Discussion on the Relationship between Language and Culture

Junyu Chen

Hebei United University, Tangshan, China

Abstract—**This paper discusses three cultural issues about English language teaching and learning and culture. The first issue touches upon the problem of Chinese English learners naming after English ones; the second probes into the debate if non-native English learners should use Anglo-American rhetoric structure in academic writing; the third debate is about if non-verbal language should be taught in English as a second or foreign language classroom. The three debates are important issues in the EFL or ESL context and of positive significance in the language education.**

Index Terms—**language and culture, English names, rhetoric structure, non-verbal language**

I. INTRODUCTION

Language and culture has become a pair which is closely related to each other. The research and study in the field is gaining an increasing momentum all over the world and is playing an important part in language education. This essay will analyse three debates concerning language and culture that that bears impacts on English teaching and learning. One debate discusses the practice of Chinese learners adopting English names. Another debate talks about if non-native English users should adopt the Anglo-American rhetoric structure in academic writing. And the last one is about non-verbal language and discusses if it should be taught in the micro classroom.

II. DEBATE 1 ON THE PRACTICE OF CHINESE LEARNERS ADOPTING ENGLISH NAMES

The phenomenon that Chinese people adopt English names to the extent which any other Asian country has never reached is not unusual in English or English-related fields (Edwards, 2006). Many English learners within and outside of China at various levels from kindergarten to tertiary level tend to use English names, and even those Chinese business people like to use English names when doing business with English native speakers. The debate focuses on the different people's ideas on the phenomenon (if they argue for or against the adoption of English names among Chinese people) rather than how their English names were produced.

There are those who strongly resist or disagree with the adoption for several major reasons. One reason is that they believe that adopting English names means 'losing their own (Chinese) identity' (Edwards, 2006). A person's name is very much a part of who s/he is. Our names reflect our sense of identity, who we are in relation to the world around us. This identity can be social identity, socio-cultural identity, cultural identity and ethnic identity (Norton, 2000). It can be roughly inferred that to change a Chinese identity seems to change any sort of identity above (Kiang, Harter & Whitesell, 2007). Another reason that they reject English names is that they believe adopting English names is the result of linguistic imperialism. Linguistic imperialism is defined as 'ideologies, structures, and practices which are used to legitimate, effectuate, and reproduce an unequal division of power and resources' (Kramsch, 1998). The resources can be both material and symbolic and language and education are typical symbolic resources (Norton, 2000). The fact is that English, the global language, is being learned by more than 1 billion people in the world as a second language or foreign language. Besides, the scientific and technological resources in English dominantly occupy the world market. China, a country with the largest population learning English as a foreign language, shows a more salient unbalance. With the highly out-of-balance global and national environment, the practice of adopting English names seems inevitable. This out-of-balance may result in any change in terms of cultural factors including name changing. Therefore, name changing can be the product of linguistic imperialism in the sense.

There are others who regard this as a manifestation of social improvement in China because they believe Chinese people are becoming more open to the world. One of my friends insists that adopting English names should indicate that Chinese people are seeing the world in a new or international perspective rather than in a 'pure' Chinese way. In today's society, a person is expected to take on new identities through life, dropping some, changing others, and take on new ones (Gee, 2006). Furthermore, for the Chinese students, the adoption of an English name is undoubtedly 'investment' in the target language and in a learner's own identity, an identity which is constantly changing across time and space. The notion of investment conceives of the language learner as having a complex social history and multiple desires. The notion presupposes that when language learners speak, they are not only exchanging information with target language speakers, but they are constantly organizing and reorganizing a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world (Norton, 2000). Besides, many people argue that name changing can be seen a flexible approach to enter a new

discourse community and conduct social activities. Learners learning English in a native country find it easier to involve in classroom discussion and interaction with teachers and peers. Chinese business people believe they can make more profits when doing business with native English speakers if an English name is introduced because a Chinese with a real Chinese name is often unequally treated by native speakers. In this case, name changing is a sort of strategy to approach western discourse communities or adapt to new cultures. This has little to do with identity change because an individual can have more than one cultural identity (Campbell, 2000).

As far as I am concerned, the issue of name changing is a very complex phenomenon in communication, which involves various factors like traditional, historical, social, economic and cultural ingredients. It is a both collective and personal, both social and cultural (including home and foreign cultures) construct. All these factors co-construct the appearing of the issue in a certain time and space. Of course it does not exclude that the chances that some people gave themselves an English name with the motif of following suit (blind belief) or self-fashioning (to have a foreign name is a sort of fashion). But it also shows one's personal or internal culture is changing at a certain period of time and space with the changes of external cultural factors. Nevertheless, I strongly disagree with such assertions like Blum's (as cited in Edwards, 2006) that '(Chinese) people are accustomed to being addressed and referred to by an assortment of names, and they do not necessarily retain any of them as their real name or as the one that they feel reflects their identity'. The assertion centres on the internal factors (one side of the coin) without considering the influences of external factors (the other side of the coin) and therefore it is not comprehensive or sufficiently grounded. To sum up, a post-structuralist understanding is that a person constructs multiple identities over time and in diverse contexts; that each such identity is capable of change; and that some may be in tension, even in conflict with others (Lemke, 2002).

In addition, I like to turn to the distinction between a *self* and a *person* to explain the question. A *person* is the publicly recognized human individual who is the focus of overt practices of social life, while a *self* is the still centre of experience to which various conscious states, including organizations of memory, perception, and agency, are attributed (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000). A name is more a *person* than a *self*. So changing a name is changing what the *person* is in the public socialization and the *self* is not necessarily changing. Personally, I think a *self* is relatively stable even though it is a coherent dynamic system according to Penuel & Wertsch (as cited in Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000). However, I take the position that the *person* and the *self* should keep balance. Our *self* is accumulated in one or more than one cultures over many years and personal cultures should be valued. When the person goes too far from the *self* (for example, a person got a ridiculous English name like 'dog or monkey'), a kind of cultural returning or letting our *self* stands a point may be a solution. But the cultural returning process must be realized in a complicated context where all the factors play a part.

As for the questions like why English names are so widespread in China while in other Asian countries is not, I believe it is because the collaborative function of the dominant language English and perceptions of Chinese people. First of all, English is the only dominant foreign language in China, so anglicized names are more popular that other foreign names. Secondly, in the whole Chinese history continuum, China has been an open country since Qin Dynasty and the openness lasted over one thousand years otherwise China would not have been a leading country in ancient times (Tiexue Forum, 2007). The historical openness and modern open policy and English education at present may contribute to the phenomenon of naming changing.

III. DEBATE 2 ON NON-NATIVE USERS OF ENGLISH ADOPTING ANGLO-AMERICAN RHETORIC STRUCTURE IN ACADEMIC WRITING

Since Kaplan (1966) proposes the diagram of cultural thought patterns, the relationship of language and culture has gained increasing momentum in the past decades, and as an aspect of the relationship of language and culture, the interaction of cultural meaning and rhetorical style in the written mode across languages and traditions of literacy has been concerned by many educators and researchers (Kachru, 1999). Variation in discourse which can only be understood in terms of the sociocultural contexts; that is, patterns of discourse use are socially and culturally shaped (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996). Since different speech communities have different ways of organizing ideas in writing (Kachru, 1999), should non-native users of English employ rhetorical progressions of text that are congruous with the expectations of Anglo-American readers and researchers? Or to narrow down the question to within academic writing and English language teaching in outer circles, should Anglo-American styles be regarded as the standard paradigm in academy and therefore be taught in the classroom? As for the topic, there is a heated debate as follows:

Many researchers argue that it is both necessary and desirable for the non-native users of English to learn to construct text according to paradigms commonly found in Anglo-American writing if they wish to participate in and contribute to the pool of scientific and technological knowledge (Kachru, 1999). It is echoed with the perception that each language and each culture has a paragraph order unique to itself, part of the learning of a particular language is the mastering of its logical system or of the logos immanent in the language (Kramsch, 2004). And Kaplan (as cited in Kramsch, 2004) also maintains his original position that the acquisition of a second (or foreign) language really requires the simultaneous acquisition of a whole new universe and a whole new way of looking at it. In addition, to be academically literate in English, non-native users of English have to acquire not only certain linguistic skills, but also the preferred values, discourse conventions, and knowledge content of the academy (Canagarajah, 1999). To some extent, the academic discourses are historically associated with the values and interests of centre-based English speaking

communities. To sum up and put simply, their basic idea is that 'to play a game is to follow the rules'. 'Without rules, the game is a mess.' Their implication is that the characterization of non-Anglo-American writing as indicative of flawed logic and idiosyncratic reasoning presents non-native users of English as incapable of contributing to the growth of relevant knowledge (Kramsch, 2004).

Opposite to this, others see the issue differently. Their main claim is that the institutionalized varieties of English used in the countries of the outer circle have developed their grammatical and textual forms to express their contexts of culture (as cited in Kachru, 1999). The lexicogrammar and discoursal patterns they use represent their ways of saying and meaning. In other words, discoursal patterns must be dependent on context of culture otherwise meaning could not be well negotiated or represented. At the same time they point out the advantages of coexistence of various rhetorical styles in academy. The rhetorical styles include Anglo-American style represented by a straight downward arrow, oriental style represented by a spiral circling toward the centre, the romance style by a downward crooked arrow broken up by several horizontal digressional plateus (Kachru, 1999; Kramsch, 2004). In view of the findings of the research on socialization through language, it is not possible to train the entire English-using population of the world to the way of thinking and writing in American, British, or any other variety of English. In other words, not all the English-using world can become identical to the Anglo-American society. Furthermore, it would be a pity to deny large numbers of people of the western and non-western worlds the opportunity to participate in and contribute to the development of knowledge in all fields, including science and technology (Kachru, 1999). To think about the issue from the perspective of world knowledge base, excluding the outer circle means even inner circle cannot benefit the publications and contributions from outer circle.

I strongly agree with the idea that it is necessary to foster an awareness of different rhetorical structures among English inner and outer circles, that is to allow having different discourse accents (writing styles that bear the mark of a discourse community's ways of using language) in academy (Kachru, 1999; Kramsch, 1998). Both Anglo-Americans and non-Anglo Americans ought to develop such a global awareness and it is quite partial to distinguish Western and the Other (Oriental) or Anglo-Americans and the Other (Pennycook, 1998) in terms of knowledge base in the world. After all, in academic writing transmission of a message is of prime importance; the topic or message and its transferability from one context to the other is the main concern (Kramsch, 1998). Plus, English teachers should also develop more than constrain a certain rhetorical structure because I believe each culture deserves the right to express themselves in their own way. In addition, there is evidence that writing across inner circle Englishes does not follow identical conventions (Kachru, 1999).

IV. Debate 3 on Nonverbal Language Being Taught in Language Classrooms

Nonverbal communication appears to be swift and subtle. Much study has been carried out on the domain of nonverbal research (Wiemann & Harrison, 1983). Nonverbal language refers to tone, intonation, emphasis, facial expressions, gestures and hand movements, distance, and eye contact, in short, nonverbal signals, or the silent language (Varner & Beamer, 2005). Since it is named some sort of 'language', should language teachers teach nonverbal language in language classrooms? Or put it more specifically, can English teachers in China teach nonverbal language in the Chinese context? There are two extremes on the issue. One is that nonverbal language is really playing an important role in interpersonal communication, in particular face-to-face interaction and it must be taught in language education. The other stresses the difficulty of teaching nonverbal language in the classroom.

On one hand, the importance of nonverbal language in communication is highlighted in the statistics: some researchers maintain that in face-to-face communication up to *ninety-nine* percent of an oral message is communicated nonverbally and that the nonverbal elements are a much better indicator of the true meaning than the actual worlds are (Varner & Beamer, 2005). It can be inferred that verbal language sometimes can be not so real and attempt to deceive or hide something while nonverbal language is 'real' representative of meaning making in discourse. In fact, nonverbal behaviours can sometimes be deceptive because people can consciously control nonverbal signals (Patterson, 1983). For example, somebody is very angry with another but they may show a happy reaction with some special purposes. Nevertheless, it is generally agreed that nonverbal signals are often a real reflection of people's true feelings and reactions.

To apply this to classroom teaching, it is of great significance in interpersonal communication and in language classroom. Firstly, a good understanding of nonverbal signals can become an effective strategy of enhancing learning (Galloway, 1970). In the Chinese context, some non-English major students characterise as silent and unwilling to respond to the teacher for various reasons. When they may demonstrate nonverbal signals such as frowning or puzzled look to show they do not understand well or disagree, the teacher may approach to them and ask if what the teacher makes sense to him or if they have any different ideas. By so doing, the students not only feel the warmth from the teacher and can more positively get involved in the teacher-student interaction. Besides, appropriate use of nonverbal language can assist understanding and learning the classroom. When explaining 'wrinkle' to my students, I did the wrinkling action and the students got the exact meaning of the word immediately. Secondly, students' nonverbal signals can affect teaching. For example, some positive nonverbal behaviour from the students like smiling or nodding, the teacher can manipulate teaching process in an appropriate way. On the contrary, if the students never give any such signals the teacher may feel less confident in the teaching process and consequently affect investment and motivation in

education. Therefore to understand the nonverbal signal may turn out to be an effective strategy to enhance teaching and learning.

On the other hand, it is never an easy job to integrate nonverbal education into classroom because nonverbal communication is influenced by a number of factors including cultural background, socioeconomic background, education, gender, age, personal preferences and idiosyncrasies (Varner & Beamer, 2005). All these factors complicate the interpretation of the nonverbal aspects of communication. The reason why we must interpret such nonverbal signals in communication is because they decode and convey meanings and get our messages across more effectively (ibid). However, considering the following issues determines the difficulty of teaching nonverbal language in English classrooms.

The first issue is the extent to which teachers understand nonverbal language which carries on cultural and cross-cultural elements. An overwhelming majority of Chinese teachers of English (teaching non-English major students) have never had international residential experiences, which constrains them from access to teaching nonverbal language in an international and intercultural manner. Furthermore, nonverbal behaviours are not static but changing across time and the variables per se make the language teaching difficult.

The second issue is which country's nonverbal language should be taught or be emphasized if more than one cultures' nonverbal behaviours are to be introduced into classroom. When it comes to the issue, there will be a discussion on that. Some people believe of course the nonverbal teaching should focus on the English speaking or anglicized countries because it is English language learning not others. But in fact, English is a global language and people from outer circle and expanded circle out populate those from inner circle. With the globalization of economy, English, the lingua franca is playing a very important role in the interaction between people from non-inner circle. In this case, people begin thinking of to what extent it is necessary for them to adopt nonverbal language in communication. Opposite to this, others argue Chinese nonverbal language should be highlighted in the classroom. Their reasons are because in English teaching all the interaction is implemented between Chinese students and Chinese teachers. Nonverbal language teaching should serve the purpose of enhancing learning by smooth nonverbal communication in the language classrooms between peer and teacher/students.

As a matter of fact, I believe the discussion above shows exactly two sides of a coin. Nonverbal language is important in communication and should stand a point in language teaching despite various difficulties. I think it acceptable to develop nonverbal communication in classrooms in terms of forming a pleasant classroom culture, to borrow the term from Breen (2001). In the meantime, it is necessary to strategically develop students' international and intercultural nonverbal understandings because of the open policy of China to the world and more and more opportunities to contact non-Chinese. International consciousness can help them clear or reduce misunderstandings caused by different interpretations of nonverbal signals in different cultures. It is equally important that some strategies should be introduced for obtaining compliance (Robinson, 2003). For example, when a gesture is used by Party A who believes it shows positive meaning but it is misunderstood as an offensive signal by Party B. In face-to-face communication, Party A should be sensitive enough to realize the gap from other nonverbal signals like frowning or unhappy facial expressions and an explanation or enquiry should be given in order to minimize the negative consequences. At the same time I suppose a 'no-offend' perception ought to be a useful way to reduce unnecessary misunderstanding. By no-offend perception, it means that in usual interactions no one means to harm others by using so-called nonverbal behaviours and they are just different ways to negotiate meanings by different people. Put simply, form (the way of nonverbal language) is different but purpose (to facilitate understanding not to offend) is the same. In addition, there is little position of nonverbal language education in Chinese context, and teachers and researchers should explore further in order to achieve the goals of enhancing education and international communication because teachers' openness and awareness of the occurrence and significance of nonverbal events and expressions is very important (Galloway, 1970).

V. CONCLUSION

The essay discusses the three topics, which are English names, multiculturalism in rhetoric structure and nonverbal language. Different people may see the issues from quite different perspectives and draw different conclusions. The purpose of the essay is not to see which argument is more convincing but to arouse English teachers' reflection on English teaching and learning in different contexts. Their reflection on English and culture may play an indispensable role in influencing English education.

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Junyu Chen was born in Tangshan, China in 1977. She received her master's degree in English Education from the University of South Australia, Australia in 2007.

She is currently a lecturer in the College of Foreign Languages, Hebei United University, Tangshan, China. Her research interests include English education and culture.