Review Article

The Ambiguity of Culture and the Effect it has on English as a Second Language (ESL) Students Living Abroad

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Abstract

Due to its ambiguous nature, culture is one of the most difficult human phenomenons to define. Sociologists and Linguists are continuously expanding the aspects of what constitutes culture in an effort to understand how our individual identities can coexist as simultaneous members of a global community. This paper analysed various theories and literature in relation to the concept of culture in an effort to determine the effect it has on English as a second language (ESL) students. It discovered that although spoken and written discourse is integral to succeeding in a community, there are several non-linguistic methods of communication that can help ESL students to participate and become accepted members of their chosen second language society. This paper also compared the differences between individual and collective cultures and the social and environmental impact they can have on its participants.

Keywords: Culture, English as a second language (ESL) students, non-linguistic methods, individualism, collectivism, ambiguity.

INTRODUCTION

Although a large percentage of cultural elements that help to define humans are observable (language, fashion, customs and traditions etc.), there are an equal amount that are unobservable (values, rules, affiliations etc.). Therefore, lumping everyone into one culture or another is perhaps convenient, but it is also dishonest because it runs the risk of unfairly stereotyping and categorising people.

What is Culture? Definition and the Effect it has on ESL Students

The problem with clarifying culture is the subjectiveness of the question. For one person culture is a collective value system or beliefs within a particular group of people, for another it is an unconscious process that controls their behaviour without realising it. Whilst some people believe that culture can be found in galleries and museums, or in bars and expensive restaurants. Taking all of this into consideration, the effect culture has on a new ESL student can be confusing and overwhelming.

For students who are attempting to become part of a new language society and a new culture, all of these definitions are beneficial because they are all correct, and by highlighting various social practices in which people conduct themselves the multi-faceted notion of culture can be better understood.

The first encounter with a second language often results in confusion and frustration due to a lack of intelligible communication. These feelings are compounded when the student is living and working in a foreign country. For an ESL student who has joined a second, sociocultural system in their adult life, the concept of meaningful interaction with the people around you superseding linguistic abilities must be a comforting thought.

Meaningful interaction is not only achieved with verbal and written communication, but with a set of `cultural tools' that allows ESL students to convey ideas and express solidarity non-linguistically. In essence, by using these tools in a certain way one becomes a member of the social group that has provided them.

Scollon, *et al.,* (2012) suggested that these `cultural tools' range from the simple (correct use of cutlery or chopsticks), to the abstract (belief in an

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ideology or opinions). By embracing and utilising everything available to them in a foreign country, an ESL student can accelerate their acceptance into a different language society and culture without relying on verbal communication alone. Unfortunately for these students living abroad, the use of 'cultural tools' will expire at some point and the need for spoken or written language will take precedence (proficiency in chopsticks becomes redundant if you cannot order the food to eat them with).

Non-Linguistic Methods

In 1999, Brian Street coined the term 'culture is a verb' (cited in Camerer & Mader, 2019) and proposed what culture *does* is far more important than what culture *is*. But what does culture do? Culture brings different people together and, regardless of a participant' language abilities, allows them to identify as a single entity through various, non-linguistic means.

Displays of culture can manifest themselves in several ways such as social organisations, religion and arts and literature and language. Sport is an important part of many cultures and can foster a sense of community by providing a focus point for participants to come together and achieve a collective goal. Whether this goal is a trophy at the end of a competition, financial benefits for the clubs or organisers involved, or simply an activity to pass the time is irrelevant. The sense of social unity and fellowship that sporting activities provide is the real achievement. By participating in sports (most likely as a supporter), ESL students can still have meaningful interactions with the people around them without a high level of spoken discourse.

Of course there are limitations to this, not everyone likes sport. In tight-knit communities, participants who are excluded from sporting events can feel a sense of isolation and social anxiety. Spaaij (2009) recognised that 'visible minorities' who are excluded either on gender, class or ethnic grounds need to be considered and although sport is vital to the community, alternatives need to be provided that will enable 'visible minorities' to become part of their community culturally and participate in an activity and environment that they feel comfortable in.

Just like sport, music is also an important part of culture and a way for people of different races and ethnic backgrounds to collectively express themselves. Over the last two decades, American hip-hop music (which was predominantly started by inner-city African Americans in the Bronx borough of New York City in the 1970s), has heavily influenced not only the music scene, but popular culture across the globe. People from all ethnic backgrounds and races identify with hip-hop music and therefore, its imitators have proliferated rapidly. However, it is not without its detractors. Scholars, women's rights activists and even politicians have criticised the high level of misogynistic lyrical content that glorifies the objectification of women in hip-hop music.

Richardson & Scott (2002) claim that although socially reprehensible, the glamorisation given to hip-hop musicians is one of the reasons that make it so attractive. It is hard to imagine the white, middle or upper class teenagers who listen to hip-hop music relating to lyrics about social and cultural inequalities, police brutality and lack of educational opportunities. Music is a product of the environment felt by its creators and in this regard, hip-hop music is a snapshot of life that many of its fans have never experienced. However, it provides a sense of community that transcends socio-economic backgrounds and cultures to make people feel like they belong to something greater than themselves.

By listening to hip-hop music, attending concerts or even wearing a hip-hop musician's t-shirt, ESL students are still participating in a culture albeit non-linguistically and in a limited capacity.

Individual vs. Collective Culture and ESL Students

Hall (1976) theorised that culture is like an iceberg sticking out of the ocean and that only our behaviours are obvious to the casual observer. However, lying beneath the waves are the formative factors that shape, define and mould an individual's core beliefs and cultural identity.

The collective programming model of cultural classification by Geert Hofstede (1991) suggested that cultures can be measured against six different categories representing independent preferences. One of these categories is individualism vs collectivism (IDV). An important note in Hofstede's work is that cultural scores on the collective programming scale are only meaningful by comparison. It would be simplistic and incorrect to paint an entire country's behaviour with the same brush. Also, they are based on national and cultural preferences, not individual behaviour.

Japan has traditionally been viewed as a collectivist society in comparison to the west. But as the ageing baby boomers are replaced by a younger generation, a cultural shift is occurring. Dalsky (2010) discovered that under the right circumstances (private decisions without interference or knowledge from outsiders), Japanese undergraduate students are in fact no more collectivist than their American counterparts. These findings suggested that all humans have an equal ability to be selfish and to put their own individualist needs before those of the collective good.

Another example of an individual's ability to change their behaviour in different cultural circumstances is Chinese 'parachute kids' studying overseas. Parachute kids is a term given to

unaccompanied minors students who are sent to study and live in the U.S. without their parents, sometimes at a very young age. These low-level students face considerable difficulties as they attempt to understand social, cultural and linguistic differences between their home country and the U.S.

Culturally, China is a highly collectivist society and some students who have suddenly been given a new level of freedom that the individualist culture of America provides, find it difficult to adjust. Comparing 'parachute kids' to Chinese immigrant adolescents who still live with their parents, Hom (2002) states that the former are behaviorally maladjusted in regards to group/gang fighting, sexual activity and substance use.

In 2015, the city of Los Angeles was put under the spotlight for all the wrong reasons due to a criminal case of six Chinese students who kidnapped, attacked and tortured a fellow ESL 'parachute kid'. Four of the students involved received prison sentences ranging from six to thirteen years. After sentencing, one of the perpetrators remarked that his parents had sent him to the U.S for a better life and a fuller education but that along with that came a lot of freedom, too much freedom. It is unlikely, under the watchful eye of their parents not to mention the collective eye of Chinese society, that the six 'parachute kids' would have committed the same crime at home as they did in the U.S. Although an extreme case, this does highlight the moveable aspect of an absolute beginner's cultural identity and the impact varying societal views (individualism vs collectivism) can have on their behaviour.

CONCLUSION

For centuries Sociologists and Linguists have attempted to heuristically explain culture but it remains one of the most elusive, if not impossible systems to define. However, the shifting parameters of what constitutes culture are not unmanageable and new members are accepted readily. A large portion of communication is non-linguistic with several 'cultural tools' to help new participants become productive members in a second language society. Geographical and environmental locations can also have an incredible impact on human's perception of culture and what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. The myriad variants that constitute this complex experience is what makes it so important. Culture acts as a glue to hold people together and helps to maintain human's individual and collective identities. One of the most

succinct and useful definitions came from Tharp (2009) who distilled culture down to these three basic human activities: what people think, what people do and what people make. Within that framework there are no borders, no racial divides and very few limitations for humans to simultaneously participate in whichever culture they identify with.

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