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[Culture Rejected as an Individual Difference in the SLA Process: Not significant, separate and appropriate, overall -nor for Northeast Asia](#)

Abstract

The question for examination is whether culture needs to be considered as a significant and/or separate individual difference factor in SLA (second language acquisition) process theory and teaching against the more traditionally considered ones such as anxiety, aptitude attitude, and personality (Gardner and Lambert.1959; Gardner, Smythe and Clement 1979; Schumman, 1986; Mangubhai, 2002). The author argues, using the preceding references in particular, that the impact of culture on SLA, too often, is not so readily identifiable, or of priority significance for the specific impact it has on individual students. For example, children tend to have neither positive nor negative perceptions of a target language (Genesee, and Hamayan, 1980) while youth are in a process of identity formation (Erikson 1994) that makes it difficult at times, to identify cultural value traits of consistency. As well, a rising global consciousness as referred to by V.S. Naipaul (in Huntington 1997) and ever increasing number of transitional economies such as China and South Korea (to which the author draws on experientially) make it evermore challenging for the average teacher to spell out particular cultural differences especially among Internet wired youth generations. A more established approach should better serve the teaching professional, than one which gives undue separation and significance to a "cultural factor".

1.0 Introduction

The interrelationship between language and culture is one that has been receiving more attention in the

last few decades in linguistic research, given its increasingly recognized importance, (Brown, 1994, Byram and Morgan, 1994, Hinkel, 1999, Jiang, 2000). More specifically, the question of whether culture should be considered as a significant and/or separate individual difference factor in SLA (second language acquisition) processes against the more traditionally considered ones, (Gardner and Lambert, 1959; Gardner, Smythe and Clement 1979; Schumman, 1986; Mangubhai, 2002) continues to generate debate. Along with this question is whether raising this "cultural factor" to such a significant level is largely unhelpful or secondary for the teaching professional attempting to source objective, unbiased, and major differences relevant to SLA of the individual learner.

The need for practicing educators to figure out as to what are mostly significant factors of an individual's learning make-up and behavior as a specific person versus those which more relate to say collective ethnic background - so as to facilitate SLA processes - represents no easy task. And from an ethno-linguistic viewpoint, should in fact, educators avoid attaching culturally connected learning "tags" to students because of their particular racial, ethnic or national background or simply look at students independently of such evaluations? Are such efforts latent with risk of reducing the effectiveness of making objective assessments of those differences which really limit or enhance the student's performance?

But there is also a need to understand what is meant by culture in its fuller sense. Stern, Allen and Harley (1992:207) refer to it as "way of life" or "life style of a community." They add that culture includes value systems and relationships of personal and family nature. But culture does not have to imply ethnic culture which may readily come to mind. One hears the terms youth culture and within that grouping; youth gangs being used -and other such references to what are largely subcultures, (Unesco, 1982). Sociologically related terms, as "working class" would also seem to be inclusive within the culture definition. It is not difficult to imagine that it can be quite a task to try to identify each student's cultural or sub-cultural membership, let alone how specifically such memberships influence that individual's language learning or production processes.

As a response to concerns about the overall worth of examining culture in SLA, Mangubhai (1997:24) states, "Nonetheless, it is possible to discern certain patterns of behavior, or primary tendencies within a cultural or sub-cultural group that permit one to address learners as a group." At the same time, he refers to the work of a number of scholars (McNamara 1973, Genesee and Hamayan, 1980) who conclude that most children have neither a positive nor negative attitude to the target language or the people who speak it. Mangubhai (1997) also acknowledges variation in behavior within a cultural or sub-cultural group(s). This inherent variation may further make it complicated to determine as to what are the real cultural traits of a supposed member of a cultural or sub-cultural group and hence, how the cultural factor might affect that student's SLA processes.

At the same time, one can additionally argue, that in today's highly globalized state with its growing focus on the individual (and his or her rights) that it becomes not only increasingly difficult, but also unacceptable to separate out specific cultural differences which might lead to unfair value judgments. One country's settings and youth culture may be also approaching similarity to a western one, for instance. Do these patterns where they seem to evermore exist make it secondary for the EFL/ESL native speaker teacher to be aware of cultural differences relevant to his or her teaching or students'?

learning? Or is it the non-native speaker-possibly the older one-who is in need of better understanding of what we might more broadly refer to as a "cultural factor"? Again, all this may provide some helpful contemplation as to both the complexity and potential for unfair -or least unconstructive-judgments the educational practitioner may have to face when deciding to elevate a cultural factor to too great a significant weighting.

The varieties of situations and settings may again add a degree of complexity which makes it highly difficult to discern what is the exact nature of the cultural factor in an additive or subtractive way to SLA as supported at the classroom level. It needs to be remembered that adolescents (and other youth) in many places in the world seem ubiquitously to be affected by globalization in one degree or another. Young people (and younger generations), as well are in a process of flux in terms of beliefs, personality and identity development, (Erikson, 1994) especially in the many transitional and developed economies of the world. Taking into account Inglehart's research showing the degree of transitional generational value change around the world (1977, 1994) combined with certain linguistic research (McNamara 1973, Genesee and Hamayan, 1980) - which contends that most children as relatively non-judgemental to the culture(s) of the L2 -it may be, thus, difficult to make generalizations about not just how the cultural factor/differences affect(s) the younger generations' learning, but what these differences might be altogether in the first place.

As a relevant question to the classroom and of practical value is whether the average educational practitioner, let alone the linguistic researcher whose duty it is to assist those in the field on such intricate matters- can readily separate those cultural differences on a consistent basis. On this matter, it is hoped that personal observations from the author's fairly extensive classroom work in Northeast Asia, will provide experiential insights on this despite the lack of theoretical underpinnings and widely collected empirical data on such classroom issues. This may not provide any definitive answers on what the average SLA teacher is capable of in isolating and acting upon cultural factors influencing acquisition and production. But hopefully it might move along the discussion and stimulate additional research.

2.0 Theoretical Considerations

In general, individual differences, as currently defined in SLA theory, for the most part, focus on intelligence, aptitude, attitude, age, affective/personality factors, motivation, and sometimes separate out sociological factors and learner's beliefs (and motivation) under attitude, (Mangubhai, 2002). These seem to be more objectively and rationally measurable and identifiable, in the way they affect or might affect the learning processes from a current, mainstream academic perspective. A summary overview, from a purely definitional perspective might lead one to conclude that sociological factors, affective factors and learner's belief, already encompass most cultural factors which impact second language learning at an individual level.

Two specific models will be examined in trying to better understand how various mainstream linguistic scholars deal with cultural factors (see Schumann 1986; Gardner, et al, 1979; Schumann 1986.) Additional research from Oxford (1999) and Krashen (1982) in regards to the affective filter, will round out the section on linguistic theoretical research. The author has also added a sociopolitical injection, so as to briefly examine how globalization and different conceptualizations of civilizations has further

added complexity to the question at hand as stated within the title. These research contributions from literature may provide additional understanding and support to views generated based on the experientially observed which follow in the subsequent section.

However, in the process of answering the question, one may want to reflect in a more deliberate fashion as to whether such models may need some further elaborative work in making them more readily useable by those at the field level and by those trying to better comprehend the theoretical influences of culture on the learning processes. It is also not the function of this paper to explain the workings of these models in detail, but to extract those relevant parts to the exercise at hand.

2.1 The Socio Educational Model

Borrowing on Gardner's combined work with Lambert (1959), the former devised a way of explaining the processes of language learning by identifying four variables related to individual differences. They are intelligence, language aptitude, motivation and situational anxiety. In paying his partial dues to culture, Gardner (cited in Spolsky, 1989:154) states, "How important each of these (variables) is depends on the beliefs of the community of language learning. The socio-educational model further holds that cultural beliefs about the second language community will influence both the nature and role played by attitudes in the language learning process."

While Gardner gives attention to the role of a social factor, and cultural influences on it, he does not separate out culture into a stand alone cultural factor, which again by implication reduces the significance of culture in the SLA processes (in Spolsky, 1989 :154). But rather, he seems to see aspects of culture such as cultural belief as having a weighing affect on variables of individual differences and is satisfied at leaving it at that. This would also seem to have some parallel in the way in which Mangubhai has listed and schematically represented individual differences affecting second language acquisition, (2002 :1.0.) For while he lists different variables to Gardner in some instances, attitude has also subsumed factors which overlap culture (i.e. community beliefs) - if we use the definition as earlier provided by Stern and others (1996) and Mangubhai's own findings (20027:15). Overall, Mangubhai (1997: 47) is also content with the idea of culture as not being meritorious of being isolated as a distinctive individual difference, nor being conflated in language teaching.

2.2 The Acculturation Model

Contrasted against Gardner's four variable process, is Schumann's (1986) nine classes of factors including affective and social factors, as well as those of personality, cognitive, biological, aptitude, personal, input and instructional ones. These former two are classified into a single factor referred to as acculturation. Acculturation is defined as "the social and psychological integration of the learner with the target language (TL) group," (Spolsky, 1989,143).

Schumann (1986) sees the possibility of an individual's affective state as not necessarily being shaped by social (culture inclusive implied) conditions. That in fact, the learner may succeed in spite of negative social conditions or presumably even fail when social conditions are more ideal. While how germane this is to the topic, may not be so readily evident, but Schumann (1986) sees social factors as being placed in a separate category to affective factors (therefore largely independent of each other and not inter-causal). It should at least cause pause for supporters wishing to subsume certain influences of culture purely under one category of affective factors. The fact that an individual may succeed in learning (or not) irrespective of social conditions, which would seem to include cultural ones at times

may provide further evidence that certain cultural influences should be carefully analyzed as to whether they really are affecting in a significant way an individual given learner's processes of SLA. Schumann, thus, seems to provide important theoretical support about the risks of over inflating culture in SLA and broadly painting someone's success or failure in respect to acquisition based on his or her' particular cultural situation.

2.3 Affective and Civilization Factors

With further attention to the socio-educational model variables, Gardner and MacIntyre 1983 (in Oxford, 1989:60-61) are referred to as considering language anxiety to be " the strongest (negative) correlate in respect to language achievement." A number of factors are considered which correlate with anxiety. Those which might be inclusive of culture are self-esteem, risk taking, competitiveness and identity and culture shock. In respect to the last correlate, Guiora's theory of language ego and Clarke's theory of clash of consciousness (in Oxford 1989) receive reference.

It should be also noted that partly in Krashen's (1997) attempt to explain "deviant" outcomes to his natural order model, the affective filter theory was proposed which does not include culture per se as a major category. Rather the three are motivation, self-confidence and anxiety. Krashen states that a situation should attempt to be generated that lowers the filter. He does not refer to culture in this work as being front and center in lowering the affective state of an individual learner, so as to facilitate SLA. However, he does talk of the importance of the situation of the learner. That could potentially have some cultural relevance towards facilitating SLA -at least in certain instances.

On matters of clash theory, Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations", (1997:21) may lend itself to those who wish to overly highlight the cultural difference factor all the way down to the EFL classroom. If there are such profound differences between the "west and the rest' or at least and between the west and such civilizations as the African, Buddhist, Hindu, Islamic and Sinic ones in particular, then the native EFL teacher will need to be highly sensitive to such contrasting value systems and perspectives if she or he wishes to thrive and survive in the classroom. But by overly highlighting and putting excess weight on cultural differences along such contrasting lines as outlined by Huntington (1997) as a factor in learning processes -which so many linguistic scholars seemingly have not done -is there a risk in excessively reorienting pedagogy towards not only a less effective approach in terms of sound process theory, but in polarizing the classroom along cultural or civilization lines? Would such an approach unnecessarily increase situational anxiety when students become aware that a native speaker instructor is defining so many limits and aspects to their learning behavior through the prism of culture and cultural differences, for instance.

Rather, are efforts not to overplay cultural differences in the school classroom more consistent to the views expressed by Shaw (in Anheier, 2003:221) who sees globalization as involving the development of a common consciousness. V.S.Naipaul (in Huntington, 1997:56) has also argued that the world is witnessing the development of a "universal civilization." It could be argued that it is an emerging global youth / adolescent culture, (Unesco, 1982) which is especially connecting to that common consciousness further reducing the importance of cultural differences as a significant factor in SLA-at least in a variety of settings and conditions.

3.0 Experiential Perspectives

When this author was hired in 1996 by the Korean government (under its Koretta native speaker teacher program and subsequently through its successor called EPIK-English Professional in Korea) he was told during the orientations; 1996 and in 1999 that because of the Confucian based culture, that Korean youth, especially girls, would be very shy and afraid of making mistakes in English. That one would need to be very patient because of such culturally defined affective factors, even though Korean students studied diligently, pining away long hours into the night and within language institutes where they learned ever greater quantities of English. Acknowledging and understanding cultural differences, according to learned lecturers and educators, had to be major priorities by the English native speaker instructor in being able to have even a modicum of success in the Korean classroom.

Such generalizations, while of some use were to be seen later in a broader context of a host of important variables in ensuring successful learning outcomes, especially in regards to elementary and early middle schooling and a variety of individual students. In informal research done by this author subsequently, students expressed less worry about making mistakes because of culturally related shyness, but expressed the view that the inherent difficulty of English learning compared to Korean learning was one of their greatest problems preventing them from being more communicatively active. (Dash, 2001; Dash 1999) Facile platitudes about cultural differences may mask more practical and important affective factors relating to non-cultural differences such as degree of difficulty of pronunciation and syntax of the L2 versus the L1.

Neither is culture always a constant as young people in Korea have one of the highest usages and access levels in the world to Internet and multimedia. A recent study by UNICEF shows that Korean children, comparatively speaking, have one of the lowest respects for adults among 17 surveyed countries, which included Australia and Hong Kong (Lee, 2001). In light of the expectations that authorities at the EPIK orientations seem to generate about the importance of the tenets of Confucian based filial respect and the need to consider it in ones relations with students and teaching, should one at least admit to a state of confusion (rather than Confucianism) as to what cultural differences are really relevant within such national settings. In the end, a transition economy such as Korea -which has been currently defined as having some of the greatest generational differences between older and younger people in the OECD (Abramson and Inglehart, 1995)- could be defined as a value ambiguous society (Yee, 2000) Certain countries, particularly in a stage of transition may offer particular risk to those educators wanting to highlight and fully utilize the cultural factor in EFL/ESL classroom teaching.

On the matter of girls not speaking up as much as boys, is this a culturally significant factor in the learning process or more a gender difference that can be subsumed respectively under the social factors or situational anxiety as in Schumann's and Gardner's models as previously examined? (see Theoretical Considerations) As Baxter (1999:83) states " Much previous research connecting classroom talk with gender has demonstrated that boys dominate the public arena of the classroom, especially in teacher-directed interactions with the class." Most of these studies referenced by Baxter (1999) referred to the United States and Britain, so the problem of less vocally participatory girls in formal classroom non-group work, seems to be a common one across a range of cultures.

It is not to argue against the fact that such social differences may be more accentuated in one culture over another. But in face of the data about transitional changes towards advanced economic development and/or democratic values which are happening in many countries (Abramson and Inglehart

1995) -though far from all- an observant and qualified educator may wish to enter a classroom with a relatively clean cultural slate and see the students for the true individuals they are than in terms of some homogeneous cultural amalgam. As a result, he or she may be able to get the most learning out of them by employing the learning process models with their current non-cultural factor emphasis. That has been this author's experience to a significant degree, but a knowledge of cultural differences has helped in refining teaching approaches such as how patient to be in waiting for a learner's response or getting to a point of comfort for pressing for a step-up in oral production.

Is it also fair to state in the context of Chinese or Japanese cultural learning traits for example- which some believe include a more reflective approach before producing orally (if at all) when contrasted with westerners (Mangubhai, 1997) that such a view may be a stereotypical one and may not be so applicable to youth. I could argue that in my China based university classroom, that hesitancy to answer was more of a gender issue related to situational anxiety under Gardner's model and social and affective factors under Schumann's model and were not necessarily culturally determined. Though these models do emphasize acquisitorial rather than production aspects. For the males were reasonably orally productive though two produced a low amount of verbal output because one apparently had a confidence problem related to a speech impediment and the other had somewhat of a self-confidence problem due to his self-perception about his intelligence and language aptitude. This latter situation could be classified under the self-esteem correlate (Oxford 1999) of anxiety which falls under the affective filter (Krashen, 1982). These observations are made on the basis of having taught a single classroom of up to twelve students for twenty hours a week and for approximately five months.

One can look beyond a student's ethnic culture and look at the political one as consistent to the definition relating to culture as encompassing community values of belief which by implication are not exclusively ethnic. (Stern et al, 1992) For example, would ones perception-at least by many westerners -that China is not a democratic political culture bear on student risk taking connected to oral production? As An (1986:1) underscores and as Oxford (1989) seems to support, risk taking is generally considered an important factor in the SLA student's willingness to participate in oral production. But a significant number of this author's Chinese classroom students are able to form and express opinions on many subjects to which they have some familiarity. Some of their linguistic limitations relate to whether they have the fluency and vocabulary at times to express those opinions. This is not inconsistent with the data and interpretation by Inglehart (2000:14) who states "Chinese show a surprisingly high score on the value dimension linked with democracy." As the program within which the students are enrolled, is one with the final objective of transferring them abroad into a western university, one might argue that they are more acculturated to western values than the average Chinese youths of their freshmen age group. Their higher socioeconomic and educational status might also help put them into a situation of being more exposed to western ideas and values which are so dominant on the Internet that they and ever increasing numbers of Chinese youth have access to both physically and linguistically. These experiences again support the view of a growing common global consciousness-hence the decreasing need for the native speaker to prioritize cultural differences and as well, the complexity of trying to do so.

With respect to elementary classes which the author taught in Korea, rather than culture having such a major impact on individual behavior, other factors such as the style, tone and ability of the homeroom

teacher (the instructional factor in Schumann's model) seem often to have had a more profound effect on the learning environment. Some of the same experiences seem to have been observed in early middle school students whereas latter grade middle school students seem to exhibit more of the culturally defined learning tendencies as warned about in the early training of the author under EPIK (i.e. apparent shyness about making mistakes seen through lack of ready participation in oral production). This would be consistent with the concept of culture becoming a more important influence among non-children in their SLA, as implied by Mangubhai, (1997:24).

But then how much of those differences in latter middle school were really related, instead to instructional factors or biology as again highlighted by Schumann's model (1986) The ever-expanding number of subjects and quantity of information learned grows remarkably in the third grade, as middle school students try to position themselves to get into a high school which counts (i.e. will eventually get them to their tertiary institution of choice). Marks and participation in communicative work do not so much count in reference to that consuming goal of joining an "elite" university with the right job network. Rather, oral work and participation in it can be seen as a wasteful burden for the latter grade middle school students. So again, what might be looked upon as a cultural factor could be more of an institutional one.

Cultural factors may be also in the eye of the beholder. For Korean teachers, it appears common knowledge that communicative work becomes ever less important to many students as they progress into the higher secondary level grade ages. (Though it may be changing.) This is not a cultural factor for the Korean teaching professional. But for a western teacher, this may be a cultural difference factor he or she needs to take into account in her teaching methods and choice of materials. That an awareness of relevant cultural factors is also relative to the origins and experiences of the teacher, adds another complication in deciding whether culture demands a distinctive place in the constellation of learning process theory which should be or can be applied in the classroom.

4.0 Conclusion

It is arguable that culture, at often times, is not so readily identifiable, or of priority significance for the specific impact it has on the learning processes of individual students, both in theory and in practice. Excessive consideration of it as a separate and significant factor can cause stereotyping and overly hinder the instructor from looking at each individual student in the broader context of traditionally well accepted and tested models from a range of scholars, (Gardner et al 1979; Schumann 1986; Manghubai 2002). These models do not separate out culture as an individual difference factor at least in the aspects of acquisition of a second language. They are somewhat less clear in respect to that specific matter of production including, the communicative kind. But neither Krashen (1982) nor Oxford (1999) lists culture in respectively describing the affective filter or as a single correlate sub-category to the anxiety factor of the language learner. Oxford's (1999) reference is to identity and culture shock

A number of classroom observations of the author both in China and South Korea are supportive of such a contention. At times, the author saw gender differences, an instructional factor and those of anxiety related to the individual personality, for example as being confused with a cultural origin of influence. It was at least clear that for the average educational practitioner - including those with significant experience- it was a complicated affair to determine what (or if any) cultural factor in SLA of his

students was relevant. Those observations and interpretations in themselves further support the approach taken by a variety of scholars as not to separate out culture as an individual difference and to subsume it under a number of existing variables including sociological factors, beliefs and affective factors, for example, (Gardner et al 1979, Schumann 1986.) Such factors appear to be relevant to cultural aspects and might more readily survive the universal test of relevancy (i.e. is one in one's native environment as a teacher or outside it? Is this classroom half Korean and/ or one tenth Hispanic and/or one twentieth Chinese? Is this an ESL or EFL school?)

Some theorists such as Gardner (in Spolsky 1989) see variables of individual differences as being impacted upon by factors which could be termed culturally inclusive. Others such as Schumann (in Spolsky 1989) prefer to include certain cultural differences into a "social" category but within a single acculturation variable. Mangubhai (1997:47) also does not separate out the cultural factor from individual ones and concludes in the same article that such a separation should not occur because the cultural factor is not sufficiently large to merit it. He still sees, however, the importance of taking culture into account but again not separately.

Stereotyping and prejudicial judgments also need to be removed from EFL/ESL teaching to ensure both effective SLA but also a psychological environment conducive to that young person's proper development, linguistically and otherwise. Does the over focus on a cultural factor lend itself to supporting such a bias in the classroom? Does it mask at times the common social situations between cultures- and even civilizations at a broader level- such as the need for females in the classrooms around the world to be provided with more teaching that lowers their situational anxiety relative to the male presence? As well, the lower cognitive capacities of children to establish a solid cultural personality may reflect their ambiguity in terms of acculturation to the target language, (Mangubhai 1997).

Additionally, transitional value formation periods of adolescence and younger adults as they develop their identities, (Erikson, 1994) renders the importance of culture to SLA as a possible secondary factor, with respect to much school teaching, one might argue. This may be particularly true for societies in a state of flux and major generational change such as in South Korea and China. Globalization, especially among youth who are increasingly globally wired and connected may again make it complicated to identify so cleanly cultural differences and to weigh their import on SLA processes in respect to individual students.

It would, thus, seem in general, that a safer and more effective way in one's teachings may be to primarily focus on the classical variables of individual differences, (Gardner et al 1979, Schumann 1986 Manguhai, 2002,) but without being ambivalent to the culturally relevant contexts, conditions and settings within which they may or may not be shaped. This more informal integrative approach especially in regards to SLA processes and their application should better serve the teaching professional than one, which gives undue separation and significance to a "cultural factor."

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