Cultural Connections to Pedagogy in English as a Second Language (ESL) Education

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Abstract

In similarity to other subjects, English as a second language (ESL) can be both taught and interpreted differently as a result of the cultural connections to pedagogy. Ideally ESL classes are taught by native English speakers, but classrooms in English speaking countries are culturally different from non-English speaking countries. In order for the native English speakers to teach a class in a foreign country without triggering their students' affective filter—a psychological barrier determined by Stephen Krashen (1982) to prevent unconscious acquisition of the comprehensible input— the teacher should familiarize themselves with that country's national culture. Geert Hofstede created what is now referred to as the "six-dimensional model of national culture" which displays these cultural differences in terms of how countries solve six separate societal issues. The pedagogical data and feedback received from students in Asia, Europe, and Central and South America show that general ESL class structure lacks two key factors in language learning: comprehensible input and consideration for their students' affective filters. No matter the country or the cultural pedagogy, students will not be able to fully acquire and apply a language without exposure to comprehensible input. Nor without consideration for the students' affective filter, which can determine whether or not the student actually comprehends the comprehensible input.

Keywords: Pedagogy, comprehensible input, affective filter, culture, English as a second language (ESL)

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Introduction

The presence of the affective filter— a psychological barrier that, once triggered, prevents unconscious acquisition of the comprehensible input provided by the instructor—emphasizes the importance of learners' comfortability in the classroom (Krashen 1982; Gonzalez 2020). Comfortability is often associated with familiarity in the sense that humans are more comfortable in familiar settings or with familiar people. It is for this reason that teachers must understand how culture is present in schools, how it plays a factor in students' comfortability in the classroom and thus, has a possibility of affecting a students' receptability of academic content. This paper will be covering the importance of understanding the impact of culture on pedagogy and how that knowledge should be implemented into interactive classroom activities to assure acquisition of the target content. In this study, I will be focusing on English as a Second Language (ESL) education, but this knowledge and these techniques can be applied to all classroom environments by any teacher.

Review of Available Evidence

The affective filter was first mentioned by Stephen Krashen (1982) as a part of his five hypotheses of second language acquisition. Krashen claims that "the true causative variables in second language acquisition derive from the input hypothesis and the affective filter--the amount of comprehensible input the acquirer receives and understands, and the strength of the affective filter, or the degree to which the acquirer is 'open' to the input" (Krashen, 1982, p. 9). Comprehensible input refers to spoken or written language that is understood by learners without needing to know every word or rule of the target language (Krashen, 1982). As stated by Krashen, the combination of comprehensible input and the state of the affective filter of the learner—determined by the learner's attitude or emotions—towards the target language are the key determining factors in second language acquisition. On top of these, there are many other variables that can affect the state of the learner's affective filter, including the manner and the environment in which the language is taught. For example, if the teacher expects perfection from students, then in turn, the students might not feel confident in their ability to speak, write

or understand the target language. According to Krashen, the students' lack of confidence will trigger the affective filter, resulting in little to no acquisition of the teacher's comprehensible input and little to no acquisition of the target language.

Another example of the causes and effects of pedagogy, the quality of comprehensible input, and the state of the students' affective filter arises from cultural differences between the students and their teacher. These cultural differences primarily stem from the contrasts in societal expectations present in each distinct group of people. These contrasts can be viewed from a very narrow perspective focused on neighboring cities or states to as broad as separate countries. For the purpose of this research study, the focus will be on cultural and societal contrasts between distinct countries including Mexico, Chile, Spain, Norway, Germany, Austria, and Mongolia. These contrasts are best displayed in the Six-Dimensional model of national culture created by Geert Hoftstede (2010). The six dimensions represent basic issues that society addresses which include individualism, power distance, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, long-term orientation, and indulgence. The overall purpose of the model is to show how countries address the common societal issues listed in a variety of ways based on their culture.

Method

Design

I conducted my research by sending out a questionnaire to consenting students that have learned or are still learning English as a second language. Sending out a survey was the best way to connect with a greater number of participants. The questions asked about the setting in which they learned, how their teacher taught the class, and their level of confidence in using English. The information that the students would give me in response to these questions would allow me to connect certain teaching styles or educational settings to different countries. Knowing their level of confidence in using English helps to distinguish which teaching style or educational setting was the most effective in that country. I also included questions about the

students' motivation in learning English as a second language such as if learning English was required in school, or how long they have been studying English and if they are continuing to study it today. Motivation to know English depends on if the student sees that knowledge as necessary or as a trigger to the student's affective filter.

Sample

I connected with participants mostly through the international club at the Universidad de Viña del Mar, but also through Jill Boettcher, who leads the English as a second language program at the University of Minnesota Duluth. All students were college-age and had been studying English for at least one year. The questions that the students responded to in the survey were specific to their experience with learning English as a second language and should not be generalized to represent every ESL students' experience. However, the information can be generalized to represent the typical structure of an ESL classroom and pedagogy.

Data Analysis

In order to retrieve the most authentic data from students, there was a second copy of the survey that was completely in Spanish (The majority of the participants were from Spanish speaking countries). To analyze the data, I translated the Spanish responses into English and condensed all responses into one document. All of the translations made were double checked by native Spanish speakers to ensure that the authenticity of responses remained. From there, I could make connections between various responses and draw conclusions from those connections.

Results

It turns out that the majority of the students' responses, despite being from different countries, experienced virtually the same problematic pedagogy for a couple of reasons. First, teachers of a second language have a tendency to drill grammar and vocabulary even though Stephen Krashen (1982) implies that grammar should not be taught in a way that focuses on accuracy and rules. Students do not acquire language by learning the grammar, rather they

understand the grammar of a language by encountering it. Second, culture plays a large part in education. Teachers using “skill and drill” methods to teach vocabulary and grammar are not formatting their lessons in a way that is mindful of the national culture. Ultimately, interaction with the target language is the key to unlocking acquisition, but those classroom interactions with language might look different depending on national culture.

Take for example the impact a “skill and drill” lesson might have on an individualistic country versus a collectivist country. The map and key are depicted in Figure 1. More individualist countries such as Germany and Norway prioritize specificity and detailed communication. Therefore, having English education focus on vocabulary and grammar is considered useful. However in collectivist countries such as Chile, Mexico or China, verbal communication is less detailed and the meaning is considered “obvious”. Thus, having a lesson that focuses heavily on vocabulary is not viewed as useful because meaning is ultimately inferred by the listener instead of described by the speaker. On top of this, in comparison to English, Chinese and Spanish do not use, or have a fewer amount of “filler words” such as “do” “does” or “the”. Instead of focusing on vocabulary, students in collectivist countries might benefit more from learning how to use these “filler words” in order to achieve fluency in speaking. These “filler words” are often used by native speakers without thinking, so the best way to increase student understanding of how to apply “filler words” would be to have students interact with a native speaker or be exposed to content like TV shows or movies as opposed to lecturing about how to apply “filler words”.

Discussion

Summary of Findings

The majority of the participants experienced very similar methods of teaching language regardless of their country’s cultural differences displayed in Hofstede’s (2010) 6-D model of national culture. These teaching methods relied heavily on grammar and vocabulary exercises instead of interaction with English speakers or content. Analyzation of Hofstede’s (2010) 6-D

model of national culture and the presence of participants' mixed feelings of confidence displayed in my research supports the idea that pedagogical methods need to evolve to include more comprehensible input and interaction with English as well as adapt to the country's national culture to increase English acquisition. The main way that participants learned English was through their time outside of school as the manner of teaching ESL in school was merely focused on grammar and vocabulary. Students instead opted for private lessons that involved talking with native speakers or consuming English content (e.g., literature, social media, music, movies, TV shows). Pedagogy should adopt some of these options to increase the amount of comprehensible input and reject the urge to focus all their time on understanding grammar and vocabulary.

Discussion of Findings

When teaching English as a second language, teachers should consider their students' national culture- where the country stands on social issues including individualism, power distance, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, long-term orientation, and indulgence. By understanding national culture, teachers can implicate activities or lesson structures that provide familiar scaffolding for students to use. The teacher then also has a better understanding of the students' expectations for pedagogy and classroom environment and can cater to those needs without triggering their students' affective filter.

Evaluation

As a result of the small number of participants and the majority of the questions in the survey being qualitative, I was unable to come to specific conclusions about cultural representation of pedagogy in the ESL classrooms. However, it is possible to conclude from the results of the study some of the common shortcomings present in second language education. Even though the data was qualitative, many participants experienced virtually the same pedagogical techniques regardless of their national culture.

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