

# ***The Application of Sociolinguistic Relativity Acquisition in Teaching English in Intensive English Program in Vietnamese Secondary Schools***

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## **Abstract**

The main aim of this article is to suggest the application our acquisition of sociolinguistic relativity in teaching in secondary schools. The article offers a critical look at the basis of theory of sociolinguistic rules, multilateral aspects of sociolinguistic relativity, cross – cultural communication. In addition, what aspects of sociolinguistic relativity that English teachers should apply in teaching and the ways how the teachers help their students overcome cross-cultural misunderstandings will be discussed. This article is intended to recommend the particular recommendations for enhancing students' acquisition of sociolinguistic relativity, cultural values and norms of the target language. We realize that sociolinguistic rules and cultural awareness bring students closer to English. They help learning and teaching English not become a burden but exciting things.

**Keywords:** *Sociolinguistic relativity acquisition, rules of speaking, secondary schools, cross-cultural pragmatic differences, cultural awareness.*

## **Introduction**

Since Vietnam takes part in World Trade Organization (WTO), teaching English in high school is more and more noticed. People realize that so far until now students have principally been taught English grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation so that they can be good at written test. That becomes really out of date. It prevents students from communicating. Meanwhile, it is obvious that teaching and learning a new language must gain the final goal which is communicative competence. A number of students in secondary schools who have learned English for eight years (from grade 1 to grade 8) are still unable to interact with the foreigners in even certain daily conversations although they have had lots of linguistic knowledge. Many a student with good grades in school performs poorly in social situations. They are often thought of as "high in scores, but low in ability". Wolfson (1983:62) points out, "In interacting with foreigners, native speakers tend to be rather tolerant of errors in pronunciation or syntax. In contrast, violations of rules of speaking are often interpreted as bad manners since the native speaker is unlikely to be aware of sociolinguistic relativity". Misunderstanding caused by cross-cultural pragmatic differences is an important source of cross-cultural communication breakdown. Consequently, language teachers should be aware of this trouble, try to apply the acquisition of sociolinguistic relativity in teaching as soon as possible. In this paper, I would like to three main following problems: the understandings of sociolinguistic relativity, what we will apply in teaching in high school, how we will apply our acquisition of sociolinguistic relativity in teaching in high school.

## **A critical look at the basis of sociolinguistic relativity**

"Communication is a process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs, or behavior". (Webster, 1983: 266) Communication is a combination of linguistic features and socio-cultural behavior. The goal of communication is information exchange and meaning negotiation. As Bauman and Sherzer (1989&1974:9) pointed out,

"language use does not occur in isolated sentences, but in natural units of speaking; stated abstractly speech acts, events, and situations; stated more concretely; greetings, leave-takings, narratives, conversations, jokes, curing chants, or periods of silence". It is obvious that we have many ways of speaking to express meaning. "Since how people say is part of what they say, language learners may well find themselves in the position of being unable to interpret the meaning of what native speakers say to them even though all the vocabulary is quite familiar." (Hudson, 1999: 15) People realize that ways of speaking also reveal the speaker's behavior in their own standard, and in their own cultural value system. How people say, behave, react, and judge the other's interaction base on their own rules of speaking, their sociolinguistic rules far from universal. Violation of sociolinguistic rules could easily happen in daily conversation. This keeps the non-native speakers away from having proper response, well-mannered performance, knowing what to say and what to do, clarify the native speaker's communicating ways (greeting, addressing, complimenting, apologizing, taking one's leave). Breaking sociolinguistic rules makes the native speaker shocked, frustrated, and annoyed. Both the ways of speaking and speaker's behavior are assumed to express the speaker's personality, individuality, which enlarges the distance of their relationship, damage the smoothness of their communication. In fact, we can realize that the non-native speakers should gain insight into the effects of word choices they make upon people from different cultures and look for a tool to avoid miscommunication or the breakdown of communication caused by sociolinguistic differences. Expressions, which convey one meaning in the non-native speakers' culture, often convey a very different meaning in native speakers' culture.

Blom & Gumperz (1972 & 1986) describe "As social interactants use language in real time, they become so involved in the complex processes of exchanging information and performing social actions. Even when Meta - linguistic /communicative concerns are aroused, most cultural ways of speaking are often the very ones which are indispensable for successful communication". Furthermore, Hudson (1999) clarifies "in every society there are some things that are simply not said or asked and others that are absolutely required in certain situations, and it is assumed that every well – brought – up person knows these rules of behavior. Each speech community has, as part of its collective wisdom, the unquestioned assumption that its own ways of speaking are the correct, proper, honest and good ways." It is certain that cultural norms, social values, sociolinguistic rules vary across speech communities. Sociolinguistic relativity describes the considerable variety of the norms and values which inform speaker's knowledge as to what is appropriate to say to whom, and under which condition from community to community around the world. Sociolinguistic relativity is also defined by Wolfson (1989, P.41) as "Cultural relativity, when extended to the evaluation of sociolinguistic rules, may be referred to as sociolinguistic relativity." This phenomenon greatly influenced the intercultural communication. The differences in value systems (collectivism, individualism, cooperation, and competition), non-verbal communication (facial expressions, personal space, and time system) are always the source of the difficulties in cross – cultural communication. Gumperz and Levinson (1996a) point out that the cultural patterning of human communicative behavior is most fruitfully inspectable at the level of situated and contexted interaction — and not simply at the level of context-free lexical and grammatical meaning. Gumperz and Levinson (1996b: 8 -9) assert that "utterances can carry with them, or project, the context in which they should be interpreted. These are subtle, culture-specific processes learnt within the social networks that utilize them". It is obvious that the only goal of the awareness of sociolinguistic relativity is to enhance the communicative competence, "the tacit social, psychological, cultural, and linguistic knowledge governing appropriate use of language (including, but not limited to, grammar)" (Schiffrin, 1994, p. 8) because sociolinguistic relativity can be the cause of intercultural misunderstandings if the speakers do not know the cross-cultural diversity to share the other's thought. Thomas (1983) emphasizes "grammatical errors may be irritating and impede communication, but at least, as a rule, they are apparent in the surface structure. It may reveal a speaker to be less than proficient language user. However, pragmatic failure causing due to the lack of knowledge about sociolinguistic diversity will lead to attribute the speaker's impoliteness, unfriendliness." When the students fail to get the meaning across, fail to interpret the communicative convention behind the utterance, their inappropriate behavior and their differences make the native speaker think that they are rude, offensive, and insincere. This may have serious and critical consequences for the social interaction. An understanding of cultural values helps us appreciate the behavior of other people and know how to treat them and understand our own behavior as well. Knowing cultural values, we know what is good, bad, right, or wrong, what to be or what not to be, what is useful, useless, appropriate, or inappropriate. (Samovar & Porter, 1981) In her work on the pragmatics of cross-cultural communication, Tannen (1984b) identifies several "levels of communication differences" (p. 189) among participants in intercultural encounters: when to talk; what

to say; pacing and pausing; listenership; intonation; formulaicity; indirectness; cohesion and coherence.

Actually, intercultural interaction that are firmly based on an "understanding of speaking in the respective groups from which participants in the contact situation are drawn and of the emergent system that organizes speaking in the contact situation" (Bauman & Sherzer, 1989, p. xiv). To generalize the problems, Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz (1982) offer a three-tiered typology on the "perspectives in the realization of communicative tasks" (p. 12) which involve:

1. Different cultural assumptions about the situation and about appropriate behavior and intentions within it.
2. Different ways of structuring information or an argument in a conversation.
3. Different ways of speaking: the use of a different set of unconscious linguistic conventions (such as tone of voice) to emphasize, to signal logical conventions and to indicate the significance of what is being said in terms of overall meaning and attitudes. (p. 12). Due to their opinions, we draw the conclusion that being aware of sociolinguistic relativity plays an important role in improving students' communicative competence. The more they know much about sociolinguistic relativity, the more they are confident in communicating with the foreigners.

## The aspects of sociolinguistic relativity taught in Vietnamese secondary schools

Thanks to those above awareness, we become conscious that we should help our students in intensive English program in secondary schools have some knowledge of sociolinguistic relativity. The important thing that we should pay attention is what to teach and how to teach. Certainly, the general definitions or the vague concepts are useless. What the students need is the tangible awareness for each social interaction. Therefore, interaction techniques should be taught cautiously. Students must be trained to know how to choose the best way to express them in a particular situation. The analysis of the students' role in the interactive situation (a friend, stranger, employee, or customer...) should be conducted first. Then, the setting of the conversation – at the party, at school, at a meeting, etc – is evaluated. In addition, the topic they want to talk about – travel, sport, a date, starting a conversation, etc- is considered. Those above fundamentals help students choose the useful way to say something. For example, to start a conversation with a stranger, students should say: "Nice day, isn't it? / don't I know you from somewhere? / Excuse me, is anybody sitting here? ..." rather than "Pleased to meet you / nice to see you / hi / hello..." Normally, in their conversation, students usually answer in their natural reaction:

1. Steven: Would you mind closing the door?  
 Nga: **Yes**, I'll close it. (The correct answer is **No, not at all**)
2. Frank: You didn't do your homework, do you?  
 Mai: **Yes**, I didn't do. (The correct answer is **No, I didn't do**)
3. Carol: Didn't you go to the beach last weekend?  
 Minh: **No**, I went to the beach last weekend.  
 (The correct answer is **Yes, I did. I went to the beach last weekend**)
4. Sandy: How about watching that exciting film?  
 Kim: Yes, I do (The correct answer is **Great, let's do that**)

All of the above situations always make the native speaker of English confused. The students' ways of speaking basing on their habits of speaking in their native language will cause misunderstanding. The native speakers do not understand their implication. In reality, some native speakers have got angry with such kinds of responses. Whereas, students in secondary school simply think that if they agree with the questions or the statements, they say "yes" and if they disagree with those, they say "no". Consequently, we must train them how to give response in the appropriate way to such each kind of question. Possible expressions of daily conversations which is included asking for information, requesting, agreeing, refusing, asking for permission, giving opinion, giving advice, expressing enthusiasm, etc ought to be trained sentence by sentence in a long time until learners are skillful at using them. Each of possible expression must be explained clearly with its usage, the situation students can apply it, the learners' intonation, facial expression, and gestures that they must show

when they say that expression. In order to demonstrate, we give them some chances to observe their teacher's practice. Furthermore, teaching techniques of hesitating, interrupting politely, bringing in other people is also indispensable because those techniques give them time to organize their thought, opinion, and decide how to express their ideas. In addition, formal and informal expressions should be listed and clearly transmitted to students. Teacher is required to explain when, where, to whom students must use them because Wolfson (1989) give emphasis to us "an inappropriate question or failure to utter the customary apology, compliment or congratulation will not be judge as an error natural to the process of language learning or, indeed, of intercultural cultural differences but as a personal affront."

Formal expressions	Informal expressions
Could you tell me....? Would you mind telling me....? Sorry to keep after you but could you tell me....? I hope you don't mind my asking but I wonder.....? Sorry to bother you but I wonder.....? I was wondering if you could help me. I'd like to know..... This may sound like a dumb question, but I'd like to know.....	Can you tell me...? I'd like to know... Do you mind...? Please tell me.....

What is more, all of us know that no one wants to appear to be rude in their social interaction. We realize that normally indirect ways of speaking, or indirect questions help students express themselves politely. Jones & Baeyer (1988) support this viewpoint "a conversation often depends on questions to keep it going in the direction you want it to go. The one who asks the questions in a conversation usually controls the conversation. If you are more direct, you may appear to be rude." Teachers should point out the ways of choosing suitable words, expressions, statement. In the conversation, the most important thing we need to concern is that "losing face" is absolutely prevented. That is the reason why North Americans often give an excuse before saying something in order not to hurt the listeners' feelings. We can undoubtedly see this in some following examples:

1. Hoa: Could you lend me a pen?  
 Sally: **I'm so sorry** but I'm writing my lesson
2. Nam: I can't catch what you mean.  
 Wendy: **Sorry, I don't quite understand** why they didn't give out their decision.

These rules, these useful expressions usually appear in many dialogues in secondary textbook. Teachers are required to facilitate students to recognize them, realize their significance, analyze the circumstances they are used and the social identity of participants to whom they are used. We can see that these rules are more and more noticed by the textbook writers. Now, in textbook they are printed formally in the charts, tables. For example, the rules of making questions to request and the rules of replying are extracted from Textbook 8 (2002) in the following table:

Request	Reply	
	Agree	Disagree
Do you mind closing the door? Would you mind opening the window? Do you mind if I take a photo?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ No I don't mind</li> <li>▪ No, of course not.</li> <li>▪ Not at all.</li> <li>▪ Please do.</li> <li>▪ Please go ahead.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ I'm sorry, I can't.</li> <li>▪ I'm sorry, that is not possible.</li> <li>▪ I'd prefer you didn't.</li> <li>▪ I'd rather you didn't.</li> </ul>

Would you mind if I took a photo?		
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Another example, the rules of expressing and responding to opinions about the activities their partners do are extracted from Textbook 8(2002):

Opinions	Agreement	Degree of agreement	Disagreement
I like... I don't like... I think... I feel... I don't believe....	So do I. I agree. You're right Neither do I	I agree, but.... Yes, but on the other hand...	I disagree.... I can't agree with you. No, I think...

In addition, another table also taken out from Textbook 8 (2002) about asking for favors, responding to favors, offering assistance, responding to assistance also clearly illustrate the textbook writers and curriculum developers' concern about the sociolinguistic rules.

Asking for favors	Responding to favors
Can / could you help me, please? Could you do me a favor? I need a favor. Can / could you...?	Certainly / Of course / Sure. No problem. What can I do for you? How can I help you? I'm sorry. I'm really busy.
Offering assistance	Responding to assistance
May I help you? Do you need any help? Let me help you?	Yes / no. Thank you. Yes. That's very kind of you. No. Thank you. I'm fine.

Actually, we are aware that these rules are noted down fully, clearly, and cautiously. They are so comprehensible and memorable to students. It is certain that teachers do not need to waste time to explore them, collect them, and put them in order. Their work is to create many activities which help students apply those rules in different situations. Students must learn by heart these rules, practice them many times in many circumstances, and try to use all of them in daily conversation.

On the other hand, teacher must mention some general rules of speaking in English such as not asking personal question for the first time, not talking about politics, religion, but talking about the weather, health, and some social events. All of those rules are to facilitate students' acquisition of communicative competence. When students comprehend and exploit them effectively, they will interact accurately, properly, and gain success in their relationship.

However, as we have mentioned above, such rules of speaking is not enough. It is also now realized that successful communication involves cross-cultural understandings which among other things, means avoiding pragmatic failure. Communication can only be effective when the students are also sensitive to the social and cultural aspects of language use and how these differ between his first and second language. Expectations and interpretations are likely to differ on the role of silence, speaking volume and intonation, situations requiring set formulas, conventions of politeness, and how information is organized and shared. In reality, language is inextricably tied to culture. Cultural values are the most significant element of cross-cultural communication. Therefore, language teaching should include culture teaching. That is the reason why we are required to put our emphasis on the development of students' cultural awareness and communicative competence. Cultural awareness is the term used to describe sensitivity to the impact of culturally-induced behavior on language use and communication. Cross-cultural awareness covers British and American life, institutions, beliefs, and values, as well as everyday attitudes and feelings conveyed not only by language, but by paralinguistic features such as dress, gesture, facial expression, stance, and movement (Tomalin & Stempleski, 1994:5). Since language and culture are very much interlinked, cross-cultural awareness must be made one of the goals in ELT. To help them enhance their cultural awareness, we must have them



explore their own cultural values. After that, we give them some chances to compare and contrast their own cultural values with mainstream American values. The important thing is that learners also have knowledge of main features of American and British cultural values so that they have ability to interpret and predict native speaker's behavior, meaning, and thought. Students ought to be learned to analyze certain incidents that involve cross-cultural misunderstandings — conflicts of values and expectations. Teachers give some examples about common interpersonal occurrences in which characters from different cultures have different interpretations of what is said or done. Students identify the communication problems in the incident, determine the values involved, and correct the misunderstanding. The purpose is to teach students to analyze misunderstandings in cultural terms and to help them learn to deal effectively with similar situations. Recognizing essential differences in worldviews permits students to respond more effectively when cross-cultural communication breaks down. On the other hand, students' exploring the cultural differences force them to choose lexis, and grammatical structure carefully, find out the ways of communication which satisfy the native speaker, not to violate the taboos in English. Students should have opportunities to observe the ways the native speakers interact, behave, verbalize, and use lexis and grammatical structure in some particular circumstances and to realize techniques of grasping the content of the conversation, the manner of responses, and the matter they are allowed to mention in the communication. From those, they can draw lots of experience for their own. The teacher's duty is to design circumstances for students to practice as many times as possible so that they can change those experiences into their interaction habits. From that time, when learners are in the same situation, they will give out the manners of response which are proper to the target cultural rules, and the target traditional customs.

### **Recommendations for enhancing students' acquisition of sociolinguistic relativity**

Nobody deny that it is difficult to teach students all rules of speaking, cross-cultural understanding, and social cultural values. Using the abstract theories is completely ineffective and waste of time. It is apparent that how to teach is a considerable problem. In this paper, I would like to suggest some ways to enhance students' sociolinguistic relativity.

Firstly, we make our classroom a culture land. It is the teacher's responsibility to organize the classroom as a setting for communication and communicative activities. The classroom is often called an artificial environment for learning and using a foreign language. It is also a real social context, where the teacher and students enter into equally real social relationships with each other. In the classroom, teachers should create as authentic an environment as possible because our learners' interactive environment in English is only in the classroom. It is crucial for the teacher to bring the outside world into the classroom and make the classroom a world of English. It is compulsory to keep a classroom ambience authentic as "a culture land" with real English through the use of reality, such as maps, pictures, posters, songs, short stories, cuttings from newspapers and magazines, underground tickets, railway timetables, restaurant menus, calendars, and so on to create a visual and tangible presence of the target culture. The emphasis on "authentic", "real-life" materials in the classroom suggests a realization of the importance of exposing students to the target culture as it really is, and it is considered desirable to give students an opportunity to develop strategies for understanding language as it is actually used by native speakers. The students' good writings, their projects and their pieces of story are required to be displayed on the board or around the class. This is principally significant in a foreign setting. However, effective use of such materials requires careful planning by the teacher. On the other hand, "culture land" must be the result of the contribution of the learners. The topics of cultural documents have to be attractive, popular, and updated. They should be varied, continually changed according to the lesson, seasons, holidays, social events, etc.

Secondly, making use of videos, films or songs is a way for students to reach the target culture. Direct experience is the best way to begin to learn any culture. Just as the best way to learn a new language is to become immersed in that language, it is most helpful to learn another culture by jumping right in. Radio stations, recordings, English songs, videos and films can be helpful ways to begin to learn culture. Films are most attractive to students thanks to their interesting contents, real beautiful scenes, social cultural problems, and beautiful actors / actresses. Films reflect the daily life, the circumstances we usually meet in the real life. English films have a lot of social, political and popular culture contents. It is easier for us to pick up idioms, slangs and to get familiar with both verbal and non-verbal behavior. We suggest using videotapes or films to stimulate discussions on aspects of the target culture. They

should be employed as a language and culture learning tool, not just for fun. Students learn various film genres and films dealing with various aspects of western life. They can observe many daily conversations, recognize the manners of asking and responding, and learn general rules of speaking from real interaction. We combine the target culture content with developing interpretation and analytical skills, followed up by exciting discussions and paper-writing. In fact, watching films is the most effective way to observe non-verbal behaviors of the target culture. After watching an American film we discuss the differences between American and Vietnamese non-verbal behavior, such as how close people stand when talking to each other? Or what are the similarities and differences between American table manners and Vietnamese table manners? Besides, the lyrics of English songs provide plentiful resources of cultural values, social cultural problems, language use, and linguistic rules. Videos, films or songs transmit socio-cultural information implicitly which students receive gently, easily and effectively. They stimulate students' enthusiasm in investigating rules of speaking, language use, cultural values, the polite manners, and so on.

Thirdly, making a comparative study of the target culture and our culture is a useful way to compare and contrast students' awareness of target culture and our culture. In reality, most students tend to transfer cultural patterns of their source language to the target language, which is the area where misunderstanding and even helplessness in interpretation occur. It is up to us language teachers to make our students aware that the target culture and the home culture do not always have identical values and attitudes. First, we should make them aware of the existence of these differences, and then help them develop an understanding of these new values. For instance, when we study the text "Allowances, eating out, going out, a school day, getting a job" (Tom Hutchinson, 1997), we can make a comparative study of the different attitudes towards work, play, money, individual rights and so on between American and Vietnamese people. In America, individuality, striving, competition, and success are highly valued, while most people having grown up within cooperative environments in Vietnam seem to stress family stability, a spirit of cooperation and tranquility. Compared with Vietnamese people, Americans are more restless, adventurous and aggressive. Of course, one cannot hope to compare two cultures unless he has more accurate understanding of each of the cultures being compared. Therefore, both the teacher and students should have a thorough study of our home culture as well as the target culture. Comparative study of cultures will bring out much that is immensely interesting to both students and teachers.

Fourthly, another helpful way is making culture study nonjudgmental. No matter when the teacher introduces cultural information or organizes students to discuss cultural topics, he should take care to guide cultural discussions so that they do not become judgmental and lead to conclusions that some cultures are superior or inferior. It is not the teacher's job to judge which language interactions are of high cultural value. What we teachers should do is familiarize our students with dominant cultural patterns and specific rules of interaction in the foreign language setting. While we may expect students to imitate the social conventions of the target culture, we do not normally expect them either to adopt a new set of values or reject them all. The correct attitude towards the target culture should be tolerance and respect. Therefore, students should understand the foreign system of values and come to respect it.

Last but far from least, using various aids for teaching culture is a way which attracts students to acquiring cultural acquisition. Culture acquisition cannot be achieved merely through classroom teaching. Students should have things relevant to culture to listen to, to talk about, to read, to watch and have personal contact with native speakers. The major causes of students' pragmatic failure are undoubtedly inadequate knowledge of, and insufficient exposure to the target culture as well as a lack of comparative studies of the two cultures. There are some other ways available to change the situation and increase cultural awareness; for instance, encouraging students to develop interpersonal contacts with native speakers or correspond with pen pals in English speaking countries. It is in such relaxed personal contacts that students are apt to pick up some of the cultural information they would not be able to get otherwise. In addition, we should recommend to students books on culture and language or assign them to read short stories or plays in English. Much cultural information can be garnered from fiction and drama written in English. While reading literature, if we are careful enough, we often come across places where we can glean some cultural information (Hu, 1997). Just as Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* and Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street* provide present-day readers with a view of the American social situation of former times and of particular geographical regions, modern works of fiction and drama can be a source of information about the target culture for speakers of other languages. Furthermore, teachers can have students perform some English plays to get some cultural

information, and familiarize our students with dominant cultural patterns and specific rules of interaction in the foreign language setting. In addition, we teachers ask students to rehearse the plays of cross-cultural misunderstandings. Then we organize some discussions in which they identify the cross-cultural misunderstandings, point out the reason why they appear, give out the solution, and suggest the prevention to those circumstances.

## Conclusion

To recapitulate, ability to interact successfully in a foreign language speech community depends on communicative competence, of which sociolinguistic rules are an important aspect. Teaching sociolinguistic rules and cultural awareness in ESL classroom is a crucial thing, a decisive way in learning English. This make students enhance their language ability, improve their communicative competence, and be passionate about learning English and its culture. The tendency of teaching sociolinguistic rules and cultural awareness in ESL classroom is supported by most of materials writers and educators. It seems that the wave of enthusiasm for teaching sociolinguistic rules is more and more developed. We realize that sociolinguistic rules and cultural awareness bring students closer to English. They help learning and teaching English not become a burden but exciting things. The more students have sociolinguistic relativity, the more they are fluent in English.

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