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Language: A 'Mirror' of the Culture and Its Application English Language Teaching

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Abstract--This article is intended to highlight the linguistic principle proposed by anthropological linguists, "Language is a mirror of the culture." The purpose of the study attempts to explore foreign language teaching and foreign language learning from the perspective of language shapes thought and to improve language learning through cross-cultural communication. In the first part of this article, the linguistic principle which is reflected in the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis or the Whorfian hypothesis briefly highlighted. The second part focuses on the practical use of the Whorfian hypothesis for teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL), especially the teaching of English for specific purposes (ESP) and cross-culture understanding (CCU).

Keywords--cross-culture understanding, cultural sensitivity, culture, English for specific purposes, grammatical categories, grammatical competence, linguistic features, linguistic principle.

Introduction

Through decades some linguistic principles have been developed and proposed by some scholars, for example: (1) "Language is a system of arbitrary signs" [de Saussure]; (2) "Language is primarily speech" [Bloomfield]; (3) "Human language is fundamentally creative" [Chomsky]; (4) "Language is a 'mirror' of the society" [Sociolinguists]; (5) "Language is a mirror of the culture" [Anthropological linguists] (Kadarisman, 2005). In this article, principle (5) will be the focus of the discussion for, at least, three reasons. First, second language (L2) teaching as well as foreign language (FL) teaching does not happen in a sociocultural vacuum. The students belong to a culture, and where this differs from the L2/FL teacher's or

the L2/FL learning style, particular difficulties may appear. Second, it is commonly known that few L2/FL teachers are familiar with the sociology or anthropology of their own or the target community. Yet, they need to learn about the characteristic of L2/FL way of life to be able to explain linguistic behavior. They need to help their students to be aware of cultural differences and realize the importance of having cultural sensitivity. Third, one goal of L2/FL learning is that the students have to master not only grammatical competence but also communicative competence, i.e. the ability to produce communicative utterances which are not only grammatical but also pragmatically and socioculturally acceptable (Grzega, 2021; Jafarova, 2021).

The whorfian hypothesis

The linguistic principle saying that language is a mirror of the culture leads to a long-standing claim concerning the relationship between language and culture (Wardhaugh, 1988). This claim is best understood through the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis or the Whorfian hypothesis – the latter term will be used since the claim seems to owe much more to Whorf than it does to Sapir – which states that the structure of a language determines how speakers of that language view the world. This may imply that “people are prisoners of their language” (Chaika, 1982). Referring to the Whorfian hypothesis, Fishman (1978) suggests three kinds of claims it makes.

Fishman’s first claim is that if speakers of one language have certain words to describe things and speakers of another language lack similar words, then speakers of the first language will find it easier to talk about those things. That is, if language A has a word for a particular concept, then that word makes it easier for speakers of language A to refer to that concept than speakers of language B, who lack such a word and are forced to use a circumlocution (Ahmad, 2012; Feryok, 2008). Moreover, it is actually easier for speakers of language A to perceive instances of the concept. Speakers of Javanese, for example, will find it easier to talk about “tingkeban” – Javanese traditional ceremony held for a woman’s seven-month pregnancy – than speakers of English who lack such a word. We may also see how this might be the case seen when technical vocabulary (terms) is used in a communication act. Pharmacists, for instance, talk easily about pharmaceutical phenomena, more easily than mathematicians do, because they have the vocabulary to do so. Similarly, pilots discuss aviation problems with less trouble than we do.

As for the second claim, Fishman argues that if one language makes distinctions that another language does not, then those who use the first language will more readily perceive the differences in their environment which such linguistic distinctions draw attention to. In other words, if a language requires certain distinctions to be made because of its grammatical system, then the speakers of that language become conscious of the kinds of distinctions that must be referred to. If we have to classify rice, camel, snow in certain ways, for example, we will perceive rice, camel, and snow differently from those who are not required to make these differentiations (Borg, 2007; Hayes, 2009). Moreover, if certain material objects must be classified as long and thin and others as round, we will perceive material objects that way; those objects will fall ‘naturally’ into those

classes. These kinds of distinctions may also affect how speakers learn to deal with the world. That is, they can have consequences for both cognitive and cultural development.

Thirdly, Fishman claims that the grammatical categories existing in a particular language both help the users of that language to perceive the world in a certain way and at the same time limit such perception as well. The grammatical categories act as “blinkers” – something which prevents us from broadening our perception. This means that we perceive only what our language allows us to perceive. In other words, our language controls our ‘world view’. Speakers of different languages will, therefore, have different worldviews.

The Whorfian hypothesis can be more easily understood through a smoker’s experience on which Whorf’s ideas were based. He argued that someone has to behave in a certain way because his or her language says or does not say something. His famous example is that the man who tossed a cigarette butt into a gas drum marked: “Empty.” He claimed that English forces the word empty even though fumes are still in the drum. He argued that the use of the word empty allowed the careless smoker to think that the drum had nothing in it. Therefore, the man disregarded the vapors and acted as if they were not there. This kind of reasoning seems to be logically presented and, thus, constitutes the strength of his hypothesis. However, upon further and deeper analysis, one weakness of such reasoning can be identified. Concerning the careless smoker’s case, Whorf did not show that an empty drum could have vapors. In other words, the mistake the man did could have been caused by sheer ignorance. Even if it were not, English certainly allows one to say that although marked empty of one substance, gas, a drum still can be full of flammable vapors (Chaika, 1982; Galloway, 2013; Kirkgöz, 2008).

The use whorfian hypothesis in ELT

In line with the Whorfian hypothesis, the three claims may have a practical implication on ESP (the first claim) and CCU (the second and third claims) pedagogical practices.

The teaching of ESP

The first claim derived from the Whorfian hypothesis above plays an important role in connection with the teaching of English for specific purposes (ESP). The idea is simple: if language varies from one situation of use to another, then it should be possible to determine the features of specific situations and then make these features the basis of the learners’ course (Ho & Crookall, 1995; Akbari et al., 2010). This claim gains ground that the English that was needed by a particular group of learners could be identified by analyzing the linguistic characteristics of their specialist area of work or study. The principle of ESP is, then, “Tell me what you need English for and I will tell you the English that you need” (Hutchinson & Waters, 1992).

ESP as part of the teaching of (general) English is becoming more important in the context of teaching English for college students and professionals. In this

particular context, English is taught following their needs and interest. The students who major in Accounting, for example, have to be taught English for Accounting. In the context of classroom teaching and learning of reading skills, for instance, it is suggested that teachers take reading texts from the learners' specialist area – i.e. texts about Accounting for Accounting students. The assumption underlying this approach is that the clear relevance of the English course to the learners' needs will improve their motivation and therefore make learning better and faster.

This assumption is supported by [Gledhill & Kuber \(2016\)](#) who propose two approaches to the study of ESP, namely concept-oriented approach and context-oriented approach. The former emphasizes the conceptual structures of specialist domains which are concerned with the technical words, notions, definitions, symbols, semantic networks, and 'spaces of knowledge'; whereas the latter focuses on the analysis of language in its social or cultural context, as well as a focus on language forms as they occur in the actual text.

Concerning the first approach, Gledhill & Kuber suggest three typical examples by referring to English (1998), [Resche \(2013\)](#) and [Peraldi \(2012\)](#). The first typical example is metaphor analysis. [Gledhill & Kuber \(2017\)](#), then, describe metaphor analysis by referring to English (1998), who adopts the terms and methodology of metaphor theory (including notions such as assumptive frameworks, metaphorical description, and explanation, blending, etc.) to examine the processes by which experts and learners use metaphors to name and understand new concepts in mathematics. Next, by following [Resche \(2013\)](#), who emphasizes the use of disciplinary labels and definitions in the conceptual construction and historical development of economics, they present the concept of domain analysis as the second typical example of the concept-oriented approach. Finally, they clarify ontology analysis by referring to [Peraldi \(2012\)](#) who uses large-scale corpus analysis as well as the traditional techniques of componential analysis to explore the conceptual domain of organic chemistry. In this case, the syntax of multiply-modified nominal groups can be used to build up a complex ontology in this domain.

Then, concerning the second approach – 'context-oriented approach' – they suggest three subtypes i.e. socio-cultural analysis, discourse and genre analysis, and language feature analysis by referring to some previous studies, for example, [Banks \(2009\)](#) and [Resche \(2003\)](#). First of all, concerning socio-cultural analysis, [Banks \(2009\)](#) clarifies the historical development of two of the earliest scientific journals in English and French, with an explanation about the scientific debates, technical topics, textual sub-genres, and other factors which have defined the social and ideological context in each journal issue. Secondly, as for discourse and genre analysis, [Resche \(2003\)](#) focuses on analyzing a specific text type – Press Releases from the US Federal Reserve – in terms of their salient lexical, syntactic and phraseological features, as well as their rhetorical move structure. Lastly, regarding language feature analysis, Gledhill & Kuber point out that this category varies from small-scale manual studies of single texts to large-scale computational comparisons of whole text collections. In some cases, the linguistic features in question lend themselves to small-scale analysis, such as compare the use of three reformulation markers (that is, i.e. and namely) in two different

corpora of scientific research and popular science articles (Gledhill & Kuber, 2016).

In connection with the context-oriented approach, offering classes on-site, in the workplace settings where language learners are already functioning has been a common practice of ESP teaching (Belcher, 2004; Pica, 2000). However, the practice of these on-site classes provides both strengths and weaknesses as well. The benefits may include both learners and their interlocutors are well aware of the learners' needs, teachers can personally observe situated interactions, and workplace realia are readily available for classroom simulations. On the contrary, those who teach on-site also realize the disadvantages, such as learners are tired after a day's work, their attendance is unpredictable, and sequencing instruction becomes more difficult. Yet, well-experienced ESP instructors often argue that having on-site classes help learners achieve better than learning in the classroom setting (Belcher, 2004; Hassan et al., 2020; Cargill et al., 2012).

Furthermore, Felecan (2017) argues that one of the most significant issues in teaching is the development of a course design. In the context of ESP, the learning objectives are already well-defined from the very beginning, which are directly connected with learners' job-related or professionally oriented needs. Echoing Carver, Felecan points out that an ESP course should be based on three elements, namely authentic materials, purpose-related orientation, and learners' self-direction, i.e. they have to be active users. This is in line with Trace et al. (2015) who clarifies that ESP course – they prefer to use the term “language for specific purposes (LSP)” comprises the methodology, the content, the objectives, the materials, the teaching, and the assessment practices, all of which are derived from specific, target language uses based on an identified set of specialized needs.

The teaching of CCU

The second and third claims may be used as a basis for planning and developing cross-cultural understanding in a foreign language teaching (FLT) setting. This is because one of the most frequently cited goals of foreign language learning is the promotion of international and cross-cultural understanding. In line with this, Kadarisman (2005) suggests that by incorporating cultural understanding into the Cross-cultural Understanding (CCU) class, the teacher should help his or her students become truly aware of cross-cultural differences and fully realize the importance of acquiring cultural sensitivity in an EFL setting.

For Hanvey (1979), there are four stages of cross-cultural sensitivity: the recognition of superficial or visible cultural traits that are interpreted as exotic and strange deriving from tourism and textbooks; the awareness of significant and subtle cultural traits that contrast markedly with one's own arising from a culture conflict situation and interpreted as irrational or frustrating; the next phase is the same as the last mentioned one but differs in that it is intellectual so that the cultural symbols are cognitively credible; and where one is subjectively familiar with how another culture feels from the stand-point of the insider which, of course, only comes from cultural immersion.

However, since the native culture of the learner acts as a filter for assimilating the alien one, one suggested method is to compare the L2 and L1 cultural and social patterns. In this case, a teaching model of contrastively analyzing culture can be applied to such domains as addressing, greeting, leave-taking; also, style and lexical domains such as religious terms, household vocabulary (clothing and culinary), government and politics, education and friendship, etc (Loveday, 1982; Hassan et al., 2020) suggest that the cultural context of CCU teaching texts can be placed in four categories, namely: elementary material presenting cultural information in a disorganized and unrelated fashion; cultural miscellanies with a preoccupation with the picturesque and trivially bizarre; comprehensive cultural histories with a propagandistic point of view; and literary texts that are not intended to illuminate culture but to develop skill in criticism.

The cross-cultural teaching materials are not always easy to interpret because they require deep familiarity with and a comprehensive explanation of the culture in question. All such materials should be selected with a purpose to find out the sub-cultural diversity of the target community, e.g. it's socioeconomic, religious, regional, ethnic sub-culture so that students do not end up thinking of the target culture as one uniform set of experiences and values (Manel et al., 2019; Supriyatno et al., 2020). In the American context, for example, teaching CCU is not teaching who Roosevelt was, for example, nor is it merely explaining what Thank Giving Day involves, for instance. CCU teachers do not have to directly refer to the concept of culture when they are teaching. Instead, they must be constantly working toward a linguistic comprehension that cannot take place without sensitivity towards the underlying cultural presuppositions.

Furthermore, there exists a widespread belief that the cultural knowledge to be transmitted in the L2 classroom is only available to a native of the L2 culture. But this is not necessarily so. A non-native teacher may, in some cases, be more aware of deficiencies in his or her students' understanding of the target culture because of his or her intimate knowledge of their cultural environment. The important thing is that the teacher who can teach CCU is truly bicultural. In other words, he or she is familiar enough with the contrast between the world of the learners and that of the target community. Loveday (1982) suggests that cross-cultural awareness is by no means a difficult state to achieve. It does not result from contact alone, nor even from prolonged contact. "There must be a readiness to respect and accept and a capacity to participate" (Hanvey, 1979; Us Saqlain et al., 2020).

Nowadays, there is a growing trend that both teachers and students are encouraged to make predetermined preparation of their teaching and learning activity to bridge the cultural gap in a multi-cultural society. Catana (2014) suggests that to accomplish this goal, teaching the English language in higher education context should not only focus on developing the students' linguistic competence but should also emphasize the achievement of cultural competence for enhancing their cross-cultural awareness. In this way, Catana believes that the students will be able to develop their discourse strategies and communicative approaches to cope with cross-cultural differences. This notion seems to gain support from a research finding by Tarihoran (2020) indicating that the students showed a positive response to this approach to teaching and learning which

promoted the students' sense of the uniqueness of his own culture as a positive value and enabled them to accept the uniqueness of the other cultures. Furthermore, Tarihoran found that the power of sharing and learning from other students encouraged understanding and appreciation of other cultures.

However, under the cross-cultural communication viewpoint, there are still essential problems in the teaching and learning process of English culture in the higher education context. To mention some, the teacher has little attention to culture teaching; the students lack learning motivation; the English culture teaching is not yet effective (Wang et al., 2018). In an attempt to cope with these problems, therefore, he offers the following suggestions: teachers should be creative and innovative in determining teaching strategies to stimulate students' interest in learning English; they should continuously improve the students' English communication skills, and they should make the sustained effort to promote the quality of college English culture teaching. In addition to these, Catana (2014) suggests that teachers should design a motivating syllabus and implement the communicative method of teaching so that the students will be challenged to learn, demonstrate their capability of identifying cross-cultural differences, understand and respect cultural awareness, and understand how to respond appropriately. In that way, Catana believes, "the students will ensure their safe and successful integration into the multicultural knowledge society."

Beker (2012) points out that the use of English as the international language demands the understanding of cultural knowledge and communicative competence to be able to successfully communicate across different cultures. He states further that a problem may emerge when the English language, especially in ESL/EFL context, is merely associated with a particular culture or nation. In other words, the conception of communicative competence and cultural awareness is limited to an understanding of specific cultures or countries like America or Britain and their sociocultural values. Thus, Beker argues that teaching English as a global communication tool "should go beyond the conception of merely teaching a fixed language and cultural context as adequate for successful communication." Another related problem is identified by Davitishvili (2017).

He finds that English, which is not the learners' mother tongue, generates other problems in connection with the teaching and learning of English and the development of cultural awareness. To cope with the problems, Davitishvili offers some suggestions. Firstly, teaching English as a second/foreign language needs to include linguistic as well as cultural aspects to create an intercultural learning environment and to positively respond to conceivable problems the student may encounter. Secondly, cross-cultural contents should be included in the syllabus to provide the students with an awareness of cultural differences so that they will be able to avoid possible cultural conflicts due to their misunderstandings and misinterpretations (Bhatti et al., 2020; Derlina et al., 2020). Thirdly, EFL/ESL teachers should change their teaching practices from traditional to intercultural. Lastly, EFL/ESL textbooks should be provided with cross-cultural materials which promote students' cross-cultural awareness and communicative competence.

The solution offered by Davitishvili gains its significance in some countries like Indonesia where English is compulsorily taught as a foreign language. Previous research by [Parlindungan et al. \(2018\)](#) observed that exposure to the English language is largely facilitated with the use of English textbooks. Thus, knowledge of culture and its origin embodied in the textbooks become a serious issue because culture mingles both languages and thought. They further argue that cultural diversity and multicultural perspectives signified in these textbooks are the essences of EFL. From their research, they also found that the English textbooks for Grades 7 and 8 pervade Indonesian cultural values and practices that do not provide a balanced and equal depiction of Indonesian cultural diversity. Therefore, they suggest that teachers enrich language materials with cultural awareness for the inclusiveness of other representative cultural values that are not yet covered in the textbooks.

Conclusion

First of all, taken literally, the Whorfian hypothesis suggests that people's perceptions and experiences are wholly determined by their language. This linguistic determination would mean that speakers of two structurally different languages would have two different versions of reality. However, the theory is best understood as an attempt to emphasize the very important point that different linguistic communities have unique ways of viewing the world and that their languages give us systematic clues to what those views are. This is important because recent studies have shifted attention away from defining the formal features of language to discovering how language is used in real communication. Furthermore, in the context of TEFL – specifically cross-cultural understanding – since it is natural for non-natives to superimpose their cultural framework on another, then the teacher has to be a skilled and sensitive cross-cultural interpreter who is capable of reducing the learners' ethnocentrism without damaging their self-image. One simple way of accomplishing this is to let students present their way of life.

Secondly, it is apparent from the above discussion that culture and language are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing their implication on either language or culture. In EFL or ESL classroom setting, the students should be taught English with the focus on gaining linguistic competence, cultural knowledge, and cultural awareness as well. Otherwise, students who show well even excellent performance in English may find it difficult to successfully communicate with native speakers in a real-life situation. Therefore, in the teaching and learning of English both as a foreign and second language, it is necessary to incorporate and develop aspects of cross-cultural awareness as a part of the course curriculum because it is believed that developing cross-cultural awareness through learning and practicing the patterns of the current lifestyle in the target culture will help the students to cope with both cultural shock and intercultural communicative barriers and thus overcoming cross-cultural communication problems.

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