THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHING CULTURE IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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Language and culture are two inseparable entities. Therefore, in learning a language one learns the culture behind it. One’s mastery of the linguistic elements of a language does not guarantee a person can communicate through it. Cultural understanding is obligatory. This paper discusses the various findings and ideas on the integration of culture into foreign language teaching. Its focus is to highlight the importance, existence, impact, and the techniques of integrating cultural elements into the teaching of English as a foreign language.

Keywords: Language teaching, Culture, Learning, Techniques.

Introduction

Language is arguably the most important component of culture because much of the rest of it is normally transmitted orally. It is impossible to understand the subtle nuances and deep meaning of another culture without knowing its language well.

Young children are inherently capable of learning the necessary phonemes, morphemes and syntaxes they mature. In other words, they have a genetic propensity to learn language. They come into the world as eager learning machines and language acquisition is a major aspect of this learning. How children actually learns a language is not entirely clear.

Most linguists believe that they do it primarily by listening to and trying to communicate with adult speakers.

Initially, this means that they imitate the phonemes. Later they begin to learn grammar by imitation as well.

What do they Say about Culture?

Culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society (Taylor, E, 1871).

It is the way a group of people behavior reacts in various conditions or circumstances (Boards, F, 1911). It is significant because it reveals relationships which are important to us due to their connection with our values (Weber, M, 1904). It is the capacity for constantly expanding the range and accuracy of one’s perception of meanings (Dewey, J, 1916).

The term culture [refers to] what is learned the things one needs to know in order to meet the standards of others (Goodenough, W, 1971). [the culture concept] denotes an historically transmitted patterns of meaning embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic
forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life”(Geertz ,1966) . It is a presupposition of cultural psychology that when people leave in the world differently, it may be that they live in different worlds “(shweder,R,1991) .

The most important characteristic of culture according to samovar (2004) is that “it is learned ...and transmitted from generation to generation. From the moment a child is conceived, culture is already handed down to him/her through the rituals of child-bearing.

Consequently, culture nurtures a person throughout his/ her life time persistently following him/her and dictating what to do in almost all circumstances from the cradle to the grave .Samovar also included five elements that are found in each culture :history ,religion ,values ,social organization, and language.

History is handed down from generation to generation, religion influences culture, values help determines how people ought to behave social organization help members of the culture organize their lives and lastly, language allows members to communicate with one other”.

What is Language and How it is Acquired?

Language, according to o ‘Neil (2005) is a “learned symbolic communication system”. It could be a spoken or a written language, body language, paralanguage, or sign language.

Fundamentally, the first words or set of words that children learn are the one that communicate their needs. It may not be necessarily the first things they ever learn to utter .Research shows that there is a difference between first and second language acquisition .McCain (2002,para.10) identified that “initial language acquisition relies mainly on neurological development over time , while second ( and subsequent) language acquisition relies on age only in associated characteristics and not in actual brain structure .

Consequently, the words found in one’s language are composed of what the speakers meet or are meeting in their daily life .These words are just mere representatives of objects that are imaginably deposited in the brain for future reference .Some countries where there are snow and sled and ski have words for each whereas in tropical countries they might not have the equivalent words because those things do not exist where they live. They might adopt the word with the same pronunciation and exact spelling or sometimes they localize the word by giving it a different spelling but similar sound.

Interestingly , the way a person speaks or uses his ,her native language will greatly affect the way he /she/ will use English and it cannot be changed overnight .Because of this , phonology can be affected by one’s familiarity with the sound .some Asians , like the Japanese, Thai, Koreans, Cambodian have difficulty in pronouncing L and R distinctly from each other because they are not two different letters in their language .

In Thai, particularly , the following pairs of letters have similar sound :

T and D, J and CH , R and L.

Sometimes final L sound becomes /ew/ like /hotew/ for hotel ,

or /n/ like /apn / for apple.

Final /s/ is often pronounced as /t/ like /thit/ for this and /it/ for is . not for nose and sometimes omitted like /rai/ for rice

/ how: / for house

Many times I found myself frustrated with my students who could not make a distinction between two sounds . Not until I realized that it had something to do with their native or first language.

Meanwhile KENT (1997) went deeper into analyzing individual -and general – variables that affect TTESOL student. These variables include age, motivation, intelligence, aptitude and cognitive, and personality in general.
He also reminded TESOL teachers “that the acquisition of a second language not only alters the learners current linguistic state, but alters their perception of the environment and the world around them”

**Language Teaching is Culture Teaching**

As L2 and FL educators, we teach and our student learns about the culture of the L2 /FL whether or not we include it overtly in the curriculum. This point was point made by Mc leod (1976, p212) some years ago “by teaching a language one is inevitably already teaching culture implicitly sociolinguistics reveals why. In an article on discourse for example , Brown (1990) question whether or not language may be value free or independent of cultural background she concludes there are values-presupposition about the natural of life and what is good and bad in it , to be found in any normal use of language ”(p-13)

Such, normal language use is exactly what most L2 and FL instructors aim to teach.

Buttjes (1990, p55) summarizes several reasons why “language and culture are from the start inseparably connected”.

1. Language acquisition does on follow a universal sequence, but differs across cultures.
2. The process of becoming a competent member of society is realized through exchanges of language in particular social situations.
3. Every society orchestrates the ways in which children participate in particular situation, and this, in turn, affects the form, the function and the content of children’s utterances.
4. Caregivers ‘primary concern is with grammatical input, but with the transmission of sociocultural knowledge.
5. The native learner, in addition to language, acquires also the paralinguistic patterns and kinesics of his her culture.

We should and do teach our students the L2 and FL culture in our classes when our goal is communicative competence. not only is culture part and parcel of the process, but the educational value of it within L2 /FL education is great as Byram (1988) argues.

Kramsh, Cain, and Murphy, Lejeune (1996) define “culture as language as and language as culture “first, because we should include culture in our curriculum in an intentional manner in order to avoid the stereotyping and pitfalls Nemni (1992) has outlined.

Second, including culture in our L2/FL curriculum is to enable teacher to do a better job teaching culture and to be more accountable to students for the culture learning that takes place in our L2/FL classes.

**Language – Culture Connection:**

Let us them examine some important point of langue –culture connection. during the eighteenth century, German scholars Johan Herder (1744-1803) and Wilhelm von Humboldt (1762-1835) as cited by Kramsch (1998) put forth the idea that “different people speak differently because their language offers them different usage of expressing the word around them. This led Kramsh to say that “language expresses cultural reality. Speakers identify themselves and others through their of language as a symbol of their social identity. The prohibition of its use is often perceived by its speakers as a rejection of their social group and their culture ( kramsh 1998)

Another important issue about language –culture connection is the sapir-whorf hypothesis. in 1929, Edward Sapir argued that the “real word” is to a large extent un consciously built upon the word “is presented in a Kaleidoscopic flux of impression which has to be organized by our mind and this means largely by the linguistic system in our minds ” (Chandleer,1994). In another words, our language influences how we see the world around us (Wikipedia).
One common example of language-culture connection is how different people greet each other. Here are some examples that I have observed. In American and other English cultures when a man and a woman meet for the first time, the man has to wait for the lady to extend her hand.

But in other Asian cultures like Thailand, people put their hands together as a prayer position and slightly bow their heads to say “hello” and “goodbye.” In Korea and Japan, old and in Algeria, acquaintances may kiss each other.

Considering these divergent cultures about the same topic, how can two people of different cultures bridge the gap? How can an English language learner decide which culture inherent in the target language?

Essentially, the culture, in other words, since English is the target language in ESL/EFL classes, student and teachers should observe the cultures linked to it.

For most Algerian people, addressing people depend on the relationship, hierarchy, and age between people. In the west for example, it is important to acknowledge someone’s superiority in age by calling him ami – uncle. In the east they call him (khalli) – uncle however in other region they say (elhadj) calling elders by their first name is considered disrespectful or defiant.

Citing from the above situations, O’Neil (2005) explained that the complexity of a language is highly influenced by the culture” he also argued that “language is the most important component of culture because it is normally transmitted orally. It is impossible to understand the subtle nuances and deep meanings of another culture without knowing its language well.

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**How to Incorporate Culture into the Foreign Language Classroom**

Traditional methods of teaching culture in the foreign language classroom have been focused on formal culture and passive learning. Student do not need both a geographical and historical perspectives in order to understand contemporary behavior patterns but this can be done with “hands on” activities. Beginning foreign language students want to feel, touch, smell and see the foreign peoples and not just hear their language.

To achieve that goal, cultural activities and objectives should be carefully organized and incorporated into lesson plans to enrich and inform the teaching content. The use of following materials and techniques for presenting culture in the classroom is widely recommended.

**Cultural Islands**

Teachers should have prepared a cultural island in their classrooms. Posters, pictures, maps, signs and many kinds are essential in helping students foreign names from the first day can heighten student interest. ‘Jamel – gemic. Short presentations on a topic of interest with appropriate pictures or slides add to this mental image.

Some of the foods they eat are another example of the influence of foreign cultures. Subsequent activities might include: sending student out to interview shop owners; inviting bilingual students to your class to tutor students or to talk about a certain topic and may be help narrate a slide show.

**Celebrating Festival**

Celebrating foreign festivals is a favorite activity of many students. Even though this activity takes a lot of planning it works well a culminating activity. We then prepare for the festival by drawing posters, decorating the room, and preparing some of the foods.

**Kinesthetics and Body Language**

Culture is a network of verbal and non-verbal communication.

If your goal as foreign language teachers is to teach communication we must not neglect the most obvious from of non-verbal communication which is gesture. Gesture although learned, is largely an unconscious cultural phenomenon. Gesture conveys the “feel” of the language to the student and when accompanied by verbal communication, injects greater authenticity into the classroom and makes language study more interesting (Peck, 1988). At the beginning of the year, teachers can show foreign films to students just to have them focus on body movements.

**Literature**

Literary works can be an effective means to develop the understanding of other cultures because they provide the readers with insights of other cultures without having to visit the real place. Carter (1995) points out:

‘Literature, it seems to me, is the surest bridge to understanding. Let student read novels, plays, short stories, poems from other nation and cultures. Let them immerse themselves vicariously in the other lives. For instance instead of reading about the Soviet Union, it is better as Glinn says “to read Tolstoy or Chekov to understand what Russians are.”’
Conclusion

Learning the unknown from what is known. L2 learners will process learning faster if there is cognitive and affective relationship between them and the words they are learning. But it is not enough that one learns the language and its grammatical structure. It is also important that teachers and student observe culturally appropriate behavior (Peterson and Coltrane, 2003).

It should be reiterated that language teaching is culture teaching and “by teaching a language “one is inevitably already teaching culture implicitly” (MC Leod, 1976:212) and gaining insights into the foreign language should automatically presupposed immersion in the foreign culture, in so far as these two, language and culture, go hand in hand.

In the end it is clear that we need not to be wary of culture in the L2 and FL context, even though it is also evident that there are still aspects of culture in the L2 and FL education that do need further research and understanding.

References