The Relationship between a Language and Culture

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Abstract: Teaching culture should be an essential part of teaching English as a foreign language because one of the main aims of teaching a foreign language is intercultural communicative competence (ICC). The aim of this article is to explore the relationship between language and culture and to determine to what extent culture is incorporated into the curriculum of schools.

Keywords: culture, intercultural communicative competence, foreign language, relationship, perspectives.

INTRODUCTION

Language and culture are interconnected so that they complement each other. Language is described as a primary vehicle by which a culture emanates its beliefs, values and norms. Similarly, language is influenced by culture – “If there is no culture, language will be like water without a source or a tree without roots”. Thus, the connection between language and culture must be considered in foreign language teaching because the main purpose of learning a foreign language is to learn the customs and traditions of the speech community, and to become competent for communication with speakers of the foreign language.

The awareness of cultural otherness is the beginning of learning a foreign language. It paves the way to ICC which is the goal of foreign language instruction and requires culture and language to be perceived as a unity. Furthermore, students must be acquainted with perspectives, practices and products of a target language culture in order for them to communicate successfully. Also, highbrow and lowbrow information must be equally assimilated into the teaching so the students could get a proper insight into the target culture. However, teaching culture has not always been as important as it is today. Its importance increases along with the changes in the world, such as globalization and multiculturalism.

METHODS AND ANALYSIS

Culture can also be seen as a context in which we exist and affect each other. It is like a blueprint which organizes our lives on both national and family levels. It is incorporated in all spheres of human life and it leaves traces everywhere. Culture can be summarized within a 3P model – perspectives (what members of a culture think, feel and value), practices (how members communicate and interact with one another) and products (technology, music, art, food, literature, etc.; the things members of a group create, share, and transmit to the next generation). These aspects transcend human life completely. It is often said that all people are ‘equal’ but maybe ‘of equal worth’ would be a better choice of words. Every human life is equally precious but people are generally different. They are molded by their culture. For example, there is an undeniable difference between the Western world and indigenous tribes.

Perspectives, practices and products of the West strive for progress, financial well-being, technology, etc. Also, products as tangible things are often considered more important than perspectives and practices. On the other hand, less developed communities, such as tribes, cherish spiritual over material aspects of life. They focus on unity, faith and humanity rather than on products. This is just an example of a ‘gap’ or ‘culture shock’ that is present not only within the mentioned instance but it can be seen in every culture. Not everyone values the same things.
Language is a bond that can bridge every gap but not without cultural awareness. Foreign language learners need to increase awareness of the diversity of their own culture and the diversity of the target culture. It helps them to be more linguistically accurate and to choose the appropriate words and phrases for the situation in question. Even though there are numerous authentic cultural texts in foreign language classes, the teacher also has to function as a mediator in such classes, which means that he/she must help students and point out what is of particular importance.

Byram, who developed the concept of ICC, explains that it consists of a number of saviors. Savoir is defined as knowledge of social groups and their customs and practices in one's own and in one's interlocutor's country. There are four kinds of saviors:

- **Savoir-comprendre** which is “the ability to interpret a document or event from another culture, to explain it and relate it to documents or events from one’s own”;
- **Savoir-apprendre/faire** is the “skill of discovery and interaction: ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction”;
- **Savoir s’engager** is described as “critical cultural awareness/political education: an ability to evaluate, critically and on the basis of explicit criteria, perspectives, practices and products in one’s own and other cultures and countries”;
- **Savoir-être** refers to “curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one’s own”.

According to Byram, ICC requires certain attitudes, knowledge, and skills to be promoted, in addition to linguistic, sociolinguistic and discourse competence. Attitudes represent curiosity and openness that is actually readiness to get rid of prejudices about other cultures. Knowledge can be separated into two categories – the first category of knowledge presents knowledge of social groups and their products and practices in one's own culture and of the foreign one; the second category presents knowledge of general processes of individual societal interaction. Skills correspond to interpreting and relating, discovery and interaction, as well as critical awareness/political education. These attitudes, knowledge and skills should be incorporated into the EFL teaching process because they open students’ minds toward other cultures and show cultural diversity as something natural and ubiquitous. This makes communication easier and prevents possible misunderstandings.

Language has been defined as the systematic, conventional use of sounds, signs or written symbols in a human society for communication and self-expression. The purpose of language is to communicate with others, to think and to create the foundation for shaping one’s standpoint and outlook to life. Culture on the other hand has multifarious meanings but for the sake of this article, the definition outlined below will serve our purpose. Culture is the total of the inherited and innate ideas, attitudes, beliefs, values and knowledge comprising or forming the shared foundations of social action.

For that reason, the relationship between language and culture is definitely symbiotic as one cannot function without the other. By this we mean that for an individual to inherit or gain knowledge, values and ideas, the individual must first be able to communicate with others knowledgeable about that particular culture through convention sounds/signs which is language. So here are some facts on the relationship between language and culture.

Language and culture are unique human abilities. The ability to create a structured language for communication is what makes humans and our culture distinct from other species. Humans learn their culture through language and foreign cultures are also transmitted through language.

The role of culture plays a crucial role in language. Humans are born without a language but are born with language-acquisition faculties which enable us learn languages. Research shows that
humans learn their local language through cultural transmission rather than from formal learning. There is a strong relationship between language and culture in numbers. There are approximately 6,000 different languages in the world and these are shared among the 9,000 different cultures currently existing on earth. Linguists have showed concern that 5% of the least used languages in the world are in danger of becoming extinct and in the next 100 years, 90% of all world languages will either be extinct or moribund. Lastly, an entire way of thinking — cultures — gets lost to the human race each time a language goes extinct.

Language influences culture in diverse ways and provides people from other cultures with a window into understanding cultures other than theirs. Studies show that the vocabulary of any language tends to place emphasis on words that are considered to be adaptively important to the corresponding culture. Therefore learning the terminologies commonly used by a culture provides a measure of understanding into the way of life of its people.

Teaching using another language in a different culture is difficult. Teachers have encountered difficulties when teaching a second language not local to a culture to its people. Studies have shown that how students learn and interact with teachers is determined by their culture. Approximately 80% of language teachers agree that cultural boundaries and roots play a huge role in determining how students understand or interpret the new language expressions they are been taught. Therefore, creators of second language policies must be sensitive to the local culture of all people.

The language and culture of different societies greatly vary. In all communities, the spoken language is in a synergetic relationship with the culture of that society; the characteristics, peculiarities, and literary words encoded in one language system are distinctive, typical, and unique to that system and they are dissimilar as well as incomparable with those of other systems. These dissimilarities in turn lead to difficulties in understanding the expressions and terminologies inherent to a certain culture by foreigners.

The major languages do not represent the cultures of the world. The major languages spoken in Europe—English, French, Spanish etc.—do not truly represent the cultural values in a majority of the nations in which they are spoken. Studies show that colonialism saw these languages having been adapted by diverse cultures for easy administration by the conquerors but they do not provide insight into understanding of these diverse cultures. Most nations using the major languages as their lingua franca have local languages that represent their culture.

The role of culture in cross-cultural communication is huge. Since each culture has its own language set and ways of communicating, cross cultural communications can be quite difficult for individuals. Research shows that culture constantly makes its presence felt during cross-cultural communication and this can lead to stereotyping and misunderstandings during communication. Language and culture are not monolithic and the belief in a monolithic human identity leads to social and political standoffs.

The relationship between language, culture and gender. Studies have shown that the language used by specific genders fluctuate in almost every culture. In approximately 80% of the world’s languages, women may communicate at a deficit which is specified as the ‘woman register’ and this places them as inferior to men. This leads to social friction when genders from diverse cultures communicate.

CONCLUSION

Learning of new languages is achieved through cultural integration. Understanding a foreign culture plays a huge role in becoming competent with its language. Studies show that students of another language will learn to use expressions and terminologies in their right context if they acquire knowledge of the society’s culture. Therefore, an integrated learning policy that targets both cultural and lingual learning is important to mastering a second language.

On the whole, teaching culture offers a great diversity of topics and teaching techniques.
Students can profit on many levels while learning about culture. Creating a “culture friendly” atmosphere and raising self-awareness is extremely important so the students do not feel overwhelmed by a new and different culture. Selecting topics that are relevant for teaching a target language culture is of great importance. Some of the possible topics are behavior, beliefs, values, leisure, family, and lowbrow and highbrow culture in general. The expected outcomes of teaching culture include the above mentioned outcomes but one of the greatest advantages of teaching culture is that learners develop the ability to understand cultures, including your own.

References: