Mediating Language and Culture: Crossing Barriers Bridging Gaps

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Abstract

The need for cross and inter-cultural communication has dramatically increased in this age, as a result, a tremendous need for people to have access to information all over the world is increasing day by day. This growing and extending need leads to a noticed growth in the foreign/second language teaching policy. Many researchers, therefore, acknowledge the fact that learning a foreign language is a requirement to survive in today's world and to keep up with the latest information technologies in the world. Consequently, it is of great necessity to draw attention to its culture as an aid to EFL learners' involvement to develop understanding and tolerance vis-à-vis the other's cultures. Thus, the present paper highlights the belief that cultural knowledge and experience may make us aware that, far from becoming members of the same 'monocultural global village', we can actually become observers and participants at the same time without loosing one's identity from which we distinguish ourselves from the others. In other words, to bridge cultural gaps that might be delivered and exploited and cross out the possible barriers which may cause misunderstanding of information in the target language and culture.

Key-Words: mediating language and culture, teaching English, integration, crossing barriers, bridging gaps.

ملخص

ان تدريس و تعلم اللغة الأجنبية لا زال يطرح أسئلة هامة على اللسانيات التطبيقية عامة و على المعلم و المتعلم خاصة. المحور الأساسي الذي نوّد استفساره في هذا المقال هو مكان و دور الثقافة في تدريس الانجليزية. لذا تسلط هذه الورقة الضوء على اهمية المعرفة الثقافية في تدريس و تعلم اللغة الأجنبية لسد الثغرات بين اللغة والثقافة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: اللغة ، الثقافة، وساطة، تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية، التكامل، سد الثغرات.

Introduction

It is often acknowledged that large waves of recent research have necessitated new ways of thinking about learning and teaching. However, most teachers are not adequately prepared for the cultural mix which faces them, and there seem to have no adequate resources to help them understand the fundamental cultural values. Although it is highly useful for teachers to learn about all the cultures that make up their classrooms (Banks, 1997; Banks, 2001), accumulating all the information necessary to understand their nuances can be daunting. Our main aim in the present paper is at crossing barriers and bridging gaps when incorporating Culture in language teaching.

Based on the assumption that deep, invisible cultural values may in all probabilities affect the ways teachers teach and also the way students solve home- and school based problems, light will be shed on finding ways to improve cross-cultural understanding in our educational system in general and in classrooms in particular.

Setting the Groundwork: unpacking Language and Culture

> *If we teach language without teaching at the same time the culture it operates, we teach meaningless symbols to which the student attaches the wrong meaning.*
> Politzer (1951:100-101)

Many researchers recognize that learning a foreign language is a requirement to survive in today's world. The English language plays an important role, as it is the lingua franca of the world, and the language that one needs to learn in order to keep up with the latest information technologies in the world. Thus, seeing that culture is embedded within every aspect of society, language learning, should not be isolated from the society that uses it.

Although one may find a variety of definitions, it is difficult to find out one valid definition that covers all the aspects of culture. In general, culture is notoriously difficult to define, for instance, Spencer-Oatey (2008b: 3) defines it as:

> *a fuzzy set of basic assumptions and values, orientations to life, beliefs, policies, procedures and behavioural conventions that are shared by a group of people, and that influence (but do not determine) each member's behaviour and his/her interpretations of the 'meaning' of other people's behaviour.*

In this context, culture includes all the social practices that bind individuals together and which distinguishes them from other groups, without determining each member's behaviours with others. From another view point, Duranti (1997:24) defines 'culture' as:

> *Something learned, transmitted from one generation to the next, through human actions, often in the form of face-to-face interaction, and of course, through linguistic communication.*

Language, on the other hand, has been long considered as being problematic, many scientists made an attempt to provide and find out a valid, unique and satisfactory definition to language. It is first and foremost conceived as an important means of human communication and yet, it is seen differently by different linguists according to their field of interest. It is clearly noticed that every day language is tinged with cultural bits and pieces; and this is a fact that most people seem to ignore: by the act of talking one generally uses social and cultural norms spontaneously in his language. In this respect, Kramsch (1998:3) points out to the fact that:

> *Language is the principle means whereby we conduct our social lives. When it is used in contexts of communication, it is bound up with culture in multiple and complex ways.*

From this layer of analysis, the relationship between language and culture has been a focus of attention for many years. Linguists, anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, and others have sought to understand how cultural factors may influence aspects of human behaviours such as language. As it becomes evident, language is a social institution both shaping and shaped by society; consequently, it should be understood as a cultural practice, i.e. language cannot be considered out of its

socio-cultural context. In this respect, Bloomfield (1970) explains the function of a language saying that:

> *Every language serves as the bearer of a culture if you speak a language you take part to some degree, in the way of living represented by that language.*
> (qtd. in Smolinsky, 1986:40).

Another important connection between language and culture was found by the psychologist Osgood (1957) who maintains that the full meaning of a word for a person is related to an experience he had with that word in the cultural milieu, as a result, it is difficult to establish exact equivalence between words in two different languages, and thus two distinct cultures. Studies focusing on the mediation of language and culture in the foreign language classroom have been the concern of a great number of researchers (Loveday, 1982; Byram, 1989), they placed cultural and intercultural studies at the core of their self-identity as academic disciplines. Nevertheless, debates about cultural studies in foreign language teaching have been noticeably missing. An exchange across national boundaries, cultural traditions and educational systems would have been more than appropriate in this discourse.

Incorporating Culture in EFL Classrooms: Crossing Barriers and Bridging Gaps

A review of the expanding literature on intercultural approaches to language education shows that, with notable exceptions (e.g. Kramsch, 1993), much of it has been concerned with teaching and learning languages other than cultures

The curricular goals of intercultural education embed language teaching and learning in a wider educational project that has explicit ethical implications. Byram (1997b: 50) sets out the 'attitudes' that intercultural education seeks actively to promote – and assess:

• Willingness to seek out or take up opportunities to engage with otherness in a relationship of equality; this should be distinguished from attitudes of seeking out the exotic or of seeking to profit from others;

- Interest in discovering other perspectives on interpretation of familiar and unfamiliar phenomena both in one's own and in other cultures and cultural practices;
- Willingness to question the values and presuppositions in cultural practices and products in one's own environment;
- Readiness to experience the different stages of adaptation to and interaction with another culture during a period of residence; Readiness to engage with the conventions and rites of verbal and nonverbal communication and interaction

Behind these attitudes is the assumption the teacher, then, becomes a moral guide, a role that more traditionally suits the state school teacher (who represents institutional authority) than the commercial school teacher (who is ultimately an employee of the learner). Intercultural approaches to language education are perhaps less likely to be implemented in totalitarian regimes where the self-reflective and self-critical components of the curriculum might well be discouraged or indeed repressed.

Intercultural language education in such circumstances can become a relatively safe way of indirectly talking critically about one's own society. Here is an understandable anxiety about the moral role taken by English-language educators in a world where English has become the global lingua franca.

From another stand point, foreign language learning is said to be foreign culture learning and in no form, culture needs to be taught implicitly or explicitly in the classroom. Many teachers argued that they cannot teach a foreign language without offering some insights into the foreign culture; therefore, they cannot focus on fostering communicative competence without taking into account the different views and perspectives of people in their speech community. As believed by Hinkel (1997:197):

> *It is crucial that foreign language learners should become aware of differing cultural frameworks, both their own and those of others, otherwise they will use their own cultural system to interpret target language messages whose*

> *intended meaning may well be predicted on quite different cultural assumptions.*

Linguists and language teachers have become, then, increasingly aware that a foreign language cannot be taught without the culture of its community. In the same way, Kramsch (1998) believes that the teaching of culture implicitly or explicitly allows the teaching of social interaction, in her view, a foreign language teaching is a foreign culture teaching because language cannot be learned without an understanding of the cultural context where it is used.

The acquisition of cultural knowledge in language learning is defined as intercultural competence. Intercultural competence is the underlying knowledge successful language learners of English acquire through culturally and linguistically integrated English language instruction. Intercultural competence, as part of a broader foreign speaker competence, identifies the ability of a person to behave adequately and in a flexible manner when confronted with actions, attitudes and expectations of representatives of foreign cultures (Meyer, 1991). This appropriateness and flexibility imply an awareness of the cultural differences between one's own and the foreign culture. Intercultural competence includes the capacity of establishing one's self identity in the process of cross-cultural mediation, and of helping other people to stabilize their self-identity.

In intercultural foreign language education, the process of foreign language learning engages the learner in the role of a 'comparative ethnographer' (Byram, 1991, p. 19). Entering into a foreign language implies a cognitive modification that has implications for the learner's identity as a social and cultural being, and suggests the need for materials which consider the identity of the learner as an integral factor in developing the ability to function fully in cultural 'third places' (Kramsch, 1993, p. 233-259).

To develop cultural awareness alongside language awareness, materials need to provide more than a superficial acknowledgement of cultural identity and address more thoroughly the kind of cultural adjustment that underlies the experience of learning a foreign language.

In this way, teachers should make culture teaching an integral part of language teaching to develop students' ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in various situations, hence, the reasons for implementing culture in the classroom is to enable students to take control of their own learning as well as to achieve autonomy by evaluating and questioning the wider context within which the learning of the target language is embedded. Along these lines, the main goal for foreign culture teaching is to develop students' knowledge about the target culture and to raise their cultural awareness and interest towards the people of the language they are learning and to understand the dynamic nature of the target culture, in other words, to develop real intercultural communication.

Besides, teachers need to be aware of the socio-cultural environment and background of the target community, they should also know the shortcomings of the target culture and how misunderstanding can be avoided. Thus, every teacher has to be cognisant of special knowledge of culture to be able to teach it to his students. According to Rivers (1981:339):

> [Teachers] *will need to acquire specialized knowledge of how cultures are organized, their value systems, their institutions, their interpersonal relationships, their adoption to their commend.*

Conclusion: The Way Forward

Despite the recognition of the importance of culture in language classes, culture enjoys less adulation than it merits, the main reason for that is the lack of teaching material and the way this materials are exploited. In addition to this, the teachers' ignorance of which cultural aspect to teach is another handicap which led to the neglect of culture in the foreign language classroom.

Cultural information should be presented in a non-judgemental fashion, in a way that teachers do not place a value on the students' native culture and the culture taught in the classroom. Some teachers have found it effective to present students with objects, ideas that are specific to the target culture. The students

need to be introduced to certain clues or background information about these objects to add them to their own cultural repertoire. At this level, students will develop sympathy and appreciation to the target culture.

Seeing that culture is of great significance in terms of raising awareness and changing attitudes towards native speakers and target societies, it should, therefore, become a vital component in foreign language teaching and learning, since it has a great deal to offer the development of communicative competence and the language four skills. Accordingly, language teaching goes beyond teaching grammatical rules and vocabulary items. Successful language learning requires language users to be aware of the socio-cultural environment of the language supposed to be learnt to get the meaning across.

Beyond the current practices, there are some areas of research in foreign language teaching which are still crying for further investigation and understanding. One question worth asking: when learning the English culture, would students see the world around them through English eyes? The answer would guide us towards a deeper understanding of culture in foreign language education and would open window for further discussion.

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