A Study of the Cultural Factors Influencing SLA

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ABSTRACT

The cultural factors that affect Second Language Acquisition (SLA) result from many aspects, some derived from the level of the acquirer’s mother language, others originated from the stratum of his native culture. Based on the relations between language and culture — language is the carrier of culture, while culture is the contents of language — it is assumed that the cultural factors that affect SLA may be classified into developmental or process factors, structural factors and pragmatic factors. However, any of those factors is the cultural connotations that a second language learner intends to express in his or her interlanguage. The outcomes from these influential factors are: the acquired language is an interlanguage that is continuously approaching the target language; the acquirer’s original cultural system has been expanding into an inter-cultural system; and the acquirer’s linguistic competence and communicative competence proceed into an inter-condition immersed in the bilingual culture.

Keywords: SLA; cultural factors; interlanguage; inter-culture; linguistic competence; communicative competence
1. Introduction

The cultural factors influencing the Second Language Acquisition (SLA) come from the influences of both mother tongue level and native culture level. There are three reasons we explore these cultural factors: first, second language acquisition needs to undergo an amalgamation process of mother language and target language, and thereout comes the interlanguage; second, the development of interlanguage is affected by the "enculturation" and "acculturation", and so appears the inter-culture; third, the coexistence of interlanguage and inter-culture during the second language acquisition made the linguistic competence and communicative competence necessarily undergo a middle state or an intermediate condition. In fact, these two competences are also the manifestation of inter-culture. From these perspectives, we have classified the cultural factors influencing SLA into developmental or process factors, structural factors and pragmatic factors.

2. Developmental Factors Influencing SLA

Since the process of Second Language Acquisition is a continual developmental process of the acquired language, then supposedly, the acquirer’s interlanguage, inter-culture, linguistic competence and communicative competence will be remaining in the progressive changes even though the learner may sometimes encounter some setbacks on a certain level related to the target language. Therefore, we view what is mentioned above as the developmental factors.

2.1 Second Language Learners’ Inter-language

It is L. Selinker who first brought forward the concept of interlanguage, for which he states that “Interlanguage refers to the separateness of a second language learner’s system, a system that has a structurally intermediate status between the native and target languages.” Then W. Nemser [1971] regards such a specific language system as an “approximative system”. In Nemser’s viewpoint, interlanguage refers to the language state between the second language learner’s native and target languages, in which the learner’s language system, with the development or progress of the learner’s second language study, would be gradually approaching the correct forms of the
target language. In other words, the acquired language of a beginning SL learner is the interlanguage resulting principally from the influences of native language pronunciations; with the learner’s progress in his language competence, the interferences out of the native language will be focused on application aspects of the target language in grammar, understanding and idiomatic usage, etc. On the basis of the achieved progress, the learner’s errors like what we discussed would decrease so much that after a period of study his interlanguage might tend towards the native-like target language that a native speaker uses. Therefore, the SL learners interlanguage may be regarded as the amalgamation product of the native language and target language in the acquiring process.

2.2 Second Language Learners’ Inter-culture

Many SLA researchers and linguists believe that “Enculturation” usually exists in the first language acquisition. Halliday and Hassan think that enculturation is a natural process in which a person is compelled to learn knowledge for the purpose that he can survive and play a role in his own social community. The reason why a language possesses certain meanings is that it is acquired in the setting of society and culture and that the meaning derived from certain culture is shaped and solidified by the language. A good case in point can be illustrated by Soapy’s thought transformation process in O. Henry’s The Cop and the Anthem. Soapy intended to live through his unbearable winter season in prison, although he had a mind to break the law in order to attract the policemen’s attention, he failed in all his attempts. However, when he came to a standstill on an unusually quiet corner, he found himself standing in front of an old church, quaint and rambling and gabled. His soul was so touched that “his heart responded thrillingly to this novel mood”.

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The conjunction of Soapy’s receptive state of mind and the influences about the old church wrought a sudden and wonderful change in his soul. He viewed with swift horror the pit into which he had tumbled, the degraded days, unworthy desires, dead hopes, wrecked faculties, and base motives that made up his existence.

And also in a moment his heart responded thrillingly to this novel mood. An instantaneous and strong impulse moved him to battle with his desperate fate. He would pull himself out of the mire; he would make a man of himself again; he would conquer the evil that had taken possession of him. There was time; he was comparatively young yet; he would resurrect his old eager ambitions and pursue them without faltering. Those solemn but sweet organ notes had set up a revolution in him. To-morrow he would go into the roaring down-town district and find work. A fur importer had once offered him a place as driver. He would find him to-morrow and ask for the position. He would be somebody in the world. He would—

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Such kind of Christian culture enculturated in Soapy’s mind changed his thoughts just at the moment he heard the anthem, “…… the anthem that the organist played cemented Soapy to the iron fence, for he had known it well in the days when his life contained such things as mothers and roses and ambitions and friends and immaculate thoughts and collars”. As a matter of fact, the cultural concept, language practice and worldview of a person are so rooted in the process of enculturation that they would definitely be reflected in the process of “acculturation”.

“Acculturation” occurs in the process of the second language acquisition and it is based on the acquisition of the first language and culture so that the second culture is formed in accumulation. In the SLA process, the learner’s native language may influence his mastery or command of the target language, and so emerges the phenomenon of “interlanguage”.

Many SL learners, however, under the impact of their native culture transfer, would communicate in the relevant community by utilizing a lot of interlanguages in which their forms are correct but their cultural connotations are wrong in the target language. A good case in point is such popular greetings as “Good morning, teacher!” and “Hello, Uncle Wang.” among the English learners in China. These blending Chinese-English interlanguages are the fruits of the influences from the Chinese traditional culture. When the learners communicate in these interlanguages, they would make errors in their language applications for they are going against the social practice in the target language.

Further, the language practices resulting from such kind of reciprocal amalgamation or mixing between the native and target languages may be defined as the connotation of “inter-culture”. Libben and Lindner (1993) think that, “Unlike SLA, therefore, SCA involves the expansion of an existing system rather than the development of a new one.” That is, in the SLA process, the native cultural system would naturally expanding into an inter-cultural system.

So we can conclude that inter-culture refers to the interspace between the native culture and target culture, where both cultures have been partially or wholly preserved. In fact, from the multiple perspectives of SL learners, inter-culture is not only the integrated outcomes of the comprehension of the two cultures by interlanguage users, but also the necessary product in the course of the second language acquisition. All in all, inter-culture is the outcome of mixing “enculturation” and “acculturation” that is greatly influential in the process of SLA.

2.3 SL Learners’ Inter-cultural Manifestation

According to N. Chomsky, language competence refers to the acquired language knowledge of a native speaker with the characteristics of being implicit and knowing superficially.
Nevertheless, from Hymes viewpoint, Chomsky’s concept of language competence neglected the social cultural factors on the exterior of language and failed to include the communicative function of language. The notion of communicative competence, a concept developed by Dell Hymes (1972) in opposition to Chomsky’s (1965) concept of the ideal speaker, refers to the ability to use speech appropriately in varying social contexts. Competent speakers of a language should know what to say, to whom, and how to say it, because only the internalization of linguistic rules is not sufficient to guarantee the learner’s application of language.

Savignon (1972, 1983), who introduced the idea of communicative competence (CC) to foreign language teaching, originally defined communicative competence as the “ability to function in a truly communicative setting — that is, in a dynamic exchange in which linguistic competence must adapt itself to the total informational input, both linguistic and paralinguistic, of one or more interlocutors” (1972, p. 8).

On the basis of Hymes’ (1972) understanding, a speaker’s communicative competence consists of four aspects of social cultural factors:

1. Whether (and to what degree) something is formally possible — correctness;
2. Whether (and to what degree) something is feasible in virtue of the means of implementation available — feasibility;
3. Whether (and to what degree) something is appropriate (adequate, happy, successful) in relation to a context in which it is used and evaluated — appropriateness;
4. Whether (and to what degree) something is in fact done, actually performed and what its doing entails — acceptability.

It can be said that these four represent the four aspects of language user’s knowledge and ability. A second language learner tends to apply the communicative stereotypes in his native language to the corresponding situation in his second language communication, and consequently he violates the social convention in the target language. This sort of negative stratum transfer of the communicative competence is the inter-cultural condition that we refer to. Thus Hymes’s language appropriateness is the ability to use speech appropriately in varying social contexts. That is why he views the communicative competence as one section of the cultural competence. From this perspective, we conclude that an SL learner’s language and communicative competences are the specific manifestation of his inter-culture.

In a word, we understand that the interlanguage and inter-culture make an SL learner’s language and communicative competences remaining in a middle stage, which really influences the process of SLA. Therefore, it is evidently reasonable for us to think of such linguistic and
cultural forms in the intermediate condition as the developmental factors in the process of second language acquisition.

3 Structural Factors Influencing SLA

The structural factors discussed in this section refer narrowly to such elements of forming a language as pronunciation, vocabulary, and syntax and so forth. Language transfer is one of the roots from which the interlanguage results, while the transfer manifestation of all the structural factors can be seen most evidently on such fundamental stratum as pronunciation, vocabulary and syntax [3] Terence Odlin 1994:13 in the native language.

3.1 Negative Transfer on the Pronunciation Stratum

English, as a spelling language, follows a regular pattern of letters or letter clusters in combination. However, Chinese learners are much affected by the Chinese Pinyin [4] Chinese phonetic system to indicate the pronunciations of Chinese characters[5] so that the negative transfer of these phonetic symbols is frequently imposed on the learners’ pronunciations of English words. Beginners learning English as foreign language or second language tend to pronounce grow [greu] as [ge'reu], and thin [θin] as [sin]. Actually, there are no such consonants or consonant clusters as [θ] and [gr] in Chinese pronunciation system and those learners must have been badly influenced by the Chinese Pinyin consonants like g and s. Therefore, the learners of English in China would take it for granted that [θ] is corresponding to [s], while [g] corresponding to [go]. In addition, many Chinese characters are pronounced with endings of compound vowel clusters, such as sky [sky] its Chinese pronunciation labels are tian kong, ending with the compound vowel clusters of ian and ong [ong]; in contrast, many English words ending with a single consonant are also regularly mispronounced by Chinese learners. For example, book [buk] is frequently mispronounced as [buko] by many Chinese students. These negative transfers of pronunciation often influence Chinese students’ motivation and interest to learn English and hence the effect of their English study.

3.2 Negative Transfer on the Vocabulary Stratum

The negative transfer on the vocabulary stratum is mainly embodied in the aspects of acceptation and collocation. Since the connotation of culture is much larger than that of language, then second language learners can only acquire the part of cultural connotation that is equal to or a little more than the language system when they study a language[6] at this point, we suppose that the
culture system comprises the language system. That is, the cultural meaning concealed beneath the exterior of the literal meaning is relatively quite difficult to acquire at the same time of understanding a word. This point can be illustrated mainly from two aspects of the following:

First, either the different conceptual acceptations or the meaning extension of words between the native language and target language result in the negative transfer of meaning. When a Chinese introduces his or her spouse to another, he or she would say, “This is my lover.” This transfer phenomenon must have been caused by the influence of meaning extension of the word — lover. However, “lover” in English culture is only referring to a heterosexual person with whom he or she has an intimate relationship, but not referring to his or her marriage partner.

Second, the figurative speech of the same word signifies different meanings or connotations and so emerges the negative transfer in figurative meaning. Due to the different backgrounds in language and culture, although the conceptual acceptation refers to the same or similar object, the meaning of the same figuration is far from each other. Take “dog” as an example. In Chinese “dog” usually bears the meaning of “abjection”, and the figures of speech with “dog” are unexceptionally referring to the derogatory sense. In contrast, English native speakers regard “dog” as their loyal friend or companion, they love their dogs like they love their own child. So “dog” is a word with commendatory and appreciative meaning in English cultures and values, which is just the opposite in Chinese culture.

In the process of second language acquisition, the differences of figurative meanings caused by the discrepancies between the native and target cultures will necessarily lead to SL learners errors in understanding, which may even result in the more serious mistakes in communication.

### 3.3 Negative Transfer on the Syntax Stratum

When SL learners have acquired a certain number of words, they may communicate by using the target language either in written or spoken forms. Nevertheless, at this stage the syntactic structures that they have mastered are not of great variety, or we say that they are not proficient in using the learnt sentence structures. Therefore, they tend to be influenced by the native language transfer when they want to express their intended meanings with syntactic structures of the target language. Some proposition formats of the negative speeches in English are really difficult for Chinese learners to master because the intention focuses in these two cultures are different. A good case in point is the tag question structure in English, for which it is quite difficult for them to answer following the English language performance.

— You don’t want to stay here, do you?
— **Yes**, I do. [不，我想。](If the speaker **does** want to stay, he will say so.)

**But,**
— No, I don’t. 对，我不想。（If the speaker does not want to stay, he will say so.）

The reason why these differences exist is that an English native speaker would focus on the subjective perspective or attitude towards the objective reality, while a Chinese native speaker would focus on his response to the counterpart’s information or attitude, that is, he is to or not to acknowledge the negative meaning conveyed by that sentence structure.

4 Pragmatic Factors Influencing SLA

With the improvement of SL learners’ language competence, the native culture transfer on the pragmatic level becomes prominent. If conversation participants coming from different cultural backgrounds follow the cooperative principles only according to their respective culture, it will be difficult for them to achieve their intended purpose of communication. Under such circumstances, probably any polite speech could not compensate for the failed communication because a misinterpreted statement can lose you a friend or a job. Therefore, a second language learner has to comprehend what the counterpart says in a concrete speech situation if he wants to successfully realize his communicative goals. Brown and Levinson 1978 point out that speech communication concerns both the social status between the speakers involved, the cultural knowledge such as politeness, and the linguistic knowledge explicit and implicit. Therefore, politeness maxim should be first considered.

However, there exist many differences in the politeness expressions and the estimating standards for the politeness degree between speakers from diversified cultures. A good case in point is a text titled Rich Meeting His Future Mother-in-law from New Horizon College English, Book II.

…As is the Chinese cook’s custom, my mother always made negative remarks about her own cooking. That night she chose to direct it toward her famous steamed pork and preserved vegetable dish, which she always served with special pride.

“ Ai! This dish not salty enough, no flavor,” she complained, after tasting a small bite. “ It is too bad to eat.”

This was our family’s cue to eat some and proclaim it the best she had ever made. But before we could be so diplomatic, Rich said,” You know, all it needs is a little soy
"sauce." And he proceeded to pour a riverful of the salty black stuff on the china plate, right before my mother’s shocked eyes.

The mother with typically Chinese traditional value described in this passage is viewing modesty as an excellent virtue, so she does not mean to overtly show off, but only to implicitly invite praises on her specially cooked dish. However, to her disappointment, Rich’s reply and responses only follow the cooperative principle in his native culture, but violate the politeness maxim in Chinese culture under such a special context. This case effectively proves that SL learners should attach more attention to the politeness discrepancies between Chinese and western cultures.

5 Conclusion

According to the covering relationship between culture and language, all the factors on the language and culture levels should be viewed as the broad-sensed cultural factors or as a consistent and whole system so that we may generally comprehend the influences of a learner’s native language and culture on the process of second language acquisition. After discussing the respective cultural factors influencing SLA, we find that all these factors involved can be confined to the scope of the interlanguage and inter-culture. If considering a learner’s command of his second language or interlanguage as “knowing that”, then we may conceive that the communicative competence of distinguishing the language and cultural discrepancies between the native and target languages can be regarded as “knowing how”. Therefore, “knowing that” and “knowing how” should be independent of each other in the process of second language acquisition. Nevertheless, if an SL learner intends to decrease the effect of negative transfer from his native culture, he must acquire and acquaint himself with the target culture so that his communicative competence can be improved. From this perspective, SL teachers will be obliged to attach much importance to the discrepancies between native and target languages not only on the language stratum, but also on the culture stratum. Nevertheless, if an SL learner intends to decrease the effect of negative transfer from his native culture, he must acquire and acquaint himself with the target culture so that his communicative competence can be improved. Only in this way can communicative misunderstanding be avoided misunderstanding can be avoided.
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