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A Cultural "Pragmatic Paradox": The Notion of the Double Bind

at an English as Second Language Center

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Abstract

The setting of a university English as Second Language (ESL) facility exhibits the elements of the "double bind" in which individuals are involved a paradoxical interpersonal relationship wherein messages are manifestly contradictory in nature, creating the inability of the receiver to aptly respond to the message being sent. The notion of the double bind is explored through an examination of American cultural patterns presented in an ESL classroom and the corresponding communication patterns disseminated by faculty and administrators.

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During the last academic year, over 1.1 million foreign students studied in the United States (Institute of International Education, 2018). Moreover, nearly 1,000 English as a Second Language (ESL) programs in the United States assist the English language learner (ELL) in qualifying for higher education at four-year universities (ESL Directory, 2018). Students who are enrolled at university ESL programs have differing educational experiences, linguistic abilities, and motivations to learn English (Bergey, Movit, Baird, and Faria, 2018). The linguistic skills of ELLs at university ESL programs have been deemed as having either an "asset" or "deficit" perspective based on proficiency (Nuñez, Rios-Aguilar, Kanno, and Flores, 2016). Accordingly, some foreign students may vary in their English language development skills because in their countries of origin they may have inadequately received formal instruction in English or none at all. Whether in English or a native language, the caliber of formal instruction affects prevailing academic preparedness and has repercussions for the development of English language skills (Jiang & Kuehn, 2001; Mamiseishvili, 2012).

There are many cultural adjustments that foreign students encounter; the foremost problems cited by the literature include lack of English proficiency, insufficient financial assets, social adjustment, and loneliness (Bastien, Seifen-Adkins, & Johnson, 2018; Lee, Abd-Ella, & Burke, 1981; as cited in Manese, Sedlacek, & Leong,1988; Mesidor & Sly, 2016). The pressure to conform to American values, norms, and patterns of behavior—what Kim (1988) calls host conformity pressure—is a constitutive aspect to the foreign student experience. "Many [students] want to participate in and learn as much as

possible about the host culture, but they do not want to lose their sense of cultural identity" (Paige, 1990, p. 167).

A university ESL program permits foreign students to learn as much as possible about the host culture with other foreign students without losing their sense of cultural identity. The notion of cultural identity is complex, fluid, and dynamic which has been examined from multiple perspectives (e.g., Berry, 1990; Collier, 2015; Phinney, 1993). It is the feeling of belonging to a certain ethnic group or culture, yet such feelings can be weak or strong. Moreover, cultural identity can be influenced by many factors, including personal, familial, and social situations (Duty, 2015). In many respects, the intensive English language program setting allows for and even encourages students to express their cultural identity within the confines of an "artificial" host culture. Nevertheless, the pressure to conform—mastering the English language—is still paramount to the ELL's experience. Thus, an ESL establishment can become a "sanctuary"—an insulated place—in which to integrate the opposite dimensions of host conformity pressure and cultural identity.

This scenario described above relates to what Gregory Bateson has defined as the "double bind." Bateson distinguishes three effects of the double bind situation: 1) an individual is involved in an intense relationship; 2) the individual is caught in a situation in which the other person in the relationship is expressing two orders of message and one message denies the other, and 3) the individual is unable to comment on the messages being sent to correct his or her discrimination of what order of message to respond (Bateson, Jackson, Haley, & Weakland, 1956, p. 254).

The features of the double bind listed previously are evidenced at an ESL setting. The students and their instructors are involved in a very intense relationship. Moreover, the students are attending the facility in order to improve their English language skills, but the advancement of their language proficiency also results in their having to disclaim some of their cultural habits. Accordingly, this paper will explore how the contrasting dimensions of American cultural patterns and the cultural identity of the foreign students are manifested in an English as Second Language facility and in an advanced ESL grammar class. Therefore, this paper will explore the following question: How is the double bind exhibited within the confines of a university English as a Second Language facility?

The Setting

The location for this research was a large Mid-western university. At the time of this study in Spring 2001, the campus had around fifteen hundred foreign students representing over one hundred countries. Out of these students, over one hundred attended the Center for English as a Second Language (CESL). CESL is an intensive English program providing beginning through advanced levels of English language instruction. Those students who attend CESL desire to improve their English abilities in order to attend the university as full-time academic students. While attending CESL, students do not receive university credit for their English language study.

CESL is located at the southern part of the university grounds on the third and fourth floors of a campus building built in 1952. The third floor is composed of classrooms, offices, and an open-area lunch room/meeting room; this floor has a very narrow hallway where students mingle in between classes. The fourth floor has a large

centralized computer lab with Internet access where students can send and receive email, study English language programs, and practice computer tutorials for their Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) test. Also, located on the fourth floor is the Conversation Café. The Conversation Café is a program composed of small conversation groups consisting of American volunteers and small groups of students. At the café, students can sit around café tables to practice their English conversation skills with American volunteers and to learn about the American culture.

CESL offers two seven-week sessions in the fall and spring semesters and two six-week sessions during the summer. The Center provides beginning through advanced levels of instruction. Students are given an individual evaluation for placement into the appropriate level of study. The cost of tuition includes instruction, books, computer lab, language lab, orientation, library privileges, university activity privileges, use of all facilities, and assistance from the International Student Services. CESL students can live on campus in residence halls, university apartments, with host families, or in off-campus housing.

The Classroom

The advanced grammar classroom observed for Session I was on the third floor of the building. There were five long desks plus the teacher's desk and thirteen chairs including the teacher's chair. On the front wall was only a chalkboard. Moreover, in the front of the classroom beside the teacher's desk was an overhead projector. Several times the instructor used the overhead projector and projected it on one side of the back wall. On the back wall was a color map of the United States, a world Mercator map, and a poster that read, "Worldwide Afro-Pop—Today's African Music and its Cousins

Abroad." On one side of the room were windows (which could open up) with shades, an air conditioner, and a television set facing the windows. On the other side of the room was a bulletin board, a clock, and a picture of roses. The bulletin board contained a small monthly calendar in which students signed up for additional help from the instructor.

The class for Session I was comprised of ten students from Korea, Russia, Japan, China, Thailand, Argentina, and Paraguay. The class for Session II included thirteen students. The two students from Argentina and Paraguay were not in Session II, possibly having completed their coursework. For Session II, the additional students came from Thailand, Japan, and Korea. Thus, Session II included all Asian students, except for a student from Russia. Due to the large size of the class, Session II was moved upstairs to the fourth floor. The classroom on the fourth floor is in the back part of an open area that includes a large screen TV, chairs, the Conversation Café tables and chairs, foosball, and air hockey. In the front part of the fourth floor is the computer lab.   In both class sessions, students periodically would check vocabulary on their electronic dictionaries. One student told me that his $200 dictionary included six languages—Spanish, German, English, French, Japanese, and Russian.

The ESL classroom setting lends itself to examining a variety of cultural patterns, notably American. In this unique environment varied cultural patterns markedly exist; nevertheless, American cultural patterns instinctively predominate. The series of examples below illustrate the association between the components of the double bind and the manifestations of American cultural patterns in the ESL classroom.

American Cultural Patterns and the Double Bind in the ESL Classroom

In one session the class talked about American Weddings—cutting cake, bouquets, wedding traditions, etc.—for a writing assignment. The students had a sheet detailing the wedding tradition to help them with the assignment. The teacher told the students to interview a partner and discuss wedding customs in their respective countries. Moreover, the teacher told them to take notes and admonished them to "be a good listener." One Japanese student in talking with a partner discussed "kimono" and "hakama," and explained the Japanese bride and groom change "uniform." A Korean student described that in Korea they have a wedding ceremony like Americans, but the bride and groom bow to the parents. A student from Thailand pointed out in his country the wedding is held in a shrine, not a church. He went on to recount Japan and Thailand use Western customs in their wedding ceremonies, such as the exchange of rings. A student from Russia revealed to his classmate in his country there is singing and dancing at the wedding. His Korean partner responded by saying in her country there is no dancing and singing, just eating.

In this class discussion, the students were learning about an aspect of American culture—American wedding customs, but at the same time they were exchanging information with each other about the wedding customs of their respective countries. Thus, this assignment combined an opportunity for the students to express their cultural identity while at the same time learning an American custom. This task therefore relates to the second component of the double bind in which two messages are expressed and one message negates the other. The students are to write a paper in English about various wedding customs around the world, but in so doing they most likely will need to utilize

such non-English words as "kimono" and "hakama" to describe each country's custom.

Also, American religious norms were indirectly brought into the classroom. For example, when discussing the use of gerunds, one of the sentences used by the teacher was "I'll never forget＿＿＿＿＿the Pope." The teacher then asked the students who is the Pope? One student replied the Pope was the leader of the Christians. The teacher questioned the student about his response and replied the Pope is the highest position in the Catholic Church.

Another occasion in which American religious norms were mentioned was after the Easter weekend. The teacher asked the students if they enjoyed their Easter weekend. The students responded with a mixture of responses, "yes, "no," and "boring." One student commented her host mother had hidden eggs in the backyard. The student said she found four eggs. In one egg was a nail and in another egg was a thorn. The teacher responded that those items symbolized what happened to Jesus. The teacher then asked, "What happened to Jesus?" The students were not sure, so the teacher said, "We will talk later; this is not a religion class."

The teacher was encouraging the students to talk about their Easter weekend in order to have them practice their English, but upon realizing the students did not comprehend what happened to Jesus leading up to Easter, the teacher quickly dismisses the message she was sending. Her reaction also relates to the aspect of the double bind in which two message commands are being expressed and one message denies the other.

In another instance, the foreign students themselves brought up the notion of an additional American religious custom—Christmas. This occurred when the class was discussing relative adverb clauses. In getting the class to understand how to use the

relative adverb clause, the teacher said, "December, a time when…" and then some of the students mentioned Christmas. This response by the students was very intriguing in that they could have responded by saying, "December, a time when there is snow on the ground" or "December, a time when it snows." Nevertheless, several students mentioned Christmas. Some of the foreign students could be of the Christian faith, so their response would not necessarily be out of place. Nonetheless, it was interesting students associated the month of December with Christmas.

In this advanced grammar class, a variety of group exercises were utilized. In one instance a memory game that included various aspects of the American culture was used for forming sentences using the present perfect tense, passive voice. The memory game included two rules: a) if the card was an agent the active voice was to be used and b) if the card was a receiver the passive voice was to be used. The students were divided into three groups. One student turned over a card that read "Huckleberry Finn" and then had to match it with another card that read "Mark Twain." Once a student found a possible match the student had to form a sentence. For example, "Huckleberry Finn was written by Mark Twain." Some of the other names on the cards included Agatha Christie, Moby Dick, Shakespeare, Murder on the Orient Express, Abraham Lincoln, and Picasso. In this exercise, the students seemed to enjoy the game, laughing and exclaiming, "Oh, oh, oh!" when they felt they knew the answer. All of the group exercises presumably were formed to ensure a mix of nationalities. Namely, for one exercise a group was composed of students from Argentina, Japan, and Thailand, a second group included students from Korea, Japan, and China, and a third included students from Japan, Korea, and Russia.

Another way American cultural patterns are communicated within the ESL program is through their Volunteer Program. This program offers the foreign students an opportunity for one-on-one dialogue with American conversation partners. In addition, there are conversation circles comprised of foreign students and two or three American volunteers who interact using informal conversation, spirited games, and discussions about a wide variety of cultural values, similarities, and differences. One foreign student remarking about the conversation circle stated, "my English-speaking skills are growing and I am learning about American culture." Another student commented that "it's good talking with American people, learning about the culture and talking about the differences." These students' comments are suggestive of the double bind situation in the emphasis of differences as opposed to similarities. This notion of differences relates to the fact that ESL students are inundated with messages iterating the distinctiveness of American cultural identity and cultural patterns or what Kim (1988) refers to as host conformity pressure. One case in point is the example of the memory game discussed above. As the students learn English, this conformity pressure forms a twofold message of promoting American cultural identity and cultural patterns while inadvertently suppressing the emergence of the students' own cultural identity and cultural patterns.

Message Patterns and the Double Bind

One means of communication between the ESL students and the faculty is through a newsletter called "CESL Dialogue." This newsletter, published two times per year by the Center, imparts various information to the students and touts diverse aspects of the accomplishments of the institution and the achievements of various students. Some of the articles in the newsletter promoting the institutional accomplishments included

titles such as, "CESL Gets High Marks from Regents" and "CESL Volunteer Program Benefits Both Students and Volunteers." Some of the stories in the newsletter highlighting a few of the CESL students included, "CESL Student Achieves His Goals," "A Lifelong Dream Comes True for CESL Student," and "Paraguayan Students Enjoy CESL."

Although not intentional, this newsletter helps to facilitate a double bind for the ESL students. For example, in the section of the newsletter written by the director various mixed messages are unwittingly produced. In one newsletter the director writes:

The aroma of wonderful food—that is something you can always expect at CESL, especially at lunchtime. Often, students will prepare delectable meals in their homes and bring them for lunch. You can smell bulgogi from Korea, shrimp tomyum from Thailand, or arepas from Venezuela. It reminds you of an international cafeteria where you cannot decide which special aroma entices you more.

In these sentences the director is extolling the virtues of the students' cultural identities through their various ethnic foods which create an "international cafeteria." Nevertheless, in another newsletter, the director extols the virtues of the facility's ability to help students improve their English language skills into order to make "learning English fun and entertaining!" The director writes:

We have increased the number of computers available to students for improving their language skills and have established an area for audiolingual practice. Another area has been designed for video instruction which is a great way to increase listening comprehension and vocabulary.

In these two newsletter articles written by the director, the contrasting elements of what Kim (1988) labels as host conformity pressure and host receptivity are conspicuous. In the first article the director commends the "special aromas" of the "international café." The inference drawn is that the director is advocating the demonstration of the students' cultural identities, thus creating the notion of host receptivity. Conversely, the other article lauding the center's increased capabilities of improving the students' English language skills has an underlying assumption of host conformity pressure by professing the Center has "increased the number of computers available to students for improving their language skills." Consequently, with increased computer availability the students ought to be increasing their English skills and, as a result, deculturate (or unlearn) some old cultural elements (Kim, 2001). These two dialectical components—host receptivity and host conformity pressure—perceived in the words expressed in the newsletters help to effectuate an atmosphere of the double bind.

The main goal and direct mission of an ESL facility is to help foreign students become successful in acquiring their English language skills. As a consequence of this goal, the ESL facility at the same time restricts the use of the students' native language— one aspect of their cultural identity. Therefore, the elemental mission of the ESL facility thus acts to engender the double bind situation. For example, in the ESL advanced grammar class there were a couple of incidents in which this language double bind occurred. One day the class was learning the use of articles, and was having some difficulty with this subject matter. A Latin American student told the teacher that in Spanish the articles can be different and mean the same things. The teacher responded by saying, "That's in Spanish, we are learning English." In another incident the teacher

called on a Korean student. Asking in Korean, the student sought help from another

Korean classmate. The teacher told him to speak in English. When the student had

trouble expressing his answer in English, the teacher told him to tell his Korean

classmate, and then after class to tell her—the teacher—in English. Moreover, when the

class was learning relative adverb clauses, a Korean student mentioned he had read a

person could use "which" in a relative adverb clause. The teacher asked him to show her

that information in the grammar book. Later the student told the teacher it was in a

Korean book on English grammar. The teacher responded that foreign grammar books

are not as good as grammar books produced in the United States.

These different instances are additional examples of how students in a university

ESL class struggle with the opposite dimensions of conformity pressure (use of English)

and the restricted use of their native language—a double bind theme. These two

dimensions relate to what Kim (1995) calls the acculturation and deculturation aspects of

adaptation. The process of learning about the host culture—in this case the English

language—is called acculturation. While this acculturation or new learning occurs, an

unlearning of old cultural habits—deculturation — results. The ESL students therefore

are learning the English language and, subsequently, American customs while at the same

time having to "unlearn" some of their cultural ways.

Sometimes this contrasting dimension of acculturation/deculturation is welcomed

by an ESL student. For example, in an in interview with one of the Japanese students, he

told me he liked the classroom style of the English as a Second Language facility. He

said:

I don't like the class style in Japan, especially in the university. In Japan [sic]

university, the professor keep [sic] talking, and many students don't ask questions. If or when students ask professor, they don't sometimes answer the question. They don't like to be bothered by students. At CESL we can ask questions. Every time I want to ask the teacher, so I like style of class. He told me that in each class he feels free to ask questions. Moreover, he said, "There are a few mistakes in Japanese grammar books, so I can learn real English grammar here." This particular Japanese student chose CESL because there are few Japanese students in attendance. He told me he would prefer Latin American, European or African students in his class "because most of Asia has similar culture or similar grammar, but other cultures don't have similar culture. So, it stimulate [sic] me or encourage me to study English or another culture."

ESL Teachers and the Double Bind

The double bind notion is not only one affecting the foreign students learning English as a second language, but the teachers of English as second language.   In general, an ESL teacher's main focus is to improve his or her students' English skills, but at the same time the teacher wants the students to express their cultural identity. For example, in the class I observed the teacher asked the students to think of their favorite dish from their country and to get the recipe for that dish. The reason behind this request was that it would generate a writing assignment. This writing assignment subsequently led to demonstration speech week when students are asked to explain how to prepare their favorite native dish. This cultural occasion then becomes an opportunity for students to practice their English language skills while heightening their cultural distinctiveness.

Even though the main focus for the CESL teachers is to assist the foreign students in becoming proficient in English, they also have a desire to enhance their students'

cultural identities. For example, one teacher commented: "I have enjoyed living in other cultures, and when I am in the classroom at CESL, I travel the world. This is something the international students give me that enriches my life." Another teacher remarked:

> The most rewarding part of my job are my relationships with the students.
> Before coming to CESL, I had no idea about the struggles many of the
> international students have in their lives and countries. Teaching at CESL has
> made me more sensitive to the world. Working with the students and finding out
> about their lives has enriched my life. My world is not so small any more, but
> much larger.

Some of the CESL teachers give assignments that are as close as possible to what students will face outside the ESL facility. Besides using the ESL textbooks, some teachers include real hands-on materials meant for native English speakers. One teacher opined: "I work with the students to make language and writing real and useful in their lives. I do this by using a visual, hearing, hands-on approach. My standard for the students is for them to learn and improve." Accordingly, CESL teachers find themselves in a type of double bind, similar to their foreign students. An ESL teacher's goal is to see his or her students succeed by getting good test scores or gaining admittance to the university. Nevertheless, these same teachers, in order for their students to succeed, at the same time must require that their students "unlearn" or deculturate some of their cultural habits. While the setting of an ESL facility can become a type of double bind scenario for the intensive English language students, the ESL program seemingly presents itself as double bind circumstance for the English language teachers as well.

Although the foreign students who study English as a Second Language and the instructors who teach English as a Second Language find themselves learning and working in an intense relationship in a unique environment which induces the cultural double bind, these students and teachers alike seem to thrive within this particular unique surrounding. One student commented: "The CESL program is very enjoyable and has opened the door to many possibilities for me." Another student stated, "I like everything at CESL—the schedules, the teachers, and the relationships between the students." From the perspective of some of the teachers, they also demonstrate a strong kinship within this cultural double bind environment. One teacher reflecting on his overseas experience said, "I want to help any student that may be having a tough time or doesn't understand. When I was in another country I had to rely on my eyes instead of the language that I didn't understand." Another teacher commented: "At CESL, the teachers are really ambassadors and I like that idea."

Conclusion

Bateson's theory of the double bind is not only an intriguing theory, but one which has applicability to many different situations and scenarios, including the setting of an intensive English as a Second Language program. One of Bateson's three effects of the double bind situation is that an individual is involved in an intense relationship. The foreign students studying English as a Second Language and their relationship with their English instructors is an especially intense relationship. CESL is open throughout the year offering twenty-five hours of instruction per week in addition to outside cultural excursions. Bateson's second effect of the double bind situation is that the sender of the message expresses a two-prong message in which one message denies the other. This

two-prong message effect of the double bind is very apparent in the ESL facility. The

goal of the ESL program is to encourage foreign students to learn the English language,

but at the same time this goal or message creates the predicament for those same students

to have to "unlearn" their cultural habits. Thus, this quandary leads to Bateson's third

effect of the double bind situation that the receiver of the message is unable to comment

on the messages being sent to correct his or her discrimination of what order of message

to respond to.

Twenty years after the double bind theory was published, John Weakland, one of

the authors, suggested that "real significance of the theory was its viewpoint that behavior

and communication are closely tied" (Guillaume, 2001). Moreover, Watzlawick,

Bavelas, and Jackson in their book *Pragmatics of Human Communication* extended

Bateson's double bind theory into a general theory of "pragmatic paradoxes" (Poster,

1978). The unique communicational setting of an English as a Second Language

program clearly demonstrates that behavior and communication are closely tied, thus

creating a cultural "pragmatic paradox."

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