Application of Cultural Anthropology to Language Education

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Introduction

One of the major concerns of language teachers would be to achieve appropriate and effective classroom methodologies. Over the past few decades, communicative teaching methods have greatly influenced second language curricula and second language acquisition (SLA) research. Pica, Kanagy and Falodun (1993) claim:

> When viewed from the perspective of current second language teaching and learning, a more effective way to assist language learning in the classroom or to study the processes of second language acquisition is revealed through the use of communicative tasks. (p.9)

Aiming to explore effective task types and groupings (arrangement of participants) that might facilitate language learning, a great quantity of experimental research has been conducted (e.g., Long & Porter, 1985; Doughty & Pica, 1986; Pica, 1991), and much has been learnt about how learners acquire certain skills of their target languages. However, while these studies have been very influential in the field of SLA, they

tend to reduce language learning to linguistic or behavioral conditioning, and ignore the socio-cultural aspects of language activities and the contexts in which they arise (e.g., Mohan & Smith, 1992; Coughlan & Duff, 1994). Referring to this point, Holliday (1994) argues:

> We do not know enough about how learning might be affected by the attitudes and expectations that people bring to the learning situation, which are influenced by social forces within both the institution and the wider community outside the classroom, and which in turn influence the way in which people deal with each other in the classroom. (p.9)

In order to achieve classroom methodologies appropriate for different situations, it is crucial for language educators to take into account such attitudes and expectations of learners and teachers, which are greatly influenced by their socio-cultural and institutional backgrounds.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the influence and significance of anthropological viewpoints for language education, which has started to attract great attention among second language researchers and practitioners. Specifically, my contention here is that language teachers and curricula should have greater awareness of the background cultures of their students and that an anthropological perspective can facilitate this. First, in order to understand the important role of cross-cultural understanding in the language classroom, I briefly discuss the interrelationship between language and culture. Then, referring to the ethnographic research on Cherokee (American Indian) schools (Dumont & Wax, 1969; Dumont, 1972), I explore the demands of language minority students both by the students themselves and by educators. Although these studies of Cherokee classrooms describe a

particular classroom culture of American Indians, they also provide applicable implications for language classrooms in general. And finally, reviewing some ethnographic studies conducted in English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms (Barron, 1991; Canagarajah, 1993), I look at the needs of students in the context of their cultural backgrounds.

Interrelationship between Language and Culture

"Many elements of a language reflect the way of life of those who speak it" (Peoples & Bailey, 1988, p.53). While some linguistic and social groups of people utilize one kind of lexicon in order to communicate effectively and make life convenient, other such groups do not express themselves using the same vocabulary. Therefore, translating a passage literally from one language into another does not always function. Learning other languages, then, does not simply mean learning technical linguistic skills; it is inevitably accompanied by all the cultural aspects behind those languages. Defining culture as an ingrained set of behaviors and modes of perception, Brown (1994) states:

> A language is a part of a culture and a culture is a part of a language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture. The acquisition of a second language, except for specialized, instrumental acquisition, is also the acquisition of a second culture. (p.165)

Acculturation is crucial concept for understanding second language acquisition among Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL)

scholars, because it appears to be closely related to successful language learning. Ellis (1994) defines acculturation as involving the development of an understanding of the systems of thought, beliefs, and emotions of the new culture, as well as its system of communication. Thus, it is important for language learners to be aware of these cultural aspects of target languages, which might be distinct from those of their mother tongues. Needless to say, the term 'acculturation' needs to be distinguished from what is called 'assimilation.' The latter is defined as "the merging of the members of one ethnic group into another, with the consequent abandonment of the former group's identity" (Peoples & Bailey, 1988, p.445). The degree to which an individual learner can understand and internalize the cultural norms of his/her target language may vary, depending on his/her goal of learning that language. However, how can language teachers help students to grasp unfamiliar cultural knowledge and to be acculturated into the new culture? How can they assist their students to become competent language users? Is it sufficient to impart cultural aspects of target languages, without taking account of background cultures of learners?

There is presently a large rate of immigration into North America; learning English as a second language is indispensable for these immigrants to survive in the new culture. Consequently, language education—the field of TESL, in particular—has begun to attract considerable attention among educators. Multiculturalism, for instance, is an established government policy in Canada (Sauve & Sauve, 1997), and the coexistence of diverse cultures has been a major theme of this policy. Such a perspective influences not only education in general but also language curricula; specifically, it affects the perceptions of both language educators and what language classrooms ought to be like. In order to create such cross-cultural classrooms, teachers need to under-

stand differences between traditional cultures of students and those of their own (typically, that of the middle class in North America). By doing so, they can provide more effective language training to their students, not only by teaching linguistic skills, but by compensating for the gap in cultures between students and educators.

This point of view can also apply to monolingual EFL classrooms like those in Japan. For example, when introducing some aspects of American culture, teachers (either native or non-native) should not force students to adopt ideas, traditional norms and practices that are valued in North America. Liu (1998) claims that studying another culture does not mean adopting it or losing one's own culture; rather, understanding another culture enables one to appreciate one's own culture better. Taking account of their students' traditional and background cultures, teachers must learn to talk about "cultural relativism as well as the universality of certain components shared by different cultures" (Dunnett, Dubin, & Lezberg, 1986).

In finishing this section, I just want to make it clear that I do not have any intention to suggest stereotyping or generalizing from one culture to another. For example, although in an EFL classroom students usually are the same nationality, it does not mean they all have the same interests, goals, socio-cultural backgrounds, and attitudes and expectations towards learning foreign languages. Probably we need to consider each class as unique consisting of distinct individuals. However, it is also true that people from the same nationality share certain of their traditions.

Studies on Cherokee Schools

When the observation was conducted in Cherokee classrooms in 1967, education to American Indians was identified as a unidirectional proc-

ess to uplift and civilize minority people. "The purpose of education presented to, and often enforced upon, the American Indians has been nothing less than the transformation of their traditional cultures and the total reorganization of their societies" (Dumont and Wax, 1969). Most teachers were white, and did not speak the language of the native people. Moreover, the teachers themselves rarely tried to learn from the Cherokee students whom they were instructing. The tribal Cherokee reside in northeastern Oklahoma, in an economically impoverished area, where the Cherokee have found it difficult to make a living. They, therefore, recognized the importance of education and learning English (even that formulated for them by the alien administrators), because they might promise future employment or economic stability. The observed school was of elementary level, and Cherokee students were the predominant group. Basically, they were eager to learn; their elder students were likely to take care of their siblings in the more advanced arithmetic and so forth.

In reality, however, the students were very silent in the classrooms, in contrast to classrooms elsewhere, in which there are active discussions, questions, and answers. Dumont and Wax (1969) argue that most teachers perceived this silence as docile behavior and 'they like to play school,' although Cherokee children had learned restraint and caution at home as the proper way to relate to others. Since they could not speak English very well, language was one of the major reasons for this silence. In fact, they chose to be silent, rather, which signified their retreat and defense, in order to deal with the conflict resulting from cultural differences. As a result, they did not learn very much. Many teachers misunderstood the meaning of the students' silence, by judging it from their own cultural norms and values. Thus, they simply continued to teach conventionally, without endeavoring to

discern the real meaning of the students' silence, and without knowing Cherokee culture. This kind of teacher misinterpretation also occurs frequently in many classrooms in general, even in classrooms where the backgrounds of teacher and students are the same. Teachers are likely to interpret the behavior of students by their own standards, which are influenced not only by conventional norms and values, but also by educational institutions.

Dumont describes two contrasting Cherokee classrooms—those of Mr. Miller and Mr. Howard (both of them were white male teachers). Mr. Miller, who was also the principal, was firm, and authoritative, and very much stuck to the conventions of his own culture. His teaching style was rather dogmatic, imposing his norms and values on his students, and tending not to accept theirs. Inevitably, students were very quiet most of the time. Although they wanted to be able to speak English, they did not speak it very much. During the observation, however, once he succeeded in inducing the positive participation of his students during their current events class, although he did it unconsciously. At the introduction of the lesson, he used the word 'golly,' which was frequently used to express humor by Cherokee people. It could melt the classroom tension, and on that day he conducted his lesson in a manner which respected the autonomy of his students. By using the vocabulary of his students, he became closer to them; consequently, students also broke the silence and accepted his teaching.

In contrast to Mr. Miller, Mr. Howard was subdued, calm and always trying to get students to work together. The students of his class were very active participants, and there was none of the tension in the classroom that was found in Mr. Miller's. He played the role of scholastic assistant rather than that of classroom tyrant. 'Co-operation' was central to his classroom, not only among students, but

also between students and the teacher—which was also the nature of Cherokee children. Since choice and compromise were always there, the autonomy of the students was induced naturally. This phenomenon was caused by Mr. Howard's attempt to understand and respect the traditional culture of his students. Unfortunately, the case of Mr. Howard is rare; that of Mr. Miller, on the other hand, is representative of most teachers in American Indian classrooms.

Dumont and Wax (1969) denominate Mr. Howard's classroom as an 'intercultural classroom' type; that is, "the locus where persons of different cultural traditions can engage in mutually beneficial transactions without affront to either party" (Dumont & Wax, 1969, p.83). They also claim that if the teacher becomes involved in appreciating the ways of his students, then they will respond with an interest in his own ways. In order to survive the present times and achieve economic stability, Cherokee children need both education and English; therefore, their conflict at school is not resolved by being taught in the Cherokee language. Appreciating students' culture allows for an 'intercultural classroom,' and at the same time facilitates their learning. Developing a relationship of mutual trust between teacher and students is crucial in every educational classroom, so much the more of language minority students. Teachers should have greater awareness toward traditional cultures and the life-style of students.

Although in this paper I present only the studies on a Cherokee school, a considerable amount of ethnographic research has been conducted on English literacy acquisition and academic failure of minority students (e.g., Erickson, 1986; Diaz, Moll & Mehan, 1986; Trueba, 1991). Those studies suggest that we must pay attention to the educational needs of linguistic minorities, especially in the process of literacy acquisition.

Application of Anthropological Perspectives to Language Classrooms

The concept of 'intercultural classroom' can also apply to language classrooms. A few years ago I conducted a pilot study on an ESL classroom in Vancouver, Canada; I observed that class for two weeks in order to investigate the effectiveness of debating as an activity for language learning. The instructor was a white male Canadian, and the class consisted of Japanese, Koreans, Taiwanese and a Russian. In order to work on a debate project, the instructor picked up possible topic issues such as abortion, death penalty, and environmental issues. Students, then, chose one proposition from among them. In fact, since a debate often calls for a controversial topic, the topics which the teacher suggested appeared suitable to that activity—at least in the context of white North American culture; nevertheless, they were not necessarily controversial and 'hot' issues in the home countries of the students. According to the questionnaire given to the students, most answered that they were not familiar with these issues; therefore, they seemed to have great difficulty in understanding them. In order to comprehend them better, these international students needed to discern the backgrounds of these issues, comparing them with their own cultures. If the instructor had made some bridge to compensate for these gaps between the cultures of the students and his own, the debate might have been more active and meaningful.

Barron (1991) claims that the traditional cultures and technologies of students should be included in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses. She argues that ESP and general English teaching have ignored the traditional cultures of students, because of embarrassment in introducing culture into the classroom, and belief in the cultural neutrality of technologies. However, abstract concepts of western

technologies are not necessarily understandable to people of other cultural backgrounds. Consequently, there are many cases in which these ESP courses result in failure. Barron conducted ethnographic research on one ESP project at the Papua New Guinea University of Technology. The specific aim of the project was to teach the elements of writing a technical paper in English. By making a model of an example of traditional engineering from their village, students were highly motivated, and could see the relationship between the concepts of their traditional technology and those of the western technology. The written English of students improved greatly. Thus, an introduction to the culture of target languages, as well as awareness of the traditional cultures of students, is critical to language teachers and curricula. By doing so, students can have opportunities to make cross-cultural comparison and do not have to lose their self-esteem.

Employing the theoretical orientation of critical ethnography (Marcus & Fisher, 1986), Canagarajah (1993) investigated ambiguities in 22 tertiary-level Tamil students' opposition to reproduction through English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). The class he observed was an English for general purposes course, which was mandatory for all students of the faculty of arts at the University of Jaffna. The study reveals the contradictory dual attitudes in those students; whereas they displayed opposition to the alienating discourses behind an U.S. textbook and to a process-oriented pedagogy, they affirmed in their questionnaires and interviews before and after the course their strong motivation to study ESOL. Although they acknowledged the importance of learning English as a socioeconomic necessity—that is, speaking English fluently might be a ticket for them to get out of the marginalized positions accorded to the monolingual, poorly educated, rural poor in the social system, their primary goals were to get through

the examination and to satisfy the English requirements of the institution. As a result, they desired a grammar-based and product-oriented pedagogy, which happened to be the traditional style of learning in Tamil society, and they did not find effectiveness in collaborative and interactive approaches frequently employed in the class.

Canagarajah does not necessarily recommend that a method of language teaching be fashioned corresponding to the native tradition of a community, since "minority cultures are steeped in traditions of domination as well as resistance" (p.623) and a traditional method might reproduce "dominant values and social relations of an oppressively stratified society" (p.623). However, the fact cannot be ignored that those students showed opposition to the unfamiliar classroom activities and from time to time experienced difficulty in understanding the foreign culture displayed in the textbook. Attempting to unravel the complex strands of ESOL students' oppositional behavior was a foremost goal of the study. The findings greatly inform ESL and EFL pedagogy. Depending on the situation, understanding and taking into account students' traditional cultures is not sufficient. From time to time language teachers might need to encourage their students to face realities in their own dominant traditions, and invite them to get involved in exploring more liberating and educationally meaningful instructional methodologies.

As seen in the two studies above, the viewpoints of anthropology reveal what is really happening in the classroom, and enable us language educators to understand the diverse cultures and needs of the ESL and EFL students. Some scholars, moreover, even advocate the significance of an anthropological perspective to students as well as teachers. Barnes (1992), for instance, claims the importance of teaching anthropology to college students. She proposes a 'problem-posing

pedagogy,' which draws contradictions and questions from students' own situations and makes them the focus of study. Four approaches are signified: teacher's investigating his/her students so as to determine themes, students' use of ethnographic methods to study their own lives, investigating ethnographies as texts which contains different voices, and seeing the social construction of one's own thoughts (Barnes, 1992). An anthropological perspective enables students to realize their own perceptions of themselves in the world, as well as individual differences and what they think is worth learning and doing. Furthermore, they can perceive the social construction of their own thoughts and beliefs in the larger cultures, and become more sensitive to inequality and injustice. As Barnes suggests, this approach can apply to teaching on all levels and diverse educational settings.

Conclusion

Anthropological research on Cherokee schools reveals what is really happening in the classrooms of American Indian children. The observation is not interpreted according to an educational or institutional stance, and it unveils the background culture and life-style of Cherokee students, which had been ignored, even though this research does not reflect on the real voice of Cherokee children. The interpretation of students' behavior depends mostly on researcher's observations. Dumont (1969) claims that there are quite a few teachers who do not even recognize the necessity of appreciating the traditional culture of their students. Looking at the classroom from a specific, anthropological perspective, as distinct from an educational angle, can open the minds of teachers. An anthropological viewpoint is also significant for the field of education. In general, education tends to judge pedagogical effectiveness only by its own standards. Even though their major

concern is students' improvement, they are likely to put aside students' cultures and perceptions except for the visible results of their achievements.

As well, the field of SLA has traditionally ignored the cultural aspects behind either English or learners' first languages. Their primary interest has been teaching methods and techniques, which were believed to facilitate students' learning. For instance, experimental studies were frequently conducted so as to investigate the effectiveness of certain teaching methods. Consequently, 'communicative' teaching approach has been dominantly adopted in many educational and language institutions all over the world. These days, however, the perspective of anthropology has begun to attract great attention in this area (e.g., Watson-Gegeo, 1988; Davis, 1995); classroom research is frequently conducted utilizing the research methods of anthropology. What is happening in the classroom is described ethnographically in detail, and not only teachers' but also students' perceptions are interpreted according to interviews or questionnaires. Thus, in order to take into consideration the traditional and background cultures of students, and play roles as connectors between students and their target languages, language educators, including both those whose nationality is the same as their students and those who are not, need to appreciate the perspective of anthropology. By doing so, they can achieve appropriate classroom methodologies for different contexts.

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