THE INFLUENCE OF CULTURAL CONSTRAINTS ON COMPREHENSION AMONG SECOND LANGUAGE (L₂) LEARNERS: IMPLICATIONS FOR LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING

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Abstract

Very many factors have been found to influence second language learning. For instance, affective factors such as attitude, motivation and personality have usually been acknowledged to play important role in second language learning. Other factors include environmental factors which could be geographical and/or cultural. This discourse reviewed the various ways in which cultural constraints and cultural differences impede comprehension among second language (L_2) learners. Emphasis was on listening, reading, pragmatics and viewing comprehension. It was recommended that language teacher apply strategies and techniques like infantilization, dramatization, excursion, audio and visual resources to concretize their lessons. Also, to bridge the cultural gap between the second language learner and the culture of the target language, acculturation or immersion programme is recommended. This is to ensure deeper contact between the learner and the culture, native speakers and the target language.

Key Words: culture, comprehension and second language learning

Introduction

Second language acquisition is the process by which people learn languages in addition to their native language(s). The term second language is used to describe any language whose acquisition starts after early childhood (including what may be the third or subsequent language learned). Second language is often referred to as (L_2) in comparison with the first language (L_1)

(Krashen, 1982). Second language acquisition attracts a lot of difficulties arising from learner factors (external and internal); affective factors, individual variation, cultural variation etc.

The leaner external factors include social disposition, input and intake, interaction; internal factors have to do with the learners' pattern or order of language learning. The affective factors include anxiety, personality or self-concept and motivation; individual variation includes language aptitude, age and strategy use and then cultural variation connote differences in background. All the factors addressed above make second language acquisition a unique but error bound endeavor. However, whatever roles these factors play in second language acquisition, comprehension is critical to language learning and usage.

Here we shall concern ourselves with how cultural variations affect comprehension at various levels among second language learners.

The Influence of Cultural Constraints on Listening Comprehension among l₂ Learners

Speaking is a fundamental language skill preceded only by listening, (Asher 1977 in Ituen, 2010). Language is primarily oral or basically spoken. The urge to speak a language is demonstrated in the activities of the language learner. It is believed that most learners begin their acquisition process with a 'silent period' usually described as a period of 'language shock'. However, research has shown that many 'silent' learners are engaging in private speech sometimes called 'self-talk'. While appearing silent, they are rehearsing important survival phrases and lexical chunks, (Ellis 1994). These memorized phrases are then employed in the subsequent period of formulaic speech. Reciprocating this natural order in language learning, there has been a de-emphasis on the traditional L2 teaching and learning practices in favour of a new trend that emphasizes communication (Allen & Widdowson 1985 in Maduekwe 2007).

Corroborating the emphasis on communication, linguists say that 'speaking is language'. Man has always used the power of speech to verbalize his thoughts and ideas. Oral skills are primary since people speak their languages before reading and writing occur. Also, our knowledge of language acquisition reveals that in acquiring a language, the child/learner first learns to hear/listen, speak before learning to read and write.

Listening comprehension depends most on acoustic and auditory clarity. It has to do with decoding and acting out of verbal information whether first hand or recorded in a tape. Many factors can mar listening comprehension naturally. For instance, noise, impaired hearing and emotions or dispositions can militate against effective listening. Cultural differences can hinder listening comprehension. Language and culture are interwoven and many language elements are culture specific.

The decoding and positive reaction envisaged or expected from an L_2 user may be delayed or non-existent owing to cultural constraints. This is one of the reasons interlocutors laugh over non-funny issues or frown over non-serious matters. Again, it is common knowledge that L_2 users transfer some language elements in their L_1 into their L_2 learning and usage. As a result, when some fossilized elements or sounds are applied in speech, listening comprehension among L_2 users is hampered especially when the fossilized sounds or elements are not existent in the linguistic background of the listener.

Fancy the following examples of fossilized language elements;

- Yoruba fossilized 'ead', 'and' and 'heat' etc relative to English 'head', 'hand' and 'eat'. This apparently distorts the meaning of the above English words and make comprehension difficult for non-Yoruba listener.

- Yoruba Ìgbò L_2 learner's fossilization of the /z/ sound relative to the Ìgbò /s/ sound in the sentence 'ezi' m Oyo' instead of 'esi m Oyo' (1 hail from Oyo).

- The Yoruba Arabic speaker's fossilization of 'Sapter' relative to English 'chapter' etc.

- Hausa speaker's fossilization of 'Pilip', 'priend', 'feter' relative to 'Philip', 'friend' 'Peter' respectively.

- Anambra (Ìgbò) speakers' fossilization of 'rawrence', 'Rondon' relative to English 'Lawrence', 'London' etc.

- Further on this issue, a Yoruba speaker perceived Ìgbò greeting 'kedu?' ọ di mma (how are you? Fine) as 'Gedu' o du njee (wood//timber? It is good edible).

- I had a personal experience when I took lectures on research method with a Yoruba lecturer in the University. The lecturer fossilized the word 'mayor' relative to the word 'measure'. I continued to take meaningless notes until he released his note to the class.

Also, unfamiliar supra-segmental elements like tones, intonation, ascent, stress etc. cause hitch in listening comprehension among L_2 users. The fact I am making is that fossilization hampers listening comprehension among L_2 users. Fossilization being 'linguistic phenomena, items, rules, subsystem which speakers of a particular native language (NL) will tend to keep in his inter language (IL) relative to a particular target language (TL), no matter what age of the learner, or amount of explanation and instruction he/she receives in TL (Selinker, 1969). These constitute a sample of cultural constraints to listening comprehension among L_2 users.

The Influence of Cultural Constraints on Reading Comprehension among L2 Users

Theoretically, reading is viewed from two points. Reading is a mechanical process; reading is a mental process. It is surprising to many people to learn that the rhythmical travels of the eyes from left to right over a page of print is not automatic, but a skill that has to be learnt. The eyes systematically move, stop, move, stop and move along the line of writing and this movement is called saccadelic movement. The stops the eyes make between the saccadelic movements are known as fixation and it is during these fixations that reading takes place. The part of the line the reader perceives at a fixation is called perception span. Dellman et al (1974) in Ikonne (2003), wrote that fixation time constitutes over 90% of time spent on reading, while the movement of the eyes from one fixation to another accounts for less than 10% of the time. The length of the perception span and the number of fixations per line are determined by the difficulty of the text, the readers' purpose and his level of efficiency.

However, during reading, time comes when the reader makes a backward movement from a point of fixation to a previously read. The backward movement is called regression. Certain factors, negative or positive can account for regression ranging from poor vision, difficulty of materials, attempts to grasp a point i.e. effort to reinforce the message and failure to imbibe the left to right orientation in reading. This is very important because, a Chinese child learns to read from top to bottom of the page, a Persian child from right to left. In our own context, a child must be taught to cultivate the left to right eye movement as a habit. "Failure to do this accounts for why poor readers reverse letters in certain words. The mental process of reading on the other hand, takes place in the brain. What the eye perceives is interpreted here and the reader now obtains meaning from the marks on the page, (Ituen 2004).

Reading is the most widely used of all the language skills. It is a tool for learning and a stimulus for formal education. Anderson, (2002) described reading as, 'a process of constructing meaning from the written texts.' He sees skilled reading a constructive, fluent, strategic,

motivated and a lifelong pursuit. Elucidating on this, Anderson says, 'reading is a basic life skill, a cornerstone for a child's success in school and indeed throughout life'. He asserted, 'without the ability to read well, opportunities for personal fulfilment and job success inevitably will be lost'.

Reading is also perceived as a means of language acquisition, of communication, and of sharing information and ideas. Like in all languages, it is a complex interaction between the text and the reader which is shaped by the reader's prior knowledge, experiences, attitude and language community which is culturally and socially situated. Foertsch's (1998) definitions of reading as cited in Beth, (2006) highlighted three processes of reading which includes; learning to pronounce words, learning to identify words and get their meaning and learning to bring meaning to a text in order to get meaning from it. This by implication suggests that reading is a skill that demands competence.

The writer presents his/her ideas or information in words in a linear order while the reader has to read and understand this linear string of words. Especially for more experienced readers, (say for schools and colleges), reading becomes less of a problem of recognizing words and more a matter of reasoning, involving the meaningful interpretation of verbal symbols (such as words, phrases and sentences) and requiring all types of thinking, evaluating, judging, imagination and problem solving. Thus, reading process involves both the acquisition of the meaning intended by the writer and the reader's own contribution in the form of interpretation, evaluation and reflection about these meanings. All the reading experts agree that reading means more than mere looking or even moping at the printed material, it is a practical task whereby the reader is required to react to the materials in several ways ending up in complete comprehension of the prints.

Reading has to do with decoding of written text. It has to do with making of meaning out of the print. Comprehension is fundamental and critical to reading. For mature readers, reading has no meaning and a waste of time if comprehension does not occur.

However, comprehension can be hindered by cultural constraints in various ways. For instance, it is only natural that people write the way they speak. For one who speaks using language lore like idioms, proverbs most likely apply such in his written discourse. For instance, writers like Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi and Chinua Achebe to mention but a few are adept in the use of linguistic aphorisms. These give second language users who come from a different background extra processing load before comprehension takes place.

Again, apart from use of linguistic aphorisms, there are certain concepts that are customized or indigenous to the writer which when reflected in the discourse affect comprehension adversely. In the Ìgbò acculturation programme organized at the National Institute for Nigerian Languages, Aba, Abia state, Nigeria, for the Ìgbò L_2 learners from Colleges of Education in Nigeria, there are some concepts that are used crude because they are customized/indigenous Ìgbò concepts without English equivalents. At such classes, comprehension is delayed. The L_2 learners may or may not have name for such concepts in their mother tongue or first language. For instance, 'Ụkpọ', 'achị', 'ọfọ' etc. (which are varieties of soup thickeners) constitute a sample. That is where visual communication becomes pertinent in L_2 teaching and learning.

Furthermore, research has shown that cultural constraints or variation affects examination performance. Alastair et al. (2000) revealed this when they conducted a multicultural educational assessment on mathematics using a foreign student from Pakistan who emigrated to England and seemed to be under-performing in mathematics. The researchers analyzed using discrete point approach ten (10) different questions drawing samples from questions he

performed very well in and samples from the questions he performed below expectation. Their analysis revealed that he under- performed in questions that are culture specific or bound but did well in other questions.

Influence of Cultural Constraints on Pragmatics Comprehension Among L₂ Users

Comprehension of pragmatics is strong evidence of increasing language competence among L_2 users. This is what Canale and Swain (1980) described as Sociolinguistic Competence in their Communicative Competence Model. The sociolinguistic competence is one of the most functional components in Canale and Swain's model of communicative competence. The sociolinguistic competence requires an understanding of the social context in which language is used i.e. how language is used in social contexts to perform communicative functions. This corresponds with Hymes' (1972) rules of use. The sociolinguistic competence is formed by two sets of rules. The rules are socio-cultural rules and discourse competence rules (Yunita, 2006). The socio-cultural rules pay attention to how utterances are produced and understood appropriately within a socio-cultural context taking into account factors such as topic, role of participants, setting, norms of interaction, attitude and register.

Hymes (1972) postulated that the ability to speak competently not only entails knowing the grammatical rules, but also knowing what to say, to whom, in what circumstance and how to say it. In Hymes' views, there are rules of use without which the rules of grammar would be useless. Hymes considers communicative competence the interaction of grammatical, psycholinguistic, socio-cultural and probabilistic systems of competence, (Canale & Swain 1980). Hymes asserted that communicative competence should include the social meaning.

The ability to understand words when used in different situations and contexts bring L_2 learners near native speakers' competence. And here is another language level where culture affects comprehension adversely. For instance, the second language users need to understand the language use and rules governing languages use in the target language. In Yoruba, for a bird's eye view, there is a difference in the use of the word 'ose' and 'ese' (thank you). Sometimes, they are alternated. In the case of 'ese' the 'e' is a plural marker that applies to elders as a mark of respect. Again, it is most unlikely to hear a young one asking an elderly 'bawoni' in Yoruba, or 'kedu' in the case of Ìgbò. Also, such expressions as 'ota mi de, ada mi do' in Ibira language (variety of Yoruba) can be misinterpreted as 'father bring knife my enemy is here' instead of 'father come, my friend is here' by an L_2 user because of cultural difference.

Collocations and language aphorisms are mostly culture specific. They interpreted differently ie literally by L_2 users. For instance, an old man who captures the hash economic condition with an expression, 'Amu akughaala ikpere' can be misunderstood to actually mean that 'penis has grown beyond the knee'. Also, in pragmatic contexts, an L_2 user may fail to understand such principles as 'anaghi agụ nwa ọnụ (children are not counted) in Ìgbò culture.

In pragmatic discussions, there are taboo words or expressions that are confined to a special group (language of the cult) etc. which are permissible to one's culture. Such words or expressions attract code switching when the need for their use arises but the L_2 users may not understand the reason for the avoidance and consequently fall short of expectation of usage or experience communication freeze when the expected expression is skipped by the native speakers. Cultural constraints make L_2 learners not appreciate euphemistic and ironical applications in the target language. For instance, the term 'agwọ' (snake) is not mentioned in the night in core Ìgbò setting, instead, it is tagged 'eriri (rope).

Elucidating on this point, second language learners of multi dialectal languages have problem of meta language i.e. one concept is called different things in as many dialects as existent in the

target language. For instance, in Ngwa Ìgbò, the elderly may refer to 'money 'as 'Nwa Ohuu' (New Baby), 'Ojomma', 'ikpeyi' etc. whereas the standard form is 'Ego'. The same Ngwa-Ìgbò refers to Fifty Naira note as 'Baby Note'. These expressions that deviate from the standard forms would certainly create comprehension gap for L_2 learners. It is therefore pertinent that the language teacher draws the learners' attention to synonyms.

Furthermore, the mode of settlement in Ìgbò land of Nigeria certainly differs widely from that of the other tribes like the Yoruba and the Hausa. Discussions centering on rural habitation and architectural structure of any of these tribes may not attract full comprehension to an L_2 learner. The Yoruba do not have masquerade in their culture. Masquerading is a peculiar cultural event for the South East and South South people of Nigeria. A non-indigene of these ethnic groups may not appreciate that certain roads are deserted at certain times whereas the indigenes are able to interpret the routes, warnings, signs and signals of advancing masquerade. In the same vein, second language user may not appreciate that items are priced in descending order in Yoruba community but in ascending order in other cultures. All these have to be taken into account while teaching pragmatics to L_2 learners in order to facilitate comprehension.

The Influence of Cultural Constraints on Viewing Comprehension among L_2 Learners

The concept of viewing comprehension is a recent phenomenon. The fact that communication transcends oral and written medium lends credence to the emerging perception of viewing comprehension (Hoven 1999). In her analysis of viewing comprehension (V.C.) and listening comprehension (L.C.) as it applies particularly in L_2 situation, Cross cultural researchers are focusing on the meaning conveyed by gesture, expression and body language leading to viewing comprehension among L_2 users. More often than not, second language learners make use of gestures and other forms of body language to comprehend linguistic information which ordinarily would have eluded them.

However, the cultural differences also bring about hitches in viewing comprehension. For instance, the gesture that signifies 'come' in Nigerian context is a sign of 'goodbye' in Western context. The gesture that means 'I warned you', 'serves you right' in the Ìgbò context may either be nonexistent in other ethnic group or conveys a different meaning all together. My little nephew used to run away from other children whenever he visited the village from the city. No one could fathom why he had phobia getting close to his mates in the village until he asked my mother if the children in the village were all lunatics. My mother answered that none of them was indeed. The poor boy asked, 'then why are they always naked? To the little boy born and groomed in the city, only lunatics appear naked.

Again, the sound a person from the core Northern Nigeria makes during conversation to show gross attention and comprehension is interpreted as resentment and indifference in the Ìgbò setting and audience.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Comprehension is the fundamental target in any mode of communication; oral, print or gesture among native speakers as well as L_2 users. This has implications for L_2 teaching and learning especially in a multilingual and multicultural society. This challenges the L_2 teachers to use visual and real live objects when they can to concretize their lessons especially culture-specific concepts. The language lessons would have to be infantilized in order to reduce stress for the learners and help them keep their affective filter low enough for optimal language intake. A lot of improvisations and audio-visual resources are needed from the teacher who would gently guide the learners through the development and usage of new vocabulary in a pragmatic sense. Excursions and dramatization/acting out roles are inevitable in second language situation. Also,

to bridge the cultural constraints in second language comprehension, the need for acculturation programme is not only pertinent but imperative for L_2 learners. This will ensure greater and deeper immersion into the target language and its culture.

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