

Cultural Differences: A Barrier to Native English Teachers in English as a Foreign Language Contexts

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Abstract: When teachers and students come from different cultures, many perplexities can arise. These can be due to different social positions of teachers and students in the two societies, to differences in expected teacher/student and student/student interaction, or to differences in the relevance of the curricula of the two societies (Hofstede). Therefore, it has been assumed that a teacher must be aware of socio-cultural differences to operate effectively in the classroom. This paper begins with cultural aspects of individualist and collectivist countries and influences of collectivist cultures in EFL classrooms. It also shows a number of cultural explanations of communication avoidance in EFL classrooms, especially in China, Japan and Vietnam. Finally, the paper presents some difficulties native speaking teachers encounter when teaching English in EFL contexts and potential solutions to these difficulties.

Keywords: Cultural differences, Confucian Worldview, Language Learning and Teaching.

1. Introduction

Learning and teaching English has been becoming popular in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) countries, and the fact is that there are more and more Western teachers going to Asian countries for teaching English. However, this might lead to several differences due to perceived social positions of teachers and students, expected teacher and learner interaction, and teaching curriculum (Hofstede [1]). This paper provides different perspectives

of individualist and collectivist cultures and the impacts collectivist cultures have on EFL classrooms. It explains the popularity of communication reluctance in EFL classes in three countries: China, Japan and Vietnam and reflects what the learners and teachers consider to be appropriate in their cultures. The paper also aims at providing challenges facing the native English teachers who are teaching English in EFL countries and presenting possible solutions to help the teachers function more effectively in these contexts.

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2. Cultural aspects of individualist and collectivist countries

Some animals, like wolves, are gregarious, and others are solitary, like tigers. The human species should no doubt be classified with the gregarious animals, but different human societies show gregariousness to different degrees. We have a fundamental dimension on which societies differ: the relationship between the individual and the collectivity. Individualism is very high in the United States and generally high in the English-speaking countries. Other countries which belong to individualistic cultures include most northern and western European and North America countries, Australia, and Canada, whereas collectivism can be found in parts of Europe such as southern Italy or rural Greece and much of Africa, Asia, and Latin America (Triandis [2]).

Individualistic cultures structure social experience around autonomous individuals. In an individualistic culture, individuals view themselves as autonomous, independent of groups, and reluctant or unwilling to subordinate personal goals to those of the group. People, therefore, in individualistic cultures often give priority to their personal goals, even when they conflict with the goals of important in-groups, such as the family, tribe, or work group. Individualistic cultures emphasize independence which is encouraged at a very young age and strive to nurture individual achievement, self-expression, and individual or critical thinking. The more individualistic society is, the more the education system of the society emphasizes the right for students to speak up and actively participate in the learning process, especially in

secondary and higher education (DeCapua & Wintergerst [3]).

Collectivist cultures emphasize serving the group and might be called *vertical* (Triandis [2]). They structure their social experience around one or more collectives, such as the family, the tribe, the religious group, or the country. In such cultures, the goals of the group are valued over those of the individual. People in collectivist cultures, therefore, give priority to in-group goals. A collectivist culture promotes interdependence, respect for authority, hierarchical roles and relationships, and group consensus. For learning, it is more important for them to be the same as everyone else than to exhibit special knowledge, even in a language class. The more collectivistic a culture is, the more its members rely on other people within their group rather than on outside organizations (DeCapua & Wintergerst [3]).

As for Power Distance, it reflects the tendency to see a large distance between those in the upper part of a social structure and those in the lower part of that structure (Hofstede [1]). Hofstede [1] noted that collectivist countries have higher power distance than individualist countries. Although inequality occurs in all societies, it is more tolerated in high power distance. Also, Hofstede [1] stated that in the educational system of small power distance societies, a teacher should respect the independence of his/her students, students may speak up spontaneously in class, students are allowed to contradict or criticize teacher. Meanwhile, in the educational system of large power distance societies, stress is put on teacher-centered education, students speak up in class only when asked by the teacher and teacher is the authority of knowledge and never criticized.

In terms of Uncertainty Avoidance which reflects the avoidance of situations where the outcome is uncertain, collectivist countries have higher uncertainty avoidance than individualistic ones. In strong uncertainty avoidance societies, communal sharing often have very clear norms for proper behavior in social situations and avoid new situations with no clear norms. Students in these societies, therefore, feel comfortable in structured learning situations and teachers are considered as experts and expected to have all the answers, whereas in weak uncertainty avoidance societies, students feel comfortable in unstructured learning situations and teachers are

allowed to say “I don’t know” when they are not able to answer the question (Hofstede [1]).

Cultural differences between collectivist countries which are dominated by Confucian culture and individualistic ones entail differences in educational beliefs between these two cultures. Flowerdew and Miller [4] contrasted Chinese – a primary example of Confucian culture and Western approaches to academic lectures, saying that the differences are caused by Confucian in relation to Western values. They indentified some following differences between Confucian and Western values in learning.

Confucian	Western
respect for authority of lecture	lecturer valued as guide and facilitator
lecturer should not be questioned	lecturer is open to challenge
student motivated by family and pressure to excel	student motivated by desire for individual development
positive value placed on effacement and silence	positive value placed on self-expression of ideas
emphasis on group orientation to learning	emphasis in individual development and creativity in learning

(from Flowerdew & Miller [4: 348])

Western educational system expects to find the reproductive approach dominant in our primary and secondary schools. By contrast, in Confucian educational system, teacher is the source and the director of knowledge who selects and transmits information and demonstrates appropriate skills; and the students seek, through memorization and imitation, to reproduce what they have been taught. The good teachers are those who present their material clearly, in a well organized sequence, and who can relate the personal experience of the students to the lessons being taught. Good students pay attention, do their homework, and demonstrate in tests and exams how “correctly” they have mastered the materials they have been taught.

3. Influences of Confucian Worldview on learning practice and communication avoidance in EFL classrooms with special reference to Chinese, Japanese, and Vietnamese EFL contexts

The process of learning in China, Japan, and Vietnam has been greatly influenced by the Confucian tradition. In fact, two of the three above countries most influenced by Confucian philosophy are China and Japan (Yum [5]). Culture is defined as the set of behaviors, materials, world view, values, symbols and designs for living which are a tradition of a society and which are transmitted from generation to generation within one group of people. Therefore, culture directly affects the philosophy of teaching and learning,

epistemological beliefs (Chan & Elliott [6]), learning styles (Kennedy [7]) and the conception of what is good teaching (Patt, Kelly, & Wong [8]). Similarly, Ballard and Clanchy [9] argued that culture influences attitudes to knowledge, and therefore styles of teaching and of learning, which characterize the educational process. Within the Confucian tradition, students learn through cooperation, by working for the common good, by supporting each other, and by not elevating themselves above others (Reid [10]). Besides, the cultural norms for Asians are characterized by absence of verbal aggression and direct expression of one's feelings, and the avoidance of confrontation. Therefore, the influence of Confucian cultures on learning philosophy and practice is totally different from that of Western cultures on learning and teaching processes.

3.1 Culture of learning

3.1.1 Chinese

Culture of learning plays an important role in determining what follows students into the classroom. Cortazzi and Jin [11: 169] defined culture of learning as "behavior in language classrooms which is set within taken-for-granted frameworks of expectations, attitudes, values and beliefs about what constitutes good learning, about how to teach or learn, whether and how to ask questions, what textbooks are for, and how language teaching relates to broader issues of the nature and purpose of education". They also emphasized the importance of culture of learning because it "influences the processes of teaching and learning" and is "part of the hidden curriculum". Cortazzi and Jin [11] examined Chinese culture of learning in more details and found out that

1) In the early years Chinese children are taught to learn through memory, imitation and repetitive practice. Learners have to memorize to become familiar with the text, that helps them understand what they learn. By contrast, Western cultures consider the process of learning as a process of discovering the truth and memorization does not enhance learning.

2) Students pay much attention to grammar, vocabulary, and reading. They are not active in class and the main purpose they are in class is only to listen. They are not willing to work in groups and prefer whole-class work or individual work.

3) Regarding good teachers, Chinese students believe that teachers should be erudite, very learned, able to answer all sorts of questions, a symbol of knowledge, a key to the treasure house of knowledge, and have the most authority in classrooms. Besides, Chinese students view a good student as one who should keep quite, listen carefully to the teacher, take notes then review them later, and memorize. As time goes by Chinese students have grown up and have been used to keeping silence in class.

4) Nearly forty-one percent of Chinese students say that they do not ask questions in class because they are too shy and fourteen percent admit that they are afraid of making mistakes. However, the common factor behind these reasons is "face" that Chinese students do not want others laugh at them or at their mistakes because they will lose face in the classroom. The concept of face is central in China as well as in many Asian cultures. In Confucian cultures, to lose face is a serious matter that brings shame not only to the individual but also to the family and/or social group because in these societies loss of face not only entails personal embarrassment or

humiliation but also threatens disruption of the larger social harmony.

Another characteristic of Chinese learning is cooperation. Cooperation in Chinese classroom is more subtle and relates to working together to maintain the relationships that constitute the group, to maintain cohesion and group harmony among the group members. In Chinese classrooms, students seldom form small groups or pairs; instead, they sit with backbones straight, eyes directly ahead...until they are called on to raise a hand, stand to recite, to take out materials to work. They expect to listen to adults, not interrupt, sit quietly and listen attentively. They arrive, they listen, they take copious notes, they depart. Even when invited to make comments or ask questions, they are reluctant to speak.

In China or in other Asian countries, the “good teacher” is an authoritative truth-giver who lectures to the students, controlling the information students receive and expecting that information to be given back on tests. One student called this “duck-feeding”: like the Peking duck, students are force-fed to make them more knowledgeable. He went on to say, “In an exam, the students are expected to throw back all the professor’s [words]...in our long tradition, the professors are always held up as somebody, almost like a saint.” The “good learner” is the student who listens well, who respects authority, who does not question the teacher; the student observes the teacher as a model in the teacher-centered classroom (Reid [10: 135]). While the American child learns from an early age to perceive the world on an “individualistic basis” and tends to be “self-oriented” or “individual centered,” the Chinese child learns to be “socio-oriented” or “situation-centered” (Chiu [12 : 241]).

3.1.2. Japanese

Condon [13] provided insight into the cultural learning styles of Japanese students. In the Japanese schools, all communication is handled by the teacher. The teacher is the authority who is responsible for everything in class. Moreover, making mistakes is not acceptable in Japanese classrooms. To make a mistake is painful; to guess is to admit not having spent enough time in finding the correct answer. In Japan, the grammar-translation approach is the most common and it does not require that the teacher be a proficient speaker of the language; knowledge of content, including linguistic content, is all that is needed. Competence in the spoken language is not necessarily even valued. A typical lesson consists of the teacher’s checking the learners’ sentence by sentence translations of a text assigned for homework, the choral reading aloud sentence by sentence of the English version, and the checking of other homework and/or of answers to other exercises from the prescribed textbook or from teacher-made work sheets. There is endless repetition and reading aloud with little evidence that learners understand the texts. And overwhelming proportion of class time is composed of teacher talk.

Due to the hierarchical nature of Japanese society, student-teacher interactions are not expected in classrooms; for example, Japanese students will commonly wait until after class to talk with the teacher, if they have questions. In Japanese culture which views questions of clarification as a means of showing disapproval, and perhaps also of implying that there is confrontation between co-participants (LoCastro [14]), it is understandable that Japanese students usually avoid questioning in class.

3.1.3. Vietnamese

Vietnamese culture is influenced by both classical Chinese and Indian civilization with important European elements introduced as a result of French rule. However, the first and probably still the most pervasive influence is Chinese. In 111 B.C., Vietnam was incorporated as the southernmost province of the Chinese empire, and the Vietnamese remained under Chinese rule for more than a millennium. Even after Vietnam regained its independence in 939 A.D., the Chinese influence persisted. Consequently, many Chinese elements have been revealed in Vietnamese culture up to now. As China is a Confucian country, Vietnam is also influenced with characteristics of Confucianism which “was based upon authoritarianism, and filial piety was the principal instrument through which it was established and maintained” (Stole [15: 46]). The social norm expects them to behave in the traditional role of hard-working, passive, compliant, obedient, and deferring to respected instructors. They often feel uncomfortable confronting or disagreeing with the instructors who are normally regarded as authorities or experts.

In a research of the reason why communication reluctance usually happens in Vietnamese EFL classrooms, (Ellis [16]) showed that Vietnamese students are hesitant in participating in classroom activities because of the following reasons.

One of the main causes of verbal passiveness is that they are afraid of breaking norms. Like Chinese culture, social harmony also plays a very important role in Vietnamese culture. Vietnamese students are, therefore, often afraid of breaking norms. Moreover, as it is unusual for Vietnamese students to get up

and speak out and if someone does that, it seems that student tries to challenge the teacher, and the rest of the class would think that student demands the same right as the teacher. Therefore, if there is someone who wants to express his own idea, he will be afraid of one another giggling behind his back. This is true of many collective cultures, where people are willing to subordinate their personal goals to the goals of the groups, and are often more concerned about acting appropriately than about doing what they would like to do.

Second, Vietnamese students are unwilling to answer the teacher’s questions unless they are sure the answer is right because they do not want to disappoint the teacher with their wrong answers, and because if they ask questions in class, everyone will know how poor their knowledge is. Also, some of the Vietnamese students are not actually shy in class, but they do not want to call attention to themselves. They are afraid, of course, to “lose face” if they make mistakes.

3.2. Culture of teaching

Besides culture of learning which results in communication reluctance in EFL classrooms, communication avoidance does seem to have its roots in culture of teaching. Culture of teaching is what follows teachers and becomes subconsciously incarnated in various instances of pedagogical performance. It includes “teachers’ understanding of second language learning processes and their beliefs about what constitutes effective instruction.”

The first problem regarding culture of teaching in EFL contexts is the focus on grammar translation in the examination system. In Vietnam, curriculum and exams are still grammar-based. Therefore, teachers are greatly

influenced by the requirements of the national exam and the university entrance exam. Because of the importance of university entrance exams in determining which university students will enter, and thus the level of company in which they will be employed after graduation, there is an emphasis, across the curriculum, on teaching testable skills. Also, Chinese society has a long tradition of nationwide examinations which focus on testing the ability to memorize classical work and thus measuring only learners' ability to repeat information. Consequently, learning is driven by the exam, and too much attention is paid to learning for the sake of passing the exam. Under the influence of traditional culture, less attention is paid to creative expression, critical thinking, and problem solving in the education process. Teaching is largely didactic and text-bound, with little time allowed for discussion.

The second problem in EFL culture of teaching is teachers' attitude toward communication in classroom. In their survey of the views of 24 experienced Chinese teachers about using Western methods of teaching English as a second or foreign language – communicative language teaching in Chinese situations, Burnaby and Sun [17] showed that Chinese teachers felt that communicative methods were good for teaching those students who planned to go to English-speaking countries to live and study, but not for other Chinese students of English, particularly not English majors. They also believed that their traditional methods such as teaching grammar provided graduates enough knowledge for living and studying in an English-speaking country and suited their students' purposes. Similarly, Vietnamese teachers feel confident at grammar teaching rather than communicative teaching. For many Vietnamese teachers of

English, they think that communicative activities look like games which just waste time and do not meet students' demands.

Third, communication reluctance in Asian students is the result of upbringing and educational experiences. Because social harmony is one of the key priorities and emphasizes social hierarchy to achieve such harmony, Vietnamese children are taught not to argue with their seniors or express their own feelings in personal ways. It is considered to be rude to challenge teachers with questions in classroom as well as outside class. Debates among students are not encouraged and obedience to the teacher is greatly stressed. Thus, keeping quiet and being attentive during class time has been a tradition accepted by the educational systems in EFL contexts, and so far there has not been a movement to change this.

4. Difficulties of native speakers in teaching English in EFL contexts and potential solutions

4.1. Difficulties

The first difficulty is about culturally inappropriate materials which usually result in offensiveness as well as being outside of established socio-pragmatic use. Despite increased awareness of issues of culturally inappropriate content in English materials, culturally inappropriate content is still a problem (McKay [18]). Therefore, the topics used in EFL classrooms are one of the difficulties for native speaker teachers. Asian students feel very uncomfortable when asked to discuss, offer opinions and disagree with others in subjects such as sex, religion, war, or poverty. However, there are many EFL course-books covering these issues.

Different learning expectations are the second difficulty Western teachers are likely to face. In most South-east Asian classrooms students expect the teacher to have total responsibility for running the class and “where a European student might think ‘Why shouldn’t I volunteer some opinions or irrelevance?’ an Asian student is likely to think ‘Why should I? It’s my teacher’s responsibility to tell me what to do’. Moreover, although communicative language teaching (CLT) is viewed as the ideal methodology for English language teaching by Western teachers because CLT focuses on encouraging learners to use the target language in appropriate ways to convey meanings, CLT is unsuitable for Asian learners because this approach would not help them to pass the traditional national examinations, which focused on discrete-point and structures (Burnaby & Sun [17]).

4.2. Potential solutions

The first solution to culturally inappropriate materials is that Western teachers should adapt the course-book so that irrelevant or embarrassing topics are left out, or teachers can choose reading texts or topics from the local English language newspapers for class discussion. For example, for many of the students in South-east Asia, learning about the culture of an English-speaking country is irrelevant, so the teacher should “leave out or change such lessons as the *Headway Intermediate* listening on a British woman forever failing her driving test or the *Cambridge English Course I* reading text on a naval battle between America and Britain more than 200 hundred years ago” (O’Sullivan [19: 50]).

Second, in considering cultural variation in learning, maybe our most important task as

Western teachers is to learn about the particular pedagogy of our students’ home cultures and adapt their teaching to the learning styles of their students (Reid [10]). When Western teachers want students to participate orally, they should give students more time to think about responses because they are uncomfortable when making guesses, thus they need time to arrive at the correct answer. For example, in reading classes, instead of moving from the reading of a text to the discussion of a text, teacher can first ask students to write down answers to questions. Teachers need to give students enough time to write their responses. If the teacher wants students to talk about what they have written, it is better to call on them by name rather than to issue an open invitation to the class and expect someone to volunteer a response. Reid also added that group work and pairwork that are commonly used in Western classrooms are not common in EFL classrooms. Therefore, Western teachers might consider decreasing the amount of small group work they do in class. In making decisions about whether or not to use groups, teachers should consider the group’s purpose. If the purpose can be achieved in another way, it may be better not to use groups. For example, if a composition instructor’s primary purpose for using peer response groups is for students to get feedback on their drafts, the instructor could schedule individual conferences with students instead. If, however, the class is focused on oral skills or conversation and the instructor’s purpose for using groups is for students to converse with other students and there are no other ways to accomplish this purpose, then the instructor can use groups.

Last but not least, culture learning is very important to be successful in teaching English in Asian countries. There are numerous ways for Western teachers to learn about another

culture. They can spend time with members of the other cultures, read about them, ask people who have been there. However, one of the major problems in culture learning is that some Western teachers do not consider culture learning as a worthwhile thing to do. Most people are ethnocentric and feel that others must learn about their culture rather than that they should learn about other cultures or many also feel that they already know enough. Triandis [2] advised individualists going to a collectivist culture to pay attention attributes more than they do in their own culture, to learn about the in-groups and out groups, to expect sharp differences in behavior when the collectivist interacts with members of such group, e.g., no criticism of high-status people, or learn about learning styles because not everyone learns best the same way.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is obvious that each nation has its own culture, which affects learning and teaching process. Therefore, in order to function well in another's culture, educators should seek to understand how difference is produced and eliminated within unequal relations of power because the more they know about cultural differences, the better they are in teaching and the more effective communication between teachers and students become.

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Sự khác biệt văn hóa: Rào cản đối với giáo viên tiếng Anh bản ngữ giảng dạy tiếng Anh như một ngoại ngữ

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Tóm tắt: Khi giáo viên và sinh viên đến từ các nền văn hóa khác nhau, sự khác biệt sẽ phát sinh. Đây có thể là do vị trí xã hội khác nhau của giáo viên và học viên, sự khác biệt về sự tương tác giữa giáo viên và học viên và giữa học viên với nhau, hoặc sự khác biệt về chương trình giảng dạy (Hofstede, 1986). Vì vậy, giáo viên phải ý thức được sự khác biệt này để giảng dạy hiệu quả hơn. Bài viết mở đầu với các khía cạnh văn hóa của các quốc gia theo chủ nghĩa cá nhân và các quốc gia theo chủ nghĩa tập thể và ảnh hưởng của nền văn hóa chủ nghĩa tập thể trong lớp học sử dụng tiếng Anh như một ngoại ngữ (EFL). Bài này cũng giải thích khía cạnh văn hóa của việc tránh giao tiếp trong lớp học EFL, đặc biệt là ở Trung Quốc, Nhật Bản và Việt Nam. Cuối cùng, bài báo đưa ra những khó khăn mà giáo viên bản ngữ gặp phải khi giảng dạy và các giải pháp cho những vấn đề này.

Từ khóa: Khác biệt văn hóa, quan điểm Nho giáo, học và giảng dạy ngoại ngữ.