

A Study of the Difference of Language Learning Context and the Culture of Language Learning

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Abstract

The present study aims at investigating the difference in the culture of language learning and teaching with reference to the change of place i.e. language learning context here BANA and TESEP. Holliday (1994) has used two terms BANA and TESEP to refer to different places or countries. He has used the term BANA for English speaking countries (ESCs) and TESEP for non-English speaking countries. Being an international language, English is taught and learnt in almost every part of the world whether they are BANA or TESEP. However, both BANA and TESEP promote different language teaching and learning culture (Holliday, 1994). Flowerdew & Miller (1995) propose that culture affects language learning in two different dimensions: ethnic culture and academic culture. The present study focuses on academic culture and aims at exploring the difference in language teaching and learning culture as promoted by the two different contexts i.e. BANA (here USA and New Zealand) and TESEP (here China). In this regard the data has been collected through interviews with five participants having language learning experience in both BANA (USA and New Zealand) and TESEP (China) contexts. The data has been analyzed qualitatively. The steps of qualitative analysis i.e. coding, categorization and interpretation have been followed. The results show a marked difference in language teaching and learning culture in the two contexts. The participants reported difference in the two contexts from the point of view of (i) Focus of language teaching (ii) Language learning environment (iii) Teachers' role and (iv) Purpose of learning. The results reveal that ELT in China is based on conscious learning through explicit instruction of grammar, memorization of vocabulary items and textbook based language teaching. On the other hand, ELT in ESCs is based upon the development of communicative skill through various communicative activities which promote implicit learning.

Keywords: Place, culture of language learning, academic culture, BANA, TESEP, language teaching, language learning

1. Introduction

The status of English as a global lingua franca and its enormous importance in international communication, education, science and technology has made its learning almost essential for everyone. In the present world, English is taught in almost all countries whether they are native English speaking countries termed as 'BANA' (Holliday, 1994) and 'Inner circle' (Kachru, 1985) or non-English

speaking countries termed as 'TESEP' (Holliday, 1994) and 'Outer circle or Extending circle' (Kachru, 1985). However, both English speaking and non-English speaking countries differ in language teaching and learning cultures they practise.

Flowerdew and Miller (1995) propose that culture affects language learning in two different dimensions: ethnic culture and academic culture. In this study, the focus is on academic culture i.e. the culture of learning promoted by an English language classroom in English speaking countries (ESCs) and in non-English speaking countries (here China). English language teaching (ELT) in ESCs is based on communicative language teaching (CLT), whereas ELT in China is based on traditional structural approach (Knight, 2001). The present study investigates how different language learning experiences at different places result in different learning outcomes. For this purpose, the present study focuses on Chinese L2 learners of English who learnt English in two different contexts i.e. China and ESCs (here USA and New Zealand). Hence, the research questions for the present study are:

1.1 Research questions

1. What is the difference between English language learning experiences in China and ESCs (USA and New Zealand)?
2. How do the differences in 1 above shape learners' English language proficiency and their attitude towards language learning?

2. Literature Review

A good deal of research on Chinese culture of language learning has been carried out by researchers like Flowerdew & Miller, 1995; Hu, 2002. They state that English language learning (ELL) in China is based on the philosophy of Confucianism, which considers learning as accumulation of knowledge. It promotes language as knowledge rather than as a skill (Hu, 2002). A typical Chinese English language class is dominated by explicit instruction of grammar, vocabulary memorization and textbook based language teaching. The language learning class is mostly teacher-centered in which teacher is regarded as a fountainhead of information and knowledge. Students are expected to be modest and receptive rather than participating actively in language teaching classes (Flowerdew & Miller, 1995). The use of communicative activities is usually considered a sort of entertainment (Hu, 2002). The assessment of language learning is done through written examinations which are mostly based on textbooks and grammatical features. Criterion of success in examinations is the achievement of high marks which encourages learners to use memorization as a language learning strategy. Hence, students are only instrumentally motivated to get high marks instead of achieving good command over language and

communication skills which are the basic purposes of language learning in CLT (Flowerdew & Miller, 1995).

On the other hand, CLT is the leading teaching methodology in Western countries now-a-days (Knight, 2001). CLT is based on the concept that the basic purpose of foreign language teaching is to develop communicative ability of the learners. In CLT teacher serves as a facilitator and the class is more student-centered (Richards & Rogers, 2001). Berns (1990: 104) explains that CLT is based on the view of "language as communication... as a social tool which speakers use to make meanings". Hence, CLT focuses on the development of language as a skill rather than as knowledge. Nunan (1988) describes the two versions of CLT: a weak version and a strong version. Though both weak and strong versions emphasize functional and communicative aspects of language, weak version incorporates functional aspect of language in a limited sense like communicative activities to practise the ways of greetings, requests, apologies etc. The strong version involves activities like role-play, group-work and pair-work which require learners to do in the class what they have to do in real-life situations.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

There are total five participants in the study; two male and three female Chinese L2 learners of English. They had an average eight years experience of learning English as full-time students in China and three years experience of learning English as full-time students in two ESCs i.e. USA and New Zealand (NZ). In China, they learned English in formal setting i.e. middle and high school and finally got the degrees of M.A in English. After this two of the participants moved to the USA where they stayed for one year; did an ESOL course and then they came to New Zealand and got admission in M.A in English language teaching and learning. The other three participants directly came to New Zealand after completing their M.A in English from China. Initially they did some English language courses, did a postgraduate diploma in ELT and then got admission in M.A in English language teaching and learning. All of them have spent almost two years in New Zealand. Hence, they are appropriate choice as participants for the present study.

3.2 Data Collection

Having obtained informed consent from the participants, semi-structured interviews were used for data collection as semi-structured interviews are one of the most reliable sources for data collection in qualitative research (Mackey & Gass, 2005). Each interview lasted for about 30 minutes and was audio-recorded. Later on, the interviews were transcribed for analysis.

3.3 Process of Analysis

The analysis is qualitative in nature and was carried out in two steps i.e. coding of themes and their categorization (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005). The first step of qualitative analysis was the identification of salient and recurrent themes and their coding. Hence the transcript was studied carefully and salient and recurrent themes, which emerged naturally from the data, were identified by using a bottom-up approach. Initially various recurrent themes were identified which were later grouped into categories on account of their similarity. The categories were coded by using the square brackets [], whereas for coding themes parentheses () were used. Similar themes were combined to form a category. In this way, five major categories were identified. Coding of the themes and their categorization was done in accordance with the following pattern:

Categories	Themes
Educational background information [EBI]	China (Ch) English speaking countries (ESCs)
Focus of language teaching [FOLT]	Grammar (G) Vocabulary (V) Writing (W) Listening (L) Speaking (S) Textbooks (TB) Handouts (HO)
Language learning environment [LLE]	Language use (LU) Encouragement (E) Class size (CS)
Teacher's role [TR]	Teaching style (TS)
Purpose of learning [POL]	Memorization (M) Communicative ability (CA)

4. Findings

First category i.e. educational background information [EBI] of the participants has already been described above while providing information about the participants. The rest of the four categories which tell us about their experiences and outcome of ELL in the two contexts are described below.

4.1 Focus of Language Teaching

The participants reported different focus of ELT in China and ESCs. ELT in China is based on textbooks and its major focus is on explicit instruction of grammatical features and memorization of vocabulary items. There was no opportunity for practising speaking and listening skills in the class. Writing skill

was emphasized, but that was also done through grammar based writing activities like *'fill in the blanks, correct form of verb'*. Such grammatical exercises proved helpful in promoting the participants' knowledge of grammar as they reported that the teachers in ESCs say that their grammar is much better than that of native speakers. However, Creative writing was not practiced in China. As a result of it they couldn't develop creative and analytical writing ability.

On the other hand, the participants reported that ELT in ESCs especially in an ESOL class and English language courses focussed more on the development of communicative ability. There was no explicit teaching of grammar and vocabulary items. The major focus of teaching was on the development of speaking and listening skills. *'teacher would specifically design various classroom activities like presentations, discussions, skits and drama playing'* which are some of the key features of CLT and promote learners' active participation in class. Resultantly, they *'learned a lot just unconsciously'*. Similarly ELT was not based on textbook; rather the teacher would use various audio-visual aids like multimedia, display charts and handouts etc. Hence, the use of different types of teaching aids would keep class lively and receptive.

4.2 Language Learning Environment (LLE)

The participants reported three main aspects concerning LLE in the two contexts. The three aspects are:

- a) Use of language in the class and daily life
- b) Encouragement for language learning
- c) Number of students in an English language class

In ESCs English was used not only in the class, but also in daily life which proved very helpful in improving their speaking skill. In China, teachers mostly used Chinese to teach English. Its major reasons, according to the participants, are lack of teachers training and teachers' lower level of proficiency in English. Moreover, the English teachers in China didn't encourage the students to speak in the class, participate in discussion and to make use of the target language (English) in the class. The classes were completely teacher-centred and would never encourage learners' active participation in the class. On the other hand, the English language teachers in ESCs were not only well qualified but they would also motivate the students to participate in class activities and never discouraged them for their mistakes. They would make their classes more student-centred. Chinese English language teachers would give *'negative comments'* to the students for their mistake. Hence, they *'always felt shy and embarrassed, and never volunteered'* to speak in the class.

The number of students in an English language class was also reported as an important factor affecting language learning environment. The Chinese class usually consisted of almost 60 students which always proved to be a hindrance in promoting language learning activities and students' participation in those activities. In ESCs, language class consisted of a small number of students (15 to 25) which was helpful in providing every student '*the chance to participate in class activities and interact with the teacher*'. Moreover, the English language class in ESCs consisted of students with multicultural backgrounds which always promoted their use of English language in the class as this was the only language they could use for communication with others.

4.3 Teachers' Role

The participants perceived a marked difference between the teachers' role in the two contexts. The teachers in China were mostly authoritative and led the class instead of facilitating learning through scaffolding. They mostly used deductive approach of language teaching and believed in spoon feeding in the form of reading the textbook, explaining it, dictating answers to the questions and grammatical exercises. They never encouraged the students to participate in the class. The learners usually '*felt tired and sleepy*'. A language classroom in China was usually quiet and '*very teacher-centered*'. Any question from students was usually considered as rude and impolite behaviour and challenging the authority of the teacher.

Contrary to it, the teachers in ESCs were very friendly and always performed their role as a facilitator. The class was more learner-centered. The students never felt '*any social difference between teachers and students*'. Teachers always encouraged the learners to ask questions and present their own ideas. They never snubbed them for their errors or mistakes. They tried to help them in every way. They created a lot of warm atmosphere and encouraged them to learn the TL.

4.4 Purpose of Learning

The participants reported that the basic aim of ELL in China was to pass the exam and the achievement of high grades instead of promoting communicative ability. Final grades were awarded on the basis of learners' performance in paper; not on the basis of their participation and performance in class activities. Moreover, the papers were also based on activities like grammar exercises, translation, and answering the questions given from the units of the text. It was totally based on rote learning from the text and then reproducing it in paper, which, according to the participant was just '*a sort of copying*'. Hence, it could not promote language skills or creativity among students; rather just the habit of memorizing. One of the participants explicitly said, '*I don't think, I learnt*

anything. I memorized a lot because memorization is very important in China'. Moreover, this sort of copying was considered as 'good work' by the teachers.

According to the participants the major purpose of ELT in ESCs was the development of communication skill among the students so that they should be able to use language in their daily life. The assessment of their final grades was done on the basis of their performance in different class activities like their '*participation and involvement in activities, and the level of their presentations and written work*'. These activities were not based on explicit grammatical learning but spontaneous language production both in oral and written work and their creativity in these activities. This practice promoted their language learning as a skill.

5. Discussion

5.1 Research Question No. 1

With reference to the first research question, the findings of the study reflect that there is an obvious difference between the participants' ELL experiences in China and ESCs. ELT in China was based on conscious learning through explicit instruction of grammar, memorization of vocabulary items and textbook based language teaching. The purpose of learning was the achievement of better marks and higher final grades; not the development of communicative ability. Similarly, the teachers' attitude was not very encouraging in the class. The language class was more teacher-centered. The learners were not having the opportunity of practising speaking or listening skills through communicative activities. Writing skill was emphasized in the class, but it was done through decontextualized grammar exercises.

On the other hand, ELT in ESCs directed towards the development of communicative skills through various communicative activities which would promote unconscious (implicit) learning. English was not only the medium of instruction but was also used for communication in class and daily life. The teachers performed a very positive role in encouraging the students to practise speaking and listening skills by providing them maximum opportunity to participate in class activities.

5.2 Research Question No. 2

So far as the second research question is concerned, the findings of the study show that the participants have a very positive opinion about their ELL experience in ESCs and are in favor of CLT rather than the traditional structured approach used in China. All four categories revealing their experiences of ELL in the two contexts show that they favour the learning of language as a skill and give more importance to the communicative aspect of language. They consider unconscious communicative learning environment of CLT better than the

conscious and explicit instructional environment of the Chinese English language class. They are in favour of the use of communicative activities in language teaching as these activities helped them unconsciously to promote their speaking skill. This corresponds to Shi's (2006) survey findings which state that the Chinese learners are willing to participate in classroom activities.

The 'only English' environment of ESCs proved very helpful in developing their fluency in speaking. Moreover, the small size of the class and multicultural environment in ESCs provided them opportunity to interact with their fellows by using the target language. They criticize the use of Chinese language in an English language class in China as it hindered their linguistic ability. This is quite opposite to the opinion of Auerbach (1993), who argues that L1 facilitates successful L2 acquisition. They take the knowledge of grammar they obtained from Chinese English language class as for granted, but the fact is that it also helped them unconsciously because while learning in ESCs their focus was only on the development of communicative ability. They are also in favour of the teacher's role as a facilitator and student-centeredness of language class. The encouragement, motivation, and friendly behaviour of teachers in ESCs also proved helpful in developing their confidence for participating in class activities and ultimately in the development of their linguistic ability.

6. Conclusion and Implications

The study suggests that both language learning contexts emphasize different aspects of language learning and in different ways. It reflects that academic culture affects the learners' linguistic ability and that learners can adapt themselves according to the culture of learning. The important role, in this regard, is that of teachers who should discover their learners' feelings and beliefs about language learning experiences and consequently review their teaching processes. However, as this study is based on just five participants, more research with more participants may reveal significant findings.

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