

## **Keep the Fish Alive in the Water Foreign Language Education and Cultural Understanding in Global Context**

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### **Abstract**

*As globalization becomes increasingly profound, the world is facing more challenges caused by ineffective and inaccurate communications among nation states and peoples. Language is the major vehicle to transmit the values of a certain culture in very subtle way. The relationship of language and culture is like that of fish and water, neither can exist without the other. This paper addresses issues and solutions of foreign language education in college setting in the United States. It asserts that, in addition to traditional approaches to expose foreign language learners to foreign cultures, such as hosting native speakers or traveling to the foreign land, language educators in the 21<sup>st</sup> century should take full advantage of the online open learning resources (especially videos) that greatly help keep the fish (the foreign language) alive in the water (the culture from which the language was originated) and enhance student language proficiency and cross culture understanding.*

**Keywords:** Foreign language education, cross-culture understanding, intercultural understanding, globalization, global context, global village

As an inevitable trend of our time, the impact of globalization on every aspect of our life is felt on the daily basis. With all the conveniences and efficiency brought about by information technology, it is much easier for us to understand global issues such as air and water pollution, climate change, pandemic diseases, or global interdependence. However, we often get frustrated in understanding why terrorists hate us; in other words, why kill innocent people at the expense of their own lives for nothing beneficial for themselves in return. Why can totalitarian regimes remain in power and even become stronger and prosperous? Do people living under the brutality of dictatorship have a sense of being suppressed or being deprived of their rights of liberty and freedom? Do they understand what human rights really mean just as the westerners do? Responding to all these questions requires cross-culture understanding – understanding of the attitudes, values, and beliefs of other peoples and ethnic groups in every corner of the world.

Cross-cultural understanding become increasingly imperative as the world has turned into a crowded village where interests conflict, ideas clash, and deterioration in living conditions overwhelm all the villagers who are forced to fully understand their “neighbors,” linguistically and culturally.

It is common sense that language education is the major vehicle in addressing cultural understanding issues for every nation state to prepare their 21<sup>st</sup> century citizenry. According to Mitchell and Myles, “language and culture are not separable, but are acquired together, with each providing support for the development of the other” (Mitchell & Myles, 2004). In the Five C’s foreign language instruction model (ACTFL, 2010), in addition to Culture, all other four Cs (Communication, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities) are interwoven with cultural understanding. Language instructors should look at culture as an essential element in their language instruction (Diaz-Greenberg & Nevin, 2003). However, at the instructional level, cultural content which is inextricably interrelated to language instruction, are oftentimes neglected (Schulz, 2007). Language instructors tend to transmit, with the language itself, a view of the world that reflects only the values and cultural assumptions of the native speaker’s society (Most often it is the language instructor’s society). Even as an international language, English instruction transmits such Anglo-Saxon values as efficiency, pragmatism, and individualism, all of which superimpose themselves on those of the learner’s native culture (Kramsch, 2006). Instructors do not conscientiously realize about how the cultural information they are conveying is received and understood in the different cultural context.

On the other hand, language learners intuitively expect that other cultures behave similarly to his/her own (Schulz, 2007). At the beginning stage, both instructors and learners do not recognize that such mistaken assumptions or expectations often lead to misunderstanding or even conflicts in cross-culture communication; they could even result in negative or destructive consequences.

It is true that human beings across the world understand and experience some knowledge or learning in a similar manner. People understand the original meaning of math or hard sciences in a same or very similar way. There won't be huge problems communicating with numbers, or talking about the quality and functions of high-tech products between people of different cultures. Nevertheless, when dealing with cultural issues such as values, beliefs, attitudes, worldview, or purpose of life, people from different racial, ethnic, cultural, political, social and economic backgrounds tend to have various viewpoints. The example I would like to share is how Chinese English learners understand the word "Leadership". Leadership is an ordinary word frequently appearing in general publication and daily oral communications. It does not represent obvious cultural, religious, or political values or group interest. The conversation depicted below took place between an American professor of Chinese origin and a Chinese student who had recently arrived in the United States for a graduate degree in engineering. At a Chinese community party where big group chatted casually. During the conversation, the professor sensed that some newcomers might mean something different when they used certain English words. Hearing "Joey always like [sin] to express his good ideas and he is a good model of discussion in class", the professor intuitively thought Joey was demonstrating good leadership in that class activity. He mentally translated the remark to himself into "Joey demonstrates great leadership in class discussion", which is a much better way to express the meaning the student wanted to convey. Now the professor was curious to ask the student how she understood the word "leadership".

Professor: Jennie, you know the word "leadership", right?

Jennie: Do you mean "leader" plus "ship"? Sure. Why? It is an abstract none.

Professor: Great! I'd like to know how you use this word in your writing or speaking. Could you give me some examples?

Jennie: "Leadership", Um... "under the great leadership of the Party (the Communist Party), something great happened..." she was recalling how she learned this word in Chinese textbook or media. "I really don't use this word much", she concluded.

Professor: Thanks. Could you give a simple definition of it?

Jennie: "Leadership refers some great people who are high leaders in the government, doing great things... something like that..."

This conversation tells us that due to cultural constraints in a society of hierarchical rule and authoritarian tradition, individual voices and contributions are often ignored or purposely denied. Chinese students tend to relate leaders and leadership to high-ranking government officials, or any social achievements done under their administration. In the west, people firmly believe that ordinary people can and often do extraordinary things. An ordinary individual can demonstrate great leadership in class discussion, or in a fundraising drive, or stir up a social movement for the public good.

Language educators are facing new challenges. Different from the previous centuries when communication and exchange between nations and among peoples mainly fell into international trade, technology transmission, or limited tourist industry, the digital age communication and exchange propelled by information technology and globalization has brought people together so close as a tight group of villagers in a tiny community. People's lives are closely connected and interdependent. New ideas are communicated and shared instantly at an unprecedented speed and scope in all aspects of our lives. Exchange of ideas has become a daily routine for all "Netizens." At such a pivotal historical moment, a higher and demanding requirement for today's language instructors and learners is to focus more effort on understanding different cultures, especially the core values or beliefs of a people or a nation state. The following ideas suggest how to integrate cultural content and enhance cultural sensitivity in language instruction:

- 1) Always be cautious of how people in other parts of the world perceive, understand, or interpret the words or expressions relating to attitudes, values or beliefs, such as love, integrity, friendship, obligation, honor, individualism, tolerance, choice, diversity, freedom, democracy, rule of law, ... Never take it for granted that people from other cultures (especially from another nation state) mean exactly that same thing when they use the same words or expression as you do in the United States.

2) Invite guest speakers to classroom to discuss interested language issues. The guest speakers could be professionals or ordinary people who have a native culture background rather than American. International students are convenient sources to consult on a regular basis. A group of speakers would help add rich perspectives on certain topics.

3) Having students develop skits and role-play culture-specific scenarios is an effective approach to sense the nuances and subtlety of cultural difference. A Chinese birthday party, a German New Year's Eve dinner, or a Singaporean debate on gay marriage, all represent such "dramas".

4) Assign thematic topics for student research. Workable topics could be "Compare childbirth ceremonies in Japan and the United States", "A Chinese village farmer's perspective on human rights", "Could you find the equivalent of "A rolling stone gathers no moss" in other cultures?"

5) Use online resources to broaden student views or conduct cross-culture projects with online communication tools (e.g., <http://epals.com>). There are tons of video resources that manifest cultural diversity and value differences. Below is a list of them. (Go to the web page following the URLs and type in "culture" in the search box on that page. You will see culture-related videos)

<http://dsc.discovery.com/videos/>  
<http://video.nationalgeographic.com/video/>  
<http://www.learner.org/>  
<http://video.pbs.org/>  
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/>  
<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/wideangle/>  
<http://current.com/>  
<http://www.hulu.com/tv>

6) Integrating current affairs into language instruction could be another creative approach to keep students' awareness and sensitivity of cultural understanding. Current affairs have a wide coverage of world issues that challenge student multicultural and interdisciplinary thinking and reasoning. This approach could be applied on the daily basis in the format of short presentation or brief discussion.

7) Another major approach of cultural integration in language instruction is assessing cultural understanding on a regular basis. Schulz' Cultural Learning Portfolio (Schultz, 2007) is a great example and it could be applied for organizing learning activities and assessing cultural understanding all the way through a semester.

Every nation and most ethnic groups have their own core cultural values and beliefs that are manifested and communicated mainly by their language, vocabulary, expressions, idioms, proverbs, analogies, and concepts that bear the codes of their cultural genes unique from one another. The rapid advancement of information technology and frequent cultural interaction among peoples of the world, both virtually and in reality, provide enormous opportunities for language instructors and learners to learn a foreign language and its culture simultaneously. To live a peaceful, harmonious, and productive life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, every member in the global village has a responsibility to understand each other, to learn from each other, and to appreciate each other. College language instruction plays a crucial role in preparing the 21<sup>st</sup> century citizenry who will be proficient linguistically and culturally to live and work with all the global neighbors side by side over mountains, along rivers, and across oceans.

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