Aspects of interrelationship between culture and language in the context of second/foreign language acquisition

Mgr., Ing. Ingrid Madárová, Mgr. Roman Čančinov

Faculty of Arts - Language Department (Centrum pripravy jazykov) - Pavol Jozef Šafárik University in Košice; Šrobárova 2, 041 80 Košice, Slovakia; ingrid.madarova@upjs.sk

Oxford University Press, Budovateľská 63/A, 080 01 Prešov, Slovakia, roman.cancinov@oup.com

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Abstract
Effective communication as a part of second/foreign language acquisition in today’s international, globalized world brings the issue of understanding interrelationship between language and culture and its influence on second/foreign language acquisition. Considering tolerance within today’s European multiculturalism as one of the most valuable tools in peaceful coexistence of various cultures, intercultural understanding opens the door to the whole world in the way of knowing and communicating with other cultures. Therefore, multicultural education, as a factor affecting second language teaching and learning process, should be taken into consideration.

Key words Intercultural Communication, Language, Culture, Second/foreign language acquisition

1. ASPECTS OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

In the last decade the importance of intercultural communication as an integrative part of second/foreign language acquisition increased, especially within European multicultural society. "Applied linguists and language teachers have become increasingly aware that a second or foreign language can rarely be learned or taught without addressing the culture of the community in which it is spoken. A second language learner's understanding of a second culture is fundamentally affected by his or her culturally-defined world view, beliefs, and presuppositions. These beliefs and presuppositions have important pedagogical implications and need to be considered in second language teaching and learning." (Hinkel, 1999, p. 2).

Understanding of thought, language and culture as three aspects of communication brings the issue of their hierarchy within the discourse. "The extent to which language, culture, and thought have influenced one another, and which is the dominant aspect of communication, have been matters of controversy for three quarters of a century, the influence of the work of Boas, Sapir, Whorf, Hoijer, at al. is seen in the amount of both speculation and careful research that has ensued." (Valdes, 1986, p. 1).
1.1 What is culture?

To understand what intercultural communication represents, it is useful to define culture as a term. There were many attempts to define culture for various purposes. L. Kroeber and C. Kluckhorn write in their book that the efforts to define a culture have been taking place in science since centuries (Kroeber, A.L.; Kluckhorn, C, 1952) (In: Mistrík et al, 1999). According to them the first scientific definition of a term culture appeared already in 1871 in the work of E. B. Tylor. It is understandable that the definition of the term culture varies within the history according to the purposes of its definition. E. Mistrík (1999) mentions existence more than 200 argued definitions of culture. From the historical point of view he divides definitions of culture in five main groups and each of them comes out from the principles related to the conception of human being. Mistrík's definition of culture within multicultural education concept is inspired by Claude Lévi-Strauss’s work La pensée sauvage (1996) (In: Mistrík et al, 1999) where he writes about the creative activity in art (painting) as about a dialogue with a model, a material or a user according to the direction of an artist’s effort aimed at the integration of an network as a certain structure and in each of the types of arts he sees all three aspects present where they differ only according to the emphasis given on one of them (Lévi-Strauss 1996, 44-46). Mistrík (1999) consequently defines culture as a system of three aspects which exist only together where a cognitive aspect "concentrates, contains, processes and transmits information about the world", a sign system "contains the objectivised ideas and information in signs, instructions, records, symbols, norms, ciphers," and an active system in a sense that "all above mentioned parts of culture would not function of they were not involved in the activity of the concrete society and they even would not arise without their involvement in the activity. Contents and the way of their processing are thus formed by culture with regard to their user, i.e. with regard to their use in life of the existing generations and in life of future generations" (Mistrík et al, 1999).

As described above, the definitions of culture can vary according to the purpose of the definition. Within the concept of intercultural communication as a part of second language acquisition we prefer to use simplified definitions of culture represented by the Moerman’s definition of culture: "Culture is a set - perhaps a system - of principles of interpretation, together with the products of that system" (Moerman, 1988). Within his definition, culture can be understood as a subjective concept of ideas, beliefs and assumptions through which the other people acting and behaviour could be interpreted. Focussing on cultural differences Craig Storti (1999) defines culture as "the shared assumptions, values, and beliefs of a group of people which result in characteristic behaviours". He believes that "cultural differences, on the ways in which a person from one culture thinks and behaves differently from a person from another" and that "it is these differences, after all, which cause most of the confusion, frustration, sometimes even hostility that occur when people from different cultures interact with each other" (Storti, 1999, p. 5).

Consequently, second/foreign language learner should become aware of the coexistence of different concepts within multicultural environment. Knowledge and understanding of unlimited numbers of different cultures is impossible. To simplify the classification of different cultures coexisting within Europe and the world, we found it useful to define horizontal and vertical stratification of culture. Within vertical stratification we can distinguish various cultural groups in a society prevailingly speaking the same language. For the intercommunication of various cultural groups with the same nationality we prefer to use a term cross-cultural communication. For the purpose of the intercultural communication aspect in second language acquisition we concentrate on the differences in cultures within horizontal stratification where we classify a culture group as a nation. Intercultural communication is preferred as a term for the communication among cultures groups within the concept of horizontal stratification.
1.2 Culture and Language

Before introducing the aspects of intercultural communication it is useful to define process of communication.

Ted Slater in his essay "A Definition and Model for Communication" (Slater) notes that from the etymological point of view, "communication" is related to word "communion" and "community". The origin of the word comes from the Latin "communicare" - "to make common" (Weekley, 1967, p.338). DeVito (1986) formulates his definition for communication as “the process or act of transmitting a message from a sender to a receiver, through a channel and with the interference of noise” (DeVito, 1986, p.61). Paraphrasing DeVito’s definition of communication, intercultural communication could be seen as the process or act of transmitting a message from a sender from one cultural group to a receiver from another cultural group, through a channel and with the interference of noise. Assuming that misunderstandings related to language barrier are minimized when considering that intercultural communication is realized between the groups within earlier mentioned horizontal culture stratification, cultural misinterpretations may lead into negative feelings and confusion and are often perceived as personal rather than cultural.

The increasing interest in the interrelationship between culture and language has been obtainable in the last few decades in a field of applied linguistics but understanding of the interdependence of culture and language has its development. Hinkel (1999, p.2) introduces a few studies to be considered as a contribution to an understanding of the relationship between culture and language. She mentions Franz Boas who studied the structure of Amer-indian languages in 1911 and who noted that relationships among thought and language as the means of communication is very complex. "His work, especially his Handbook of American Indian Language inspired and influenced many researches who concentrated their research on relation of language and culture." (Hinkel, 1999, p.3) Then she introduces Edward Sapir who in the 1920s explained that a language and the culture of its speakers cannot be analyzed separately. "He described language as a way to describe and represent human experience and understanding of the world (Sapir, [1921], 1961) and considers language as a referential framework of expression" (Hinkel, 1999, p. 3). Then she compares Saphir with Whorf: "Whorf (1956) who notes the thought processes that separated Amerindian worldviews and beliefs from those of Europeans in terms of their definitions of time, space, and natural phenomena." (Hinkel, 1999, p. 3). Then she concludes that the study of culture has become the challenge for anthropologist, culture as the way of life of people and also sociolinguistics analyses the social relations in a group, the frames of behaviour within a group from the point of view of socialization processes. Hinkel mentions also the anthropological approach: "Geertz in his book The Interpretation of Cultures, (1973) concludes that language and its uses within a group are in a centre of social anthropologists as they are a relevant part of human behaviour that represents symbolic action resulting from the social structure and interactions within the group. He also explains that behaviour is a part of culture and determines how language is used to express meaning" (Hinkel, 1999, p. 3). Based on the analyses of language and its use, through access to cultural frameworks, the concept of world perceived by members of different cultural groups could be understood by socio- anthropologist. Culture theory, based on researches within social anthropology is further investigated by sociolinguists describing the close interrelation between language and culture.

As for the current perspectives in applied linguistics of the last two decades, several researchers extended the thinking about the relation of language and culture in language teaching. Kramsch (1993, p. 8) mentions Halliday considering grammar as "a theory of human experience and text the linguistic form of social interaction". She also sees a different approach of Quasthoff and Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper who "have explored the cultural dimensions of speech acts a discourse pragmatics". Kramsch
(1993, p. 8) further notes Keller's and Muller-Jacquier's examination of stereotypes and self- and other-perceptions and also Byram's reassessment of the cultural studies role in foreign language education. Kramsch (1993, p. 9) also introduces perspectives in applied linguistics in United Stated mentioning "Nostrand and Kramsch are reevaluating the notion of cultural authenticity, while Valdes gives a fresh look at the 'cultural gap' in language teaching" (Kramsch, 1993, p. 9). The interrelation between culture and language has become the interests of many researchers approaching this idea from different points of view. This subject "brings together research in anthropology and social cognition, as well as second language learning, acquisition, and teaching. The authors take the position that multidisciplinary studies on culture carried out in various domains of applied linguistics, sociolinguistics, interaction and pragmatics, and rhetoric and writing can inform second and foreign language learning and teaching. Conversely, the environments in which languages are learned and taught often serve as research grounds where the impact of culture can be investigated" (Hinkel, 1999, p. 2).

2. CONCLUSION

Through studies and researches of a few decades linguists and many second/foreign language teachers understand intercultural communication as an inseparable part of effective communication in second/foreign language which consequently brings the issue of intercultural understanding. Second/foreign language learning containing training in intercultural communication potentially means more effective communication in second/foreign language with members of a target language cultural group. Teachers and students should be aware of the fact that describing the features of any cultural layer of group means a number of generalizations. It is known that any generalizations can contain unfair and not accurate statements about the individuals as members of a group. And as Craig Storti notes, "cultural generalizations can help to understand how people from certain cultural group may act and behave in situation and not necessarily how they will behave" (Storti, 1999, p. 3).

Students are not always aware of the power of consciously using the knowledge about specific cultural features when communication with a member of a different culture group which may cause misunderstandings in communication. Skilled second/foreign language teacher should be the one who could help.

References


