A STUDY ON TEACHING CHINESE CULTURE
IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTES IN SRI LANKA

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Abstract:

"One belt one road initiative" concept caused to strengthening China – Sri Lanka bilateral relations considerably during last years and as a result of it a vast number of Sri Lankan students are motivated to learn Chinese language based on its significant impact on Contemporary Sri Lankan society. The purpose of learning foreign language is to learn to communicate in the target language. For foreign language educators, it's quite important to know how to develop learner's intercultural competency. In foreign language teaching (FLT) in Sri Lanka, the culture teaching is a problem countered by foreign language teachers in both higher and general education system. This paper focuses on an investigation carried out in Sri Lanka into Chinese language teachers' and learners' perception of teaching and learning culture in teaching Chinese as a foreign language (TCFL) classroom. Furthermore, it describes how teachers perceive culture and language teaching, their students' attitudes towards the foreign cultures associated with the foreign language they are learning. The outcomes of this study will serve as a guide in designing Chinese culture teaching curricular including authentic intercultural competence teaching and learning in foreign language education, Sri Lanka.

Keywords: Chinese culture; foreign language; higher education institutes; Sri Lanka; teaching & learning

1. Introduction

There is a complementary relationship between the language and the culture also between the language teaching and the cultural teaching. Learning a new language, therefore, involves more than acquisition of linguistic and communicative competence in that language. It is also important to increase in learners' familiarity with that language's cultural background and an expansion of the learner's cultural awareness and intercultural competence.

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In recent years, with the comprehensive development of the teaching Chinese as a foreign language, the Chinese culture teaching for foreign language learners has also obtained more and more attention. The learning of Chinese in the contemporary world has become a global trend. The teaching of Chinese culture in TCFL was initiated in the 1950S, almost at the same time the TCFL started. Teaching culture at that time was more for political propaganda than for increasing language competency. Chinese cultural subjects were not widely established in the university until 1980. Through Confucius institutes China has taken measures to promote and enhance TCFL language and culture learning in other countries around the world.

The main purpose of this study is to explore the presence of culture in the Chinese language classroom in Sri Lanka. Teaching culture should be an essential part of foreign language education because one of its main objectives is intercultural communicative competence which refers to knowledge of social communities, their practices and their customs. Therefore, in order to achieve well progress in all areas of a particle foreign language, it is necessary in cooperate its culture as an essential component of foreign language learning. Moreover, since the language and culture are inseparable, the culture teaching in FLT does not exclude grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation or four language skills.

Since language is a culturally conditioned phenomenon, it is necessary to raise culture awareness of the foreign language learner. Each culture has distinctive rules and social courtesies that are different from another culture. In order to minimize possible misunderstandings, teaching culture along with the language can provide students with greater cultural sensitivity and can help them to adjust when necessary. In fact, students cannot truly master the language until they have also mastered the cultural contexts in which the language occurs. For example, in English, "teacher" usually refers to a person who provides schooling for pupils and students. In China, people usually use "lao shi" to address a teacher or to address a respected person who actually does not work at school. Sri Lanka's culture is different from the Chinese culture. The Sri Lankan culture is greatly influenced by Buddhism while Chinese culture is mainly influenced by the ideologies derived from Confucianism and Taoism. Hence, when Sri Lankan students start to learn Chinese language, a lot of misunderstandings brought to the classroom due to cultural differences in between China and Sri Lanka. Therefore, this article basically focuses on following facts:

1) Basic characteristics of the Chinese culture teaching in foreign language education in Sri Lanka.
2) How do teachers in higher education institutes in Sri Lanka describe their culture teaching practices?
3) The learners' attitudes towards the teaching Chinese culture learning and culture teaching models?
4) The difficulties countered by learners in terms of learning Chinese culture in TCFL classroom.

2. Literature review

2.1 Culture and language teaching

For language teaching professionals and lay people alike, learning a foreign language odes not merely mean mastering an academic subject, but it more appropriately demotes learning a new means of communication, a new culture. The cultural aspects make of language learning a meaningful, rich and versatile experience. Rivers (1981) claims that culture instruction should have at least seven goals. These include making students aware of the way people act; the effects of social variables such as age, sex, and social class on the way they speak; how people in the target culture conventionally act under different circumstances; culture in the most commonly used words and phrases; being critical about the target language culture; developing skills necessary for locating and organizing materials about the target culture; and developing intellectual curiosity about the target culture and empathy towards its people. Although these goals have been recognized by different researchers, whether culture can be taught in the language classroom is still a controversial issue.

Krashen (1982) argues that the classroom setting is not an appropriate place to acquire either language or culture. In his view, classroom is only appropriate to teach language rules. Damen (1987), in support of Krashen, pinpoints that classroom-based learning relies too much on rule ordered pedagogy, and teaching culture in this view can only reflect and integrate cultural facts rather than the dynamic view of culture. Robinson and Nocon (1996) highlight the importance of living in the target culture and propose that culture learning in the classroom is only "*cognitive boundary crossing*" which leaves learners' previous experiences unexamined and unchallenged. In other words, because the foreign language classroom underestimates what the learners already knows and believes, it cannot become a suitable place for teaching culture. Nonetheless, there are also views in support of teaching culture in the foreign language classroom (Bada, 2000; Pulverness, 2003; McDevitt, 2004; Byram, 2008; Nieto, 2009; Dai, 2011).

Through the concept of 'communicative competence' has highlighted the role of context in language use, and hence in language learning/ teaching, it did not provide genuine help in language classrooms. Attention shifted to 'cultural competence' on the basis of which language patterns and structures are to be taught with their culture specific meanings. Many language teachers, currently, put it as their goal to include culture in their courses. Many others, however, still focus on vocabulary and grammar. Thanasoulas, (2001) notes that through language pedagogy has transcended the behaviorist and structuralize era, some of its old beliefs are still sensed in modern classroom methodologies and curricula, undermining the role culture should play in foreign language classrooms. He, insists, further, that "*language teaching is culture teaching and teachers do their students a great disservice in placing emphasis on the former, to the detriment of the latter*".

2.2 Intercultural communicative competence

Competence in intercultural communication is the ability of an individual's understanding of key issues involved in the communication of language in culturally different contexts. These cultural differences convey dissimilar meanings and values attached to a social system demanding a great deal of understanding on the part of speakers taking part in intercultural communication. It even requires higher level of communication skills to make sense of the meaning communicated in culturally diverse contexts. Furthermore, the studies on intercultural communication not only determine the role of competence but also advise the understanding of cultural awareness for meaningful communication (Koester & Lustig, 2010).

In view of Kim (1991), the most challenging issues of intercultural communication are cultural differences, unfamiliarity, and incompatibility among the individuals. The status of English as an international and intercultural source of communication raises a number of issues and challenges for teachers and learners of English. No doubt, acquisition of linguistic knowledge is mandatory for effective communication, but more attention needs to be paid on cultural context of the target language. It implies the knowledge of cultural patterns, norms, and values of a society communicating specific meaning to its participants. Therefore, intercultural communicative competence cannot be achieved without the development of communicative competence (p.259).

According to Koester & Lustig, 2010), competent interpersonal communication may be regarded as the result of appropriate behavior and attitude of participants reflecting actions that fit the expectations and demands of a situation. It is through effective and appropriate behavior that results in the accomplishment of social or personal goals based on relationships in communication. No doubt, a number of people act and add nonverbal signs to show positive response to meet the expectations of a communicative situation. Thus, appropriate nonverbal attitude not only softens relationship but also involves understanding of ideas in communication.

Wiseman (2001) suggests that intercultural communication competence is comprised of knowledge, skills, and motivation needed to interact effectively and appropriately with persons from different cultures. In this definition, motivation is a unique element not included in some of the other definitions of intercultural competence and is further defined as "*the set of feelings, intentions, needs and drives associated with the anticipation of or actual engagement in intercultural communication*" (p. 4). As Baker (2011) stated, intercultural competence has been identified as "*one approach to systematically conceptualizing and investigating the knowledge, attitudes and behavior associated with successful intercultural communication*". It means that, in order to be successful in intercultural communication, students need to develop their intercultural competence. It brings new requirements for foreign language courses (teaching and learning). Intercultural competence requires learners to develop relevant knowledge and skills regarding target language and culture and their cultural awareness, and to be reflective and transferable among different languages and cultures. As Sercu (2004) summarized, there are two dimensions of intercultural competence identified by recent models:

culture-specific (knowledge and skills about target culture) and culture-general knowledge and skills "*more generalizable in nature and transferable across cultures*" (p.135)).

2.3 Teaching Chinese as a foreign language in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka known as the pearl of Indian Ocean has a deep rooted relationship with China that dates back to many centuries. Chinese language is taught as a foreign language in schools, universities and Confucius institutes in Sri Lanka. In 1972, teaching Chinese as a foreign language was commenced as a certificate course study in University of Kelaniya. Hence, University of Kelaniya was recognized as the pioneer institution for Chinese language education in Sri Lanka. In 2007, a Confucius institute was established attached to the University of Kelaniya, this was in order to promote, expand and deliver Chinese language teaching and learning to Sri Lankans who wanted to learn Chinese language. In the year 2013, University Kelaniya was the leading higher education institute to produce Chinese local teachers trained in China with masters' degrees to teach in Chinese. At present, 5 universities, 40 schools and 4 Confucius institutes engage in Chinese language teaching and learning in Sri Lanka. The Chinese language education of higher education institutes in Sri Lankan can be mainly divided as TCFL education of the University and TCFL education of Confucius institute. In the University education system, Chinese language is taught as 3 years general degree program, special 4 years degree program, Certificate course program, optional course program, external degree program and currently it has uplifted to MPhil degree program as well. The Chinese language curricular of the universities mainly consists of Chinese grammar, culture & civilization, literature and Chinese speaking.

In the late 1970s, Chinese language education was introduced to G.C.E Advanced Level Examination in the general education system of Sri Lanka. Not only the Sri Lankan local teachers but also the Chinese native teachers who were arranged by the Confucius institute engage in Chinese language and culture teaching. Amongst, the developments of teaching Chinese in Sri Lanka, Chinese language is now offered even at the primary and the secondary level school education system. Both University Chinese language learners and the secondary school learners have been successful in attending the international Chinese bridge competition organized by the Hanban headquarters China and get one year or half year scholarships to study Chinese language and culture in China. Although, learning Chinese has some developments in Sri Lankan education system, a lot of students still think that Chinese language and culture is very difficult to master. The teaching approaches that are being used does not cater to overcome the difficulties which are brought by the cultural difference in between Sri Lanka and China. The students have a good command of Chinese grammar and character writing but, they are incompetent in actual communication as they lack the cultural aspects in target language which enables them to communicate and express themselves.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research sample

The research sample consisted of 92 students and 7 Chinese language teachers enrolled at the university context. The student participants come from Chinese major and general degree second, third and fourth year undergraduates at University of Kelaniya. The teacher participants can be divided as native Chinese teachers and the local Chinese teachers. 4 local teachers and 3 native Chinese teachers participated in this study. The teacher participants may have pursuit Mas or PhDs. Teacher participants varying years of teaching experience ranging from one to ten years.

3.2 Instruments

In order to elicit students' perceptions and attitudes about the role of culture teaching in TCFL classroom, a questionnaire was designed, and follow-up interviews were carried out.

a. Questionnaire

The students were given the questionnaires personally and they were given enough time to complete and return them to the researcher. The questionnaires with three parts was developed for the survey study. The first part of the questionnaire related to the demographic information of the students (Table 1). The second and third part of the questionnaire comprised on a Likert scale each of them had five options, i.e. Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Neutral (N), Disagree (D) and Strongly Disagree (SD). The parts of the Likert scale dealt with the students' attitudes of the culture learning and their culture learning difficulties in TCFL in Sri Lanka.

Table 1: Demographic information of the participants

		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	23	25%
	Female	69	75%
Year	Second	43	46.74%
	Third	31	33.70%
	Forth	18	19.57%

b. Interview

This is a matter of forming a balance between the amount of evidence and data while seeking the best fit for the analysis of antithetical viewpoints. After the theme and scope of the study were introduced and presented to the participants, the interviews were conducted with one participant at a time between 10-15 minutes. With the aim of deriving the results of the survey and exploring teachers' perceptions about the integration of culture teaching in TFL class, a semi- structured interview was conducted by the researcher. The interviews were conducted in Sinhalese, in the participants' mother tongue, in order for them to carry out better verbal communication. Using the mother tongue during the interviews allows the respondents to feel free in expressing their opinions and elaborate more clearly on their viewpoints.

Table 2: Demographic information of the teacher participants

		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	1	14. 29%
	Female	6	85.71%
Type	Local	4	57.14%
	Native Chinese	3	42.86%
Qualification	B.A.	1	14.29%
	M.A. / M.Phil.	4	57.14%
	PhD.	2	28.57%
Teaching experience	1-5	5	71.43%
	5 - 10	2	28.57%

3.3 Data collection and analysis procedure

The data were collected and analyzed by following a two stepped procedure:

1) The questionnaire administrated to Chinese undergraduates of University of Kelaniya in order to answer the research question. The data gathered from the questionnaire were analyzed descriptively by calculating the percentages

2) Following the completion of this questionnaire, the face to face interviews were carried out with seven teachers. Qualitative data gathered through interviews were transcribed, translated and included in the study to further clarify the issue being investigated.

4. Results and Discussion

The data obtained through the questionnaire was analyzed using the percentage for every item. As the interview was a continuum of the survey study, data achieved through interview was thematically with that of the survey study. The themes covered under this study were:

1) Students' perception of the Chinese culture teaching in higher education institutes, Sri Lanka.

2) Students' difficulties in learning Chinese culture in the university.

The table bellows shows a clear understanding on student's perception of Chinese culture learning in higher education institutes, Sri Lanka.

Table 3: Students' perception of Chinese culture learning

No.	Items	SA	A	N	D	SD
1	Learning Chinese culture is very difficult.	16.30%	38.04%	29.35%	11.96%	4.35%
2	There's little opportunity to learn Chinese culture in classroom.	19.57%	34.78%	25%	14.13%	6.52%
3	There's a huge difference in between Sri Lankan culture and Chinese culture.	19.57%	23.91%	30.43%	14.13%	11.96%
4	No interest towards learning Chinese culture.	9.78%	25%	18.48%	33.70%	13.04%
5	It's very important to learn culture when learning Chinese language.	23.91%	30.43%	5.43%	23.91%	16.30%

Note: SA=Strongly Agree; A=Agree; N=Neutral; D=Disagree; SD=Strongly Disagree.

The research findings reveal that although the Sri Lankan students who studying Chinese at higher education institutes are interested to learn Chinese or they are able to acquire lot of Chinese words and grammar, but they are not able to construct sentences or communicate in Chinese as they lack the Chinese cultural knowledge. And also, some of them are not aware of the importance of the culture learning. According to Baker (2011), L2 users need to understand L2 communication as a cultural process and to be aware of their own culturally based communicative behavior and that of others'. Although there are classes specifically programmed for "Chinese culture" in University of Kelaniya, students still find it difficult to master the culture and they don't actually understand the importance of culture awareness.

The cultural difference in between Sri Lanka and China is also one of the main factors affecting the growth of Chinese language and culture teaching and learning in Sri Lanka. For example, when Chinese people are greeting to each other, they used to use questions such as "have you eaten?", "do you have a girlfriend/ boyfriend?" "Where are you going?", "how old are you?". If the Sri Lankan students do not have a little exposure to the Chinese culture, they might get embarrassed or little anger as they keep them as privacy. Therefore, if these cultural points are not taught clearly in TCFL, the students will end up thinking difficult to learn Chinese. And also, Sri Lankans do not usually distinguish relationship between the people as Chinese do. In China, there is a great distinction between relatives from maternal and paternal side. If there is no clear guidance to the Sri Lankan students, they might get confused with all these cultural differences. Therefore, the difference in culture between Sri Lanka and China is a complex issue that needs huge attention of the Chinese teachers in order to avoid the misunderstandings when the Sri Lankan students communicate with the target language.

The table below shows a clear understanding on difficulties in learning Chinese culture in FLT classroom, Sri Lanka.

Table 4: Student's difficulties to learn Chinese culture in TCFL

No.	Items	SA	A	N	D	SD
1	Lack of time.	25%	34.78%	18.48%	11.96%	9.78%
2	Lack of teaching and learning materials.	34.78%	19.57%	11.96%	18.48%	15.22%
3	Content is not rich enough.	23.91%	28.26%	20.65%	16.30%	10.87%
4	Not satisfied with the teaching approaches.	19.57%	11.96%	31.52%	17.39%	19.57%
5	Content is not practical enough to communicate.	15.22%	23.91%	29.35%	14.13%	17.39%

Note: SA=Strongly Agree; A=Agree; N=Neutral; D=Disagree; SD=Strongly Disagree.

The findings show that, time allocated for Chinese culture learning and teaching and learning materials is not adequate in TCFL teaching and learning. The interviewees stated that, the schedule and the arrangements of the TCFL classroom is not up to their satisfaction. Chinese language and its culture are rather different from the students' mother tongue and Sri Lankan culture. It requires lot of effort from each responsible parties and it needs enough time to practice. The interviewees commented that, during teaching Chinese, there are words or phrases have cultural meanings which requires

more time to discuss adding some cultural content, but due to time constraint, they had to continue without teaching cultural values attached with the target language.

Students also responded that, the Chinese culture content appeared in classroom is not rich enough. Chinese native teachers who were arranged by the Confucius institute, have not stayed in in Sri Lanka for long time. Hence, they do not actually understand Sri Lankan culture. Therefore, it lacks intercultural context in TCFL classroom and lot of students lost their interest in learning Chinese. The students also complained that, the content is not practical to communicate in Chinese. The interviewees commented on this and stated that, text books used in the TCFL are compiled from China, everything in the textbooks was set in China, therefore, most of the time, Sri Lankan students unable to understand the cultural context given in the book and how can it be applied in communication with native Chinese. At Sri Lankan universities usually use the textbooks named "跟我学汉语"（Learn Chinese with me）and "新使用汉语课本" (New practical Chinese reader), all these books were published in China, there examples, setting and everything based in China. Due to the shortage of time, students are not fully taught to understand as the passages and everything in the textbooks contain lot of cultural meanings which need to be explained by the teacher.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study tried to investigate on how the teachers and students in foreign language education, Sri Lanka deal with various aspects of the target culture and what values they attribute to the target culture as part of the foreign language study. The findings of the study have indicated that both students and teachers generally aware of the importance of the teaching, learning and integrating culture in the foreign language classroom, but due to lack of appropriate teaching methods and materials, the learners could not experience the target culture in classroom.

The close interaction of language and culture justifies the cultivation of culture awareness in foreign language teaching. The teaching of culture knowledge will undeniably promote communicative methods. The paper through a brief discussion of the relation between language and culture, the principal involves in cultivation of culture awareness and the approaches to develop culture awareness, aims at a tentative exploration into the modern teaching method of foreign language teaching.

Sri Lankan students know a lot of words and grammar, but they lack the ability to use the language properly. When they speak with the Chinese native speakers, they a lot of mistakes and misunderstandings are created. All Chinese teachers have knowledge about aspects of the target culture to some extent, but how they deal with the target culture is affected highly by the curricular considerations and limitations. One implication that can be derived from these findings is that the teachers should be given more opportunities to deal with the target culture extensively in their TCFL classroom. If they are more flexible in integrating culture, the students may benefit more in terms of the exposure to the target language. Culture teaching should allow leaners to increase their knowledge of the target culture in terms of people's way of life, values, attitudes

and beliefs and how these manifest themselves or are couched in linguistics categories and forms. It has been shown that cross-cultural understanding is indeed a byproduct of foreign language learning, and the foreign language should be taught explicitly as a cultural practice. It is important to balance the factors such as the teacher's attitude towards teaching culture, pedagogical development, the adoption of appropriate technologies, and a creation of a self-organized learning environment for learners. More, specifically, the teaching of culture should make learners aware of speech acts, etiquette, appropriate or inappropriate behaviors, as well as provide them with the opportunity to act out being a member of the target culture.

As Fyrstenberg (2010) pinpoints, our goal as teachers is to help building intercultural competence along with the linguistic and communicative competence as well. Hence, the language class can become the cradle of teaching culture and intercultural communicative competence our students need. The teachers in this study are aware of the changes and challenges of the contemporary language classrooms and do their best to prepare their students to become globalized citizens. The teachers should also consider taking local and multicultural identities into account while considering the place of culture in language teaching (Alptekin and Tatar, 2011). It goes without saying that foreign language teachers should be foreign culture teachers, having the ability to experience and analyze both the home and target cultures (Byram, Morgan et al., 1994: 73)

In order to shed more light on this issue, further studies are required to explore the actual cultural teaching activities Chinese language teachers practice in their classroom through observation. Studies that focus on culture teaching by observing the students' and teachers' real behavior in actual TCFL classroom should be handled to foster the most benefit to the students as well as to the foreign language education. Also, it is hoped that, the present paper has contrived to clarify most of the issues it sent out to investigate and has helped contribute to a better understanding of culture and its importance in the Chinese language teaching and learning.

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Authors' research work:

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