

RESEARCH ARTICLE / ARAŞTIRMA MAKALESİ

Cultural sensitivity as a critical prerequisite of a good conversation

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Abstract

The paper features cultural sensitivity as a central, if not a critical, factor of a communicative practice. Diverse behavioral strategies either strengthen or ruin the joy and pleasure of a friendly banter, business meeting or social convention. The purpose and scope of the research deal with raising awareness of the fact that interlocutors' "soft skills" are no substitute for technical know-how, and that without that knowledge people have little chance to be acknowledged in any societal setting. It is important to recognize that behavior makes sense through the eyes of the person behaving and that logic and rationale are culturally explained. The contrastive conceptual analysis comes into play and explains cultural conversations, as far as envisages symbolic meanings of basic interpretative approaches to deciphering cultural constructs. Transdisciplinary research fields uniting cognitive linguistics, linguistic psychology, and cross-cultural communication, enhance value awareness and value systems of particular culture codes. Culturally induced typical conversational strategies are under closer observation. Being well noticeable and self-evident, cultural differences manifest themselves in every facet of discourse. Findings of the research are being proven by a combination of factors, such as age and gender, social status, and respect of seniority in the particular society. The elicited and verified factors govern the mode in which the conversation develops. It is sufficed to confirm the fact that participants from different cultures may encounter troubles and misconception of daily conversational interactions and routine colloquial exchanges. Such constituent elements as turn-taking during the speech act or established sense of hierarchy in some cultures, keeping silence or touching may produce frustration and embarrassment for representative of another culture. Language and culture are opposite sides of the coin. In many cases a conversation is a conflict, but it is often a mutual collaboration of people seeking the same goal: "to make everyone feel happy or satisfied at the end of it" (Crystal, 2020: 192).

Keywords: Cultural sensitivity, communicative practice, conversational interactions.

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Learning a foreign language is problematic for learners because they are, as a rule, in a deficit position. As V. LoCastro mentioned, “It is necessary to change attitude towards acceptance of difference and diversity, because it requires awareness and understanding of intercultural communication so that styles and strategies of enactments and communication of pragmatic meaning become a part of everyday life” (LoCastro, 2011: 319). As far as the language learning process must be contextualized both socially and psychologically, communication implies that there is now more emphasis on exposure and use of the target language through situational dialogues and practice (Grenfell, 2000:4). At the same time there is also a growing interest in moving away from language learning alone toward learning to learn languages just as there is a growing interest in moving beyond “language learning” towards “languaging” (Phipps and Gonzalez, 2004) wherein the purpose of learning and using a language is not an objective in itself – language is seen as a material part of the student’s life. Taking all this in consideration, we are asking a question “Are there any clear-cut methods to follow to reach cultural sensitivity and become a good conversationalist?”

It would be fair enough to emphasize that currently scholars argue that language teachers are experiencing a so called “post methods era” (Dooley, 2008: 2). Different language teaching and learning approaches often overlap, exacerbated by the fact that there seem to be so many diverse notions and definitions of what it means to “know a language”. There are some common strands emerging, however. It is increasingly common to hear voices clamouring for the need to understand the language learning process within its socially pragmatic frames.

It goes without saying, that language learning is situated and socially gated. It begins at the micro level of social activity. Social interactions are characterized by joint actions that are dependent on intersubjective or shared cognition, that is, a human being’s recognition that can share beliefs and intentions with other humans (Clark, 1996). The scope of these contexts can be wide-ranging

and includes every day, informal contexts of interaction, such as ad hoc conversations, text messaging, online game-playing, as well as more formal contexts such as those comprising Foreign Language classrooms where students are instructed, and informed: they discuss, solve problems, and so on.

We are formulating General research questions as the following ones: “How to teach students to acquire a new language and to develop their cognitive skills that will provide them with a needed intuition and cultural sensitivity?”; “What theory can propose instruction, and how to design and best facilitate the learners’ cultural journey?”, “What types of teaching methodologies, strategies and techniques contribute best to construct learning, identity, intuitions and retention of culturally-induced information?”

In terms of academic literacy skills, it is important to focus on communication success and ways to explain it. Understanding of learning, teaching and using a foreign language pragmatics, studying interactions in naturalistic, real-life encounters is a basic requirement for progress. Generally saying, pragmatics is grounded in the language use seeking to explain how communication functions through linguistic forms. Moreover, L2 pragmatics specializes in a variety of linguistic and non-linguistic enactments across different cultures to make meaning.

Clark argued that cognitive linguistics does not assume that “a specific language module exists in the mind: there is no autonomous cognitive facility”. Language is regarded as a part of “interlocking networks of knowledge, including social and pragmatic knowledge” (Clark 2008: 259).

David Crystal, a renowned and notoriously famous linguist, writer, editor, and broadcaster, explores in one of his latest books “Let’s Talk” the factors that make possible to produce different kinds of talk and put a strong emphasis on the rules speakers use unconsciously in their conversations. Speaking in a mother tongue, people think of conversation as spontaneous,

instinctive, or habitual. Crystal describes the rules of conversational constructs, shows how they work, and how people can manipulate with them when circumstances warrant it.

So, the point is: how to strengthen soft skills to be able to play conversational games and remain on a strain of interlocutors' principles and priorities, how to be efficient in articulating ideas and delivering them in an appropriate and rational way that is up to everyone's cultural understanding and a mental picture constraint. There is a trend in cognitive linguistics to combine various quantitative and qualitative methodologies as, for instance, discourse analysis and corpus studies with socio-cultural theory, in order "to explore the ways in which the systematic study of natural language usage can provide insights not only into the nature and specific organization of linguistic system, but also the interplay between linguistic, cognitive, and cultural phenomena" (Mittelberg, Farmer & Waugh, 2007: 19).

Therefore, cognitive linguistics takes more often a functional perspective on communication and language use. The Culture Code is the unconscious meaning we apply to any given thing. Therefore, the codes – the meanings we give at an unconscious level – are different as well. They all come down to the worlds in which we grew up. What most people don't realize is that these differences actually lead to our processing the same information in different way. Revelations of the codes lead people to a new understanding of behavior, how it contrasts with behavior in other cultures, and what these differences mean for all of us. Once you know the codes, nothing will ever look the same again.

In these usage events unfolding at the micro level of social activity, the semiotic resources are afforded for language learners, as novice communicators, to appropriate, recycle, and expand in contextually adaptive ways, as they co-construct meaning. Such contextually adaptive ways ideally serve language development, and positive outcomes can be expected given average conditions of health and social and emotional well-being.

Teaching the University students a Japanese culture, we teach the sort of things that businessmen should avoid in order not to give offense in a country, and what they should to give a better impression. There is a strong feeling of saving face in Japan. For instance, they never say 'No'; they will find a lot of different ways to say 'Yes', but it does not mean 'Yes, we agreed to your terms'; it means 'Yes, we hear what you are saying'. They just do not like to upset people by saying 'No'.

Another amazing cultural difference is establishable and easily recognized. It concerns a so called 'turn-taking' in a seniority and hierarchy respectful Japanese culture, that governs the way in which the conversation proceeds, and participants from a different culture may have trouble identifying the different roles.

According to D. Crystal's reminiscence of visiting a bookstore for a talk and a book-signing, he found himself after the event in a side room for drinking tea in a complete silence. He was accompanied by a bunch of people, namely, the sales assistant who had been looking after him, the head of the department in which his books were located, the bookstore manager, and the bookstore owner.

Experiencing discomfort during a tea drinking session, D. Crystal broke the silence and asked the sales assistant how many books they sold that day. To his bigger surprise, the assistant, the manager, and the owner looked embarrassed, they were bowing to each other turn by turn and giving 'nice little speeches', and finally, supplied the author with the details.

So, the situational context in question taught the author the conversational hierarchy and the important role of silence.

Silence plays a much larger role in Japanese society than in many other countries: people are a lot more indirect in a high-context culture, care more about others' feelings and are much more willing to tell a white lie. There is less reliance on words and more on non-verbal means of communication. Silence in Japanese culture is not just the absence of words or speech – it's a skill.

It communicates many truths. Silence is seen as a virtue. Holding your tongue, repressing emotions, etc. all work together to give a sense of the divine. Silence, therefore, shows you have some sense of manners.

As one of the commentators of the Japanese culture testified, "The Japanese have the wonderful ability to enjoy the company of friends in silence as well as sound. In fact, they sometimes seem to be able to communicate far richer meaning with a pause than with a word... It is equally necessary to learn the rhythms and pauses of the culture in order to achieve the proper timing to contribute to the calm surface effect. This timing, or utilization of the effective pause, is called *ma*" (Crystal, 2021. P. 150).

Having said all that, we may conclude that silence is a linguistic resource to signal pragmatic interference in interactional contexts. Many stereotypes or myths are being discussed while taking into account how Japanese students respond to American or Australian teachers. The findings pointed to the use of silence by the Japanese participants as a face-saving strategy for the speaker, whereas the Australian informants used speech to deal with face-threatening situations such as not knowing the answers to the questions posed by teachers.

Nakane (2006) notes that in Japanese educational system the lack of response is unmarked, and off-record strategy. Other cultural contexts may perceive a lack of response as "rude" and "impolite" (Nakane 2006: 1832).

Topic choice is another culture-sensitive aspect of cross-cultural communication. What to talk about and what not to talk about. There is a top five topics: politics, money, religion, race, and sex which no one should tap on in the conversation. Just a well-known ice-breaking question is to enquire about each other's family. *Do you have children? How old are they?* At the same time these questions would not be appropriate to ask in China, which introduced a one-child policy in 1979.

Another example: the weather is a common and the safest opening of a conversation in English-speaking countries. Other options cover finding

a parking spot, getting through airport security, local food, and drink. When someone in the US asks a question *'What do you do?'*, Americans could offer any number of answers, but the question really means *'What job do you do?'* and the only expected answer involves your work and enables us to size someone up, as well as providing a worth of small talk. Such questions might be viewed as uncomfortable topics in some European countries, such as Italy, Germany, or France. Some Europeans might be baffled by the fact when they know that people have made enough money to keep themselves comfortable the rest of their life. So, the concept of continuing at one's job because one loves one's work is unfathomable. Europeans usually take six weeks of vacation every year. In the US two weeks is a norm. The question is *'How Americans imprinted a very different approach to work and what it meant to them at an unconscious level?'*

Dr. Clotaire Rapaille, internationally revered cultural anthropologist and marketing expert, the chairman of Archtype Discoveries Worldwide and a personal adviser to ten high-ranking CEOs argues in his national bestseller *'The Culture Code'* "Work could make you feel that you were like a queen, that you were on the map, or that you had arrived; work could make you feel that it was all you did; if you lost your work, you could feel that you had nothing" (Rapaille, 2007: 115). In other words, for Americans, work was not simply something you did to make a living or because you had to do it. Even if you did not like your work, it had a much more powerful dimension, a life-defining dimension.

The American Culture Code for work is WHO YOU ARE. Americans very strongly believe that they are what they do in their jobs. Why are unemployed people often depressed by the loss of their jobs? Because they are unsure of how they will pay the bills? Certainly, at a deeper level, though, it is because they believe that if they are 'doing' nothing, then they are nobodies.

If the work means "who we are", then it is perfectly understandable that we seek so much meaning in our jobs. If our jobs feel meaningless, then "who we are" is meaningless as well. If we feel inspired, if we believe that our jobs have

genuine value to the company we work for (even if that “company” is ourselves) and that we are doing something worthwhile in our work, that belief bolsters our sense of identity. This is perhaps the most fundamental reason why it is important for employers to keep their employees content and motivated. A company operated by people with a negative sense of identity can’t possibly run well.

Ritz-Carlton does an excellent job of giving its staff a positive sense of who they are. The company calls its employees “ladies and gentlemen serving ladies and gentlemen.” Their goal is to give their guests the best hotel experience of their lives, and their employees’ job is to provide that experience. Ritz-Carlton understands that if they want to create a culture of sophistication for their guests, they need to do the same for those who work there. They treat their staff like adults and give them a strong sense of empowerment. If a cleaning person encounters a guest with a problem and the guest complains to her, that cleaning person has the power to improve his experience by giving him a free meal or even a free night in a room. This gives the cleaning person a strong sense of motivation, the belief that she is part of the corporate mission. It is much easier to treat the guests like “ladies and gentlemen” when you are treated like a lady or a gentleman yourself. Ritz-Carlton employees tend to be very loyal and very proud of what they do.

Americans consider their work ethic so strong due to the fact that at the unconscious level, they equate work with *who they are* and they believe that if they work hard and improve their professional standing, they become better people. It is possible to be happy doing the same job for thirty years, but only if that job provides consistent new challenges. Otherwise, we think of ourselves as “stuck in a rut” or “going nowhere” (Rapaille, 2006: 118).

Americans are always seeking the next promotion, the next opportunity, the next chance for something big. Moreover, the sense that they are moving toward something more glamorous is very much on Code. On the other hand, those who fail to act, who accept the limitations of their

work with barely a grumble, are likely to feel miserable about their lives. But deep down, Americans believe that they never have to be stuck in what you do. Self-reinvention is definitely on Code. Americans champion entrepreneurs because they are our most aggressive identity-seekers.

This study was based on inclusive approach to learning and teaching that tries to fulfill the unique learning needs of each individual student to acquire a foreign language intricacies. The diversity Pedagogy Theory and transdisciplinary approaches contended that there is a natural and inseparable connection between culture and cognition. In the context of the study, the specific association of cultural sensitivity was explored.

Moreover, the framework is supported by the Social Learning Theory. This theory stressed that an individual learns from interaction with other people in a social context. The theory is important because students have to adapt or accept the culture of others to prevent barriers from one another and could therefore reach a higher cultural sensitivity.

The present study endeavored to determine the cultural sensitivity and classroom management of teachers. Findings revealed that both teachers and students have high level of ability to assess and evaluate other cultures. They also are able to reach a high level of cultural competence in terms of message skills; intercultural management; behavioral flexibility; identity management, and relationship cultivation.

The results strengthen the suggestion that an effective cross-cultural communicator should be able to adapt to “new social conventions and behavior demands”.

Another revelation is: awareness of the impact culture has in shaping students’ behavior is a critical part of emotional intelligence. These two constructs are interrelated to one another.

Conclusions and recommendations may be formulated as follows:

- The results revealed that students could demonstrate high level of ability to assess and

consider other cultures (Class activities create a positive climate within which effective teaching and learning can occur).

- While this study is focused on a multicultural context, future studies should be conducted to further understand the cultural sensitivity and classroom management of teachers across levels.
- Conversation refers to behavior, to the way people conduct themselves in daily life, and describes a regular social occasion where people meet to talk about things.

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