Teaching and Learning Culture of a Second Language

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Abstract

The paper concerns with the contribution and integration of culture in the second or foreign language education. More specifically, some consideration will be given to the why and how to teach culture. Teaching a foreign language is not the same as giving a lecture on syntactic structures or learning new vocabulary and expressions, but mainly integrates, or should integrate, some cultural elements, which are matted with the target language itself.

In addition, an attempt will be made to incorporate culture into the classroom by means of considering some techniques and methods currently used. The main hypothesis of the paper is that effective communication is more than a matter of language proficiency, but successful communication hardly ever takes place unless second language users have obtained a kind of cultural competency of the language they use. One's meaningful cross-cultural communication depends on the achievement of abilities to understand different modes of thinking and living, as they are embodied in the language to be learnt, and to merge or mediate between different modes present in any specific interaction. This mode of understanding can be labeled as "intercultural communicative competence.

Cultural competence helps students to develop an understanding that social variables such as age, sex, social class, and place of residence influence the ways in which people speak and behave. Furthermore, cultural competence enhances and enriches communicative competence; and it can lead to understanding and appreciating different cultures as well. Consequently, cross-cultural awareness seems a very noble innovative goal for many nations to pick another language and its culture, especially for us as an African groping our way in the age of globalization.

Introduction

Abundant available studies tackle effective approaches to teach the second language culture, curriculum development, or making materials. The relationship between culture and classroom learning and teaching has become something of a hot potato in recent times. It is an apt and crucial act that the second/foreign language teachers in Africa talk about the utilization of culture in second or foreign language. Culture is a fundamental element of foreign language education, and many teachers have seen it as their goal to include the teaching of culture into the foreign language syllabus.

Defining Culture

What is culture? Westerhuis (as cited in Cheung, 2001, p.56) defines 'culture' as the customs, values, laws, technology, artifacts and art of a particular time or people. Culture in English language teaching materials has been subject to discussion for many

years. The reason for the use of cultural content in classroom is for the supposition that it will promote learner motivation (McKay, 2000, p.7).

The National Center for Cultural Competence defines culture as an "integrated pattern of human behavior that includes thoughts, communications, languages, practices, beliefs, values, customs, courtesies, rituals, manners of interacting and roles, relationships and expected behaviors of a racial, ethnic, religious or social group; and the ability to transmit the above to succeeding generations" (Goode, Sockalingam, Brown, & Jones, 2000).

This means that language is not only part of how we define culture, it also reflects culture. It can be said that cultural content is a key for effective teaching and learning a second or foreign language. Necessarily, students cannot master the language unless they have mastered the cultural contexts in which the language occurs. (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 1996, p. 27)

Aspiration of cultural teaching

Changes in linguistic and learning theory suggest that culture can be used as an important element in language classrooms. According to Tomalin & Stempleski (1993: 7-8), modifying Seelye's (1988) 'seven goals of cultural instruction', the teaching of culture has the following goals and is of and in itself a means of accomplishing them:

1. to help students to develop an understanding of the fact that all people exhibit culturally-conditioned behaviors.
2. to help students to develop an understanding that social variables such as age, sex, social class, and place of residence influence the ways in which people speak and behave.
3. to help students to become more aware of conventional behavior in common situations in the target culture.
4. to help students to increase their awareness of the cultural connotations of words and phrases in the target language.
5. to help students to develop the ability to evaluate and refine generalizations about the target culture, in terms of supporting evidence.
6. to help students to develop the necessary skills to locate and organize information about the target culture.
7. to stimulate students' intellectual curiosity about the target culture, and to encourage empathy towards its people.

This list of goals is definitely an improvement on Huebener's (1959: 182-183) list of 'desirable outcomes'.

Linguistic competence alone is not enough for learners of a language to be competent in that language (Krasner, 1999). Language learners need to be aware, for example, of the culturally appropriate ways for addressing people, greetings, expressing needs, and agree or disagree with someone. They should know that behaviors and intonation patterns that are appropriate in their own speech community may be perceived differently by members of the target language speech community. They have to understand that, in order for communication to be successful, language use must be associated with other culturally appropriate behavior. Anyhow, the aim of teaching culture is 'to increase students' awareness and to develop their interest towards the target culture and their own, helping them to make comparisons among cultures' (Tavares & Cavalcanti, 1996: 19). These

comparisons, of course, are not meant to underestimate or overestimate foreign cultures but to enrich students' experience and to make them more cosmopolitans. Appreciating the culture of the others helps civilization interaction and religious tolerance.

The Teacher's Role

Many teachers are reflexively sticking to the traditional second language teaching methods through which they themselves had acquired the language when there had been little attention paid to the role of culture. This may be due to teachers' insufficient training in culture or some other criteria as curriculum and materials they are handling. Therefore, second/foreign language teaching would appear something raw and meaningless, only presenting the unrealized body of language.

By and large, teachers, with well designed materials and analyzed situational factors, first initiate appreciating and incorporating culture into the second language classroom by analyzing students' needs and their own needs at the same time. Through getting familiar with the aspects relating to products (e.g., foods, games, literature and laws), practices (e.g., customs, patterns of social interactions) and perspectives (e.g., beliefs, values and ideas), they can provide a better second language situation. Also, if the teachers keep themselves up-to-date with the cultural change(s), as a result of political, economic and social impact, they can represent the community whose language they are teaching.

Teachers in general and second language teachers in particular can make a difference in the second language learners. Teachers must be culturally aware of the language they are teaching and they must be aware of cultural diversity in multicultural and multilingual societies. Furthermore they must bear in mind while dealing with cultural contents that English is an international language and its culture acts as an aid for motivation.

The Learners' role

To get culturally aware in the second language classroom, learners should:
1. Work with authentic materials derived from the communities, who use the language,
2. be able to contact with the native speakers of the language,
3. from these contacts and materials appreciate the similarities and differences between their own and the second culture,
4. get a quasi identity with the people of the second culture,
5. Use this knowledge to develop a more objective view of their own customs and ways of thinking (cited in Byram, M. & Fleming, M., 1998).
6. Make the second language teachers promise to take more dependable role in presenting culture.
7. Identify the subtle differences in their own culture when compared to the culture of the second language they are learning and behavioral modification exercises can be given in the class.

Sources and Techniques for Cultural Content

In age of globalization with the help of the advanced technology, it is easier to access many sources swiftly. Via the Internet we can easily search anything anytime. Therefore,

cultural contents are obtainable for use in our classrooms. Kodotchigova (2002) discusses the role of role-play in teaching culture for classroom suggesting quick steps for classroom implementation. Cullen and Sato (2000) suggest practical techniques and a wide range of sources for teaching culture in the EFL classroom using three different parameters, namely, information sources, activity-types and selling-points and also Jordan (1997, p. 105) lists sources of cultural information:

> Newspapers: these are a good source of cultural information: local papers will give more of a flavour of everyday life in towns.
> Video: a number of published ELT video tapes are a good visual source of cultural information. (Today, we have CD/DVD versions of these video tapes.)
> Talks/discussions: some topics may be suitable for giving information to students in a plenary session.
> Role-plays/dramatizations: these can be used to set off discussion and introspection.
> Culture quizzes/tests.

Useful Techniques for Teaching Language and Culture

The following are some useful techniques for presenting culture in the classroom:

- **Genuine Materials**
Using authentic sources from the native speech community helps to engage students in authentic cultural experiences. Sources can include films, news broadcasts, and television shows; Web sites; and photographs, magazines, newspapers, restaurant menus, travel brochures, and other printed materials. Teachers can adapt their use of authentic materials to suit the age and language proficiency level of the students.

- **Films**
Film and television offer students a chance to observe behaviors which are hidden in texts. Film is often one of the more current and comprehensive ways to encapsulate the look, feel, and rhythm of a culture and now they are available in CD/DVD. Film also connects students with language and cultural issues simultaneously (Stephens, 2001), such as depicting conversational timing or turn-taking in conversation. At least one study showed that students achieved significant gains in overall cultural knowledge after watching videos from the target culture in the classroom (Herron, Cole, Corrie, & Dubreil, 1999).

- **Role Play**
The role-play must take place after an exposure to authentic conversation. For example, after learning about ways of addressing different groups of people in the target culture, such as people of the same age and older people, students could role play a situation in which an inappropriate greeting is used. Other students observe the role play and try to identify the reason for the miscommunication. Then they role play the same situation using a culturally proper form of address.

- **Proverbs**
Contrasting common proverbs in the target language possibly will focus on how the proverbs are different from or similar to proverbs in the students' native language and how this concept gives insights of the target culture.

- **Volunteers Cultural Resources**
  Native speakers' volunteers are a good authentic source for acquiring cultural awareness. They can be invited to the classroom as expert sources or by the direct interaction in the teaching process to teach certain oral topics.
- **Interviews**
  An effective way for students to learn about the target language and culture is to send them into their own community to find information via interviewing native speakers in the community, which they can record in notebooks or on audiotapes or videotapes. Discussion activities could include oral cultural topics. No doubt this technique needs time and devotion from teachers in preparation or appreciation.
- **Literature**
  Literary contents are often full with cultural information and evoke unforgettable reactions for readers. Texts that are carefully selected for a given group of students and with specific goals in mind can be very helpful in allowing students to acquire insight into the target culture.
- **Newspapers**
  Newspapers and magazines are a good source of cultural information: local papers will provide elements of everyday life in society such as interviews, advertisement and other social affairs.
- **The Study Abroad**
  Taking the advantage of studying abroad is very essential for the second language teacher to interact in authentic situations and to transfer this awareness to his community.

Conclusion

Authentic materials enable learners to interact authentically not boring artificial situations. Understanding the cultural context of everyday language functions means more than just being able to produce grammatical sentences. It means knowing what is appropriate to say to whom, and in what situations, and it means understanding the beliefs and values represented by the various forms and usages of the language.

Culture must be entirely integrated as a central component of language learning. Second language teachers should identify key cultural items in every aspect of the language that they teach. Students can be successful in speaking a second language only if cultural issues are an inbuilt element of the core curriculum.

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