

Contrastive Pragmatic Study and Teaching Culture in English Language Classroom – A Case Study

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Abstract

Language is used both as a means of communication as well as a carrier of culture. Language without culture is unthinkable, so is human culture without language (Wei, 2005). Moreover, linguistic competence alone is not enough for learners of a language to be competent in that language (Krasner, 1999). That is, learners need to be aware of the culturally appropriate ways to address people, disagree with someone, express gratitude or make requests (Peterson and Coltrane, 2003). The present paper looks at this issue by taking a contrastive pragmatic approach toward comparing and contrasting the specific behaviours that two cultures, namely Iranian and American, select in their language to express gratitude. Cross-cultural and contrastive pragmatics studies help teachers with enhancing their students' awareness of the social and cultural differences of the native language and the language they are learning. The findings of this study are hoped to have implications for teaching and learning culture in English as a Foreign Language classrooms.

1. Introduction

According to Wei (2005:56), language has a dual character: both as a means of communication and a carrier of culture. Language without culture is unthinkable, so is human culture without language. A particular language is a mirror of a particular culture.

Brown (1994:165) describes the relation between language and culture as follows: 'A language is a part of a culture and a culture is a part of a language; the two are

intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture'. In a word, culture and language are inseparable (cited in Jiang, 2000: 328). When it comes to the realm of teaching and learning, as Gao (2006) presents it, the interdependence of language learning and cultural learning is so evident that one can conclude that language learning is culture learning and consequently, language teaching is cultural teaching (p.59). Gao further states that foreign language teachers should be aware of the place of cultural studies in foreign language classroom and attempt to enhance students' cultural awareness and improve their communication competence. Wang (2008), likewise, asserts that 'foreign language teaching is foreign culture teaching, and foreign language teachers are foreign culture teachers (p.4).'

According to Tomalin (2008), the international role of the English language and globalisation are the two main reasons to teach culture as a fifth language skill, in addition to listening, speaking, reading and writing. 'What the fifth language skill teaches you is the mindset and technique to adapt your use of English to learn about, understand and appreciate the values, ways of doing things and unique qualities of other cultures. It involves understanding how to use language to accept differences, to be flexible and tolerant of ways of doing things which might be different to yours. It is an attitudinal change that is expressed through the use of language.'

Tomalin (2008) further argues that teaching of culture in ELT should include cultural knowledge (knowledge of culture's institution, the big C), cultural values (the 'psyche' of the country, what people think is important), cultural behaviour (knowledge of daily routines and behaviour, the little c), and cultural skills (the development of intercultural sensitivity and awareness, using English language as the medium of interaction.)

According to Spence-Oatey (2000:4), 'culture is a fuzzy set of attitudes, beliefs, behavioural conventions, and basic assumptions and values that is shared by a group of people, and that influences each member's behaviour and each member's

interpretations of the meanings of other people's behaviour'. 'Culture' in language teaching and learning is usually defined pragmatically as a/the culture associated with a language being learnt. (Byram and Grundy, 2002)

Admittedly, it is not an easy task to teach culture. Teachers can show the way rather than regulate a specific way of seeing things, which has the inclination of cultural imperialism. Making students aware of the important traits in the target culture, they realise that there are no such things as superior and inferior and there are differences among people of distinctive cultures, as well. (Wang, 2008:4)

Kramsch (1993) argues that a foreign culture and one's own culture should be placed together in order for learners to understand a foreign culture. Learners' interaction with native speakers or text will require them to construct their own meanings rather than having educators simply transfer information about people and their culture, and therefore non-native speakers should have opportunities to make their own meanings and to reflect on both the target culture and their own. Kramsch (1993) refers to this as establishing a "sphere of interculturality". Moreover, what educators should always have in mind when teaching culture is the need to raise their students' awareness of their own culture (Straub, 1999) and 'the target culture' (Wei, 2005:55), to cultivate a degree of intellectual objectivity essential in cross-cultural analyses (Straub, 1999, cited in Wang, 2008:4).

Teachers and program developers are asked (Coleman, 1996; Holliday, 1994; McKay, 2002) to take the learners' sociocultural background into consideration in choosing materials and pedagogical approaches for particular contexts of teaching since ignoring the students' norms and expectations – that is, what students bring to the classroom- is denying the learners' experiences (Dogancay-Aktuna, 2005:100), and thus a lack of consideration of variations in cultures of learning can lead to frustration and subsequent failure in language classrooms (Li, 1998; Holliday, 1994). Mastering in a language requires learners' mastery of the cultural contexts in which

the language occurs (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 1996:27 in Peterson and Coltrane, 2003).

Several questions are raised when it comes to the role of culture in language classrooms: "When should teachers teach culture? How should culture be taught? Why is it necessary for students to learn about the target culture at all?" (Fleet, 2006:5). How can teachers incorporate culture into foreign language classrooms in terms of fostering learners' cultural awareness and communicating insights into the target culture; how to teach culture for effective language learning?" (Wang, 2008:3)

Issues of interaction and culture are integral elements of language teaching. Learners must not only be aware of language, but they must be taught how language is actually used in everyday interaction and what is characteristic in a given culture (Dufva, 1994).

Pragmatic awareness (i.e. knowledge about language use in the target culture (Dufva, 1994:21) is very important from the point of view of social interaction. It is often claimed that pragmatic features of a language can be taught only 'after the students have learned the basic grammar', however, Dufva (1994) believes that pragmatic awareness ensures that "the first attempts to communicate in a foreign language are likely to be successful" (p.21)

There are two types of approaches in pragmatic studies, i.e. sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic. These terms were first employed by Leech (1983: 10-11) and then elaborated by Blum-Kulka (1997: 55-56), who explains that in sociopragmatic studies, the focus is on the choice of strategies across different situations, examining the way in which pragmatic performance is subjected to social and cultural conditions, whereas in pragmalinguistic studies, the focus is on examining the linguistic realisations in a particular language for conveying a specific pragmatic function.

Linguistic competence alone is not enough for learners of a language to be competent in that language (Krasner, 1999). Language learners need to be aware, for example, of the culturally appropriate ways to address people, express gratitude, make requests, and agree or disagree with someone. They should know that behaviour and intonation patterns that are appropriate in their own speech community may be perceived differently by members of the target language speech community. They have to understand that, in order for communication to be successful, language use must be associated with other culturally appropriate behaviours (Peterson and Coltrane, 2003).

Talking about pragmatics, many culture-specific pragmatic features are implicit, but they are nonetheless central in communicative encounters. Some examples of culture-specific features would include mental sets (Sternberg, 1995, cited in Žegarac and Pennington: 2000: 166), schemata (Yule, 1996:88), scripts (Yule, 1996:87), speech events (Yule, 1996:57), sociocultural norms (Barraja-Rohan, 2000:65), linguistic etiquette (Kasper, 1997:381), and pragmatic accent (Yule, 1996:88, cited in Pohl, 2004).

According to Thanasoulas (2001), more specifically, the teaching of culture should make learners aware of speech acts, connotations, etiquette, that is, appropriate or inappropriate behaviour, as well as it should provide them with the opportunity to act out being a member of the target culture. Besides, foreign language teachers should be foreign culture teachers; therefore, they need to have the ability to experience and analyse both the home and target cultures (Byram, Morgan and Colleagues, 1994). Contrastive pragmatics is one of the many ways that can give teachers insight about differences of the two cultures.

Contrastive pragmatics compares the pragmatic systems of languages in cross-cultural contact. Speech Act theory, conversational routines and the theory of linguistic politeness are at the heart of contrastive pragmatics. Speech Act theory, proposed by its advocate Austin (1962) and Searle (1969), attempts to explain how speakers use language to meet intended actions and how hearers infer intended

meaning from what is said. Nowadays speech act studies are considered a sub-discipline of cross-cultural pragmatics; however, they take their origin in the philosophy of language. Early classifications of speech acts identified five major categories of speech acts: 'representative' (a perceived truth condition of an utterance), 'directives' (a request to perform an action), 'commissives' (a commitment to carry out a future disposition) and 'declarations' (an announcement that alters a state of affairs). According to Wolfson (1981), 'speech acts differ cross-culturally not only in the way they are realised but also in their distribution, their frequency of occurrence, and in the functions they serve' (p.123). Study of speech acts can provide the learners with a better understanding and new insights into the correlation between linguistic forms and sociocultural contexts (Olshtain and Cohen, 1983). Also, research on speech acts is crucial in that it can provide the appropriate sociocultural rules surrounding the utterances of native speakers (Murphy and Neu, 1996). This is the most important source and basis for sociopragmatic rules governing speech acts in a language.

One of the implications of doing contrastive pragmatics in language teaching is to make learners aware of pragmatic aspects of language use by analysing their own language use and by looking for aspects of conducting speech acts that are in common or contrast between the first and target languages (Kondo, 2004:51).

This research takes a contrastive pragmatic approach to examine what implications the study of this type would offer to language learners.

2. The present study

The present study takes a pragmatic approach to compare and contrast the use of speech act of gratitude among Iranian native speakers of Farsi and native speakers of English. The objective of the study is to examine how similar or different the two cultures are in terms of strategies used in expressing gratitude. Expression of gratitude is the most commonly used speech act in everyday conversation among speakers of any language. Expressing gratitude also is recognised as one of the most

important social acts because it conveys warm feelings and solidarity among interlocutors (Cohen, 1996; Eisenstein and Bodman, 1986, 1993; Intachakra, 2004) and is categorized in the 'social' use of language (Kumar, 2002:7). Language learners need to understand what native speakers mean when they use the language, even if they do not choose to replicate native speakers' behaviour (Liddicoat, 2000:51, cited in Paul, 2004).

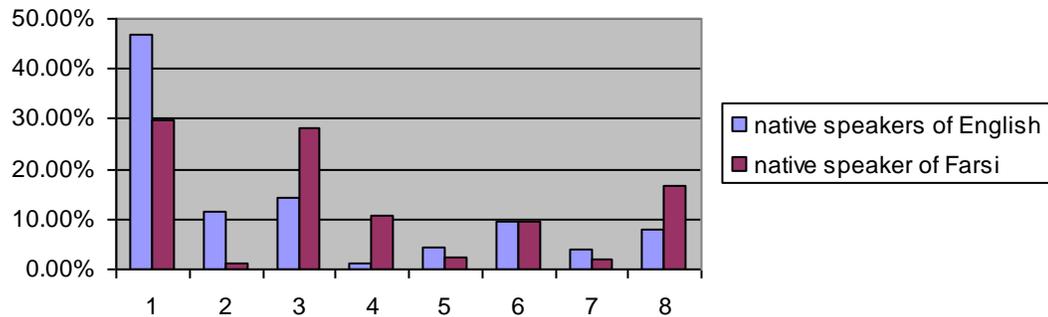
The subjects of this study are 20 Iranian native speakers of Farsi and 20 American native speakers of English. The Iranian data were collected in Iran and the American data were collected in the United States. To elicit the strategies - specific behaviours that learners select in their language learning and use' (Cohen, 2003:279) - an open-ended questionnaire in the form of discourse completion task were used in the study. Respondents were asked to read each situation and write down what they would say in real conversation. The questionnaire included situations in which the respondents received a favour from people at equal and unequal status (e.g. professors, classmates, and friends).

3. Data analysis

After data collection, the analysis of data obtained from the responses to the DCT is based on an independent evaluation of each response according to a number of dimensions. These dimensions have been given operational definitions, presented in the form of a coding scheme. Coding schemes are based on Cheng's (2005) framework for expressions of gratitude. Cheng formulated eight main strategies in her study of expressions of gratitude in response to a favour: (a) thanking, (b) appreciation, (c) positive feelings, (d) apology, (e) recognition of imposition, (f) repayment, (g) other, and (h) alerters. According to Eisenstein and Bodman (1986), expression of gratitude could be appropriately thought of as a speech act set, rather than a solidarity speech act.

Then, the data were entered into SPSS software package for further descriptive and statistical analyses. Figure 1 shows the overall findings for the native speakers of Farsi and native speakers of English.

Figure 1 Frequency of preferred strategies for native speakers of Farsi and English



Note: 1=thanking, 2=appreciation, 3=positive feelings, 4=apology, 5=recognition of imposition, 6=repayment, 7=other, 8= alerters

The result of *t*-test analysis shows that the two groups are significantly different in the use of thanking, appreciation, positive feeling, apology and alerters strategies. As can be seen from the Figure 1, American native speakers of English used significantly more of thanking and appreciation strategies. On the other hand, Iranian native speakers of Farsi used significantly more of positive feelings, apology and alerters strategies than the other group of respondents. However, there is no significant difference in the use of imposition, repayment and other strategies between the two groups of respondents.

Table 1: Results of *t*-test for the use of strategies

Strategy	St. deviation	Sig. (2-tailed)
Thanking	2.5005	.022*
Appreciation	2.7511	.003*
Positive feelings	2.9558	.000*
Apology	5.1289	.020*
Imposition	1.0195	.287
Repayment	.4611	.397
Other	.9234	.163
Alerters	3.5997	.003*

* Statistically significant at the level .05

4. Implication for teaching culture

Wei (2005) proposes to make our students aware of our own culture instead of spreading and teaching merely American or British culture in EFL classroom. Since studies on one's own culture EFL classrooms, learners may be more aware of cultural differences and therefore keep their cultural identity in cross-cultural communication.

Students must be taught of the potential differences between their mother tongue and the target language. As the table shows, Iranian and American responses are significantly different in thanking, appreciation, positive feelings and apology strategies in situations where the interlocutor receives a favour. The frequency of thanks seems linked to cultural values. The United States is a 'super-egalitarianism' society (Wierzbicka, 1991: 112), while Iran on the other hand is a non-egalitarian society. The American society has a strong belief that all people are equal and should have the same rights and opportunities. The value of egalitarianism has been suggested as the cause of frequent thanks in daily interactions in the United States (Apte, 1974:86). It lends the perception that people do not have to perform services for others, so that speakers tend to explicitly acknowledge everything that is done for them with verbal thanks. However, the Iranian society is traditionally non-egalitarian and has a firm sense of social hierarchy and strong awareness of status differences. Hierarchical differentiation in some societies like Iran takes on "a special symbolic

significance" and there are few societies which take "the obligation of status as seriously as the Iranian society" (Beeman, 2001).

As the table shows, Iranian respondents use positive feelings and apology strategies more significantly than American respondents. In other words, the Iranian uses much positive reaction to the favour giver (hearer) or expresses their positive reaction to the object of the favour. They also use apologizing words and state the favour or the fact, or criticise or blame themselves or express embarrassment and state the imposition which makes them embarrassed. The language and the strategies involved in Iranian society are controlled by *tavaazo* (modesty), oblige individuals to lower themselves in self- references and raise others while referring to others. Power, distance, social class, and age are very important in its use. Iran, being a hierarchical society, the direction of the frequency of use is from the lower to the upper for all of the above variables. This points out to the fact that Iranian culture places great emphasis on having *ehteraam* (respect) for superiors. Having restrain and limiting one's wants and wishes in front of others is another aspect of *ta'arof* usually referred to as *rudarbaayesti*' (Sahragard, 2003 :419). The notion of *mennaet* (obligation or imposition) is a powerful one in Iran since everybody occasionally depends upon other people for their help and services in a daily interaction and therefore it makes Iran a 'debt-sensitive culture' (Koutlaki, 2002:1740). Therefore, in order to mitigate the face-threatening effect of expressing gratitude, Iranian employ apology.

Pragmatic errors occurs when an interactant imposes the social rules of their own culture on his/her communicative behaviour in a situation where the social rules of another culture would be more appropriate" (Riley,1989:234). In this case, pragmatic errors occur if an Iranian learner of English uses many apologizers with native speakers of English to express his gratitude where it is only appropriate in their own culture. Sometimes pragmatic failure leads to intercultural miscommunication, such as the following example:

An Iranian student at Shiraz University receives from her American lecturer the recommendation letter that she has asked him to write for her and then turns to

him and says, "I'm ashamed". Bewildered by the student's response, the lecturer asks, "what have you done?!!!" (Sharifian, 2004:119)

This is an example of intercultural miscommunication from the use of a wrong illocutionary force indicating device for thanking. The expression used by the Iranian student would be more appropriate when an offence is committed, rather to show gratitude and appreciation (Eslami-Rasekh, Eslami-Rasekh, and Fatahi, 2004). Difficulties of this type are more frequent when one of the speakers is monolingual and cannot imagine that the intentions of their speaking partner may be different from their own if they were to use a form or expression the other uses (Liebe-Harkort, 1989).

5. Conclusion

The present study took a contrastive pragmatic approach in raising learners' awareness of cross-cultural differences between first and target languages. Appropriate use of language is intricately connected with cultural values, situations, interlocutors, and other variables. As mentioned earlier, foreign language teachers should be foreign culture teachers, having the ability to experience and analyze both the home and target cultures (Byram, Morgan and Colleagues, 1994: 73). Therefore, taking an awareness-raising approach makes learners more sensitive to cultural differences and different variables involved in language use (Kondo, 2004). According to Wei (2005:56),

EFL teaching should lead to a better understanding of and an insight into one's native culture. Students must be provided with the necessary linguistic, communicative and intercultural skills to reflect upon and portray their own society, to express themselves, and to present their own culture in the target language. Besides, discussion can be initiated for the students to compare the underlying values and beliefs in students' native culture with the target culture so that students can not only know the difference but also better appreciate both cultures (p.56)

The findings of this study can contribute to EFL teaching and learning. Language and culture are interrelated. Since pragmatics is the study of language in use, and some features of languages are culture-specific, when it comes to the study of another language, contrastive pragmatic studies can help EFL teachers become aware of cultural differences in language usage, by emphasizing the importance of a curriculum that utilize any specific speech act, e.g. this study expression of gratitude, with its cultural contexts.

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