

國立清華大學 104 學年度碩士班考試入學試題

系所班組別：外國語文學系 乙組（語言認知與教學組）

考試科目（代碼）：英文閱讀與寫作（3503）

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*請在【答案卷、卡】作答

Read the following article, *How Learnable is a Foreign Culture?* by Marina Rassokha and then do the following:

1. Briefly summarize the entire article (40%)
2. Write an essay in response to the article. You can, for example, criticize the article in general or in part, take some of the author's ideas further, apply the ideas to English teaching in Taiwan or your own experiences. These are only some suggestions. (60%)

Introduction

Teaching language and culture or – slightly changing the emphasis – teaching language through culture has been the focus of the intercultural approach to a foreign language education since the 1980s. Issues discussed included approaches to intercultural competence of learners, educators' views on cultural training and materials, students' motivation and methods of teaching about culture. There are hundreds of theoretical as well as empirically oriented books and papers on how to teach about culture. As any other approach of applied linguistics being engaged in controversial discussions, intercultural teaching over time has developed different views regarding, first of all, the cultural teaching model and the type of cultural competence learners should attain. These issues will be discussed in the paper with a particular stress on a shift from a native speaker cultural model.

The cultural dimension of ELT

The present understanding of the nature of culture is mainly determined by an ethnographic approach: culture is viewed as a system of patterned elements and behaviors (Benderly, 1977). In other words, culture is something that every person takes part in (Benderly, 1977). Furthermore, culture, as Davis (2007) contends, is a system of meaning. Living in a culture people construct a reality associated with specific meanings. When members of culture interact with each other they communicate the meanings they need to be involved in particular activities and solve problems together.

Generally speaking, in foreign languages education a similar approach is applied to teaching about culture. Students are exposed to different cultural phenomena (ideally systematically) and learn how cultural meanings are expressed in lifestyles, traditions, literature, films, other cultural products and events. The most important thing, however, in cultural education is to teach foreign language students that culture is reflected in the language, that certain cultural patterns exist behind linguistic patterns and largely condition communicative behavior. Thus an ultimate objective of ELT is to stimulate an awareness of significance of culture while one communicates in a foreign language.

Clearly, cultural dimension of ELT is a complex issue. When teaching culture we have to take into consideration the fact that culture has two main aspects: they are often referred to as objective and subjective culture. Objective culture is the part of culture that can be easily observed and that includes such things as history, literature, and customs. Subjective culture which includes attitudes and feelings, on the contrary, is not easily observable (Davis, 2007). Earlier ELT most commonly focused on objective culture, nowadays educators increasingly tend to teach subjective aspect of culture understanding that it makes a decisive impact on interaction, first of all, translation of meanings and comprehension.

Cultural competence of language learners

Cultural (or intercultural) competence is typically developed along with language skills which include skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking generally described as communicative skills. But when using a foreign language to communicate with someone from a different culture, mere language competence is not sufficient (Byram, 2000, p. 97), learners should acquire intercultural competence. It is important to stress that intercultural competence is not one skill but rather a multi-aspect and multi-skill phenomenon. M. Byram (2000), for example, points out that intercultural competence is part of communicative competence. The latter includes three parts: linguistic competence (the ability to produce the standard language and interpret spoken and written language); sociolinguistic competence (the ability to communicate meanings and interpret social meanings negotiated by the interlocutor); discourse competence (the ability to use strategies for the production and interpretation of texts which follow the conventions of an interlocutor or are negotiated as intercultural texts). Intercultural competence also has a number of aspects and includes attitudes (for example, curiosity and openness); knowledge (of social groups, their products and their practices); skills of interpreting and relating (ability to interpret a document or event from another culture, to explain it and relate it to documents or events from one's own culture); skills of discovery and interaction (ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of real time communication). And finally, apart from knowledge and skills, it includes critical cultural awareness, that is, ability to evaluate, critically and on the basis of explicit criteria, particular perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures and countries (Byram, 2000, pp. 97-98).

In the same line of thought, Dignen (2010) defines intercultural competence as a blend of knowledge, mindset and behaviours which enables individuals to interact successfully within a certain context. In the author's words, firstly, this means understanding the scope of culture (for example, national, corporate, functional, team, etc.). Secondly, it means self-understanding to manage one's own ethnocentrism, becoming aware of one's own assumptions and cognitive filters, so enabling the use of a more flexible and curious mental process when dealing with others (Dignen, 2010, pp. 22-23).

Actually, dealing with intercultural competence as a combination of knowledge, attitudes and performance (Mader, 2010) one has to consider the essential point: what culture to teach and what kind of cultural model to select for developing intercultural competence in the EFL classroom. Should a teacher target at the culture of a native speaker of English? Or should the students be exposed to a variety of cultures students' home culture including? More questions have to be invited along with these two. If we teach the culture of a native speaker of English, what culture should be highlighted British or American or other? At the same time, we all recognize the fact that both British and American societies are actually multicultural and multilingual. But, perhaps, even if we decide to teach, let us say, an American variety of English and hence move towards an objective of building native speaker cultural competence of a user of American English, we should address a question: Is it possible to develop native-like cultural competence in an EFL learning setting?

In special literature there exists a whole range of opinions regarding this last question. On the one hand, there are views that learning a target language presupposes learning only a target culture and to be functional in a language means following the culture patterns of this language. Alternatively, according to quite a number of educators who have addressed this issue, we need to realize that native-like cultural competence of an EFL learner is practically unattainable. Hence in the overwhelming majority of cases the answer to a question *Can an EFL learner attain the cultural competence of a native speaker?* is no. The learning, as is obvious, is limited by the EFL setting whereas culture is acquired through everyday exposure and cultural involvement in all activities of the members belonging to this culture. However, that does not mean to say that EFL teachers have to reject completely the native speaker cultural model as a fruitless effort. It depends on what we look at when we refer to this model. One aspect of its usefulness cannot be doubted, that is the relationship between language and culture and the rich material of the English language to demonstrate how the Anglophone

culture is reflected in the language. Viewed in this light, the culture of the native speakers of English is expected to be part of culture education along with other cultures.

Issues of acquiring culture

The agenda of appropriating culture in EFL setting includes quite a number of issues. In this section, I will deal with the questions that have come to dominate the current language and culture teaching discussion: ways of acquiring cultural skills, the role of home culture and students' cultural identity.

Agreeing that cultural as well as linguistic behavior should be instructed, a clear understanding should be developed about classroom activities that lead to building intercultural competence. The authors of *Discovering Culture: An Introduction to Anthropology* (Benderly, 1977) point out that "true education consists not of accumulating lots of facts and definitions in a notebook, but of assimilating some important concepts in the mind." They continue emphasizing that "ideas that clarify, that explain, that help one to approach the world creatively and critically are the only things that make the hard work of studying worthwhile." (p. iii). Thus it is most important that students acquire those concepts about culture that would result in skills of interpreting, comparing and relating facts and, consequently, in behaviours that would facilitate intercultural communication. Upon completion the training programme, students would have developed an ability to critically evaluate cultural practices and products both of their own culture and other cultures.

The intercultural approach to language teaching is generally placing a lot of emphasis on acquiring practical cultural skills by learners. In her research into cultural competence of EFL learners, Davis (2007), for instance, states that cultural competence should be developed as practical skills through particular communicative activities. She contends that understanding of culture and cultural behavior is best imparted through analysis of concrete examples of cultural incidents (case studies) rather than through learning some complex and abstract theories. She included as part of her textbook *Doing Culture: Cross-cultural Communication in Action* a variety of cultural situations analyzing which learners not only realize how representatives of different cultures act, but they also are able to recognize cultural problems and to evaluate their experiences with them. Within this approach, students are regularly engaged in problem solving cases, thus their knowledge developed on the basis of experience, analysis and interpretation is likely to be less abstract. To mention only one concrete example about guest-host culture. Students start with *Exploring Ideas* activity when they make a list of responsibilities hosts have towards guests in different cultures (in this case, Chinese and Western) and a list of expectations guests have; then students read the text *Dinner with Friends* about a visit of an American couple to a home of a Chinese couple, one of whom is their co-worker. Finally, they answer questions and discuss cultural discrepancies in guest-host relationships in Chinese and American cultures. The topics students are expected to delve into are food culture, guests' entertainment, communication difficulties between representatives of American and Chinese cultures, etc. The discussion of the case-study finishes with a role-play when students explain the emerged cross-cultural problems to each couple (Davis, 2007, pp.70-73).

Thus it can be argued that the only way for acquiring intercultural competence is first-hand experience. At the same time, students have to realize that there might be hundreds of different communicative situations in which they can interact with representatives of different cultures. Thus learners should be aware that what they need is some common framework to apply to a variety of cultural encounters. This may be built on the following important concepts and learning goals:

- cultures are communicating communities with socially determined practices thus communication across cultures is always culturally-based;
- learning a foreign language presupposes leaning about foreign cultures and involves a process of language socialization;
- successful intercultural communication is based on knowledge of cultures and involves using the skills of observation, interpretation, comparability, empathy, and tolerance;

- new cultural knowledge and skills enhance linguacultural identity of EFL students and lay a special emphasis on the importance of home culture for learners' cultural self-identification.

In developing these important concepts EFL students' home culture, their language and cultural identity are crucial. "We now know, Hall (2007) writes, that rather than being peripheral to learning, the sociocultural worlds into which learners are appropriated play a fundamental role in shaping their language and cognitive abilities and, more generally, their cultural beliefs about language and their identities as language users" (p. 72). Davies (2007) is particularly right pointing out that "each of us is programmed by our home culture" (p. 19). Thus, it is clear that students' culture should become part of a foreign language classroom as an available resource to be used in many ways: to demonstrate the link between learning and acculturation, to reflect on sociocultural values of home culture and other cultures, to explain conventional social meanings behind language forms, to raise awareness about culture bumps, etc. This involves a fundamental change from a more traditional perspective of aiming at a native speaker cultural model to a shift of emphasis on students' cultural identity.

Few would disagree that the interactive behavior of people articulates their culture or, more specifically, their cultural identity, which determines the ways how meaning is constructed. Learning how to make cultural and linguistic meanings while socializing into one's own culture is a long and socially complex process which, according to Vygotsky (1978), needs scaffolding, modeling and training. These are the types of activities in which more responsible and competent members of culture help less experienced members to acquire sociocultural knowledge and patterns of communicative behavior. For example, in our home cultures, "in addition to learning how to take action with our words, we also develop a shared base knowledge about the world, including frameworks of expectations for what counts as knowledge and for what we can and cannot do as individuals and as group members in using the resources to build upon our understandings of this knowledge" (Hall, 2007, p. 49).

However, the essential thing about acquiring home culture is that it shows a lot of unawareness of the processes and means involved, much of culture is not learned through instruction. Looking at students' home culture as a rich and existing resource for enhancing intercultural competence, special classroom activities should be aimed at relating L1 culture to other cultures. There is reason to argue that they should become part of the instructional practices: activities based on scaffolding when teachers (materials writers, etc) as more experienced educators assist learners in competences building; activities based on modeling and training by providing examples and models of successful intercultural behavior for students to observe, follow and learn from. By doing that teachers socialize learners into culturally specific ways of thinking and knowing (Hall, 2007) and facilitate the change from one cultural perspective of looking at communicative situations to multiple perspectives of other cultures. As Byram (2000) stresses, "The teacher should only help learners to identify values and assumptions, and to become conscious of their own standpoint. This awareness then helps them to interact more successfully with others, recognizing points of conflicting views, negotiating resolutions or, where this is possible, clarifying where difference has to be accepted." (p. 98).

The point to make here is that though language learning – as any learning – is a process of sociocultural transformation (Hall, 2007), students should not set aside their cultural identity but through acquiring new knowledge and skills become much better equipped and enriched. "In other words, learning a foreign language does *not* mean losing one's identity and assuming new cultural roles. Rather, it entails having a clearly defined identity, a strong sense of self" (Porto, 2000, p. 91). Thus addressing the issues of L1 culture and other cultures in a comparative perspective will help learners getting a better awareness of what their cultural identity entails and what makes them the representatives of their culture. This also will give them the insights into how their identities are expressed through a foreign language in intercultural encounters with linguistically and culturally diverse interactants. In the intercultural situations identities serve as a framework of reference to look for similarities and differences both in verbal and non-verbal behaviors. To provide this understanding, teachers should be encouraged to use the materials and activities demonstrating that identities

are the products of cultures.

With greater awareness of their own culture learners will be better prepared to communicate across cultures effectively. Many would agree that what is happening in the great number of cases is that an overwhelming majority of EFL learners do not aspire to become a member of L2 culture. They learn the language to become functional in international activities: to publish, do research and business, study and travel, etc. This changes the whole focus of culture learning and means that the ultimate goal of learning English is not to approximate the native speaker cultural model but to become a proficient user of the language who can express her identity through a foreign language.

A final point worth noting is that expressing identity also involves showing attitudes to cultures being learned. It is another key theme that dominates intercultural teaching. Lantolf (2001) points out that “work on culture learning and teaching has been more interested in attitudinal issues relating to learner’s development of tolerance and understanding of other cultures as well as in the degree to which the study of other cultures enhances cultural self-awareness.”(p. 28). Cultures, no doubt, can be perceived as exciting and exotic, unbelievable or frustrating. That is why teachers should pay a constant attention to the attitudinal aspect of culture learning and teach students to try to look at the culture objectively and try to recognize that there might exist a different system of values and cultural meanings. Increased realization that difference is not a deficiency, that cultural and linguistic diversity is a natural thing should become part of learning. True understanding, therefore, occurs as a result of assimilation of experience (Benderly, 1997) and “personalizing learning by applying it to our own lives” (Davis, 2007, p. 2). Thus it is useful to place a special emphasis on organizing opportunities and instructional activities engaging students to practice empathy, adaptability and tolerance. While presenting a challenge in the classroom, they, no doubt, mean emotional engagement and sensitive appreciation of the people and the culture of other countries.

Conclusion

Samovar (2007) points out that culture that we acquire from the moment of birth has a “most important characteristic – *it is learned*” (p. 21) (emphasis in the original). Can a foreign culture in the EFL classroom be learned similarly to home culture? Obviously, no. And mostly due to the fact that a learner has already acquired cultural constructs of his home culture and through one course cannot be transformed cognitively, emotionally and culturally to become a person with new identity. Using a foreign language, students still demonstrate the behaviors of representatives of their home culture. Then what goals do we work towards to while teaching interculturality? The essential point is that the intercultural approach to a foreign language education does not anymore encourage mimicking a linguistic and cultural behavior of native speakers of English. Educators voice a lot of doubts about the learnability of native speaker culture and about learners’ capability to acquire a native speaker cultural model. Thus the goal is to teach EFL learner to capitalize on his/her own culture and a variety of other cultures. In other words, intercultural education is mainly about cultural explanations and clarification why we behave like that, why we think in that way, why we are different and distinct. Developing learners interculturality through assimilating these important concepts helps a learner to be prepared to speak about their culture using resources of a foreign language and generally approach a representative of another culture critically and creatively with empathy and understanding.