



Enhancing Language Learning Through Cultural Understanding and Diagnostic Assessment Strategies

Hanwei Tan¹, Xiaoyan Zhou², Yuanfeng Zhang³

Defence Language Institute, United States^{1, 2, 3}

Abstract

In his book Language and Mind (1968), Chomsky discusses the role of culture in language acquisition and how cultural factors may influence language variation and use. According to Chomsky, language is deeply embedded in culture, and by delving into the cultural aspects of a language, learners can gain a deeper understanding and proficiency in that language. This presentation not only embraces Chomsky's theory but also explores the crucial role of cultural understanding and effective diagnostic assessment (DA) strategies. By combining these approaches, we aim to enhance language learning at higher proficiency levels. Through our practical experience, we have discovered that by emphasizing the teaching of culture and employing DA strategies that measure both linguistic and cultural competence, learners can surpass basic language skills and develop advanced proficiency. The presentation will cover the following topics: 1. The significance of using the target language in language learning and the advantages of creating an immersive language learning environment. 2. The integration of culture-focused learning to enhance learners' cultural understanding, sensitivity, and communication skills. 3. Strategies for designing and applying DA and ODA that encompass both linguistic proficiency and cultural competence, enabling a comprehensive evaluation of learners' language abilities. 4. Case studies that highlight the positive impact of this integrated approach on learners' language proficiency and cultural awareness. Readers will gain valuable insights and practical strategies to enhance their language teaching practices.

Keywords: culture, language, diagnostic assessment, strategies, competence

Introduction

In his seminal work, "Language and Mind" (1968), Noam Chomsky ventured into the intricacies of language acquisition, illuminating the profound connection between culture and the acquisition of language. Chomsky's insights challenged conventional wisdom, emphasizing that language, rather than being an isolated entity, is intricately woven into the cultural fabric within which it flourishes. This research pays tribute to Chomsky's theory, elucidating not only the central role of cultural understanding but also the integration of effective diagnostic assessment strategies (DA) within the domain of language education.

The essence of this research lies in the belief that language acquisition goes beyond mere linguistic proficiency. To attain advanced levels of language proficiency, learners must embark on a journey that encompasses the cultural nuances, traditions, and contextual intricacies that underlie the language they aim to master. Drawing from our extensive practical experience in language education, we have identified a powerful formula: the amalgamation of culture-focused learning and DA strategies, which evaluate both linguistic and cultural competence. This integrated approach not only propels learners beyond basic language skills but also cultivates advanced proficiency and cultural awareness.

There are four fundamental facets of this integrated approach:

1. The Significance of Using the Target Language in Culture-Based Immersion

Effective language learning often involves immersing oneself in the target language environment. Immersion allows learners to naturally develop their language skills and gain a deeper understanding of cultural nuances. Cultural Immersion involves engaging in cultural experiences that include virtual immersion. For example, as a part of classroom teaching tasks, they are asked to make reservations with a Chinese restaurant, schedule appointments with a Chinese doctor, or participate in online



forums, meetings, or conferences—all conducted in the target language. Instructors utilize rubrics to assess these tasks, encompassing not only linguistic proficiency but also the understanding and application of target culture. This comprehensive evaluation ensures that students grasp cultural nuances and can employ them effectively. Other cultural immersions may include watching films, reading literature, attending target language clubs like calligraphy, Taichi, folk music etc., or participating in events like Chinese New Year celebration, Chinese cultural event, and Chinese Talent Show. These encounters naturally expose learners to the language's cultural context, enabling them to develop language skills more organically and gain deeper insights into cultural subtleties.

2. Integration of Culture-Focused Learning

Incorporating cultural understanding into language teaching enriches the learning experience in profound ways. Culture-focused learning serves as a dynamic conduit that amplifies learners' cultural understanding, sensitivity, and communication skills, forging a deeper connection with the language.

Culture-focused learning cultivates cultural sensitivity among language learners, extending beyond the mere acquisition of grammar and vocabulary. It provides insights into the customs, traditions, and values of native speakers, allowing learners to authentically reflect culture in their behavior, attitude, and thinking. When in Rome, act like the Romans. By internalizing the culture, learners can genuinely embody it in their actions.

Language and culture are intricately intertwined, and culture-focused learning reinforces this connection and helps learners delve into the heart of a culture. It empowers learners to not only speak the language but also navigate the intricacies of cultural communication norms. For instance, the Chinese idiom 柔能克刚 (softness winning over the strong) extends beyond words to shape behaviors and attitudes. Understanding such cultural nuances enables learners to communicate effectively within the cultural context. Understanding such cultural underpinnings enriches learners' language proficiency and allows them to decode subtle nuances and idiomatic expressions.

Language and culture often intertwine in riddles and sayings. For example, the riddle "人有它大，天无它大" ("When a man has it, the man becomes big, and when heaven has not it, heaven becomes big") reveals deeper philosophical insights. Knowing the cultural context behind the characters aids in deciphering such riddles, offering a profound sense of cultural awareness.

Language is a mirror of culture, and dialogues provide a unique window into cultural phenomena. For instance, in the dialogue involving the word "意思" (*yisi* underlined below, the same word has different meaning in each sentence), learners not only focus on the linguistic aspect but also unveil the layers of culture hidden behind the word. It reveals concepts such as modesty, hypocriticalness, and corruption, showcasing the interconnectedness of language and culture.

A: “你这是什么意思？”- What do you mean by this?

B: “没什么意思，意思意思。”- Nothing. It's just a token of thanks.

A: “你这就不够意思了。”- You know you do not need to do this.

B: “一点小意思，小意思。”- Well, it's just a small gift.

A: “你这人真有意思。”- Emmm, you are an interesting guy.

B: “其实也没有别的意思。”- It's just a gift to express my gratitude. I mean nothing else.

A: “那我就不好意思了。”- Then I'd be rude not to take it.

B: “是我不不好意思。”I would be rude to visit you without any expression of thanks!

3. Strategies for Designing and Applying DA

As we know, diagnostic assessments encompass both linguistic proficiency and cultural competence, offering a holistic evaluation of learners' language abilities. It is a learner-centered approach, placing emphasis on how students learn best rather than on just concerning the materials. The surface



meaning and the deep meaning is subject to the learners' level of understanding of the linguistic meaning and cultural meaning behind the underlined words in context.

Diagnostic assessments encompass both linguistic proficiency and cultural competence, offering a holistic evaluation of learners' language abilities. This learner-centered approach emphasizes students' optimal learning methods rather than focusing solely on the materials. The interpretation of both surface and underlying meanings depends on the learners' comprehension of linguistic and cultural significance within the given context.

Diagnostic Assessment Dimensions: DA assesses learners from various dimensions, including Personality, Motivation, Learning Styles, and Cognitive Styles, among others. These aspects collectively contribute to a comprehensive evaluation of an individual's language learning potential and progress. There is also an Online Diagnostic assessment (ODA) for Proficiency and Cultural Understanding. ODA assesses learners on their comprehension of passages and vocabulary usage in context. Moreover, it can be tailored to evaluate learners' understanding of specific Foreign Language Objectives (FLO) topics such as culture and society, military and security, politics and economics, and environment and geography. ODA serves as a versatile tool for assessing both linguistic and cultural competence.

Assessment items may include questions pertaining to cultural practices, gestures, and etiquette, which serve to assess learners' comprehension of cultural nuances and their sensitivity towards cultural differences. When it comes to incorporating cultural elements into diagnostic assessment, a specialized focus on culture proficiency can be achieved through the following strategies:

- 1) **Cultural Competence Evaluation:** To gauge cultural competence effectively, it is imperative to integrate target cultural components into assessment items. This process involves evaluating an individual's ability to interact with proficiency. Assessment items may include questions pertaining to cultural practices, gestures, and etiquette, which serve to assess learners' comprehension of cultural nuances and their sensitivity towards cultural differences.
- 2) **Cultural Contextualization:** The integration of cultural contexts within language tasks is a pivotal strategy. This approach assesses how well learners can practically apply their language skills within real-life situations embedded in specific cultural contexts. Recognizing that language proficiency is intrinsically connected to cultural competency, this strategy empowers individuals to communicate effectively while comprehending the cultural subtleties of a foreign language. It includes two perspectives:
 - A. **Cultural Sensitivity:** Promoting awareness of cultural differences and discouraging stereotypes is of paramount importance. Assessments within this category may include scenarios or case studies wherein individuals are tasked with responding appropriately to culturally sensitive situations, thereby fostering cultural sensitivity.
 - B. **Cross-Cultural Communication:** Effective communication across diverse cultures is a vital facet of cultural competency. Assessments in this domain focus on evaluating an individual's capacity to engage in respectful and appropriate communication with individuals from different cultural backgrounds. This encompasses assessing listening skills, proficiency in non-verbal communication, and competence in resolving intercultural conflicts.
- 3) **Feedback and Remediation:** Ensuring comprehensive feedback is critical to the assessment process. Feedback should not solely address linguistic errors but should also encompass cultural misunderstandings. Additionally, offering resources and avenues for remediation in both linguistic and cultural aspects equips learners with the necessary tools and support to enhance both their language proficiency and their understanding of diverse cultures.

By employing these strategies, educators can create a robust framework for diagnostic assessment that not only evaluates language skills but also delves deeply into cultural proficiency. High cultural competency and high language proficiency are closely interlinked, with language proficiency serving as a valuable tool for enhancing cultural competency. However, it is crucial to recognize that cultural competency encompasses more than just language skills. It encompasses knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors that promote effective and respectful interactions with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds.



4. Case Studies

In this segment, we will delve into concrete case studies that highlight the tangible benefits of our integrated approach, showcasing its positive impact on learners' language proficiency and cultural awareness.

Case 1: Unlocking Cultural Nuances through Language

In an advanced class, students were organized into three groups, each comprising three members. Each group was assigned a different passage containing the statement '青出于蓝而胜于蓝' (blue comes from the indigo plant, but it is bluer than indigo) to read and explain its meaning in the given context. This statement originates from an essay by the ancient Chinese scholar Xun Zi. The passages included:

- "This young actor, although a newcomer, has astonished audiences with his performance in the latest movie. His acting skills '青出于蓝而胜于蓝,' surpassing many seasoned actors."
- "Although this young entrepreneur is just starting out, his creativity and business acumen have made his company stand out in the market, '青出于蓝而胜于蓝,' quickly gaining the trust and support of customers and investors."
- "This young artist, though at the beginning of his career, has already garnered widespread attention and acclaim in the international art world. His creativity and unique style make his artwork '青出于蓝而胜于蓝,' becoming a rising star in the contemporary art scene."

Students initially studied the passages within their original groups, focusing on the key word '胜' (surpass, stand out) and the meaning of the statement within the passage. They then broke into three new groups, each comprising members from different original groups, to share their interpretations. Finally, each student submitted a report on their understanding of the statement and applied it to at least one example they found independently. The essays were assessed based on the degree of comprehension and the accuracy and appropriateness of the application.

Language proficiency: students were assessed on their comprehension of the statement and their ability to apply its meaning to different contexts. This assessment evaluated their linguistic and cultural competence. The essays submitted by students were assessed based on the degree of comprehension and the accuracy and appropriateness of the application. This aligns with the principles of diagnostic assessment, which aims to measure a learner's abilities comprehensively.

Cultural Proficiency: The statement '青出于蓝而胜于蓝' is deeply rooted in Chinese culture and philosophy. It is an example of a cultural concept conveyed through language. Students needed to understand not only the linguistic aspects of the statement but also its cultural connotations and implications. This demonstrates the integration of cultural understanding into the assessment process. By engaging with this statement in different contexts (acting, entrepreneurship, art), students gained insights into how culture shapes language and communication in diverse fields.

Case 2: Unlocking Cultural Depth in Language Proficiency

Here high proficiency Chinese language learners faced challenges in understanding highly nuanced language, such as the lyrics of a song by Dao Lang. The lyrics contained the phrase, "那马户不知道他是一头驴，那又鸟不知道他是一只鸡" (The horse and household do not know that he is a donkey, and the other bird does not know that she is a chicken).

While the surface meaning was decipherable by combining simplified and traditional Chinese characters (马户=驴 and 又鸟=鸡), the deep meaning critiqued an upside-down society where chickens assumed political roles, and individuals with donkey-like qualities took center stage on the battlefield. To comprehend the profound cultural elements behind the language, the learner was guided to read the novel 《聊斋志异》 written by 蒲松龄 in the Qing Dynasty.



Language proficiency: The learner's initial difficulty in comprehending the lyrics highlights the need for diagnostic assessment, as it identified a specific area where the learner required support. The learner's journey to understand the lyrics involved reading a novel from the Qing Dynasty, showcasing a tailored approach to address the learner's unique needs. This approach aligns with the principles of diagnostic assessment, which involve identifying areas for improvement and providing targeted support.

Cultural Proficiency: The lyrics contained cultural elements and metaphors that were not immediately apparent to the learner. This demonstrates the intertwining of language and culture. The learner's reading of the novel 《聊齋志異》 further illustrates the importance of cultural contextualization and sensitivity in language learning. By delving into the novel, the learner gained a deeper understanding of the cultural elements embedded in the lyrics. This showcases the enhancement of cultural proficiency through language learning.

Both case studies underscore the relevance of diagnostic assessment in identifying learners' strengths and weaknesses in both linguistic and cultural aspects. They also emphasize the importance of cultural contextualization, sensitivity, and understanding in language learning. By integrating DA and cultural proficiency, these case studies showcase a holistic approach to language education that goes beyond linguistic skills to encompass cultural awareness and competence.

5. Conclusion: Nurturing Proficiency Through Cultural Integration

Language stands as more than a standalone entity; it is the vessel through which culture finds expression, and culture, in turn, molds language. To excel in a foreign tongue, one must traverse beyond grammar and vocabulary, navigating the intricate tapestry of cultural norms, values, and behaviors. This fusion of language and culture forges learners into true communicators, equipped to engage effectively and respectfully with individuals from diverse backgrounds.

As educators and learners embark on this journey, it is paramount to acknowledge that cultural proficiency surpasses language skills alone. It encompasses knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors that foster meaningful and respectful interactions across cultural boundaries. In this holistic approach, we bridge the gap between linguistic proficiency and cultural awareness, equipping learners with the tools to thrive in an interconnected world.

References

- [1] Chomsky, Noam. "Language and Mind: Linguistic Contributions to the Study of Mind" Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1968, <http://rarre.org/documents/chomsky/Noam%20Chomsky-%20Language%20and%20Mind.pdf>.
- [2] Liu, Ke. "以弱胜强: 卮言句式析解下的《道德经》第六十七章兵法思想解读." Humanities Social Science Journals of Hainan Universities, vol. 33, no. 1 (January 2015).
- [3] See ODA at [Online Diagnostic Assessment - DLIFLC](#)