

LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL

**THE ‘HAND IN GLOVE’ RELATIONSHIP
OF LANGUAGE AND CULTURE IN EFL CLASSROOMS****DANG THI MINH TAM* - NGUYEN THI MINH HANH****

ABSTRACT: Culture is an integral part of language teaching. Within the literature, there have been different ways to view language as well as culture. This paper reviews the contemporary understandings of these two concepts with a focus on their inter-relationship. The discussion highlights the significant role of culture in foreign language classrooms and recommends that the intercultural language learning be the appropriate approach to enable learners to engage in multilingual and multicultural communication.

KEY WORDS: language, culture, tranlanguaging, multilingual turns, intercultural language learning (ILL)

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1. Introduction

Language and culture are said to have an interwoven and complex relationship. Understandings of language and culture are contested and evident within the literature. Such contestation becomes even more significant when language and culture are brought together and viewed through the goal of enabling students to engage in multilingual communication in multicultural communication. This body of knowledge is significant for not only language teachers, but all those people associated with curriculum design and implementation. The way language is understood and conceptualised in relation to culture greatly affects how language is taught in the EFL classrooms.

This paper will first focus on reviewing the literature around language and culture and approaches to teach language and culture in the classroom. Also, pedagogical recommendations will be made for successful intercultural communication.

2. Language**2.1. What is language?**

It is commonly acknowledged that no other species has such a complicated communication system as human language. Nunan (2012) describes language as the “phenomenon that defines us as humans” (p.5) while Liddicoat and Scarino (2013) label language as “a complex and multifaceted phenomenon” (p.11). Discussing its purposes, Gee (2011) states that language is used to give and get information. He further explains that language can be used positively or negatively for different purposes. People use language for lots of different things. They use it to communicate, cooperate, and to help others. They use it to build things like marriages, reputations, and institutions. They also use it to lie, advantage themselves, harm people, and destroy things like marriages, reputations, and institutions. (Gee, 2011, p.2).

Gee articulates the concept of language as “saying, doing, and being”. This idea is also indicated in his previous work that says “language also allows us to do things and to be things” (Gee, 2011, p.2). This reflects the complexity of language as the same words may be interpreted differently, depending on what ‘action’ (doing) is performed and which ‘identity’ (being) the speaker is trying to create. The act of ‘saying’ needs to be analysed in relation to ‘doing’ and ‘being’ in order for the message to be thoroughly understood.

2.2. Understanding language**2.2.1. Language as code**

Traditionally, language has been perceived as code. In this view, language is seen as fixed and finite, made up of words and rules that link words together. This approach derives from the scientific tradition that holds that there is a ‘real’ world ‘out there’ that can be understood and described

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objectively in language. This 'scientific' view originated from the structural linguistics approach proposed by Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure in the early nineteenth century. Liddicoat and Scarino (2013) view of language as a set of agreed meanings assembled according to a set of rules. This suggests that forms and structures are the essential parts making up language.

The view of language as code is reflected in teaching methodologies such as the Grammar-Translation approach. This approach sees grammar and vocabulary as essential components of language. It also involves a significant focus on the instruction of grammatical and lexical forms (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). The Audiolingual Method, which gained prominence in the 1960s, also sees language primarily as structural 'patterns' best learnt through imitation and drill. Although the Grammar-Translation Method and Audiolingual Method have different skill areas as a focus (on reading-writing and listening-speaking respectively), they both treat language essentially as a system of rules and forms.

The understanding of language as code or as a structural system, which is largely associated with psycholinguistic perspectives, is increasingly criticised to be a narrow view as it does not explore the complexities involved in using language for communication. Language teaching approaches that focus on teaching 'codes', such as Grammar-Translation or Audiolingual Method, fail to enable learners to use the target language effectively for communicative purposes. Recent research indicates that this traditional view is still prevalent in Vietnam.

2.2.2. *Language as social practice*

Over the last few decades, there has been a strong shift in the literature towards understanding and acknowledging the social dimensions of language. This has resulted in viewing language as social practice and considered as open, dynamic, energetic, constantly evolving. In a further explanation, language is described as "something people do in their daily lives and something they use to express, create and interpret meanings and to establish and maintain social and interpersonal relationships" (Shohamy, 2006, p.16). From a sociocultural perspective, language learning, like all learning, is socially constructed and mediated through social interaction. That is to say, language changes with no fixed boundaries and is a social practice of meaning-making in context. Understanding language as social practice, as evidenced in the interpretations presented above, is very different from understanding language as code. In turn, these different understandings have enormous ramifications for the learning and teaching of language.

An interesting interpretation of understanding language as social practice, and one that has had a significant impact on the linguistic field is Gee's concept of big D Discourse. Traditionally, the process of discourse analysis looks at the verbal interactions and sequences of utterances between speakers and listeners, 'language-in-use' or the 'little-d discourse'. However, Gee adds a further meaning through the notion of 'Big-D Discourse', or also known as 'language *plus* other stuff'. He states that, making visible and recognisable *who* we are and *what* we are doing always involves a great deal more than "just language"... These all involve acting-interacting-thinking-valuing-talking (sometimes writing-reading) in the "appropriate way" with the "appropriate" props at the "appropriate" times in the "appropriate" places. (Gee, 2011, p.34).

In this statement, Gee has encapsulated the view of language as social practice in a more comprehensive way. Big D Discourse is composed of "language plus other stuff" (Gee, 2011, p.34). This interpretation provides a powerful tool to investigate discourse and social practice, which takes into account the interrelationship of language, language learning, social identity and contexts. This theory of Discourse has significant implications for both language learners and teachers. Accordingly, learners are required to be familiar with the various discourses that are associated with multiple Discourses, within which they are likely to participate. Accordingly, teachers should provide learners with exposure to, and opportunities to practice and use Big D Discourses.

2.2.3. *Multilingual turn*

Discussion and theorisation of language as social practice has been further extended through what is known, in more recent years, as the multilingual turn. Within this view of language, the norm of the monolingual native speaker is no longer considered to be satisfactory for the present situation in

which most people are learning and functioning in more than one language. Cognitivists cannot reject the complexification of looking at the social world of language. As such, the term ‘multilingual turn’ has been born out of, and has come to reflect and acknowledge contemporary linguistic superdiversity.

The multilingual turn has gained considerable attention from scholars. The literature shows that there is a change of focus in terms of what language is and how language is acquired, learnt and used. Viewing language as social practice has been extended to be multilingual social practice. The phrase ‘multilingual turn’ is recognisably used in the title of two significant volumes in the field, one by Ellis (2019) and the other by May (2013). Findings of a thematic analysis of these two books indicate that language learners are recognised to be diverse multilingual and social practitioners” and language learning is viewed as “multilingual social practice based on theoretical pluralism. Interestingly, language is conceived of as a resource for learning and as associated with status and power.

“Translanguaging” is now a way of describing language use in the interconnected global community. García and Wei (2014) assert that “the focus moves from how many languages an individual may have at their disposal to how they use all their language resources to achieve their purpose” (p.445). This means all linguistic repertoires need to be evoked in order to function well in a given multilingual communicative situation. Translanguaging tends to recognize the pure individuality in the way people combine their languages. This necessitates a shift in language teaching methodology further away from understanding language as a cognitive process towards there being much greater emphasis on language use as social practice and ‘multidimensional’ in how it is enacted in any given situation. To date, however, there has been very little research on the implications of the ‘multilingual turn’ for the teaching and learning of second or subsequent languages.

Within the context of Vietnam, multilingualism particularly can be seen as a substantial “economic resource”. Many government documents describe foreign language education as the key to empowering the country in the international arena (Dang et al., 2013; Lo Bianco, 2017). Also, it is in the Approval Decision of National Foreign Language Project 2020, which overtly states the objective of turning foreign languages ability into an advantage for the Vietnamese people to serve the country’s industrialization and modernization.

3. Culture

3.1. Culture defined

Culture is a complex and elusive concept. A great deal of confusion with respect to ‘culture’ is reflected in the multitude of definitions of the term. Depending on what field or discipline researchers come from (for example business or anthropology), different emphases and aspects are included in definitions of culture. Lo Bianco and Crozet (2003) acknowledges that there are hundreds of definitions of culture and asserts that “there has been more or less a consensus that it is not possible to lay down an ‘authorised’ definition of culture” (p.42).

In their book *Redefining culture: Perspectives across the disciplines*, Baldwin et al (2006) identify over 300 definitions of culture from a wide array of disciplines. These definitions provide different way of viewing culture (other than being associated with a discipline). Analysing the definitions, seven common themes are identified to categorise contemporary definitions of culture:

- + Structure or pattern: Definitions seeing culture as a system, a framework of elements (i.e., behaviours, traditions, beliefs, norms and values), as observable of regularities (i.e., way of life, language and speech and social organisation). There is a focus on what culture is.

- + Function: Referring to culture as a tool to achieve an end, definitions in this group link with what culture does.

- + Process: This theme derives from those definitions that describe how culture is socially constructed and transmitted from generation to generation.

- + Product: Culture is seen as artefacts such as folklore, clothing or paintings – products of meaningful activities of a certain group.

+Refinement: This theme is present in definitions focusing on the moral and intellectual refinement of humans, distinguishing us from other species.

+Power or ideology: Definitions of this group target the process of gaining and exerting dominance of one group over another.

+Group membership: Culture is perceived as a group of people or a place (i.e. a country) that share a worldview, communication system or behaviour.

Whilst such a categorisation may be useful for the analysis and investigation of culture, it further adds to the complexity associated with the notion of what culture is, and beyond this, to the intentions associated with the application of the term 'multicultural'. Interestingly, few scholars specifically include language within their definitions of culture. Kramsch (1998), however, is among the few who have done so. She describes culture as "membership in a discourse community that shares a common social space and history, and common system of standards for perceiving, believing, evaluating, and acting" (p.127). By acknowledging 'the shared discourse community' in the definition of culture, language is seen as an indispensable part of what makes up culture.

3.2. How culture is viewed

The complexity of culture goes beyond how culture is themed and analysed, and is also shown in the various ways culture is viewed. Culture is often viewed as a static and learnable body of knowledge. However, viewing culture as an unchanged phenomenon is criticised by many scholars. For example, Scarino and Liddicoat (2009) argues that "culture is not something fixed and frozen ... but a process of constant struggle as cultures interact with each other and are affected by economic, political and social factors" (p.140). Culture can be more broadly understood as a framework in which people live their lives and communicate shared meanings with each other. In this argument, culture is seen as an active phenomenon, reflecting complex human interactions.

Culture can be interestingly viewed through the use of metaphors. For example, Scarino and Liddicoat (2009) introduce the model of a floating iceberg to describe the many layers of culture with the tip visible above the water and most of its mass submerged under the water. Yet another way of looking at culture is as high culture and low culture. High culture is the best that has been written, created or thought in the world and has no real social structure. As such, high culture is interpreted as a body of work from many different societies and many different periods of history. High culture is commonly referred to as classic works of art, music and literature that are frequently taught and studied. This is, in many contexts, contrasted with 'low culture', also known as popular culture. Low culture emphasizes morality but limits itself to familiar and individual problems and the values, which apply to such problems. This cultural subset refers to ideas, perspectives, attitudes and other phenomena of the masses of a given culture.

All these different ways of viewing culture add more complexity to understanding the term, thus causing confusion with respect to what culture is. In addition to the approaches described above, there have also been attempts to identify specific characteristics of culture. In short, not only are there a multitude of definitions of culture, but there are also many different ways of even thinking about culture.

3.3. Approaches to teaching culture in language classrooms

The fuzziness in defining and understanding culture and its relationship to language has resulted in a number of approaches being used to teach culture.

3.3.1. The 'F word approach'

This approach familiarizes learners with the target language speaking community through a narrow and repetitive concentration on topics such as the 'F words' – food, festivals, folktales and the family. In the language classroom, there is a focus on teaching information about another country, its people, its institutions, and so on. There is often a tendency to reinforce traditional cultural stereotypes. For example, Italy is associated with spaghetti and Rome while Japan is linked with sushi, kimono and Mt Fuji. This approach results in a very stereotypical representation of what culture is, and importantly, separating it from language.

3.3.2. Culture by osmosis

This way of 'learning culture' is often associated with teachers who are background / native speaker teachers of the target language. This approach sees little direct attention to 'culture' with the assumption being that culture will be learnt through teacher modelling and incidental asides. This approach is based on the assumption that the culture will automatically be there with the language spoken by a native speaker. This assumption has led, in many foreign language learning contexts, to a preference for native speaker teachers. This is strongly contested in contemporary research associated with the multilingual turn.

3.3.3. Cultural studies approach

In this approach 'culture' is seen as a body of knowledge about the target country/culture (May, 2013). In classrooms this is often reflected through a focus on 'bits and pieces' of culture (often emphasising differences) and through products such as projects (e.g. about islands, mask making etc.). This approach is particularly prevalent in lower secondary school contexts and usually sees 'culture' being taught through the medium of English rather than that of the target language.

3.3.4. Intercultural language learning (ILL)

ILL emerged out of Michael Byram's seminal work on *Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence*. Byram's articulation of five '*savoirs*' (a French word for *knowing*) of intercultural competence has laid the foundation for what has become ILL, a contemporary approach to addressing 'culture' within the second / foreign language classroom. These five *savoirs* are:

- + *Savoir être*: attitudes of willingness to revitalize the self and valuing the other
- + *Savoirs*: knowledge of self and other, of individual and societal interaction and processes
- + *Savour comprendre*: ability to interpret a document or event from another culture and explain or relate it to own culture
- + *Savour apprendre/faire*: ability to acquire new cultural knowledge and operate in real-time communication
- + *Savour s'engager* ability to critically evaluate own and other cultural perspectives, practices and products

ILL reflects the dynamic view in which language, culture and learning are fundamentally interrelated concepts. Byram (1988) explain that,

Intercultural language learning involves developing with learners an understanding of their own language(s) and culture(s) in relation to an additional language and culture. It is a dialogue that allows for reaching a common ground for negotiation to take place, and where variable points of view are recognised, mediated, and accepted. (p.46).

This approach enables learners to position themselves so that they can view and critique their own language and culture in relation to a different language and culture. Liddicoat et al. (2003) uses the idea of 'third place' to capture the interculturality process. A 'third place' is referred to as "a comfortable unbounded and dynamic space which intercultural communicators create as they interact with each other and in their attempt to bridge the gap between cultural differences" (Kramsch, 1993, p. 1). This is also known as the process of 'decentralizing' from one's own cultural assumptions and developing an intercultural identity.

Scarino and Liddicoat (2009), however, give a slightly different perspective in terms of what intercultural learning means. She argues that because learning English as a global language does not necessarily lead to constructive interaction among people, it is important to develop "positive dispositions for intercultural communication" (p.468). She clarifies dispositional aspects as "attitudinal dimensions of human communication for fostering the competence necessary to engage in constructive communication and mutual understanding across national borders" (Kubota, 2016, p. 468). Noticeably, she talks about two types of dispositions, "foundational dispositions" and "communicative dispositions" (p.476). Foundational dispositions are referred to as being interested in the culture of Self and Other, building trusted relationships, and having non-prejudiced attitudes, as well as knowledge of culture, history and politics. On the other hand, communicative dispositions

include the willingness and persistent efforts to communicate across all kinds of difference and mutual accommodation and to understand each other. These two types of dispositions can provide a useful guideline for developing intercultural competence in the EFL classrooms.

4. Discussion and conclusion

There are two main ways of understanding language – language as code and language as social practice. The former view stresses the importance of teaching forms and structures while the latter view acknowledges the social dimensions of the target language. Culture is embedded in language and language is a vehicle for understanding culture (Kubota, 2016). As such, language cannot be learnt independently from culture, nor can culture be learnt independently from language.

Understanding language as social practice, for language teachers, means an expansion of how to view language. Accordingly, the goal of language teaching will be far more than just addressing linguistic knowledge such as the grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation. Language teachers have to add the social dimensions of the target language to the instruction of forms and structures. Both dimensions (code and social practice) of the target language need to be attended to so that learners are better prepared for real life use of the language.

However, the two above perspectives have now been extended through conceptions such as the ‘multilingual turn’. Multilingualism can be construed as a resource and preparation for the world, applied to any aspects of engagement with the world, intellectual, recreational, spiritual, diplomatic or commercial. Although there is a large body of literature developing around the ‘multilingual turn’ and its significance in our inter-global connected world, limited empirical research has been conducted with respect to implications for language learning and language classroom contexts.

The discussion in this paper so far has indicated that there is a myriad of ways to define and view language and culture. Within the literature in recent decades there has been an increased emphasis on language and culture being understood as inextricably bound. The literature associated with language teaching and learning has also seen this shift being reflected in languages pedagogy.

Lo Bianco (2017) stress that "moving towards an intercultural approach in language teaching fulfils one of the higher potentials of education - to expand the learners' horizons and to prepare them to participate in a multilingual and multicultural world" (p.19). In reviewing the literature that theorises and critiques nature, roles and approaches to the teaching and learning of languages it is increasingly apparent that ILL is being advocated as the most appropriate way to develop learners' ability to negotiate meanings across languages and cultures.

In conclusion, language use is socially and culturally bound and the ability to communicate effectively across cultures requires understanding of the cultural concepts within which language is used. It is, therefore, important that the teaching of language be viewed as a process directed towards the use of language as social practice with its inseparable link with culture and the development of interculturality.

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Mối quan hệ mật thiết của ngôn ngữ và văn hóa trong giảng dạy tiếng Anh

Tóm tắt: Văn hóa là một thành tố không thể tách rời trong giảng dạy ngôn ngữ. Các nghiên cứu trước đây cho thấy rằng có rất nhiều cách hiểu khác nhau về khái niệm ngôn ngữ cũng như văn hóa. Bài báo này tập trung tóm tắt và thảo luận các cách tiếp cận đương đại và đặc biệt tập trung vào quan hệ tương hỗ lẫn nhau của hai phạm trù này. Thông qua phân tích các cơ sở lý thuyết, bài báo này đưa ra kết luận về vai trò quan trọng của văn hóa trong các lớp học ngoại ngữ. Đồng thời, khuyến nghị rằng cách tiếp cận học ngôn ngữ theo hướng liên văn hóa sẽ có tác động tốt để phát triển năng lực giao tiếp trong bối cảnh đa ngôn ngữ và đa văn hóa.

Từ khóa: ngôn ngữ; văn hóa; chuyển ngữ; cách tiếp cận đa ngôn ngữ; học ngôn ngữ theo đường hướng liên văn hóa.