

Development Of Cultural Awareness In Teaching A Foreign Language

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Abstract: *The article deals with the issues of culture which has taken a vital place in teaching a foreign language and learning studies. It has been widely accepted that culture and language are used as an important medium through which culture is expressed. Nevertheless, “pure information” is useful but does not necessarily lead learners’ insight awareness; whereas the development of people’s cultural awareness leads them to more critical thinking. The purpose of the given article below has been to provide essential facts for the teachers of foreign language and learners so that they can ascertain a good connection with the target language and its culture.*

Keywords: Culture; teaching culture; teaching foreign language; cultural awareness; culture based activities, techniques, culture standard, cultural behavior.

Introduction

Everybody knows that understanding a language entails not only knowledge of phonology, grammar and lexis but also certain features and peculiarities of the culture. To communicate worldwide certainly implicates communicating interculturally as well, which probably leads us to discover factors of cultural distinctions. Such kind of distinctions exist in every language such as the place of silence, tone of voice, appropriate subject of conversation, and phrases as speech act functions as apologies, suggestions, complains, refusals, etc. Bearing the points given above, it can be stated that a language is a part of culture and a culture is a part of a language. These two are complicated interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture. In contrast, as the use of language in general is connected to social and cultural importance, language is considered to be a social and cultural phenom.

Since every culture has its own cultural standards for conversation and these standards differ from one culture to another, some of the standards can be fully various and conflict with other cultures' standards. Accordingly, communication problems may ascend among speakers who do not know or share the standards of other culture. So that in order to solve the communication dilemmas in the target language, the learners of EFL classrooms need to learn the target culture within the curriculum, and the teachers should be attentive and careful to the learner's fragility so as not to lead the learners lose their motivation.

What is Culture?

Culture is the patterns of learned and shared behavior and beliefs of a particular social, ethnic, or age group. It can also be described as the complex whole of collective human beliefs with a structured stage of civilization that can be specific to a nation or time period. Humans in turn use culture to adapt and transform the world they live in.

The anthropological study of culture can be organized along two persistent and basic themes: **Diversity** and **Change**.

An individual's upbringing, and environment (or culture) is what makes them diverse from other cultures. It is the difference between all cultures and sub-cultures of the world's regions. People's need to adapt and transform to physical, biological and cultural forces to survive represents the second theme, **Change**. Culture generally changes for one of two reasons: selective transmission or to meet changing needs. This means that when a village or culture is met with new challenges for example a loss of a food source, they must change the way they live. This could mean almost anything to the culture, including possible forced redistribution of, or relocation from ancestral domains due to external and/or internal forces. And an anthropologist would look at that and study their ways to learn from them.

Culture is:

- Learned through active teaching, and passive habitus.
- Shared meaning that it defines a group and meets common needs.
- Patterned meaning that there is a recourse of similar ideas. Related cultural beliefs and practices show up repeatedly in different areas of social life.
- Adaptive which helps individuals meet needs across variable environments.
- Symbolic which means that there are simple and arbitrary signs that represent something else.

Why is Culture important to society?

Cultural traits of a particular cultural community are preserved over time and get passed on to future generations. Cultural traits live through tide of times. Knowledge, traditions, language scripts, dress codes, etc. are some of the cultural traits that are unique to a particular region`s culture.

Culture is important to us because it defines our evolutionary identity. Culture helps us understand our ancestral values and gives us the meaning of life. It also makes us unique from other parts of the world. When born in a particular region, we grow up by learning our regional culture and the society shapes our lives to become what we are today! Traditional culture of a community keeps us bonded forever.

Importance of preserving cultural heritage lies in the sense of belonging and unity that it offers. Cultural heritage and traditions serve to link us with our ancestors, which is valuable and should not be lost. The beliefs and laws laid down by the roots of our culture are meaningful and are for the betterment of our lives. Everything from marriage traditions to religious beliefs should be valued, in any culture. Even though times are changing now and “mixed cultures” are in fashion, effort to not let go of regional cultures are constantly carried out.

Teaching Culture through language.

In EFL classrooms, as we teach the language, we would automatically teach culture. The forms of address, greetings, formulas, and other expressions found in the dialogues or models our students hear and the references to aspects of culture identified in the reading represent cultural knowledge. Body movements, gestures, and distances maintained by speakers should foster cultural insights. Students' intellectual curiosity is aroused and satisfied when they learn existent another expression mode to talk about feelings, wants, needs and when they read the literature of the foreign country. For depth of cultural understanding it is essential to see how such patterns function in relation to each other and to value their place within the cultural system.

If language learners are to intercommunicate at a personal level with individuals from other cultural backgrounds, they will need not only to understand the cultural influences at work in the behavior of others, but also to recognize the profound influence patterns of their own culture exert over their thoughts, their activities, and their forms of linguistic expression. The teaching of the target culture has to develop cross-cultural communication. The realization of this purpose is possible with the preparation of an organized inventory that would include both linguistic and extra linguistic aspects of the target culture. This way the language could build bridges from one cognitive system to another (Seelye, 1968).

The culture of people refers to all aspects of shared life in a community. A language is learned and used with a context, drawing from the culture distinctive meanings and functions which must be assimilated by language learners if they are to control the language as native speakers control it. If language is described as a mode of human attitude and culture as "patterned behaviour", it is evident that language is an important constituent of culture. As above-mentioned, each culture has a unique pattern and the behaviour of an individual, linguistic or otherwise, manifested through that is also unique. Foreign language will mean, therefore,

changing the learner's behaviour and injecting a new way of life and new values of life into his already settled behaviour pattern. So, there is a close relationship between the language and culture. This relationship of language and culture is widely recognized, communicative behaviour and cultural systems are interrelated, as there is relation between the form and content of a language and the beliefs, values, and needs present in the culture of its speakers.

It is also generally known that the students, who are in need of developing cultural awareness and cultural sensitiveness, are normally those who are least disposed toward these goals. Teacher's task is to make students aware of cultural differences, not pass value judgments on these differences.

Students learning a foreign language have to absorb many new categorizations and codifications if they are to understand and speak the language as its native speakers do. This does not mean that the native language of the students could not have established such distinctions for them. All languages which have been closely studied seem to possess the potentiality for expressing all kinds of ideas and making all kinds of differences (Rivers, 1982). Therefore, the causes for familiarizing learners with the cultural components should be to: develop the communicative skills, understand the linguistic and behavioral patterns both of the target and the native culture at a more conscious level, develop intercultural and international understanding, adopt an expanded cognition in the perception of the reality, make teaching sessions more enjoyable to develop an awareness of the expected mistakes that might appear in comprehension, interpretation, and translation and communication.

Some key considerations in developing cultural awareness in EFL classrooms.

An important perspective of learning any foreign language is learning its culture. However, many teachers still seem to underestimate this key component in language teaching. Consequently, the present study sought to shed some light on

the place of culture in EFL classrooms at secondary-school level in an different educational context in general, and the main aims of teaching culture, major means of teaching culture, the main difficulties facing teachers in teaching culture, and the cultural content of textbooks in particular.

Culture learning and language learning are appraised to have a strong correlation in most of the communicative techniques. The teaching of English as a foreign language is very significant; however less significance is given to the teaching of its culture. Studying the language without studying the culture of the native speakers is a lifeless struggle. Good teaching requires not only the teachings about the language but rather teaching the language as such. Furthermore, linguistic capability is not enough in the learning of a second language and it is not sufficient to be really competent in that language. Foreign language learners need to be conscious of the target culture; they need to know how to address people, make request, show agreement, and demonstrate condolence and feelings, to cite but a few.

There is a need to know and understand the other culture in order to have a proper and a successful communication. Language must not be used in isolation from culture; it needs to be associated with cultural aspects. Scarcella & Oxford (1992:183) argue that “culture learning is an ongoing process in which learners’ cultural perception can change, unfold, and mature over time.” The process of foreign language learning stands as an opportunity for learners to be knowledgeable of the target culture. It is pivotal to understand that a second language cannot be mastered unless the target culture is comprehended and appreciated. Hence, teachers are supposed to transmit cultural ethics through language not only structures.

There are miscellaneous degrees and levels of supplementing cultural learning awareness among foreign language learners. Cultural awareness is developed through three main levels:

1- Aspects, stereotypes and deficiencies:

When learners start learning a foreign language, their information about the target culture consists of facts, stereotypes and deficiencies. Learners may have certain notions about a given culture. For example: American females are sexually free, they live in luxury, and they are rich. The learner's at this level are concerned to have stereotypes about the target culture.

2- Insubstantial Awareness:

At this stage, learners are believed to be exposed to different aspects that are beyond their level of comprehension. The learners, however, at this phase of learning process can have a shallow understanding of undeniable cultural aspects.

3- Comprehensive awareness:

At this stage, learners commence to put on show a high degree of understanding the target culture. They go beyond level two and they start to understand the aspects of the target culture, appreciate them, and accept them after all.

The goal of EFL teaching is not only raising awareness about the target culture. The main and the basic aim is to assist learners be aware and comprehend the similarities and differences existing between the native and the target culture, as well as to know what is considered to be appropriate and what is not. The following objectives can be set:

- Teachers are supposed to help learners move beyond level one and help them correct the already believed stereotypes through nurturing them with facts.
- The least of things is to make students able to have a shallow understanding of the target culture and later on help them to move from a shallow to an in depth understanding of the target culture and other cultures.
- Teachers are supposed to provide learners with opportunities that can allow them to develop an understanding of the dissimilar cultures discussed in the classroom.

•The teaching of culture can stand as a good opportunity to help learners become independent via the activities implemented in the teaching and learning processes.

There are some dilemmas that are involved in teaching culture; they are summed up in four main problems: overcrowded curriculum, psychological problems, negative attitudes, and lack of adequate training.

Overcrowded curriculum: EFL teachers find themselves obliged to complete a curriculum which is long all the time. Unfortunately, they put their focus, on: grammar, lexis, reading, writing, etc. They, moreover, consider the teaching of culture as a waste of time.

Psychological problems: It is considered to be the fear of not knowing enough. Teachers are afraid to teach culture because of their poor background about certain cultural aspects; they just do without it and give it a cold shoulder.

Negative attitudes: Sometimes, teachers find themselves in a situation that they cannot solve quickly. This is the case when students have negative attitudes about the target culture. Teachers find it better not to teach culture in this case.

Lack of adequate training: In practicum, teacher' trainees are trained to teach the four skills. They are not given the opportunity to teach culture. Moreover, the seldom have access to the didactic and strategies of teaching culture.

There are many types of cultural instruction activities among which we can name: native informants, teachers' presentations, music, pictures and real objects, role plays, project work, proverbs to cite but a few.

Native informant: An activity used in EFL teaching and learning. It involves a variety of activities like lectures on cultural aspects, open discussions, cultural exchange, social event discussions and so forth. In this type of activities, teachers most of time invite informants who have the same age of students.

Teachers' presentations: They consist of lectures by teachers about various cultural characteristics. Normally, this type of activity ends up with a group discussion which is learner-centered.

Music: Music is the international language shared between different people belonging to different backgrounds; it has gained its importance in raising the students' cultural awareness. It is used as a way to develop learners' cultural understanding.

Pictures and real objects: It is referred to as authentic materials that can be used in the process of teaching culture. For a better understanding of the target culture, learners need to see: pictures, images, signs, videos, etc. This type of activities can give students a clear idea about the target culture and its conventions.

Role plays: As mentioned earlier, learners start their learning of EFL with having wrong information regarding the target culture; however, during the process of learning many misconceptions are corrected. This is an opportunity for students to comprehend the differences and similarities of the native and target culture.

Project-based activities: Learners are supposed to choose projects that fit their interests, for example: different kinds of food from all over the world, means of transportation, clothes, sport, etc. the learner's understanding of the target culture is developed throughout the project work.

Proverbs: Even proverbs can be implemented and discussed in the target language. Discussions based on understanding proverbs related to the target culture help in understanding the extent to which native proverbs and target proverbs are different.

With regard to current viewpoints of culture teaching in the foreign language classroom, culture does not need to be dealt individually of language because studying language directly brings about awareness of the target culture and people's behavior in that target culture. Pulverness (2003) emphasizes the need to learn culture by asserting that for foreign language learners, language appears

pointless if they know nothing about the people who speak the target language and the country in which the language is spoken.

McDevitt (2004) further suggests that since learning a foreign language is a provocation to figure out the nature of other people, it is impossible to imagine language learning independent of culture. As language indicates humankind nature, studying language inherently reveals learners to target culture. It is then the teacher's role to relate what students bring to the classroom to what they, as teachers, bring in order to familiarize students with the culture of target language. From a broader perspective, this interaction of what students and teachers bring to the language classroom effects the way foreign language culture is taught.

Moreover, the classroom itself has its own cultures, and the teacher should pay close attention to cultural variation within the language classroom. Consequently, culturally responsive teachers are those who arrive at an all-encompassing comprehending of cultural diversity within the classroom and within the foreign language. Such an understanding requires teachers to emphasize cultural distinctions in the classroom as a starting point to lead students to develop cross-cultural awareness. Once such awareness is created, then the teacher can further intricate on foreign language culture, and the similarities and differences between students' own culture and the target culture. In order for teachers to be culturally responsive, they need to reflect on their own definitions of culture, and how culture influences student and teacher behavior. What is more, such teachers need to question whether they are aware of the cultural diversity within the classroom and whether they should consider this diversity or defy it. More importantly, they should seek ways to make use of cultural diversity. From this perspective, culturally responsive classrooms recognize culturally diverse students and enlighten the way for these students to make necessary connections among themselves and the target language culture.

What is more essential to highlight is the position of language teachers in paving the way toward this common ground which can only be populated by those who share the same values and ethics. When each generation has learnt to value their own culture and respect the other's, then they will be able to build a solid Bridge together or, better still, to Be that Bridge. "Language, quite simply, is a window through which we can reach out and touch each other's minds. Anyone can reach through it – regardless of race, regardless of belief. It is the most intimate act we can ever perform. We must be sure, always, to keep that window open." (Altmann, 1997: 233)

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