

Learning Language in the Corridors of Culture

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Abstract

Language binds people. It is a medium to share their thoughts and emotions. However, when people of different cultural background come together, it becomes a barrier. As language is a cultural barrier, culture too is a language barrier. Lack of knowledge of the culture equals to lack of knowledge of the language. Hence in order to learn a language it is very crucial to understand the culture of the target language. It is the responsibility of a language teacher to open the windows of the culture of the target language to the students.

Teaching a foreign language is not just giving a clear understanding of the syntactic structures, with focus on grammar or enrichment of vocabulary; but it is also an exposure to the cultural elements of an entirely new world, that are interwoven with the language itself. Language proficiency is not just speaking or writing the language correctly but having a complete understanding of the cultural context including the verbal as well as the non-verbal aspects, so that effective communication takes place. The incorporation of cultural awareness in the foreign language classroom not only helps the students learn the language but also helps them have empathy and respect a variety of social behaviours, beliefs, customs and traditions. The paper highlights the significance of understanding the social and cultural aspects of the target language in order to learn it, and attempts to show that culture holds an important place in foreign language education. Moreover it provides creative strategies that teachers may use to incorporate culture in their language teaching.

1) Introduction

The attitudes, behaviours and values of a group are collectively known as culture. Hammerly (1982) very simply defines culture as “the total way of life of a people” (p.513). Truly, culture is

the way of life of a group of people which includes the beliefs, values, symbols, behavior, etiquettes and lifestyle that they accept and are passed from one generation to the next.

Language is the medium of communication and individual expression in any culture and thus becomes one of its main ingredients. Language and culture are so absorbed in each other that learning a new language requires learning a new culture. Recent research has focused on the importance of cultural knowledge in communicative competence.

2) Language and Culture

Language teaching is not just teaching the grammar rules for correct use of language and having good speaking skills, but also having a deeper understanding of the contexts which involves the cultural, political, economical and social aspects of the country whose language one wants to learn.

Linguistic variation is the result of the existence of cultural differences. For instance, the Chinese and Japanese learners of English avoid the use of relative clauses because their languages do not contain equivalent structures. (Ellis, 1997) Linguists Labov (1972) and Rebok (1987) state that dialects such as southern or black English have different structure and rules when compared with Standard English. For instance, Black English often uses the verb “to be” rather than the future tense; hence, the statement “I am leaving” is expressed as “I be going”. (Henson and Eller) The use of double negatives is common in Black English, for instance “He don’t know nothing” or “I ain’t afraid of ghosts” (Yule, 1985) Cultural factors also affect the formality or informality of speech. For instance, Japanese and Indian Languages have different terms to address a person depending on the formality and the amount of respect you wish to give. French (*tu* and *vous*), German (*du* and *sie*) and Spanish (*tu* and *usted*) too have two pronouns for ‘you’, with the first reserved for close friends and family. (Yule, 1985), but the English language has a single word ‘you’ for formal as well as informal occasions.

Cultures develop words for the things and concepts that are significant to them. The English speaking countries have over 3,000 words for colours, whereas, other cultures such as the Hanunoo people of Midori Island in the Philippines or the Dani in New Guinea have fewer than five words for colours, even though they can recognize many colour variations. (Woolfolk, 2004) Similarly, the Ulgunigamiut Eskimos have more than 160 words for ice, because they have to

recognize ice at different stages of freezing to hunt and live safely in their environment. (Woolfolk, 2004) Likewise, there are many words for rice in South Asian Languages, where it is largely consumed, not to forget the cultural dimension of it being the food to be offered to an ancestor's spirit.

3) Nonverbal Communication and Culture

With the socialization process, members of a particular community share some common attitudes, beliefs and values which are reflected in their communication. The Americans value logic and clarity in thinking and expect people to be straightforward in their communication. If you are not clear in expressing your opinion about something then you are simply wasting time. Singaporeans consider silence as an important element of communication. They give appropriate thought to every question and frame their response carefully which creates many pauses in the interaction. The British are very formal in communication and strictly follow the rules of protocol. The Japanese often trust the non-verbal messages more than words.

The non-verbal communication too varies in different cultures. Shaking hands is the most natural way of greeting people. Shaking hands with visitor is a very common thing all over the world, but the French also shake hands with everyone in their office when they arrive in the morning. There is such a minute difference in the cultural norm, but it creates 'hurt' and misunderstanding, as was the case with a French Rugby player when he joined an English team:

“When I first came (to England), I wondered why nobody shook my hand when we met at the start of the day, I was hurt. But it is just the culture...” (Thomas Castaignede, *Rugby World*, February 2003)

4) Cultural Awareness in Classroom

The key to learning is in activity, as it demands active participation of the learners. Teachers can assist learning in the classroom in the form of giving information, motivation, guidance and solving problems; and then gradually allowing the students to do more and more on their own. During all the activities it should be borne in mind that the main aim of all the activities is to improve language and communication through exposure to the culture.

i) Online Activities

Research suggests that technology in the classroom can have a positive impact on both the social and academic behavior of students. (Alvestad & Wigfield, 1993; Bruder, Buchsbaum, Hill & Orlando, 1992; O'Brien, 1991) The easy access to internet is a boon for learning the language from the cultural perspective due to the opportunity it provides of interaction with native speakers, without visiting the country. Intercultural encounter in the form of interaction with native speakers of the target language can easily be done with the use of internet. www.britishcouncil.org and www.elanguages.org offers an opportunity to collaborate with teachers globally, whereas www.epals.com offers a platform to students to interact.

Students can be asked to interact with a native speaker of the target language on the following topics. They must also maintain a journal of their learning during the interaction.

- 1) Share the personal, local, national and international events of the day
- 2) Share their favorite poem or song and explain it
- 3) Describe an important place in their city
- 4) Explore non-verbal communication in their community
- 5) Describe the verbal and non-verbal communication in a public place
- 6) Discuss their childhood games and toys
- 7) Discuss their systems of education
- 8) Discuss the local sports
- 9) Discuss the dish that they associate with their culture
- 10) Explore different religious practices, customs and traditions
- 11) Learn about their festivals
- 12) Discuss the values, beliefs and superstitions
- 13) Explore names and their meanings

ii) Visits to Museums and Heritage Centres

The exhibited artifacts in a museum and heritage centres are a great learning resource. They propound the culture of and give glimpses into the history of the country. Taking the students to museums displaying artifacts from the target language's country would help them understand a lot about the lifestyle, political systems and economic developments of the country. A list of questions or a worksheet can be provided to the students before the visit, which the students would answer. The students may note down their experience in their journal. If no such museum is in the vicinity, then virtual museums can be explored. A number of sites such as www.britishmuseum.org, <http://oi.uchicago.edu> and www.nga.gov provide the opportunity to have online tours into the history and culture of other countries.

iii) Role Plays

Role play is a technique in which participants assume an identity other than their own, to cope with real or hypothetical problems in human relations and other areas. (Dutta, 2009) Hence, role plays would demand a good understanding of the difference in the usage of language, the attitudes of people belonging to a particular cultural group in that specific situation and their mannerisms. The role plays can be designed in such a fashion that students use the language and undertake to act out behavior patterns that they believe are characteristic to a particular culture in specific social or professional situations.

The students may be divided into pairs and asked to act out situations such as, an English and an Indian striking a business deal; a teacher and a student from different cultural backgrounds interacting in a classroom situation; a host of a show interviewing a celebrity belonging to a different country; a person visiting a foreign country and asking for directions. They have to keep in mind the rules about when to talk, how to talk, who to address and how to begin or end a conversation. Moreover, the role play must end with an open discussion, wherein the audience share their observations and give suggestions; and the teacher review what has been learnt in the role play.

iv) Studying Literature

Literature is a mirror of life. The literature of a country is a good source to learn about the culture of that country. It provides a glimpse into the social, political, geographical, economic and historical aspects of a country which have a great impact on the culture. Students would acquire

language skills by focusing on the language usage and understand the culture through its setting. For instance, the students can understand the lifestyle and values of the Georgian society by reading Jane Austen, the Afghanistan society by reading Khaled Hosseini, the American society by reading Mark Twain or Arthur Miller, the African society by reading Alice Walker and the French society by reading Honoré de Balzac. The students' social and cultural background may help or hinder their understanding of the text; hence, the teacher's role becomes important. Moreover, the students can be motivated to think about the common underlying themes across different cultures.

v) Enactment of Drama

The social roles and linguistic rules differ from culture to culture. Hence the activity of performing a drama based on a folk tale or a piece of literature of the target country would help to understand and provide exposure to the cultural attributes of a country. A piece of literature would provide instances of language structures in use, the social situations and the culture specific settings.

The learners can be divided into groups and assigned the task of enactment. The teacher can provide guidance in selecting the literary piece or folk tale, in assigning roles and in making logistic arrangements. The story can be chosen on the basis of whether it is appropriate to students' interests and whether it will stimulate a high level of personal involvement. The learners would put in efforts to modify their language and speech patterns, adjust their attitudes and change their mannerisms in accordance to the cultural rules, which would further facilitate the learning process. The use of culture specific settings, costumes and objects would complete the impact it aims to have on the audience. The audience, which would be another batch of learners, would also observe and learn a lot about the language of the country and would get a feel of the culture.

vi) Preparing Charts of Idioms

Idioms are deeply influenced by culture. They hold implied meanings, and do not just denote the literal meaning. And as idioms contain rich cultural connotations in it, they cannot be understood by isolating them from the cultural background. Hence, competency in using idioms indicates competency in language.

Idioms can be influenced by religious factors ('Ninth circle of hell' which means something that couldn't get worse influenced by Dante's Inferno, the ninth circle of hell where worst punishments are found), historical factors ('You're your waterloo' which means to be finally defeated after a period of success influenced by the battle of Waterloo) literary factors ('Man Friday' which means a loyal servant influenced by the novel Robinson Crusoe) myths ('Midas touch' which means an excellent skill for making money, influenced by the myth of Midas, a legendary king of Phrygia, who was granted the boon that whatever he touches would turn into gold) legends ('Achilles' Heel' which means a person's weak spot influenced by the legend of Achilles who was dipped into river Styx by his mother Thetis in order to make him invulnerable, but his heel wasn't covered by water making it his weak spot) fables ('Bell the cat' which means to perform a daring act influenced by the fable in which a mouse bells a cat so that they get a warning of her approach) and lifestyle ('to hit a home run' which means to succeed in something influenced by the game of baseball). Students can be divided into groups and given the task to prepare charts on idioms such as the above mentioned. They should then present their chart in front of the class and explain the idiom and the cultural element underlying it.

A study of idioms does not just focus on language but also gives learners a deeper understanding of cultural context. In other words, we learn a lot about the culture by studying idioms and get a better understanding of the idiom by learning the cultural background.

vii) Organize a Vocabulary Quiz

Every culture has its own set of words that are specific to the traditions of that culture. English is a language that has adopted enormous amounts of words from other languages. Students can be given the task of searching the words that belong to other languages and have been adopted in English and the origin of the word. Some of the words may be culture specific for instance, 'gladiator' borrowed from latin, 'feng shui' from Chinese, 'theatre' from Greek, 'salsa' from Spanish, 'banana' from African and 'avatar' from Indian languages. A Vocabulary Quiz can then be organized in the class to test the knowledge of the words borrowed from the other languages in English.

viii) Poster Presentation

It is human tendency to be fascinated by new and unfamiliar objects. As bringing real objects from the target culture to the class is a challenging task, images of the objects can be used to learn about them. Students can be divided in pairs and asked to prepare a poster of the objects used by the people of the target culture. The students can be asked to choose their objects from different spheres or fields such as musical instruments, toys, clothes, food, jewelry, modes of transportation, dwellings, etc. or products such as machines, sports goods, furniture, etc. that exist in the target society. The learners have to describe the object, talk about the usage and explain its cultural relevance.

ix) Screening Movies

Movies, like literature, are the reflection of the society. Screening movies from the target culture for the learners can be a very didactic and interesting exercise. The learners can be shown movies and asked to share their observations on the theme of the movie, the language, the setting, the beliefs and behavior of the characters, and the cultural elements that surprised them in the movie. The movie should have subtitles in the target language as it would aid the listening process. Students can also be motivated to watch movies at home and share their views in the class. Moreover, learners can be motivated to watch films from the target culture and share their observations and opinions about those films online with a person from that culture.

x) Other Activities

Apart from the above activities, the teachers may also use authentic material such as newspapers, magazines, pamphlets, advertisements, travel brochures and menus to help the students learn the target culture and enhance their second language learning. Screening of television shows, news broadcasts, video clips of their sports and documentaries on celebration of festivals can be done. Picture Dictionaries too offer a good scope to design activities such as crosswords, memory games or word snakes depending upon the level or age of the learners. A very ambitious task can be to travel abroad or participate in student exchange programs.

5) Conclusion

Second language acquisition is second culture acquisition. (Spackman) Language learning comprises of several components such as grammatical competence, communicative competence,

language proficiency as well as cultural knowledge. Hendon (1980) believes that unless culture is the central focus in language teaching, students will not communicate to “the fullest extent”. The teacher should concentrate on how to integrate the cultural features into language learning.

The goal of communication is to understand, and understanding requires stepping into the shoes of others. Enhancing cultural competence, would not only stimulate and satisfy the intellectual curiosity of the students about the target culture, but would lead to empathy and respect towards different cultures. Integrating cultural understanding would give students an opportunity to formulate their own views and hence develop the ability to critically evaluate generalizations about the target culture. Accepting and understanding cultural differences and being able to adapt to them is the way to successful communication.

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(The paper was presented at the Third International [ELT@I](#) Rajasthan Conference on 'Interfacing Language, Culture and Technology' organised by Department of Languages, BITS Pilani, in collaboration with English Language Teacher's Association of India, Jaipur with the support of British Council and RELO, U. S. Embassy New Delhi from 8th to 9th October 2012.)