BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN MULTICULTURALISM AND SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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ABSTRACT

The needs of the 21st century demand a citizenry that is culturally sensitive and internationally focused, with an orientation toward the future rather than the past. Every child is born with a language acquisition device having innate properties that plays a role in acquiring knowledge of language. As Whorfian hypothesis goes, it is the conceptual categorization of the world that is determined by the structure of the language. According to C. Andrade, the Cultural Anthropologist, 'the cultures have consensual domains having cognitive schemas that are inter-subjectively shared by social groups.'(as quoted in Manjali, 1998). These are throughout and forever reconstituted by cultural blending and children learning a second or a foreign language have to deal with the absence of similar cognitive domains. The article reviews research on the level for learning a language, the assets of multiculturalism and second language acquisition, the problems that arise from lack of recognition for other languages and cultures, the ways to change current language education, and the integration of international language policies.

INTRODUCTION

The number of languages spoken throughout the world is estimated to be 6,000. Although a small number of languages serve as important link languages or languages of wider communication around the world, these are very often spoken as third, fourth, or later-acquired languages. Fewer than 25% of the world's approximately 200 countries recognize two or more second, official languages, with a mere handful recognizing more than two. Language is the expression of all these things evolved through communication among members of the community and the culture it represents. Language, like culture, is community specific and is intricately interwoven with the culture it represents. Language helps members of the community to establish, assert and maintain their identity as individuals and as a group, bringing among them a sense of solidarity. Language is not interpreted as an autonomous system outside culture but as a

manifestation of culture. As a system it is designed to accommodate any kind of cultural diversity and plurality. Culture can be described as totality of thought processes, belief systems and behavioral patterns of a community, handed over by previous generations. Culture is community specific; it is the peculiarities of the people, who have developed a worldview according to their needs, their modes of living shaped by their geographical and social environments. Multiculturalism in linguistic societies and heterogeneity in languages are the consequences of people living together, working together, and sharing the services and goods of the same community. This linguistic community does not require an imposition of homogeneity as it is a design of diversity." There are psycholinguistic benefits of multilingualism, as well as economic benefits. Psycholinguistic benefits include both cognitive and neurolinguistic "flexibility". That is, people who speak more than one language often find it easier to deal with linguistic and other complexity, and multilingualism does have an impact on the type and amount of "wiring" in the brain.

MULTICULTURALISM

"Multiculturalism is a system of beliefs and behaviors that recognizes and respects the presence of all diverse groups in an organization or society, acknowledges and values their socio-cultural differences, and encourages and enables their continued contribution within an inclusive cultural context which empowers all within the organization or society". This is an operational definition of the term multiculturalism. The culture and environment in which the language is spoken, determine structure of language and its semantic networking. Since the structures of languages differ considerably, the conceptual categorization also differs from one language to another Therefore the contrast between semantic set cannot be studied without discovering contrast that exists in the referential world, that is the world in which the members of a community live and do things together.'(Manjali F.C.1998) 'Meaning components are combined in lexical items but are 'encapsulated' in different languages in different ways based on their cultural and geographical background. It requires a special skill to remember the differences' These are throughout and forever reconstituted by cultural blending and children learning a second or a foreign language have to deal with the absence of similar cognitive domains. This becomes a learning issue.

In an age of cultural pluralism and diversity, multiculturalism is needed to provide a corrective to the reality of our heritage. It is the only option open to educators, leaders and administrators in an ever-increasing culturally pluralistic environment. This is because today's diverse student populations are simply not going to go away, but increase. This is the direction of the future—multicultural, multiethnic, and multilingual. And schools and communities will reflect these dynamic changes.

MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION

Multicultural education is an approach to teaching and learning that is based on democratic values that affirm cultural pluralism within culturally diverse societies in an interdependent world. In a country that champions equal rights and opportunities for all individuals to improve the conditions of living for all, educators' major concerns at institutions of higher education should be to promote the academic, social, and political success of all students (Green, 1989).

Multicultural education has been transformed, refocused, reconceptualized, and in a constant state of evolution both in theory and in practice since its conceptualizations in the 1960s. Multicultural education is a progressive approach for transforming education that holistically critiques and addresses current shortcomings, failings, and discriminatory practices in education. It is grounded in ideals of social justice, education equity, and a dedication to facilitating educational experiences in which all students reach their full potential as learners and as socially aware and active beings, locally, nationally, and globally.

Multicultural competence is the process in which a person develops competencies in multiple ways of perceiving, evaluating, believing, and solving problems. The purpose is to focus on understanding and learning to negotiate cultural diversity among nations as well as within a single nation by becoming aware of one's own perspectives as well as becoming conscious of other cultural perspectives as a foundation of informed cross-cultural interaction. The five dimensions of Multicultural Education i.e. Integration, Knowledge Construction, Equity Pedagogy, Prejudice Reduction, and Empowering school culture and social structure. Institutions of higher education whose leaders embrace the global perspective of multicultural education will not only

reap the benefits of multicultural education but also become pillars of academic excellence, models for democratic pluralistic societies, and attractions for international economic and human resources as they promote good human relations within their own nation and with other nations in today's increasingly interdependent world. Therefore linguistic and cultural diversity are among the treasures of humanity; they are our tools for survival.

Everyone in society develops the core human values that allow for the development of acceptance and appreciation for cultural diversity and respect for human dignity among all cultural groups in the nation and across nations. There are interactions among the various groups of people, strengthening of intercultural competence, and increased awareness of the state of the planet and global dynamics. Each culture has its own solution for self-sustainability that works in specific contexts, the disappearance of which would deprive humanity of solutions to future possible problems. Culture is recognized as instrumental in shaping speakers' communicative competence, in both their first and subsequent languages. Participants in multicultural communication are sensitive not only to the cultural meanings attached to the language itself but to social conventions concerning language use, such things as taking turns, appropriateness of content, nonverbal language, and tone. These conventions influence how messages are interpreted. In addition to cultural knowledge, cultural sensitivity is essential. Just knowing something about the culture of an English-speaking country will not suffice. What must be learned is a general empathy and openness toward other cultures.

SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Sfard (1998:5) tells us that "[S]ince the dawn of civilization, human learning is conceived of as an acquisition of something" The first way is language *acquisition*, a process similar, if not identical, to the way children develop ability in their first language. Language acquisition is a subconscious process; language acquirers are not usually aware of the fact that they are acquiring language, but are only aware of the fact that they are using the language for communication. The result of language acquisition, acquired competence, is also subconscious. The second way to develop competence in a second language is by language *learning*. We will use the term "learning" henceforth to refer to conscious knowledge of a second language, knowing the rules, being aware

of them, and being able to talk about them. Cummins (1979) discusses two forms of language developed in the acquisition process: Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). BICS is the first type of language a student acquires and is often referred to as "playground vocabulary" or survival vocabulary. It is the language that a person needs to function in society or to socialize with family and friends. It usually takes a student 2-5 years to acquire a high proficiency in BICS. Students with advanced BICS skills can converse about a seemingly endless number of topics and are familiar with the target language slang and idiomatic expressions. To ensure the success of second language students, it is important for content area teachers to directly instruct second language students (using comprehensible input strategies) in the academic vocabulary and language patterns necessary to comprehend the content area lesson.

Krashen hypothesizes that every person learning a language will acquire that language in a predictable order. For example, students learning English, regardless of their cultural and linguistic background, will acquire the plural "s" (girls) before the third person singular "s"(likes). Despite the time a teacher spends practicing the grammatical aspect of third person singular "s" with the students, the students will not use the grammatical aspect in target language conversations until they have naturally acquired it. The natural order of acquisition is not affected by instructional sequences. Krashen suggests that providing students with meaningful comprehensible input that contains grammar, but focuses on communication, will enable students to naturally acquire the necessary grammar.

Schumann (1976) *Social distance* refers to the social proximity of two cultures that come into contact with one other. For example, the culture of Americans and Canadians are quite similar. Therefore, the *social distance* between them is minor. However, American and Mexican cultures are very different. Therefore, the *social distance* between these two cultures is quite great. The second language learner intends to reside within the target culture for an extended period of time. The target language group and the second language group are culturally congruent (similar). The second language learner desires assimilation or acculturation into the target language group. One of the manners in which a teacher can prevent social or psychological

distance is by helping students become familiar with and enjoy the target culture. Swain, Canale, Long and Gee hypothesize that language acquisition is enhanced through interaction with people of the target language and culture.

"From a social-cultural perspective, children's early language learning arises from processes of meaning-making in collaborative activity with other members of a given culture" (Mitchell and Myles, 2004:200). Lantolf and Thorne (2007) defend that the principles of the Social Culture Theory(SCT), can also apply to Second Language Acquisition. They explain that "SCT is grounded in a perspective that does not separate the individual from the social and in fact argues that the individual emerges from social interaction and as such is always fundamentally a social being". It is in the social and multicultural world that the language learners observe others using language and imitate them. It is also with the collaboration of other social actors that learners move from one stage to another. Therefore Language students, language and culture barriers have been identified as the major obstacles to learning; in other words, the language and culture of linguistic students are in direct contradiction with those pre understandings of the dominant cultures. It has been recognized that the condition most needed for linguistic students to fully and successfully experience the educational process depends upon teacher acceptance of the students' language and culture within the classroom setting, as well as the use of that language and culture in the learning process. Our understanding of the process of second language acquisition continues to evolve. These developing conceptions in turn influence our beliefs as to what is best practice for the teaching of English language in our schools to the multicultural learners.

SECOND LANGUAGE STUDY PROMOTES MULTICULTURAL AWARENESS AND COMPETENCY

Culture as a process undermines the idea that culture can be learned through superficial aspects like food, costume, and holidays. It is experienced though language, however because language is inseparable from culture. Learning a second language requires learning the linguistic aspects of the target culture. Second language acquisition is second culture acquisition. This is true even if the culture in which the learners are studying is not the culture of the target language. Even students learning English as a foreign language in Japan still requires some sort of English

cultural underpinning. Obviously this applies to Japanese learners of English as a second language as well. There are several linguistic ways that differences between British Commonwealth/American English culture and Japanese culture differ. For example, Japanese culture is hierarchical and the language reflects this. There is no word corresponding to the English for "brother." Rather, Japanese has four words for "brother," used to distinguish between older and younger brothers as well as in different situations: addressing the brother requires one form, and talking about the brother with someone else requires a different form. The Japanese language contains many other examples of language that does not translate culturally into English. Names, for example, are often not used in Japanese if there is some way to avoid it. Relationships or occupations are frequently used to refer to people instead. An Asian learner of English in America may experience culture shock at the idea of calling a teacher by his or her name rather than just calling that person "teacher." These can be seen as cultural manifestations of the Whorfian Hypothesis (Brown, 2007)

Culture and language are closely related that learning a new language requires learning a new culture and thus a new way of viewing the world. Learning a new language involves learning about new ways of thinking, feeling, and expressing. Learning a new language while living in the culture involves coming to terms with the new ocean you are swimming in. This is acculturation, which can have two meanings. The general meaning is just the process or act of adjusting to a new culture. Brown (1980) and Schumann (1986) seem to be using the term acculturation in this way when talking about the Optimal Distance Model and the Acculturation Model, respectively. This process can put tremendous pressure on an adult who has a well- developed sense of self in the native language and culture. In an age of global interdependence and an increasingly multicultural and multiethnic society, early foreign language study gives children unique insight into other cultures and builds their cultural competency skills in a way that no other discipline is able to do. "The age of ten is a crucial time in the development of attitudes toward nations and groups perceived as 'other' according to the research of Piaget, Lambert and others. At age 10, children are in the process of moving from egocentricity to reciprocity and information received before age 10 is eagerly received." (Curtain & Dahlberg 2004). Thus learning a language at a young age helps connect a child with another culture while they are still open-minded and have

not yet begun to restrict their views of others whom they perceive to be different.

Psychologists say that language acquisition device is at its sharpest between the age of three and twelve. It thus becomes necessary to acquaint teachers about the linguistic system of different languages and the modern methods of language teaching. This will help to build an empathetic attitude towards the students and to create interest among them to learn the languages.

Tang (2006) argues that culture-as-facts, and culture-as-behavior approaches are insufficient and that to truly understand a culture, students need to understand the common underlying themes in the culture. One way to practice this in the classroom is to "perform" the culture. Second culture students are likely already doing this as they are living in the culture, but "performing" realistic scenarios in the classroom and thinking about the underlying meanings of the actions/reactions could be very useful for second culture acquisition as well as language acquisition. Altman (2005) gives a series of brief lesson plans for teachers to do in class to help students acculturate to the second language classroom. Especially important here is that Altman's plans teach learning strategies and study strategies explicitly (p. 946, lesson four). This sort of orientation and direct instruction should be easily usable in many second language classrooms. Therefore the positive impact of cultural information is significantly enhanced when that information is experienced through foreign language and accompanied by experiences in multicultural authentic situations.

CONCLUSION

According to Curtain and Dahlberg 2004, "... (E)xposure to a foreign language serves as a means of helping children to intercultural competence. The awareness of a global community can be enhanced when children have the opportunity to experience involvement with another culture through a foreign language." Multiculturalism is an important part of second language acquisition and for that reason alone should be an important part of the language classroom. As the Optimal Distance Model and the Acculturation Model show, acculturation can be an important factor in successful second language acquisition. Multiculturalism and second language acquisition increases productivity because a variety of mental resources are available for completing the

same tasks and it promotes cognitive and moral growth among all people. This makes it all the more important that learners encounter culture and learn acculturation strategies so that they can maximize their ability to acquire a second language and a second culture.

In an age of global interdependence and an increasingly multicultural and multiethnic society, early foreign language study gives children unique insight into other cultures and builds their cultural competency skills in a way that no other discipline is able to do. Hence experiences in learning a second language and learning another culture will facilitate teachers' interactions with their students' learning experience. Competent teachers understand that positive self-concept and positive identification with one's culture is the basis for academic success.

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