

The Role of Cross-Cultural Understanding (CCU) in Foreign Language Learning

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Abstract

Every nation or even a group of people or community has their own culture. This sometimes makes some contradictory between one culture and another. Therefore, the different cultural background between one nation or community and another will often make some hindrance like inner conflict, frustration, and even shock. Especially those who think that their own culture is better than the others, usually they directly dislike and refuse any other culture that does not match with their own culture. There are 2 (two) kinds of shock in CCU (Cross Cultural Understanding), namely culture shock and country shock. This study was intended to overcome some problems like inner conflict, frustration and any other kind of shock dealing with foreign language learning. Based on the study analysis, to overcome some problems related to different cultural background, the key is only one: the learners have to learn the other nation's / community's culture through CCU. For example, if everybody of us moves to another country, we must know and realize that every country/nation has their own culture. As a new comer, we must try very hard and be capable of adjusting with the new culture of that country or community if we want to keep on living among the majority of other people in a long time. Meanwhile, everything related to different cultural background can be learnt and known from CCU learning. Therefore, CCU is essential in foreign language learning. This learning takes an important role in efforts to avoid and eliminate misunderstanding, frustration and both culture shock and country shock between the two persons or groups of people/community having different cultural background.

Keywords: CCU (Cross Cultural Understanding), Foreign Language Learning

INTRODUCTION

Culture (N) is the quality in a person or society that arises from interest in arts, letters, scholarly pursuits, etc. (Webster's, 1990). Meanwhile, the broader meaning of 'culture' was stated by Hornby, Cowie & Lewis (1974). He said that culture was (1) advanced development of the human powers; development of the body, mind and spirit by training and experience. (2) evidence of intellectual development (of arts, science, etc) in human society. Culture includes 3 (three) aspects of human activities: personal or individual communication (self-communication), collective or communication in a social

context, and expressive or society expresses (Karamanian, 2001). Those three activities require some certain rules and signs which are established by a certain group of people or community so that they will be understandable.

In line with some definitions about 'culture' stated above, it could be assumed that Culture cannot be separated from the people or community and their language used. The reverse, language cannot be separated from the people and their culture. As a social community, human society needs to interact with one another. In efforts to interact one another, the people need a language. One language could be established as a product of a culture and a culture is created by human society. In short, both culture and language are interconnected each other. Rivers (1981, p. 263) said that language was deeply embedded in culture and a foreign language was the key to the cultural heritage of another people, and that knowledge of a foreign language enabled an individual to increase his personal culture through contact with great minds and works of literature.

Furthermore, the interconnection between a culture and language was also stated by Valdes, (1986). She said that the extent to which language, culture, thought have influenced one another, and which is the dominant aspect of communication. As a means of communication, language has an important role in terms of social relations. Therefore, almost all nations or countries in the world, even a group of community consisting of only a small number of families have their own cultures and languages. Indonesia for example, a country with its thousands of big and small islands has surely thousands and many varieties of cultures and languages also which might be different between one community in one region and another.

However, the cultural variety sometimes might cause some hindrance, and even a big problem to the other group of people or community who has different cultural background if there is no cultural understanding between them. If this happens, their communication will not run smoothly. To overcome this problem, and in efforts to avoid miscommunication and misunderstanding in efforts to obtain a smooth communication between the two groups of people from different background of culture, Cross Cultural Understanding (CCU) between the two groups of different community is required.

WHY THE LEARNERS NEED TO LEARN CCU?

In line with the close relationship between culture and a language, it is essential that the learners need to learn CCU for social interaction using the new language being learnt. This is due to the cultural difference between the first language of the learner and that of the new one. Rivers (1981) stated that besides linguistic aspects, foreign language learners had also to learn a culture because it could not be separated from a language. Meanwhile, Levine and Adelman (1982) said that English as a second or foreign language cannot fully assist foreign and immigrant students to understand and adapt to important cultural differences of the host country. This statement could be inferred that the learners have to own strong desire or passion in efforts to adjust the culture of the new language and the natives of English speaking people to make communication run smoothly with no cultural shock. Furthermore, Stewart and Bennet (2011, p. 1) said that

lasting success in working or living with people from another culture ultimately rested on good relations. This statement is quite good and reliable but very hard to realize. In reality it is very difficult to adjust and adapt the cultural difference of the two languages. The adjustment of course takes a long time and involves some other aspects, such as linguistics, social community, economy, and culture itself. Therefore, within a long time of learning process sometimes the learners feel disappointed or even frustrated if they cannot achieve as what they expect to get. However, the learners have to try and try in order to achieve the target as what Stewart and Bannet (2011) stated above.

Furthermore, Hanoum in Condon (1985) said, the French people were cognitive oriented, the American were psychomotor, and Spain were affective. This made them easy to understand and adjust one another although the adjustment process of culture (acculturation) was more often quite complex and complicated. Acculturation is the adoption or adjustment of traits or patterns of another group or culture (Webster, 1990). In accordance with this statement, to do acculturation from one culture to another is not such an easy work to do. It takes time, patience and sometimes sacrifices to do so. The most efficient way to overcome this problem is by changing our mind set or way of thinking and how to feel something from different perception or somebody else's point of view. We have to know and realize that in communication, it is affected by some aspects, such as linguistics, culture, socio-economic and community, and so on. For example, the European and American people will feel annoyed, offended and even get angry for some problems which they think were taboo things. They think that their own privacies should not have been known by anybody else especially those of the new people. Some taboo questions are such as:

- 'How old are you?'
- 'Are you married or still single?' and
- 'Have you got married?'
- 'How many children have you got?'

If we want to know somebody else's information by asking such those three questions above, in general most of the western people will be offended or even get angry. This condition is often called 'culture shock'. However, in Indonesia such those questions are commonly expressed to ask somebody else although they have not been familiar before. This reality indicates that there is a different cultural background between Indonesian and western people.

WHAT IS CULTURE SHOCK?

In line with the previous explanation, it was stated in DLI (1966) that a learner studying a new language is confronted not only with new sounds, words, and structures but also with a new culture. The new culture often makes the learners shocked or culture shock if they do not want to accept it. A culture shock can be defined as someone's expression, utterance, or action considered being a common thing in his culture but it might make somebody else unpleasant, offended and even get angry or shock due to the different cultural background. However, besides culture shock, there is another kind of shock

which is called 'country shock'. As it was stated by Storti, Craig (2001) that shock could be classified into 2 (two) kinds, country shock and culture shock.

Country Shock

Country shock is a kind of shock experienced by someone or a group of community moving to another country that has a significant difference in terms of their language background, culture, social community, economy, and even religion. For example, Indonesian people who move to European or American countries often face or encounter some problems which are significantly different from that of their own country related to the country's relation, such as the language, people, and climate. Furthermore, Craig (2001) said that several problems causing country shock are covering: (1) climate; (2) doing without; (3) the loss of routines; (4) unfamiliar faces; (5) additional issues; and (6) a new job.

Climate

Climate becomes one of the first obstacles encountered by Indonesian people who have just moved to European and American countries. As we know that Indonesia has only 1 (one) tropical climate. But in reality it is classified into 2 (two) seasons, rainy season and dry season. However, the average temperature of the two seasons is not so far different, between 30 and 35°C. Meanwhile, European and American countries and Australia too, they have 4 four climates: autumn, spring, summer, and winter that the temperature can reach below zero degrees Celsius. This condition often makes Indonesian people not feel comfortable and even stress. The writer had ever got such this bad experience when he stayed in Sydney, Australia a few years ago. Once, there was an extreme weather there. The weather outside was extremely cold although it was sunny. The writer and his friends decided to stay inside the room to heat our bodies (using some heater) to make us warmer for several hours. After a while, unpredictable thing happened when the writer wanted to get out of the room to go to the bath room. As soon as he opened the door, suddenly he fell down and fainted because of the extremely cold weather.

Doing Without

Take Ahmed from Indonesia for example. He was used to stay in one *pesantren* (Islamic Education Centre) that had very strong religious surroundings. When he was in *pesantren*, he and all of his friends were used to wearing *sarung*, skull cap (*kopiah*) and *koko* or *taqwa* shirt whenever they go to the mosque to pray. Someday, Ahmed had to move to France to continue his study. The way the students get dressed in France is of course different from that of he and his friends got dressed when they were still in *Pesantren*. Even, in the new country (in France), he can no longer see and find anybody wearing *sarung*, *koko* and *kopiah*. If he forces himself to wear those three kinds of clothes (*sarung*, *kopiah* and *koko*), he is afraid of being laughed and discussed by many people around him. But if he does not wear them, he feels that he is not considered as a

good Moslem, and his prayer will not be perfect. This condition more often makes some kind of inner or spiritual conflict.

The Loss of Routines

The loss of some certain activities which somebody was previously used to do and became his favorite which make him very happy and impressed is very hard to forget. However, all of them suddenly got lost and neither could be done nor repeated any longer when he had to move to another country. For example, someone when he was in his own country, he used to go to the beach or some coastal area with his close friends during the full moon. There, he could enjoy everything that really made him very happy and unforgotten. E.g, in the beach, he could enjoy the natural beauty while playing the guitar and singing together. Besides, he could also have a chat, have some meals or snacks and any other activity that could make him laugh happily and impressed. Meanwhile, at the same moment, in the new country where he lives now, he cannot do whatever he used to do with his close friends when he was still in his own country. Whenever he remembers this 'sweet' memory, he feels very sad and his tears sometimes drop on his face.

Unfamiliar Faces

Anybody who goes abroad, especially to American and European countries and he does not have any relative or friend there, of course he will see unfamiliar people. Furthermore, if we are still new, we will find it difficult to meet Indonesian people. This sometimes makes us sad, sequestered, lack of self confidence, frustration, and another unpleasant thing. If this happens to him continuously, it will make him difficult to interact or communicate with other people and adapt with his new surroundings.

Additional Issues

The modern or up-to-date instruments, tools, or utensils as the current issues of high technology more often make us difficult to operate and control if we have not been familiar with those things before but we have to work with them. For example, we have to operate the newest inventions of technology, such as robot, computer, mobile phone, gadget, washing machine, and any other invention of advanced technology which have not been familiar before.

A New Job

A new job in overseas countries sometimes also makes us difficult, and usually it takes time to adapt with it quickly. However, how hard and difficult it is, we have to do it and keep on working as our consequence of job's acceptance. If we want to be said as a responsible person, we have to do our best what we have to do. We must have some kind of self confidence and commitment, such as the following statements: a) Nothing is impossible. b) If somebody else can do, why can't we?, c) Every problem has to encounter not to avoid. d) No problem cannot be solved, and e) Any other thing that might make us encouraged and well-motivated to accomplish our new job.

Culture Shock

Storti, Craig (2001, p. 26) defined that Culture shock is one condition encountered to have gone wrong whenever one or more of the parties is confused, offended, frustrated, or otherwise put off by the behavior of any of the other parties. This definition indicates that when a problem or bad experience faced by somebody or a group of people (more of the parties) in social interaction with foreigner(s) of different group of people or nations because of the different cultural background that makes him/them a sudden shock that has not been found and experienced before in his own culture. As we know that almost every group of community has their own habit and culture which is often different between one and another. This cultural variety often makes the other group of community embarrassed, oppressed, offended, frustrated, and other unpleasant things. This might occur if one group of community finds the same kind of experience but it is contradictory with that of their own culture. For example, in Indonesia we never find girl students going to campus or college wearing miniskirts or tank-top. Furthermore, we almost never find boy and girl students do kissing at the campus area. This reality was different from what the writer saw and experienced a few years ago. At that time, the writer got an opportunity to visit some Universities in Sydney, Australia a few years ago, and he found many of the lady students wore miniskirts or tank-tops. Besides, he also found many of the students (boys and girls) did kissing and some other romantic actions in the campus area without feeling guilty or embarrassed. For the first time, the writer felt very surprised, shocked and embarrassed himself.

SOME STAGES OF CCU

There are four stages of CCU in efforts to avoid shock. Those stages are dealing with inconvenient, adjustment, appreciation, and cultururation.

Inconvenient

One condition when someone feels to be forced to accept something new that he has never done, found and experienced in his own habit, culture or community before. In this condition, usually he will feel severe shocked for the first time; something that becomes contradictory or inner conflict between accepting and refusing. If he accepts his friends' habit or culture, it is contradictory with his own mind and heart. But if he refuses, he is afraid of being rejected to be a member of his new group of community. For example, someone never did smoking cigarettes nor consuming alcoholic drink when he used to live in his community. But someday when he has new friends with different community, all of them do smoking and drinking whenever they meet and gather. In this stage, Mr. X is trying hard to refuse his friends' offer although all of his friends have been trying to force him to smoke and drink if he wants to belong to their group or community.

Adjustment

In this stage, someone (Mr. X) has been trying much to refuse something that he was not used to doing. However, the temptation and pressure from his new community to follow

are much stronger. It seems that there is not any chance not to follow. Therefore, he will try to adjust and follow his friends' habit or new culture although he feels it under pressure and contradictory with his deepest heart. He does it just to be accepted in his new community.

Appreciation

Having passed from the adjustment stage, someone comes to appreciation stage. In this stage, he has started to do and enjoy something that his new community is used to doing. However, he is still trying to make it accustomed when he stays around his new community. Furthermore, sooner or later he will start to appreciate and accept the new culture. Finally, he will do the same thing and make it accustomed in his new community something that was never done in his previous culture of community.

Culturation

Culturation is a condition where someone has been willing to accept totally the new culture that at first was refused and disliked. In this stage, he has already been accustomed to do it happily. He does not feel ashamed and awkward any longer to do something that firstly made him frustrated and under pressure. He can enjoy doing it very well although among the new people or community that had ever made him frustrated and get stressed. For example, one gentleman is now willing to accept some offers from some other ladies although he has not known them before. He can really enjoy dancing with them very much while the romantic and soft music is playing on during dinner party or any other of the same kind. This is usually experienced by Indonesian people who have not been accustomed to do dancing romantically with the other ladies, even with their own wives among many other people. At first, they thought that dancing with ladies among many other people is something embarrassing or taboo. But later on, after passing the three stages of CCU (inconvenient, adjustment, and appreciation), that had used to make him inner conflict, under pressure and heavy burden in his mind, now all have gone away. Therefore, one gentleman who had never been willing to do dancing in advance, even with his own wife, at this moment he never refuses to accept any offer from any other lady to do dancing with him. Even he still enjoys and continues to dance although the music has already been stopped.

CONCLUSION

In general, every country has its own culture which is different from that of any other. The different cultural background between one country and another will often make some hindrance like inner conflict, frustration, and even shock. This sometimes makes their communication not run smoothly. There are many aspects in foreign language learning. One of them is CCU (Cross Cultural Understanding). More often, the two persons/groups of people/community of different cultural background will get frustrated or even shocked if they do not want to adjust each other's culture. The two kinds of shocks that might make a problem are culture shock and country shock. Culture shock is a shock experienced by someone due to the different cultural background. S/he

usually will get a culture shock if s/he does not want to accept or is not capable of adjusting the other's culture which is different from his or hers or even contradictory. Meanwhile, country shock is a shock due to the condition or habit related to the new country where someone stays or lives. Some kinds of shock dealing with one country's condition are covering Climate, Doing Without, the Loss of Routines, Unfamiliar Faces, Additional Issues and a New Job (Craig, 2001). Furthermore, there are four stages to learn CCU in efforts to accept the culture of the other community. Those stages are covering Inconvenient, Adjustment, Appreciation and Culturation. Therefore, to avoid any shock and misunderstanding between the two persons/groups of people/community of different cultural background, CCU is essential to learn. Besides to avoid shock, this learning is also meant to avoid misunderstanding and miscommunication between the two persons/groups of people/community of different cultural background. Otherwise, they will get stressed and frustrated.

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