.

The English speaker happened to overhear their conversation. He believed he had understood every Chinese word they said, but was still mystified as to why the man was concerned about the whereabouts of his neighbor, what the woman meant by that kind of an answer, why she offered a reply which made no sense, why she didn't seem offended by such a "rude" question, and why the man seemed satisfied enough with the answer which hardly gave any information.

Such a conversation serves as a Chinese traditional way of greeting. It contains questions showing concern and warmth to the addressee. When people meet, it is natural for them to spend some time greeting each other by asking something about their daily life. Greeted this way, the Chinese will feel close to each other. Misunderstanding seldom occurs. However, when asked "Where are you going?" English speakers will sense intrusion on their freedom, and consider the question disrespectful of their privacy.

Thanking. "Thank you" is used both in English and in Chinese to show gratitude for a deed that is beneficial. English speakers say "thank you" for *objective* entities such as the time you've generously invested for them, the dinner you've warmly offered, the gift you've deliberately chosen to send, etc. Chinese speakers say "thank you" for *subjective* supporting deeds, such as the concern, the help, the hospitality, the care, etc, that they've received.

The similarity of thanking expressions in both languages lies in the length, which reflects the depth of appreciation the thanker feels. In response to a generous offer of a \$1,000 loan, an English speaker may express thanks like this: "Thank you. You are a lifesaver. I'll never forget this. You really can't imagine what this means to me," and a Chinese speaker may say, "Thank you. Thanks. Thank you so much indeed. I'll pay it back as soon as I have the money!" Here we see that the English speaker uses "thank you" only once, as compared to the Chinese speaker's repetition of the same expression until a great indebtedness is felt.

In receiving a gift, it is customarily acceptable for an English speaker to open the gift in front of the giver to share the enjoyment and show the happiness. The receiver expresses thankfulness not only at this point but also long after the giving event. This reentry of thanks is as important as the original thanks. In contrast, in Chinese culture, when one is given a gift, one will mostly put it aside instead of saying anything about it. S/he may open it when the giver is not present. What's on a Chinese person's mind is the cultural "rule" that an emphasis is to be placed on the present giver rather than on the material object.

Offering. In an offering, the speaker provides something and meanwhile directs the hearer to take up the offer.

In Chinese culture, linguistic forms of making offers differ from those used in English. In receiving a guest, the host may cordially offer him a cup of tea with the words: "Come on, drink this tea" without referring to the guest's opinion. The imperative form "drink" makes the utterance sound more like a command than a polite offer.

However, in English even an informal offer would be “Have a cup of tea,” or an offer can take an interrogative form, “Like a cup of tea?” or “How about a cup of tea?” In fact, in most cases, the host would provide a few kinds of drinks for the guest to choose from. For instance, “What would you like to drink: tea, cola, or coffee?” The rule for the host is to offer a choice so that the guest does not feel that his will is imposed upon.

In Chinese, “Would you like a cup of tea?” would be interpreted as a question rather than an offer. The guest tends to take the offering as insincere because the social convention requires the host to offer enthusiastically almost as if he were forcing the guest to drink, regardless of the guest’s desire.

The ways to respond to an offer contrast even more distinctly in the two cultures. The Chinese guest is expected to refuse an offer out of politeness and expects the host to offer another two or three times before accepting. In contrast the English host will not offer more than once or twice. If the guest says “no” to the first offer, the host will interpret it literally as a real refusal and thus stop offering any more. The funny and foreseeable results would be that a “Chinese speaker who visits an English speaker’s home would stay hungry and thirsty because his refusal had been taken seriously; while an English speaker who visits a Chinese home would probably suffer from indigestion because his ‘no’ will be taken as a polite form of ‘yes’” (Zhou and Hu, 2002, p. 49).

Leave Taking. Leave-taking is the closing phrase of a visit. According to Zhou and Hu (2002), an English visitor normally gives the reason for putting an end to the visit. The reason is often compulsory to the guest and is generally from the first person perspective. Typical comments are added to the apology: “I’m afraid I’ve got to go. I’ve an early start tomorrow morning.” English speakers believe that ending a visit is not of one’s own free will, but due to some other objective matters. Therefore they tend to find reasons for their reluctant departure and apologize for it.

The Chinese guest, on the contrary, tends to give the reason for ending a visit from the second person perspective. For example, “You are so busy. I wouldn’t want to disturb you any more,” “You must be very tired. Do take a rest soon. I’ve got to leave,” or “I’m sorry to have taken up so much of your time,” etc.

Conclusion

Language, as a tool of communication, is “bound up with culture in multiple and complex ways.” (Kramsch, 1998, p. 3) If we learn English without learning its culture, we are learning meaningless symbols or symbols to which we attach the wrong meanings. Without understanding the target culture within which the target language is embedded, it is unthinkable for one to communicate effectively with its native speakers. Therefore, it is time that we realized that a language learner is inescapably a culture-learner. If Chinese learners of English can increase their awareness of the cultural differences between English and Chinese, and thus put more emphasis on cultural interferences in English learning, then many pragmatic breakdowns in communication caused by a lack of cultural knowledge may be avoided.

In brief, Chinese learners of English ought to expose themselves to the target culture as much and as often as possible. Once they have achieved a high level of cross-cultural awareness, they will be in a better position to reach across the many borders.

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