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ACHIEVING CULTURAL ACQUIESCENCE THROUGH FOREIGN LANGUAGE E-LEARNING

Globalization, a multidimensional phenomenon primarily viewed through its economic component «has redefined communities, changes boundaries, fused cultures and altered social relations» (Dominelli). As a result of these challenges, a global economy composed of world-wide interconnected capital markets presents challenges that greatly impact multiple disciplines, including business, science, education and technology. In regard to technology, the global community can be characterized in respect to two distinct phenomena: the revolution of mass media and the subsequent creation of transnational social spaces (Sklair).

Therefore, to address these challenges, many individuals, businesses, educational institutions and governments have turned to informational communication technologies (ICTs) as a cost effective way to enhance cross-cultural communication and, in particular, foreign language learning. However, although these technologies are easily accessible, they do not adequately address the cultural aspects associated with second language development. Cultural sensitivity training and instruction must be integrated into foreign language instruction so that learners can effectively utilize second language skills to the objectives of adapting to the beliefs and values of the new culture.

However, with English referred to as the Internet or commerce language it is gaining more wide appeal and thus, increased numbers of individuals are increasingly learning English in addition to their indigenous language. The majority of the learning is taken place via World Wide Web and the Internet along with structured information communication technology dedicated toward such language learning.

The need to learn additional language is also increasing due to migration that accompanies globalization. As people migrate from one society to another, there is an increasing need to learn the language and the culture of the host

societies, which is also a pre-requisite for adaptation and social capital building along with wider socio cultural participation – the need to look beyond one's own group or culture. Not with standing the increased availability of computer enhanced or enabled language learning, there exist some challenges with language learning and ICTs. One impediment in particular is the ability to offer a certain group from the home country information in the dominant language to assist members in establishing and maintaining relations.

In 1972, Geert Hofstede's research found that variations in culture can be separated into four universal cultural dimension: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism and masculinity. As a result of this research, Hofstede defines culture as «collective programming of the human mind that distinguishes the members of one human group from those of another». From this perspective, culture affects the human behavior, beliefs and values of the individual and accounts for the «basic problems of humanity». It also influences the organizational infrastructure and social dynamics adopted by a society (Pai, Adler & Shadiow).

The origins of a society's cultural influences are part of a «homeostatic (self-regulating) quasiequilibrium» wherein societal norms are rooted in the demographic, economic, genetic, technological and urbanized histories of a particular community (Hofstede). This «collective level of mental programming» defines the individual as part of a particular culture. This culture then shapes «the language in which we express ourselves» as well as interpersonal behaviors including power distance, respect, love and ceremonial rituals (Hofstede).

In order to illustrate the similarities and differences among cultures and languages, Hofstede chose to analyze three countries with at least two dominant languages. He discovered that culture shapes the peculiarities of a spoken language rather than language influencing the cultural norm. Moreover, culture and language construct an intertwined experience which shapes the community's understanding of language codes, idiom, and usage. It is no wonder that culture is referred to as the «software of the mind,» for it shapes an individual and creates his/her

worldview (Hofstede). Hofstede states that it is important to understand the differences between general and specific mental programs that influence a particular culture's beliefs, value systems, social dynamics, gestures, religions, customs and languages, because no two cultures are alike. Even countries that share a common border and a common language do not always encompass the same cultural value systems. Consequently, numerous differences exist in language usage and behaviors, even within the same nation or cultural boundaries. Thus, culturally based linguistic variations (e.g., regional context, dialect, idiom and connotation) create a unique challenge to the foreign language learner. For this reason, foreign language learning can only be enhanced through cultural-based instruction.

Sociocognitive Cultural Approach to Second Language Development

The analysis of language codes, coupled with Hofstede's research, illustrates that an individual may learn the grammar and even the phonetics of a language, (digital codes) without possessing an understanding of the cultural dimensions, or the analogic codes, that are contained within that language (Kim). Evidently, it is this cultural dimension that increases a student's ability to learn, or as Atkinson, Churchill, Nishino, and Okada refer to it, acquire the ability to navigate their surroundings, and adapt to their changing settings. This enables the learner to survive in an unfamiliar environment, or in this case, the culture of the target foreign language.

Atkinson states that the sociocognitive approach to foreign/second language (L2) development does not solely comprise learning new linguistic skills, but calls for the acknowledgement of the mind-body-world integration within the learning context. This concept of mind-body-world stems from the organismic approach to cultural understanding which states that «a culture should be seen as a living organism-an integrated system».

This interrelationship between various aspects of the culture symbolizes that any change to one component will ultimately have an effect upon them all. Therefore, this mind-body-world ecology accounts for an understanding of the

human organism within his/her environment. Thus, a learner must not only to learn the codes of the target language, but acquire the ability to dynamically adapt to and align with his/her surroundings in order to survive in an ever changing and unpredictable environment. This dynamic adaptation consists of a learner's ability to integrate with, depend upon and construct meaning from within the cultural context of the target language.

Consequently, it is only with an understanding of the culture and pragmatics of the target language that language fluency and acquiescence within the society can be achieved. In order to enhance our ability to function in an ever changing world society, it is essential to incorporate cultural instruction within foreign language and/or second language learning. This integration is the only way to encourage the growth of cultural sensitivity and dynamic adaptability within foreign language learning.

Challenges to Cross-Cultural Communication. Since international business transactions are becoming more and more prevalent, it is essential for individuals to possess multilingual skills. In the United States, for example, the National Language Conference (2005), sponsored by the United States Department of Defense, reported that a severe lack of foreign language skills has hindered the United States national and international cross-cultural communication. This deficit has limited diplomatic effectiveness, social mobility, and commercial competitiveness within the global society.

When compared to other nations, Blake and Kramersch report that a recent survey conducted in the European Union determined that over half of its citizens speak a second language, in Great Britain, 30% of its citizens report speaking a second language, while only 9% of United States citizens report speaking a second or foreign language.

According to Blake and Kramersch, this poor showing could be a result of a «national language ideology that considers speaking and using other languages as slightly un-American». Brecht explains that for individuals residing in the United States, a predominantly English-speaking country, globalization

presents a «real danger of not understanding the world around us, the role of language in communication, the influence of culture on conceptual understandings and on behavior». Therefore, and if this is indeed the case, there exist great cultural challenges in the United States to implementing foreign language programs. Unfortunately, this also affects cultural education as well. Although this example focuses on the United States, similar cultural challenges occur in various countries around the globe.

The fact remains that the development of a globalized world has pushed all nations, governments, businesses and educational institutions to increase foreign language instruction, and integrate a foreign language curriculum into training and educational programs. For without these programs, intercultural communication becomes impossible. With the continual demand for multilingual employees, in particular within international business, military, law and domestic governmental positions, foreign language skills are now, even more than before, an essential requirement for many key positions. However, employees with foreign language skills are, at many times, very difficult to find.

Cultural Challenges to E-Learning. When discussing the end user's fundamental learning needs, cultural sensitivity remains essential. Without deliberate consideration of the cultural features of the end user, the e-learning technology is certain to be unsuccessful (Olaniran). Furthermore, Olaniran states that e-learning technology must meet the blended needs of both the provider and the end user simultaneously.

Unfortunately, many technologies are designed with western cultural biases (sometimes not intentionally), however, when this is the case, adoption of these technologies are met with resistance and unintended consequences. Consequently, there remains a need to pay close attention to the impact of culture upon e-learning as teachers and learners embark upon using ICTs for language instruction.

Another area where attention must be directed is in the specific usage of ICT in fostering teaching strategies. For instance, students from cultures that possess a high power distance structure expect teachers to be the source of authority and to

provide information and direction for how material is learned. However, if care is not taken, the benefits of ICTs, primarily targeted at having students take direct control of how they learn, may be contrary to how students come to understand their role in the learning process. This fact, in particular, also affects the ICT language learning environment, for if care is not taken, students may display reluctance and unwillingness to complete the course of study. Therefore, more research needs to be directed at the level of resistance and frustrations that students experience as they engage in language learning over ICTs. Having access to such information would inform teachers, and the academic community, as to best course of action to foster language learning using ICTs. Moreover, attention to cultural sensitivity is not only needed for the United States foreign language learner, but all foreign language learners in order to facilitate successful second language development.

Another drawback to foreign language e-learning is that in the absence of study abroad programs, the average student may not have the opportunity to interact with a native speaker, except for their instructor or an international visitor they may encounter. Hence, in order to develop cultural sensitivity, ICTs must facilitate foreign language course work that provides a cultural foundation for the target language, incorporating examples of cultural artifacts and excerpts of native speakers' conversation. This will help learners anticipate as many idiosyncratic contextual uses of the language as possible and increase their ability to communicate with native speakers. This foundation increases intercultural competence and creates an opportunity for cultural sensitivity to develop.

References:

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