Developing Cultural Awareness
In Foreign Language Teaching

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ABSTRACT

Regardless of different points of view, culture has taken an important place in foreign language teaching and learning studies. It has been widely recognized that culture and language is used as a main medium through which culture is expressed. However, "pure information" is useful but does not necessarily lead learners' insight; whereas the development of people's cultural awareness leads them to more critical thinking. Most frequently confronted that students to a great extend know the rules of language, but are not always able to use the language adequately as it requires since they are not knowledgeable enough about the target culture. Bearing all this in mind, the aim of this article has been to provide necessary information for the foreign language teachers and learners so that they can establish a good connection with the target language and its culture.

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

INTRODUCTION

We all know that understanding a language involves not only knowledge of grammar, phonology and lexis but also a certain features and characteristics of the culture. To communicate internationally inevitably involves communicating interculturally as well, which probably leads us to encounter factors of cultural differences. Such kind of differences exist in every language such as the place of silence, tone of voice, appropriate topic of conversation, and expressions as speech act functions (e.g. apologies, suggestions, complains, refusals, etc.). Bearing the points above it can be stated that a language is a part of culture and a culture is a part of a language. The two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture (Brown 1994:164). Furthermore, Smith (1985:2) adds that the presentation of an argument in a way that sounds fluent and elegant in one culture may be regarded as clumsy and circular by members of another culture.

However, as the use of language in general is related to social and cultural values, language is considered to be a social and cultural phenomenon. Since every culture has its own cultural norms for conversation and these norms differ from one culture to another, some of the norms can be completely different and conflict with other cultures' norms. Consequently, communication problems may arise among speakers who do not know or share the norms of other culture. To solve the communication problems in the target language in the EFL classrooms the learners need to learn the target culture within the syllabus, and the teachers should be sensitive to the learner's fragility so as not to cause them to lose their motivation.

WHAT IS CULTURE?

Culture may mean different things to different people. In the anthropological sense culture is defined as the way people live (Chastain 1988:302). Trinovitch (1980:550) defines culture as "...an all-inclusive system which incorporates the biological and technical behaviour of human beings with their verbal and non-verbal systems of expressive behaviour starting from birth, and this "all-inclusive system" is acquired as the native culture. This process, which can be referred to as "sociolization", prepares the individual for the linguistically and non-linguistically accepted patterns of the society in which he lives.

According to Brown(1994:170) culture is deeply ingrained part of the very fiber of our being, but language –the means for communication among members of a culture- is the most visible and available expression of that culture. And so a person's world view, self-identity, and systems of thinking, acting, feeling, and communicating can be disrupted by a change from one culture to another. Similarly, Tang (1999) propounds the view that culture is language and language is culture. He suggests that to speak a language well, one has to be able to think in that language, and thought is extremely powerful. Language is the soul of the country and people who speak it. Language and culture are inextricably linked, and as such we might think about moving away from questions about the inclusion or exclusion of culture in foreign language curriculum, to issues of deliberate immersion versus non-deliberate exposure to it.

In a word, culture is a way of life (Brown, 1994163). It is the context within which we exist, think, feel and relate others. It is the "glue" that binds a group of people together. It can be defined as a blueprint that guides the behaviour of people in community and is incubated in family life. It governs our behaviour in groups, makes us sensitive to matters of status, and helps us to know what others expect of us and what will happen if we do not live up to their expectations. Thus, culture helps us to know how far we can go as individuals and what our responsibility is to the group.

WHY IS CULTURE?

Sometimes, some teachers are hardly aware of the necessity of cultural orientation. Communication is seen as the application of grammatical rules in oral and written practice. In some case, learning about the target culture is taken as a threat to the native values, and the importance of linguistically relevant information is neglected. Since having a close contact with the target culture and its speakers is a rare opportunity for all language learners in our country, learners cannot appreciate the importance of learning the cultural aspects of communication unless they visit a foreign country and experience the difficulties. Non-verbal aspects of target culture are sometimes picked up from TV serials, which are far from being helpful for communicative purposes or which may sometimes impart faulty conceptions.

It should not be forgotten that if the learning of the cultural aspects were necessary for the learner's survival abroad, the problem could be minimized; but when the person faces problems in the comprehension, interpretation, translation and production of written and oral texts, either as a learner or as a professional, the problem gets even more serious. That is to say, an analytic look at the native culture is as important as the learning of the target culture. On the other hand, problems that arise from the lack of cross-cultural awareness are

not limited to the verbal side of communication. The paralinguistic aspects and appropriate manners of behaviour are equally important factors in the communicatively competent learner's performance. The fact that culture-bound hand-signals, postures, mimics, and another ways of behaviour can also cause miscommunication is neglected.

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 utterances found in the dialogues or models our students hear and the allusions to aspects of culture found in the reading represent cultural knowledge. Gestures, body movements, and distances maintained by speakers should foster cultural insights. Students' intellectual curiosity is aroused and satisfied when they learn that there exists another mode of expression to talk about feelings, wants, needs and when they read the literature of the foreign country. For depth of cultural understanding it is necessary to see how such patterns function in relation to each other and to appreciate their place within the cultural system. If language learners are to communicate at a personal level with individuals from other cultural backgrounds, they will need not only to understand the cultural influences at work in the behaviour 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 serve the development of cross-cultural communication. The achievement of this goal is possible with the preparation of an organized inventory that would include both linguistic and extralinguistic 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 behaviour and culture as "patterned behaviour", it is evident that language is a vital constituent of culture. As mentioned earlier, 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 (Lado:1963:110). 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 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 judgements on these differences. Students learning a foreign language have to assimilate 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 distinctions (Rivers, 1982). Learners should be exposed to these distinctions as much as possible in the foreign language teaching classrooms. Therefore, the reasons for familiarizing learners with the cultural components should be to;

> ➢ develop the communicative skills,
> ➢ understand the linguistic and behavioural patterns both of the target and the native culture at a more conscious level,
> ➢ develop intercultural and international understanding,
> ➢ adopt a wider perspective in the perception of the reality,
> ➢ make teaching sessions more enjoyable to develop an awareness of the potential mistakes that might come up in comprehension, interpretation, and translation and communication.

SOME KEY CONSIDERATIONS IN DEVELOPING CULTURAL AWARENESS IN EFL CLASSROOMS

As is mentioned, both learners and teachers of a second language need to understand cultural differences, to recognize openly that everyone in the world is not "just like me", that people are not all the same beneath the skin. There are real differences between groups and cultures (Brown,1994:167). Therefore, language teachers cannot avoid conveying impressions of another culture whether they realize it or not(Rivers,1981;315). Language cannot be separated completely from the culture in which it is deeply embedded. Any listening to the utterances of native speakers, any reading of original texts, any examination of pictures of native speakers engaged in natural activities will introduce cultural elements into the classroom.

While developing cultural awareness in the EFL classroom it should be kept in mind that the native language is learned along with the ways and attitudes of the social group, and these ways and attitudes find expression through the social group. Learning to understand a foreign culture should help students of another language to use words and expressions more skilfully and authentically; to understand levels of language and situationally appropriate; to act naturally with persons of the other culture, while recognizing and accepting their different reactions, and to help speakers of other tongues feel at home in the students' own culture.

While most learners indeed find positive benefits in cross-cultural living on learning experiences, nevertheless a number of people experience certain psychological blocks and other inhibiting effects of the second culture. Teachers can help students to turn such an experience into one of increased cultural and self-awareness. It is possible that learners can feel alienation in the process of learning a foreign language, alienation from people in their home culture, the target culture, and from themselves. In teaching foreign language we need to be sensitive to the fragility of students by using techniques that promote cultural understanding.

The use of *role-play* in EFL classrooms can help students to overcome cultural "fatigue" and it promotes the process of cross-cultural dialogues while at the same time it provides opportunities for oral communication. Numerous other techniques *–readings, films, simulation, games, culture assimilators, culture*

capsules and culturgrams can be used for language teacher to assist them in the process of acculturation in the classroom (Chastain:1988).

In addition to these techniques, teachers can play a therapeutic role in helping learners to move through stages of acculturation. If learners are aided in this process by sensitive and perceptive teachers, they can perhaps more smoothly pass through the second stage and into the third stage of culture learning and thereby increase their chances for succeeding in both second language learning and second culture learning. While teaching culture through the language teaching Seelye (cf. Rivers, 1982: 323-4), suggests that students should be able to demonstrate that they have acquired certain understandings, abilities, and attitudes:

> ➢ That they understand that people act the way they do because they are using options the society allows for satisfying basic physical and psychological needs.
> ➢ That they understand that social variables as age, sex, social class, and place of residence affect the way people speak and behave
> ➢ That they can demonstrate how people conventionally act in the most common mundane and crisis situations in the target culture.
> ➢ That they are aware that culturally conditioned images are associated with even the most common target words and phrases;
> ➢ That they are able to evaluate the relative strength of a generality concerning the target culture in terms of the amount of evidence substantiating the statement;
> ➢ That they have developed the skills needed to locate and organize material about the target culture from the library, mass media, and personal observation;
> ➢ That they possess intellectual curiosity about the target culture and emphaty toward its people.

Another point that needs to be addressed is that if we wish the learners to master another language, we need to help the learners become communicatively competent in that language as much as possible. Namely, successful speaking is not just to master of using grammatically correct words and forms but also knowing when to use them and under what circumstances. Communicative competence should incorporate grammatical competence, discourse competence, and sociolinguistic competence. In other words, if the goal of the language course is to enable students to reach a level of communicative competence, then all three components are necessary. The sociolinguistic component of communication refers to rules of speaking which depend on social, pragmatic, and cultural elements. Thus, which linguistic realization we choose for making an apology or a request in any language might depend on the social status of the speaker or hearer, and on age, sex, or any other social factor. Besides, certain pragmatic situational conditions might call for the performance of a certain speech act in one culture but not in another.

The other issue that should be focused is that before learning about culture, students must be receptive to the concept of learning about cultures other than their owns. To achieve culture goals, often teacher has to play a role in breaking down cultural barriers prior to initiating teaching-learning activities. One way to begin teaching culture on a positive note is to emphasize similarities between people. Such a beginning should be followed by a discussion of differences between members of students' family, between families, between schools and

between cultures. Moreover, the topics to be used to teach the target language should be presented in the contexts accompanying the native ones. That is to say, while teaching a culture specific topic first language equivalent can also be given in order to enhance learning.

The use of culture-based activities abundantly in the classroom help learners be familiar with the target culture. The activities in the materials should involve the cultural values of the target language designed for every level. A cultural series usually begins at the elementary stage with discussions of the daily life of the peer group in the other language community –their families, their living conditions, their school, their relations with their friends, their leisure-time activities, the festivals they celebrate, the ceremonies they go through, dating and marriage customs. At intermediate and advanced levels attention may be drawn to geographical factors and their influence on daily living, major historical periods, how the society is organized, production, transport, buying and selling, aspects of city and country life, the history of art, music, dance and film and so on. Some topics that can be presented within the course syllabus are suggested below:

- Climate
- Clothing
- Crime
- Eating
- Education
- Family life
- Geography
- Nonverbal communication
- History
- Holidays
- Humor
- Language
- Leisure activities
- Meeting people
- Money
- Pets
- Population
- Religion
- Social occasions
- Sports
- Transportation
- Vacations

In doing these activities, the aim is to increase students' awareness and to develop their curiosity towards the target culture and their own, helping them to make comparisons among cultures. The comparisons are not meant to underestimate any of the cultures being analysed, but to enrich students' experience and to make them aware that although some culture elements are being globalized, there is still diversity among cultures. This diversity should then be understood, and never underestimated.

CONCLUSION

In developing cultural awareness in the classroom it is important that we help our students distinguish between the cultural norms, beliefs, or habits of the majority within the speech community and the individual or group deviations from some of these norms. Students should be enabled to discuss their native culture with their foreign-speaking friends at the same time that they are provided with a real experiential content. They can make use of their knowledge of the foreign language. There should also be presented, discussed, or merely alluded to in two parallel streams.

It should also be kept in mind that language teaching, as mentioned above, is a long process in which performance is not absolute and therefore we cannot expect all learners ever to acquire perfect nativelike behaviour. What we are after is the development of an awareness of sociocultural and sociolinguistic differences that might exist between the students' first language and the target language. Such awareness often help explain to both teachers and students why sometimes there is unintended pragmatic failure and breakdown in

communication. If we are aware of it, it might be easier to find the appropriate remedy. In this respect Smith (1985:6) advocates that studying English does not change one's identity. Student's ethnic, religious, and political backgrounds should remain the same. Students will certainly want to use English well and be acknowledged as doing so, but this does not require them to attempt a change in their identity. There is no need to become more American or British in order to use English well. One's morals or dedication to family traditions need not change at all.

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