

The Qualitative Study of a Non-Traditional Classroom for Immigrants in the United States

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Abstract

アメリカの移民を対象とした英語の授業を観察したり、そこで教える先生にインタビューをしたりして、どのようにアメリカ文化が授業のなかで提示され教えられるのかを、この論文は検証した。特に先生と生徒のやり取りの中で起こる誤解に注目し、英語の熟語が持っているイメージを理解することが語学学習において大切である、と著者は指摘した。また英語の先生の責任は、ただ言語のみを教えるのではなく、その背景となる文化や慣習をも同時に教えることが重要であることを著者は示した。

Introduction

The teaching of English does not simply consist of teaching the language. The interplay of cultural contexts embedded in the English language certainly plays a crucial role in teaching English. One component in one culture might have an entirely different meaning in another culture. Because my initial interest was to examine the relationship between one's foreign culture and language acquisition in the classroom, I decided to conduct qualitative research on a classroom where different cultures were present. I had the opportunity to observe such a classroom where recently arrived immigrants studied English as a Second Language in Lake City; and as I conducted my participant observations and interviews, I designed research questions that corresponded to my interests. In this paper, I will investigate how the language learners achieve an understanding of American culture through interactions with the teacher and how the teacher helps them understand cultural features of the United States.

Data Collection and Method

In 1997, I visited the English class for immigrants in Lake City once or twice a week in February and March and again from September to November. I collected nine sets of fieldnotes and four sets of interviews: three interviews for the teacher and one for one of the students, and the data that I ultimately collected amounted to one hundred ninety four pages of paper. Overall, I visited the class eighteen times during that period.

This English class was neither conducted in a school nor in a community center. The surroundings around the building of the classroom and indeed the physical space of it provided a really good sense of social milieu in which students and the teacher had the shared experience of learning. The classroom was located in one of the Lake City Apartment Complex buildings. The Lake City Apartment Complex was located just north of East College in Lake City. There were about 24 two-story buildings in the area, and several families resided in each building. Some of the residents were immigrants from Russia or Armenia whereas others were Americans with lower income. Many of the students attending the English class resided in this area so that they could walk to the classroom without having to rely on outside transportation while a few did not live in this area.

The classroom was small, hardly adequate for approximately ten students. It could be seen that there was exposed plumbing for water and heat along the ceiling. There were five round tables there; and around the table were four or five chairs. Four of these tables were unevenly arranged along the line of the depth on the west side while on the opposite side there was one table that the teacher, Jessica, usually stood.

The teacher, Jessica, came to the United States from Germany as a student in the late 1960's; and after getting a degree, she had taught German, French, and English in the United States. All the students whom I observed (except the young single Puerto Rican, Daniel) were elderly immigrants who came to the United States with their spouses, sons or daughters, or grandchildren for political or religious reasons. Some students lived in the United States for five years; others just arrived only several months before.

The length of stay in an English-speaking country is one of the major determinants for English proficiency for immigrants (McAllister, 1986). Another revealing factor for observing immigrants' English language skills is the immigrants' education, both in their home country and in the United States, in addition to having children in the U. S. schools (Espinosa & Massaey, 1997). Typically, a long-term commitment to the U. S. society, which is indicated by the presence of siblings in the U. S. and acquisition of U. S. citizenship, constitutes a deciding factor that motivates immigrants to acquire a high level of English proficiency (Espenshade & Fu, 1997). Even though these factors influence the students' behavior in the classroom, this study is not devoted to the measurement of students' language proficiency. This research is conducted to chiefly see how language learners come to understand so-called American culture through the context of their classroom interactions with the teacher and how she instructs English in the classroom in proper ways that allow one to acquire comparative perspectives on American culture.

The description of this ESL class in the promotional brochure is very simple; and students can enroll in the class anytime free of charge. This class was open for everyone, but the student body was mainly

comprised of recent immigrants who lived nearby. Some of them obtained American citizenship while others were applying for it. Because the atmosphere in the class was casual, cozy, and relaxed, I sat around at the table in an unobtrusive way and observed how the teacher interacted with the students while participating in their conversation. Unlike an observer who sits in the corner of the classroom, I joined the lesson and agreeably responded when asked by Jessica. Yet, I tried to be reticent as much as possible to see how the teacher and students interacted with one another. Surely, my experience of having been a teacher of English for 7 years to Japanese high school students could influence my perspective on the classroom interactions, but it is not the focus of this research.

In the English as a Second Language class, students often bring to the classroom their own striking values and ways of thinking traditionally oriented by their home cultures, which may or may not conflict with the values that American society generally holds. Learning in the classroom occurs through the interactions between the teacher and students, and this study is primarily aimed at understanding “the process by which people construct meaning and to describe what those meanings are (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p. 49). Lending support to this idea is the fact that my concern is not to test the efficiency of teaching techniques. Instead, it is my objective to investigate how language learners come to understand American culture, and how a teacher creates the precise environment in which the students are able to acquire the knowledge of American culture through language learning. This is the main reason why I employed qualitative research methods.

Qualitative research has been introduced into the field of second language acquisition and teaching in the 1980s. Scollon (1995) indicates that there increasingly have been evidences that ethnography is more adapted by researchers specializing in teaching English as a Second Language. Yet, qualitative research is not widely used in investigating second language acquisition because its methodology assumes to credit social contexts and culture more than an individual’s own psycho-linguistic process of acquiring language (Lazaraton, 1995). In fact, many researchers in this field are reluctant to use ethnographic methodologies because of the reason that “the major limitation of ethnography is the insider/outsider dilemma” (Hornberger, 1994, p. 689). In their view, the dilemma exists over how to negotiate the balance between insider perspectives and outsider ones. Understandably, a researcher has to take a risk to stand at a certain position, facing the phenomenon from a particular perspective. This decision is of great importance; but it is also very hard to make. Too much familiarity with the subject misses what is taken for granted, while a distant position restrains an emic understanding of the subject. It should be kept in mind that tension between knowing and not knowing creates a researcher’s position suitable for a particular research question, and contributes to a more strategic coherence.

By the same token, credibility is yet another area in which qualitative research is often criticized in the field of second language acquisition. Davis (1995) suggests that researchers should provide thick descriptions that allow readers to critically examine the research findings. In other words, detailed and thorough descriptions are needed to identify in a sophisticated way how people achieve an understanding of a certain thing. It is of vital importance not only to delve into the assumptions that made by the subjects but also to scrutinize underlying themes that bridge the contradiction of the surface phenomena. According to this reasoning, researchers can gain credibility in their findings.

The most difficult part in my research was to break down my own assumptions that I had made concerning teaching English as a Second Language. When I began my research, I was inclined to

believe that American culture should be predominant in the classroom. Had I maintained this point of view, I would have limited my scope on language learning and my observational data. As Daniels (1993) states, "the value of the data collected will depend on the researcher's ability to see the world through the natives' eyes and from their perspectives" (p. 197). Therefore, it is important to perceive ambiguity that makes me feel, true to life, frustrated, yet, that leads me to sense the new hermeneutics of reality while carrying on the process of qualitative research.

Learning Language and Culture

The object of this English class at this time was to help immigrants to communicate in English. As one would expect, the teacher, Jessica, wanted her students to "learn proper English, which meant using the correct grammar, even if they sometimes made mistakes in grammar." In addition, she engaged in "making them acquainted with many aspects of American life, history, daily life, holidays, culture, geography." This aim was reflected in how she decorated the classroom, in which there were some pictures and maps that convey what she thought of "America," which was most clearly exemplified by a dozen of pictures showing national parks in the U.S. on the wall. Jessica obviously thought that to be familiar with American life was "particularly important for those who are immigrants, who will spend the rest of their lives in this country and have their children and future generations living in this country" because the immigrants "need to know their environment and become comfortable with it." She also mentioned that an extensive intergenerational gap between family members occurred when her students could not understand English while their grandchildren rapidly acquired English proficiency at school. This was why Jessica emphasized conversational practice as well as grammar exercises in the classroom.

In the lessons she usually used a daily local newspaper, a grammar textbook, and a biographical textbook that described historical figures who contributed to American society. This class lasted for two hours. Sometimes the number of students was four or five, and at other times the number was seven. Although the class members were not fixed at all, there were certain students who regularly attended the classes. All students whom I observed appeared to be motivated and diligent; they usually did the assignments. Typically in the first half of the time, Jessica brought some current issues in politics, economics, and culture, and facilitated the conversation among the students without forcing the argument. She had a lesson plan in her mind, but she liked to be flexible. Then in the second half, she let the students do some exercises in grammar and read a historical text.

During my participation in the classes, I attempted to understand how the students come to understand American culture and the proper use of the English language. What stood out in my observational notes was the misuse and misunderstanding of English words or phrases by the students. By looking at errors that the students made, a couple of themes emerged in regard to successful language acquisition. At first glance, the misuse of English words by the students revealed their perceptions of reality restricted by their lack of competence in English. A prime example, one day Christopher and Nicole (who were a married couple from Hungary) excused themselves to Jessica, saying that "we were waiting at a bus station, but the bus came late." In response to this excuse, Jessica corrected their use of the language, saying that "you were not waiting at a bus station. It is a bus stop. A bus station is much

bigger.” Jessica knew where Christopher and Nicole lived and thought that it was incorrect to use a bus station to indicate the site where they caught a bus. If Christopher and Nicole had had a clear image of a bus station like the Greyhound bus station in Lake City, they would not have used the term ‘bus station’ to indicate where they customarily caught the bus. Above all, concrete images of what a word or phrase represents ended up being very significant in understanding English. Without correctly associating the word with what it signifies in reality, people are likely to be misunderstood.

Similarly, there was an instance when one of the language learners failed to understand the meaning of the word by sticking only to a part of the word whose meaning he could easily understand and thus did not get the picture. One day the students were reading Paul Revere’s famous midnight ride during the American Revolutionary War in 1775 and the Sons of Liberty which “was a secret group of Boston patriots, formed sometime earlier to keep a close watch on everything the British did”(Dixson & Fox, 1987, pp. 7–8). Daniel, a young Puerto Rican, asked Jessica a question after Rachel, who was an elderly Russian woman, finished reading a couple of paragraphs in the textbook, including the following sentence: “The Sons of Liberty obtained information from servants of the British officers or through special sources planted throughout Boston” (Dixson & Fox, 1987, p. 8).

Daniel tried to elucidate his question: “I have a question. Throughout is a ...out.” “Everywhere,” answered Jessica. “Out of Boston?” asked Daniel. “No. Everywhere in Boston,” answered Jessica. “Throughout?” asked Daniel again. “Each building has central heating. There is heat throughout each building,” explained Jessica.

Daniel kept thinking that “throughout” had something to do with “out,” so at first he thought that this word was somewhere outside a place or had some meanings close to “out.” His question was interesting because his reaction was not unusual. When language learners do not know a word, they can attempt to guess the meaning by dividing the word into prefix, root, and suffix. Jessica mentioned this technique in class.

Jessica explained, “You have heard about seven babies? Septuplets. In the state of Iowa, this woman had seven babies. Septuplets. This part means seven,” said Jessica. She wrote down the word, ‘septuplets,’ and pointed to the prefix ‘sept.’

In this scene Jessica took for granted that the word “septuplets” was divided into two parts; and the students could readily guess the meaning of the word primarily by understanding a part of it. Conversely, in Daniel’s case, Jessica thought that the word “throughout” was one word and inseparable. At least, she did not explain why “out” did not constitute the meaning of “throughout” while she did emphasize that “sept” was a prefix in defining “septuplets.” A teacher constantly makes value judgments regarding whether the details of a word should or should not be explained in class, and this decision affects the ways in which language learners learn a more precise usage of English.

Yet, another point, student’s native language also influences the understanding of English words or expressions. An incorrect association with the expression of one’s native language sometimes generates an unexpected utterance, which implies how the cultural framework of one’s native language interferes

with generating English words. For example, when Joseph, who was an elderly Russian, talked about his ancestors, he related: "My ancestors were blacksmiths, and they served for the sultan, and they opened the secret." Jessica corrected the mistake; she said that he should say, "tell the secret," not "open the secret" in English. Jessica seemed to know that Joseph literally translated the expression from the Russian language, so she wrote down "opened the secret → told the secret" on the blackboard. Invariably, the expression in the student's native language did not parallel the English counterpart to create a similar awareness.

Likewise, the individual students sometimes have distinctly different images of the English words or phrases. I had a chance to observe that the students had a hard time in understanding the word because of their own distinguishing image that was associated with it, which was the opposite of the image that they were supposed to have:

Jessica asked the student a question: "A person who is bubbly...bubble...when you pour a coke, the air comes off. These are the bubbles. When we describe a person, oh. This person is bubbly, this person is what?" "Empty," answered David. The two other students also said the same thing. "Empty? No. We would say that person is an airhead," confirmed Jessica. And she continued: "Happy, very talkative, very active. A bubbly person. The person who is empty, we would say that person is an airhead."

It was difficult for the students to associate bubbles with happiness or liveliness. Instead, they thought that bubbles evoked the image of emptiness. The students' reaction to the word 'bubbles' was very interesting, and the image that they had in mind led to the misunderstanding of the word. The misunderstanding of the images of the idiom sheds a new light on how the students learn English.

For language teachers to notice the students' failure to understand the words, phrases, and idioms is a good chance to examine what they take for granted in teaching English as a Second Language. The teacher's decision as to whether taken-for-granted knowledge should be made explicit or not is very critical (Bowers & Flinders, 1991, p. 11). To be sure, a shared common understanding makes it possible for people to communicate smoothly, yet for immigrants who study English, shared understanding of the language is not taken for granted. Therefore, misuse and misunderstanding provide teachers with a unique opportunity to examine how they can elaborate on some aspects of American culture in relation to language learning.

However, certain English expressions are sometimes easier to visualize and remember because similar expressions exist in the student's native language. For example:

Jessica asked the question, "How about yesterday's weather? How do you describe yesterday's weather?" "It was raining cats and dogs," said Sara who sat next to Amanda, both of whom were elderly Russian women. "That's right. Is there another expression?" asked Jessica. Nobody came up with another expression, so Jessica said, "It was raining buckets." As soon as Amanda heard this expression, she whispered, "It is the same in Russian."

There must be the same kind of expression in Russian, and Amanda immediately associated the English

expression with a Russian idiom that must have had the same sort of a visual image provoked by “it was raining buckets.”

There is an occasion in which I, who am a native speaker of Japanese, instantly came up with the images that are associated with a certain expression, which is “face-saving.” One day Jessica explained what was happening in the United Nations:

Jessica explained: “Clinton said, ‘Saddam Hussein cannot tell us how many people from what nations. We make a decision in the United Nations.’ But they think Saddam Hussein does not want a war, and he said this for face-saving.”

Because the English expression “face-saving” is easily remembered and visualized as there is a similar expression in Japanese, the meaning behind this expression is easily understood. I associated this idiom with the image of a person who apologizes, bending his or her knees on the floor or of a person who quits a job for his or her mistakes in the company, or as an extreme case, of a warrior who cuts his belly with a short sword to take full responsibility for his mistake. Clearly, this idiom evokes rich images for me. Since all the students in the class that I observed had different cultural backgrounds from Americans, they learned the English words from their own unique perspectives, often interpreting the words and phrases in light of their previous experience and perception. The crucial issue is that the rich images of the English phrases are evoked by the association with the student’s native language while at other times the unflinching interference of the student’s first language leads to the misunderstanding of the phrases.

It cannot be overstated that visualization of the English words is very important in teaching English as a Second Language because that makes it easier to understand the concepts of the words and phrases. Since Jessica is good at drawing pictures, she sometimes explains a word with a graphic depiction. It can be assumed that historical imagery within a culture has been relegated to a secondary position next to text. As Fleckernstein (1996) states, the use of imagery “as a functional part of conceptualizing common-sense reality was ... marginalized” (p. 91). In teaching English as a Second Language, imagery is as meaningful as text: it really helps the students understand the concepts of the words, phrases, and idioms. Jessica explained that “one of the functions of teachers is to explain what image is in the idiom.” In the same vein, Bohlken (1996) claims that when the students associate images with the referents in reality, “they get involved in the message and in applying the concept to the current context” (p. 219).

It is interesting to note that certain idiomatic expressions utilize images that come from the American cultural and social common phenomena in order to make the English language more “colorful.” In examining this point, without knowing the daily lives of Americans, it is sometimes difficult to understand these expressions. Jessica gave me an example in the interview: “We have the idiom ‘to keep abreast.’” I think this is coming from horsemen, people who ride horses. And the horses stay on about the same line. If you don’t understand this background, you don’t understand this idiom.” Therefore, it is important for immigrant students to “learn this common American background in order to understand certain idioms,” because they come from countries whose cultures are somehow different from that of the United States. Of course, all of the English idioms cannot be associated with American daily life,

but what a teacher has to keep in mind is that it is a teacher's responsibility to accurately deliver the images of certain idiomatic expressions, and, if necessary, to correct the wrong images that may be caused by the interference of one's native language.

How can the immigrant students learn the common American culture? Components of the American culture reside in daily life as concrete forms, not in an abstract fashion. Jessica believes that to be acquainted with American culture one starts with "very basic things like shopping habits or daily routines." In this regard, it is good to bring in the newspaper and to discuss the current issues of American society. Jessica suggests that it is a good idea for the students to "look through those advertisements and look at coupons, how to use these brochures, and how to use coupons."

Certain idiomatic expressions are associated with the images derived from the American scenes or traditions, and these expressions consist of interesting areas in which the students from different cultural backgrounds are motivated to study English. Jessica furnished me with one example that had something to do with a cowboy:

He is the kind of person who will die in the saddle. It is a typical American image. The horseback rider, the cowboy sitting on the horse in the saddle. It means...not that person was killed when he was riding, but it means it is somebody who will work until he dies.

Unless a teacher explicitly explains the connotation of the phrases, it is very hard to understand the correct meaning of them because "in the saddle" hardly provokes the image of a cowboy right away for many immigrant students.

It is of vital importance for teachers to make a bridge between the culture of school that governs and nurtures students and the culture with which students are familiar at home when students are immigrant children (Schmidt, 1998). In this respect, in the classes which I observed, the students were encouraged to share their customs and tradition with other students, in which there was not the atmosphere that restricted the appreciation of different cultural values. In brief, Jessica succeeded in creating the locus where differing cultural knowledge and experience were equally valued. For example, Jessica talked about a typical American holiday in the way that allowed the students to mention their own comparative views on the holiday:

She asked everyone who Valentine was. Kevin, an old Russian man, said, "He is a saint." "Yes. When I came to the United States in 1966, St. Valentine's Day was nothing. Nowadays, companies try to sell cards, chocolates and other goods on that day. They try to make St. Valentine's Day bigger and bigger," explained Jessica. "Is this a religious day?" asked Alexandra, an old Russian woman. "No, it is a business day," replied Kevin. Nicole, an old Hungarian woman sitting next to me said, "Christmas Day becomes bigger and bigger business day. In Hungary boys give a pin to girls that they like in February. It is called little marriage. When a girl is popular, she can get a lot of pins."

It is an enriching experience for both a teacher and students to compare two or more cultures because the students can have a chance to relate perspectives about their own historical and cultural background

as well as on American culture when they learn English. When each contributed his or her reaction, Jessica thought that this kind of experience was critical in deepening the fundamental understanding of American culture. She stated in the interview as follows:

Once the students can read a little bit the newspaper, for example, they see what is happening here, and in their minds they compare. They say this is better, or this is worse. You know, freedom here is wonderful. Or no, this is too much freedom. I think it definitely creates some critical thinking when they are able to compare, knowing two cultures. And they can only know the culture through the language.

Conclusion

Language learning is potentially the most important means to understand culture, and it is often the case that the dominant culture of American society, implicitly and explicitly, permeates the classroom. The students in these classes, by contrast, tend to judge the issues in the context of where they formed their own value system partly because of their age but mainly because of how the teacher conducts the lessons. When teachers instruct English to immigrant students, they have to be aware of comparative perspectives that each brings to their classroom according to age, gender, and indeed outlook, which would result in an enriching experience for all of the participants in the classroom.

Undeniably, however various, the dynamics of the larger framework of the American culture can be bridged beyond the initial exposure to the grocery store and fast-food imagery of everyday life. Such abstracts as freedom, democracy, and social issues require syntax and would inspire a community of ideas conveyed in oral or written form. This means that in order for the students not to be entirely tied to the literal meanings of words, the classroom should explore ways to extract an index of feeling by encouraging students to study lists of vocabulary dealing with words denoting and connoting outstanding values and qualities. By giving special emphasis to the border potential between the concrete visualization process in both old and new languages, one is more successful in responding to practical thoughts, but it is of value to learn about theoretical premises in both languages. In sum, cultural artifacts attract attention, but the domestic frame of reference, at times, should embrace more scholarly principles because of the interplay of each immigrant's consciousness, which carries on an inner dialogue. Consequently, for future research, overlapping verbal and visual territories should be explored.

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