Language Learning is Culture Learning: Revisiting Theories and Current Practice

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Introduction

It has been said that without developing an understanding of culture, a language cannot be learned adequately (Genc & Bada, 2005). This statement seems to be self-evident after considering the case of many foreign language students' experiences after having completed a semester's worth of language classes. Second language (L2) learners' social media posts about foreign exchange programs seem rife with sentiments of how they were only able to 'really' speak in the vernacular after learning about and immersing in the relevant culture.As a consequence of this dynamic, by the 1980s, the need for cultural content to be included in language classrooms was widely recognized (Genc & Bada, 2005). However, linguistically diverse regions of the world, particularly those with a colonial history, seem to have struggled to make sense of this (Migge & Leglise, 2007). For instance, the Bilingual Education Policy of the Philippines (DECS,1974) mentions the need to maintain "English as an international language for the Philippines…" (DECS, 1974, p. 1) but fails to recognize the fact that English had itself become a language of local communication, with its own cultural groundings. On top of this, the promulgation of Filipino as the only other official language neglected the undoubtedly multiple cultural divides between the 'national' language and other indigenous tongues. Decades later, the Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013 (Enhanced Basic Education Act, 2013) was passed into law. The act

better acknowledged the linguistic diversity of the country and mandated the use of a child's mother tongue as a medium of instruction. Policy guidelines (see DepEd, 2019, for example) repeatedly mentioned the need for educators to adapt teaching materials to their students' language and culture. However, studies have now repeatedly shown that the interpretation of the law has been diverse (Metila, Pradilla, & Williams, 2016; Young, 2011) and many educators have expressed doubt about the supposed improved effectiveness of such systems (Lopez, Coady, & Ekid, 2019). For its part, the Philippine Department of Education has been unable to explain the theoretical groundings for such policy and pedagogical shifts.

The goal of this essay is therefore to highlight the intimate link between language and culture and the necessity of engaging with cultures to better learn languages. Some pedagogical implications and institutional solutions will also be offered up in the end. To do this, however, an appreciation for the complexity of concepts involved must be developed, beginning with culture.

Culture

Culture has been the subject of much research in multiple fields of study (Katz, 2015). However, pinning down a precise definition has proved difficult. Condon (1973) described culture as any manner of living and Nida (1954) described it as all human behavior learned through social interaction. These definitions are broad and illustrate the fact that if the goal of a field of study were to examine anything and everything related to human beings, the topic of that field would be culture. These definitions, however, are less useful for the purposes of examining culture's possible effects on second language (L2) learning because questions like "how can manner of living be described or measured?" and "how can all behavior be accounted for?" are bound to arise. To further complicate the problem, it is apparent from the definitions that it would be impossible to divorce the subjective human experience from the study of culture; this makes the phenomenon difficult to qualify. Social constructivists, influenced by the writings of Michel Foucault (1972), began to recognize the interpretive and relational nature of collective or 'agreed-upon' realities (Germignani & Pena, 2007). This philosophical shift

gave rise to a widespread recognition of how material and social constructions, embedded within time, place, and history are in fact what constitutes culture; and how each of these things is situated within persons and relationships among people, which are dynamic and subject to construction, deconstruction, and the like (Germignani & Pena, 2007). This view, therefore, asserts that culture is complex and the only way to adequately examine it is to embrace its involute and constructed nature. Because of this, Atkinson (1999) proposed a pragmatic conceptualization that accounted for the individuality of humans and culture, the contradictory and multiplicitous nature of identification with a social group, and the inadequacy of research methods stemming from a realist/positivist ontology/epistemology in capturing the subjective nature of the phenomenon. He recommended that methods which recognize the flaw in assuming any one tool can adequately qualify culture be used. For example, it is through ethnographic research methodologies and the examination of so-called 'counter-stories of resistance' that we are better able to understand the complex cultures of peoples as lived and experienced by them.

That being said, the examination and characterization of cultures need to be operationalized into manageable scales of inquiry so as to provide a shared vocabulary that can be used to have coherent discussions about cultural phenomena. This conundrum has been called the problem of scale; that is, should culture be examined at the level of the nation, community, or individual? To address this, Holliday (1999) coined the terms *large*[1] and *small*[2] cultures; more recently, The Douglas Fir Group[3] (2016) proposed a macro-, meso-, and micro- schematization for understanding culture. In other words, culture is experienced and enacted at the level of the individual, local community, and global scale; and understanding the phenomena necessitates analysis at multiple levels.

Culture and Language

At this point, it would be useful to recognize the conflation of language and culture that is common in the research cited below. Some have described language as the best representation of culture (Gleason, 1961). Others have claimed that the two phenomena are inextricably linked, with

both influencing each other (Armour-Thomas & Gopaul-McNicol, 1998; Fairclough, 1989, p. 33; Samovar, Porter, & Jain, 1981). It is easy enough to see how the two are connected since human interaction and communication are mediated through a shared language. It is less clear how language might be able to embody a culture or how it might be shaped by and in turn, shape it. To understand how this is the case, it is useful to examine the findings within the field of applied cultural linguistics (Palmer & Sharifian, 2007). In an attempt to describe language use in context, Sharifian (2017) first posited the existence of cultural cognition, which is described as a distributed and emergent cognition that arises not from any individual mind or the sum of minds in a community, but from the multiple shared experiences, traditions, and conventions constructed by the various relationships between members of a group. That is, if two speech communities had varying cultural conventions surrounding their classification of colors (for example, see: Paulsen, Uuskula, & Brindle, 2016), this would necessarily be reflected in their language as differing use patterns of color terms.

Other examples of elements of cultural cognition being reflected in language are described by Lackoff and Johnson (1999) in their examination of how the comprehension of idiomatic expressions relies on knowledge of the culture it is embedded in. To illustrate, a notion exists in the Japanese culture that one might be able to 'wrap' anything from real objects to abstract concepts in either physical or metaphorical layers of 'padding'; to understand this expression one must first realize that amongst the Japanese, the act of wrapping is commonly associated with a desire to protect the object being wrapped. The act of 'wrapping' one's words then means to layer them in elements of politeness and appropriate social distance (David, 2014). Many complex notions and categories[4] do seem to rely on common experiences within a culture to derive meaning (Lakoff, 1987). A good example of this would be how the ritualized retelling of folktales amongst the Maranao continually reifies the cultural schemas of important communal events, which are in turn necessary to comprehend language and other behaviors performed in these moments (Acmed-Ismael, 2021). It is these kinds of phenomena that are alluded to when Langacker (1999) describes language as a reflection of culture.

For similar reasons, Palmer (2003) asserts that "grammatical phenomena are best understood as governed by cultural schemata…" (p. 64). An example of this is the instantiation of noun classifiers in the Bantu language, Shona; to simplify, within this ethnolinguistic group, it is hypothesized that their system of noun classification (which is embodied in their use of specific noun classifiers) is best understood as constrained by a finite number of frequently occurring ritual practices (Palmer, 2003). Other researchers have shown similar grammar-culture links in languages such as Tagalog, Dyirbal, Tarascan, and Navajo, which reflect social interdependence, belief systems, hierarchies of animacy, and body-image schemas (Lakoff, 1987; Martin, 1988; Palmer, 2007). From this regimen of research, it can perhaps be said that all grammatical conventions are a product of cultural influence since whatever is said to be 'conventional' is determined by the society and culture surrounding it (Palmer & Sharifian, 2007). An interesting example is the ever more frequent use of the informal English contractions 'gonna' (going to) and 'gotta' (have to); while perhaps not yet conventional grammatical forms in the macro-cultural sense[5], their use continues to permeate English speaking societies and may one day become the wider norm (Tagliamonte & Denis, 2008). To foreground the Philippine context, while the patterns of Tagalog-English code-switching behaviors (better known as Taglish) can be examined from a purely lexico-grammatical paradigm, an understanding of their patterns of use can only be achieved after having considered the socio-cultural background of the Philippines and its languages (e.g. Rafael, 2008). These phenomena are in fact prime examples of how language shapes wider culture and how the inverse can also be true.

At this point, in the interest of avoiding a reductionist view of any purported language-culture intermingling, a reminder of the complex nature of culture may be in order. Despite the use of organizing frameworks such as that of the Douglas Fur Group, cultural boundaries are tricky to define. This can make it difficult to determine what conventional language characteristics might be. For example, while the 'wrapping' idiom is ascribed to the Japanese culture, it is not impossible for a person who self-identifies as Japanese to be unfamiliar with or not use the expression. This is a function of the diffuse nature of cultural cognition; that is, not all members of a social group share an equal knowledge of cultural schemata, categories, and metaphors (Sharifian, 2017).

Another feature of some of the research in this area is the need for native speakers of a language to translate linguistic data. This obviously poses some problems since the integrity of the study would hinge solely on the skill of the translator. Compounding these difficulties is the inevitability that the researchers view the data through their own, biased lens. What they might interpret as a reflection of domestic activities and conventions influencing the language's morphology may be something completely different from the actual speaker of the language. Lastly, most of the studies are only able to take a snapshot of the current cultural and linguistic environment. They are unable to make any conclusions about the outcomes of two cultures and languages influencing each other, which they undoubtedly do. Any attempt to do so would only be a speculation.

Addressing these criticisms would involve a few things. More studies by researchers who speak the language being studied need to be conducted; that is, members of the cultural community should be empowered to examine their own local phenomena. Furthermore, these researchers need to ensure that their analysis reflects the subjective experience of the participants. The participants should be involved in the analysis of the data by deriving narratives from discourse and other similar methods. Lastly, the work would benefit from replications within either the same or similar populations and contexts to better establish the integrity of any claim made about the language and culture.

However, despite the need to address these limitations, the current work still convincingly shows that there is a clear dynamic at play, with culture shaping language and language influencing culture. Language is therefore shaped by socio-cultural experiences (Palmer & Sharifian, 2007).

Culture and Second Language Learning

Having established the intimate link between language and culture, it is possible to see how language learning is culture learning (Swiderski, 1993). By virtue of this fact, the need to teach culture in the L2 classroom has been recognized by many institutions (Genc & Bada, 2005; Lange, 1998). However, in order to frame the discussion of why this is the case, the relevant theories of L2 learning need to be grappled with.

It is widely recognized that the experience of learning a first (L1) and second language are qualitatively and quantitatively different (Meisel, 2011). Furthermore, while outcome differences do occur amongst those acquiring an L1, the process of learning a second language can vary amongst L2 learners for at least one additional reason: their knowledge of one other language. L2 learners appear to take up an intermediate space between their L1 knowledge (i.e., grammar, lexicon, etc.) and a native-like understanding of the target L2; this space is known in the literature as the interlanguage (Selinker, 1972). According to Selinker (1972), the development of a native-like understanding of the target language is affected by a number of factors inherent to the L2 learner. A different but related paradigm known as error analysis (Richards, 1971) also posits that a number of factors (e.g., interference of the L1, strategies of communication and assimilation, etc.) that only exist in L2 learners may affect L2 learning outcomes. Applying these concepts to cultural linguistics, it is possible to predict that the micro-, meso-, and macro-cultural status quo of the soon-to-be L2 learner (that is, the micro-, meso-, and macro- cultural variables the learner is bringing to the table by virtue of their L1 and other experiences) are bound to affect the L2 learning process and outcome.

In order to illustrate the phenomena described above, imagine the Filipino learner of English as a second language. Amongst these learners, the most commonly recorded 'errors' have been those of verb tense, subject-verb agreement, and preposition use (Mabuan, 2015). The following hypotheses are all plausible accounts of what might be influencing these productions: the learner's L1 does not instantiate verb tense in the same way English does (and in fact uses the bare infinitive form of verbs, which of course, is not common in English); the learner frequently hears similarly 'errored' productions from conversational partners such as family and friends; the teaching material used leaves the learner susceptible to overgeneralizations. Translating these hypotheses in terms of cultural factors, it is apparent how the macro-cultural variable (learner's L1) potentially influenced the L2 learning process; how the micro/meso-cultural variable (learner's home/community environment) influenced the L2 learning process; and how the meso-cultural variable (learning materials) the learner was exposed to influenced the L2 learning process. From this exercise, it is

apparent that cultural factors do indeed play a role in language learning and therefore deserve careful consideration when teaching and learning an L2.

Looking now specifically at the classroom setting, research has demonstrated that factoring in the culture(s) of the learner and target language community has produced positive L2 learning outcomes. For instance, Queller (2001) describes a program wherein phrasal lexicon[6] of the target language is taught by illustrating the socio-cultural connotation behind the structure's use as well as its conceptual mapping. For example, the conventionalized expression 'there was a *heated discussion*' and similar derivations are explained as making use of the conceptual mapping: 'intensity of argumentation is temperature'. The rationale for teaching this is to go beyond simple dictionary-based explanations to improve the meta-awareness of the L2 learner regarding the socio-cultural origins of the phrasal lexicon. Programs such as these were designed to address the particularly difficult aspect of phrasal lexicon and idiom learning. The difficulty which Wolf and Bobda (2001) maintain is due to the tendency of the L2 learner to map their own (incompatible) schemas from their first language [L1] onto these items. Occhi (2007) cites a specific example wherein Japanese university students studying archaeology had difficulty using (and presumably understanding) the English construction 'modal+have+past participle', which uses the semantic schema 'condition A supports conclusion B' (as in, multiple hominid remains were found together, therefore, they *may have held* burial rituals). Occhi asserts that this is because the underlying schema is common in Western sciences but not in Japanese culture; the fact that the construction is not common in Japanese publications on archaeology supports this claim.

The discussion so far can now culminate in a number of pedagogical recommendations. Some necessary steps towards enabling these changes can also be extrapolated; however, more should be examined but are beyond the scope of this essay.

Pedagogical Implications

Learning a language involves learning about a culture. The sentiment has been embraced by multiple institutions; however, a gap in expressed belief and practice still exists (Lee, 2015). Rather than comparing

cultural stereotypes and calling it a day, there is a need to make use of innovative practices (such as those of Occhi and Queller) to build a meta-awareness of culture embodied in language within L2 learners. At the same time, there is a need to recognize that the L2 learner can only get so far within the confines of the language learning classroom. To truly understand the culture in which a target language is embedded, there is a need to immerse oneself in elements of it (Palmer & Sharifian, 2007). Hopefully, in doing so, negative experiences and detrimental effects on L2 learning will be mitigated.

In the Philippine context, it is not an uncommon practice to teach elementary and secondary students English (or other foreign languages) with the cultural subtext of 'this is the sort of English used in the United States, or other "English-speaking", "Spanish-speaking", or "Italian-speaking" countries (Karami & Zamanian, 2016). While perhaps not immediately apparent to the educators and students, a closer look at curricular content, pedagogical practices, and wider (meso-) cultural expressions support this claim. For instance, even language teaching materials used in foreign-language classes at higher educational institutions have been found to be incompatible with the socio-cultural experiences of students taking the class (Cabling, et al., 2020). Additionally, a cursory review of learning material made freely available by the Department of Education clearly shows that the micro- and meso- cultural contexts of the students have been neglected—in reading comprehension worksheets meant for Grade 5 students, several selections are about animals not native to the Philippines; the selections themselves are also written in a tone seemingly inappropriate for a fifth-grade student (see DepEd, 2021, for example). Perhaps most egregiously, in English or Language/Reading classes, required reading like novels meant for the semester-end book report are most likely by non-Filipino authors. This fact has been much derided by Filipino authors themselves (Jose, 2020) but has not enjoyed widespread recognition as problematic. This, despite the fact that the Philippines has a rich tradition of English-language writing and novelization, owing in large part to its colonial past. The Philippines and Filipino people have long made concerted efforts to take the foreign languages of colonial powers and reappropriate them, quite effectively and quite powerfully, as their own. This sentiment is perhaps best put by Gemino Abad when he says "the images, symbols, and metaphors his words made to serve may always bear more than the words always mean beforehand;

more, for they bear his way of thinking" (Abad, 1993, p. 12), that is, the Filipino's continued use of the English language enables her to compound meaning onto it and make it her own. And yet, this cultural element is all but absent from many English classrooms and is bound to leave significant gaps in the language learning outcomes of students. It is as if students are asked to learn English for the purpose of communicating with individuals other than their fellow countrymen.

There is also the problem of conflicting narratives and socio-cultural perceptions of native and foreign (English in particular) languages. These contradictions and inflection points were perhaps never clearer than in the case of the expulsion of three students from a private school in the northern Philippines (Tupas, 2015). The school in question had a strict 'English-only' policy and when these three students were caught speaking in their native language, Ilokano, they were dismissed. Given the wider Philippine context, it is not difficult to imagine how these three students would have most likely been using a fair amount of English even while they were conversing in Ilokano, employing a communicative strategy known as translanguaging[7]. This undoubtedly would have represented a more honest reflection of the utility of the English language in these students' lives. As has been frequently shown in numerous World Englishes[8] studies (Bolton & Butler, 2004; Collins, Borlongan, & Yao, 2014; Lim & Borlongan, 2012), English in the Philippines has taken a life of its own, distinct from the English of the United States, United Kingdom, or anywhere else where English is spoken. It is a wonder how this cultural reality is almost completely ignored in English and language classrooms.

Perhaps, the following sentiment offers a pathway toward reconciling these problems: there is a need to always keep the learner's context (meso- and macro-culture) and language learning goals (micro-culture) in mind. In this regard, it is useful to invoke the notion of translanguaging spaces (Li, 2011)—within the language classroom there is a myriad of ways through which learners and educators alike can construct meaning; the use of language(s), grounded in their current time and place would do well to facilitate this. It is now apparent that the desired outcomes of the language classroom should not be limited to achieving an impossible-to-imagine, singular goal of "native" speaker competency, defined by the usage patterns

of the language in its country of origin. Grounding the discussion in the Philippine socio-cultural environment, the learning of English (or other languages) is not meant to create students and citizens who can speak like a U.S.-American or any other nationality. Rather, it is to prepare the citizenry to engage with a wider global and local community that recognizes that there is a plurality of thought, culture, and language.

The response to these revelations must be two-fold: increased recognition and subsequent action. For the language teacher, this means using a continuous process of evaluation and adjustment of course content, material, and pedagogy. At the institutional level, avenues that would allow educators to achieve the necessary competencies need to be provided. And at the level of the individual and local communities, a more holistic view of language learning can be adopted—old sentiments stemming from colonialist structures of power need to be broken down.

The question then needs to be asked: how does the student expect to be able to use the language they are learning? And in what contexts are they likely to use the language? Maintaining cognizance and reflexivity to these questions would enable educators and students alike to be more effective and achieve their collective goals. Ultimately, the outcome of L2 learning, its success or failure, will be defined and become embodied in the learners themselves, becoming a part of their culture.

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Notes

[1] Large (culture) – a conceptualization of culture that focuses on large social constructions such as the nation, ethnicity, etc.

[2] Small (culture) – a conceptualization of culture that focuses on small social constructions such as schools, local organizations, etc.

[3] The Douglas Fire Group proposed that culture could be analyzed at three levels: macro-culture, having to do with belief systems, cultural values, etc.; meso-culture, having to do with family structures, local institutions such as schools, neighborhoods, etc.; and micro-culture, having to do with the individual's language, personal interactions, non-verbal behaviors and tendencies, etc.

[4] George Lakoff introduced the idea that metaphors structure our understanding of the world; for example, because we use words like 'attack' and 'defend' when talking about arguments, it is possible to see how we understand arguments as a form of warfare—the metaphor that sums up our experience of argumentation is then: 'argument is war'. Therefore, if a separate ethnolinguistic group with a distinct culture perceived argumentation differently, they are likely to speak of it using completely different metaphors (see Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

[5] For instance, 'gonna' and 'gotta' are not yet accepted as the conventional forms for 'going to' and 'have to' when writing

[6] Phrasal lexicon – highly conventionalized phrasings of common expressions; for example: it's a *shot in the dark* (meaning an unsubstantiated guess), I want to *ask him/her out* (meaning the speaker would like to invite someone on a date) (see Martinez & Schmitt, 2012 for more)

[7] Translanguaging – the use of all available semiotic resources, including those of other languages (Li, 2011)

[8] World Englishes – a conceptualization of English that rejects the notion that there is a single or ideal form of English; the concept takes into account that English is spoken all across the world and varies in its patterns of use (see Melchers, Shaw, & Sundkvist, 2019)

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