

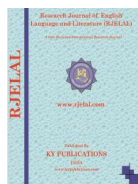


## THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LANGUAGE, CULTURE AND IDENTITY AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR LANGUAGE TEACHING

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### Abstract

The use of the English language is increasing in popularity and importance worldwide, in all fields of study, whether it is humanities, science or social sciences. Following that, the emergence of learning and mastering English shows itself in the English learning communities in Vietnam. The difference between learning and mastering any language is the awareness of the cultural values and social context within which the language is used, as well as the relationship between the language and its users. These three factors: language, culture and identity, are even more crucial in the English learning communities, since this language is shared among multiple countries and cultures. The problem is, many English learners in Vietnam do not realize this and thus, fail to integrate culture and identity into their use of language. Therefore, this paper aims to (1) explore and describe the interrelationships between language, culture and identity, (2) investigate the use of English in intercultural communication, and (3) provide recommendations on language learning in ensuring a meaningful and effective use of English in students' learning outcomes.

Keywords: Language, culture, identity, communication, relationship, learners

### I. INTRODUCTION

Language is one of the most wonderful products created by human. It allows messages to be exchanged, and thus, brings people together. However, the use of English can be problematic due to various reasons. Particularly, factors such as one's belief system, culture or background would interfere with the way language is used and understood, even more so if the communicators do not share the same mother tongue. Therefore, those who want to be competent in a foreign language must not only pay attention to words, phrases, grammar rules, but they need to focus on other fields relevant to language as well, namely, "culture" and "identity". These are the three inseparable facets of a language learner.

Unfortunately, not many language learners recognize this relationship. That's why they fail to achieve their ultimate goal which is natural and effective communication. As an educator, who has been in the field of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) for nearly thirty years, the author realized the emergence of teaching and emphasizing the relationship between language, especially English, competence, and cultural background to English learners in the Vietnamese community. I choose this topic for my project paper to study hoping that I can help my students see one key point which is language skills and/or competence must go hand-in-hand with cultural backgrounds so that they could use the language effectively, correctly and appropriately. Besides, another reason which urges me to choose this topic

is that although English has long been considered one of the most important foreign languages in Viet Nam and it is included in the national education program as well as considered an evaluation criteria of academic titles, only a few has managed to master it. Hence, this is a chance for me to study and find out a solution to improve the situation. And this study would benefit the proportionally increasing population of English learners in Vietnam.

This paper will investigate the three facets of language learning, including, “language”, “culture”, and “identity”, as well as how they are related. During that process implications for language teaching will come between the discussions in the paper to make the matter clearer. Then language policy is discussed. The essay will also present the Sapir – Whorf hypothesis and some other relevant concepts to the basis for the discussion and lastly section 3 and 4 will serve as recommendations and a conclusion.

## **II. LITERATURE REVIEW AND DISCUSSION**

### **1. Language**

To begin with, in order to examine the concept of language and its relation to culture and identity, the author has looked at Lee (2003)’s definition of language which stated:

Language is the system of communication comprising codes and symbols which is used by humans to store, retrieve, organize, structure and communicate knowledge and experience. Language is not a static process. It is the primary instrument in the expression, transmission, and adaptation of culture. Language is used to maintain one’s own culture and to acquire a new culture and new knowledge.

Indeed, anyone who learns a new language must, at the same time, learns a new culture, too. Matsumoto & Juang (2008) has also mentioned that “language is a major feature of culture: language is the embodiment of culture and culture influences language use”. In other words, language is one of the most important factors of a culture; it is a part of culture besides the other factors such as the belief system, music, clothing, the arts and so on; culture is included in each language and every language has the cultural beauty of its own. Another wonderful

definition about language is that of Diamond (1993) who considered language as the culmination of thousands of years of a people’s experience and wisdom.

### **2. Culture**

In those above concepts of language we can see culture silhouetted against the language so the following definitions will shed light on the concept of what culture is.

Goodenough (1957, p. 167) said that “a society’s culture consists of whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members, and to do so in any role that they accept for anyone of themselves.”. Or according to Rai and Panna (2010, p. 8), “Culture is knowledge about humanity which is learned and acquired but not natural” Culture is also defined as follows by Singer (1998, p. 5):

A pattern of learned, group – related perceptions – including both verbal and nonverbal language, attitudes, values, belief systems and behaviors that is accepted by an identity group.

Through the above concepts of language and culture, we can clearly see that language and culture do have such a close relationship that “you cannot understand or appreciate the one without a knowledge of the other” (Wardhaugh, 2010, p.230). So in order to be competent in a foreign language, we need to attain both the understanding of the language itself and the understanding of cultural knowledge in the context of that language. For example, Vietnamese tend to lead a mutual relationship in their daily activities due to being affected by water-rice agricultural culture, that’s why a very common way of starting a conversation by Vietnamese is expressed through some questions such as: “Have you eaten dinner yet?” or “Where are you going?” or “What are you doing?”... This is a habit of greeting in which the speaker doesn’t really mean to ask or need an answer; and also the person who is asked may or may not answer these questions. This habit reveals a cultural feature of the way Vietnamese interact among themselves, which is quite different from other Western societies, within which greetings may stop at merely “hello” or “good morning/afternoon/evening”. Those who are

not familiar with this custom may find it strange to have such a greeting. Without the knowledge and understanding of other people and their culture, language learners may be led to misunderstanding and miscommunication, which may worsen and put them in a preposterous situation. Therefore, language teachers have a vital role in imparting the cultural and social aspects to their students' learning, helping them become aware that thoroughly understanding these aspects would not only bring more confidence to their application of the foreign language, but also help them use it effectively and appropriately.

### **3. Identity**

In addition, the use of language extends beyond its relationship with the cultural context, to form a bidirectional connection with the language user's identity. Specially, one's identity is largely shaped by their origin, culture and tradition. And since "Language is rooted in culture and culture is reflected and passed on by language from one generation to the next" (Emmitt and Pollock, 1997), it is inevitable that language and identity also influence each other. In reality, language does help culture to be passed from generation to generation. Vice versa, culture affects the way one uses language and eventually, forms one's own identity. Take the Vietnamese lullabies as an example. Despite the decreased practice of this tradition in the urban settings, for centuries, folk lullabies, carrying the cultural and historical values of Vietnamese people, have been sung to young children. Eventually, the lyrics are memorized, the language is internalized, and the values are applied to one's life and an identity is established. Here language is something like a boat carrying culture to each individual who then partly bases on these cultural features and exposes their identities through their language use. Through the language use, people will know where they come from, what their level of education is, or what social class or profession they belong to; even culture, religion also bare themselves through language use, so identity is another factor having the relationship with language since "through our use of language, we not only display who we are, but also how we want people to see us" (Paltridge, 2006, p. 1).

There are many definitions about identity, one of which is "Identity is people's concepts of who they are, of what sort of people they are, and how they relate to others" (Hogg and Abrams, 1988, 2, as cited in Jamaluddin, 2008), or Deng (1995) described identity as "the way individuals and groups define themselves and are defined by others on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, language, and culture"

By looking at the language and communication through linguistic diversities and cultural lenses, we can easily see the differences among people in a community where there are many types of identities. Paltridge (2006, p.38) stated that:

A person may have a number of identities, each of which is more important at different points in time. They may have an identity as a woman, an identity as a mother, an identity as someone's partner and an identity as an office worker, for example. The ways in which people display their identities includes the way they use language. Identity is not something that is fixed and remains the same throughout a person's life. It is constantly constructed and reconstructed as people interact with each other.

What is mentioned above by Paltridge is a very important view point that any language teacher has to take into consideration because language would certainly affect the identity of all language users, and even more so for bilingual or multilingual people. Students should be well instructed and well explained on how and when to use the appropriate language so as to suit their desired identity in a given situation, as well as to not undermine their identity; For example, our words choice can reveal our age or ranking in any system. It is clear that the words used by teenagers who always tend to create neologisms are quite different from what used by the older generation; or different people of different social status choose their own language style to maintain their identities. Wardhaugh (2010, p.88) proved this by stating that "traditionally, in each country the high variety has been associated with an elite and the low variety with everyone else. Diglossia

reinforces social distinctions. It is used to assert social position and to keep people in their place”

#### 4. Sapir Whorf Hypothesis

In order for an individual to portray their desired or wanted identity to their interlocutors in both aspects of meaning and expression, people must choose and combine different words, structures, with a specified grammar. However, such process is easier said than done, especially when the language used is not their mother tongue, because “people who speak different languages perceive and think about the world quite differently” (Chandler,1955a). This phenomenon is further explained and discussed in Sapir-Whorf hypothesis by Sapir (1956) as follow:

... the real world is to a large extent built up on the language habits of the group. We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation. The words in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached.

Sapir – Whorf hypothesis has also been described by Chandler (1995a) as to consist of two associated principles: linguistic determinism, our thinking is determined by language; and linguistic relativity, people who speak different languages perceive and think about the world quite differently. This first and second principle of the hypothesis is obviously manifested through the conception about colors in different countries of different cultures. For example, Viet Nam has been under the rule of monarchy so Vietnamese venerate yellow since it is the color of royalty. Asians like red for it symbolizes good luck, happiness, success so on wedding days the brides wear red while the brides in the west wear white cause they consider white as the purity of the brides. Another example for the second principle of the hypothesis is that Viet Nam is one of the first cradles and home of rice in South East Asia. Throughout history, the rice and its products are valuable things to Vietnamese so all the good feelings, the way of thinking of Vietnamese carry a unique imprint from rice, this represent a range of vocabulary to talk about or related to paddy rice.

Other languages such as English, French, ... don't have many words to express this. In English there is only one word to express “rice”, while in Vietnamese, there are different words to talk about or related to “rice” according to its growth and use such as: thóc (unhusked rice), lúa (rice, paddy), gạo, cơm, xôi (steamed glutinous rice), nếp (glutinous rice), tằm (broken rice) ...

Because people don't have the same experience and also they don't perceive the world in exactly the same way, they certainly cannot understand each other well so another important factor that language teachers and language learners have to be constantly concerned with is cross – culture or intercultural communication. Ron, Suzanne & Rodney (2012) stated that “When we think of Intercultural Communication, we think of two people from two different countries such as China and the United States communicating with each other and proceed to search for problems in their communication as a result of their different nationalities”. Intercultural communication can also be understood in the way of Milton (1998) who pointed out that “the study of Intercultural communication has tried to answer the question: How do people understand one another when they do not share a common cultural experience”.

We are now living in the time of globalization so abridging the gap between countries is what we need to do now. By increasing our knowledge and understanding of other people and their cultures, we can avoid certain mistakes such as unintentionally attacking someone's values or cultural beliefs when communicating. Besides the lack of knowledge about culture, the lack of experience in language use also causes misunderstanding that could have been avoided; For example, there are words that have different meanings in different countries, even if they share the exact same language (e.g. “pants” in American English means “trousers” while it means “underpants/underwear” in British English.) This shows how important the teacher's role is in designing or preparing their lesson plans. That is why Thomas and Nancy (1996) once stated that “the most fundamental concerns of ESL/EFL teachers –

that is, what will I teach? How will I teach? And why do I teach? – are all language policy issues.”

### III. LANGUAGE POLICY AND RECOMMENDATIONS Language policy

When investigating the matter on a systematic level, it is the government, the educators that have to set up a stable and appropriate language policy which can ensure meaningful and effective learning outcomes. With that being said, there are many factors influencing language policy. Politics, cultures and the economy are some of the dominating ones. That’s why in Viet Nam many different foreign languages have ever been in turn considered to be as important ones, but English has risen to the top for the recent years, especially since Viet Nam is in the open era with open door policy to expand relations with many countries in the world. With that comes the diversification of languages and cultures in this country; and this may become a chance for language users to expose to the target language. Thus, there is a demand of a universal language that anybody can use and understand, which is English.

In Vietnam, English has been a compulsory subject applied across the three stages of schooling including Elementary level (for children aged 6 to 10), Secondary level (for pupils aged 11 to 15), and High school (for pupils aged 16 to 18). It, indeed, is a very long time to master a language. However, most of the pupils graduating from high school cannot use the language effectively due to many reasons. Heavy syllabus, the grammar – based method as well as a large number of tests may account for the matter.

On the other hand, when the matter is examined in a smaller scope, such as the teacher’s classroom, the teachers themselves are responsible for and capable of finding solutions to the above mentioned language problems by critically evaluating and adjusting their curriculum as well as the goals of their lectures. This would allow the teachers to address the social needs or communication purpose rather than merely aiming at students’ academic achievements, or improving pedagogical methods, and professional qualifications.

### Recommendations to the official bodies such as Ministry of Education, educators, School administrators:

- The first and foremost purpose of language is communication, so educators should consider if it is necessary to set up such a heavy curriculum, in which pupils have to study so many grammar rules without having many chances to expose themselves to the target language in real life. The current text books used in Vietnamese general education should be refined to correspond more with the social contexts and less with grammar that has low frequency in practice.
- Educators should have a wide variety of choices for pupils to consider. We should let them choose what they think may suit their needs. Take IELTS (International English Language Testing System) as an example. IELTS has two types of tests: IELTS Academic and IELTS General Training. The first test is designed for those who want to get a scholarship or study in an English – speaking environment or university (higher education) while the second one is for those applying to study lower degree level or for other employment training. It is obvious that the pupils wanting to apply for Foreign Language Department of Teacher Training College will have different motivation and method of language learning with the ones who want to apply for Computer Science Department of a university.
- Instead of implementing a heavy syllabus and organizing so many examinations, educators should think of the plan in which pupils will have many activities such as a gaining fieldwork experiences, attending clubs, or debates, organizing or joining community events, engaging in creative acts such as plays, musicals, talent shows, etc,... where English is used. The pupils should have at least one week per semester for such extra activities outside the classrooms.

### Recommendations to the teachers and students

- A well – prepared lesson plan with definite goals for each lesson is really important. After each lesson, it is a good idea for teachers to recap the important points and guide the learners how to get more practice by

introducing websites, materials available for them to learn by themselves. For example, *Words and theirs stories in VOA Special English* is worth trying.

- English clubs run by foreigners are places language learners should visit. It may be a difficult task at first since most of the people attending these clubs find it hard to understand the discussions there. However, this is what language learners should not shy away from. Learning a language unconsciously is always considered better because this process is the same as how a child learns his or her mother tongue in pre – and post – natal stage.
- Short stories, magazines, newspaper articles in English are also some good medium for language learners to get more exposure to the foreign language. With that in mind, music and movies have always been the top and most effective methods for people to learn language in context, minus the burden of literally “studying”.

#### **IV. CONCLUSION**

Language is a means of communication through which one’s culture is revealed. And at the same time, how a person uses language also represents so much about themselves, including their identities and therefore, we cannot deny that language, culture and identity have a very close relationship. Possessing a sufficient volume of cultural and social aspects of the target language helps direct language learners to use the language at the right place, at the right time and to the right person. The way language learners use the target language and how well they use it can show us to what extent of the language aspects they have mastered.

Hence, English teachers should be aware of the importance of this interrelationship in order to not only have good pedagogical methods in the classroom but also maintain a vital responsibility in helping his or her students master both the target language and the cultural knowledge underlying that language. If a language learner can communicate well in a target language, he or she can easily get success in any aspects because “If you talk to a man

in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart” (Nelson Mandela).

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