CORRELATING CULTURE & LANGUAGE LEARNING: AN ABSTRACTION LEADING TO REALITY.

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Abstract

English has become a passport to the world of opportunities. The educational, professional and social development of an individual today depends on the competence of English displayed by him/her. Ample deliberations have been carried out by experts on the various methods, approaches and theories of English language teaching and how it can be improved. However, there is one area that demands more discussion and investigation. The role of culture in language teaching needs to be examined in detail. The reason for this demand has been voiced by Claire Kramsch when she cites 'Unlike other subjects in the school curriculum, language has this unique characteristic that it cannot be used correctly and appropriately if one does not obey the rules of usage and the conventions of use of the English speaking community' (2010). This observation mandates an examination into the definition of culture, its relevance to language teaching and the problems associated with. The present paper attempts to examine the afore mentioned areas for academic deliberation.

Key words: *Culture, language teaching, text, intercultural communication*

INTRODUCTION

English, unlike other subjects in school and college curriculum, possesses a unique dual characteristicbecause it cannot be used to ones advantage without knowing its rules and conventions, but at the same time warrants a customization to include the individual's identity in it.The rules and conventions point to the external world where language is a tool for communication whereas the internal identity refers to the expression of individual wants and needs. These external and internal worlds are two parts of the larger subset of culture and the learning-teaching continuum of English should cater to both these subsets. Language is both culture and voice (Kramsch, 2000). In first language acquisition the gap between culture and voice is neither large nor is it apparently felt. However, with second language learning the chasm between culture and voice is vividly evident for the learners and the teachers and sometimes becomes too large to fill. Successful teaching of English in the classrooms should understand the link between culture and language and be able to bridge this gap. The present paper attempts to deliberate on the correlation between language and culture and to draw attention to their interdependence. The researchers have also tried to contemplate on the aspects to be considered while including culture in the language classroom and its benefits.

DEFINING CULTURE

Culture is a difficult term to define because of its omnipresent nature in all walks of life. Anthropologist, historians, artisans and scientist have all attempted to define culture and to align it with their specific fields. Some of the most common meanings attributed to culture are that it comprises of a large number of self-sustaining population and their collective thoughts experiences, and patterns of behavior (Hofstede, 1994). Culture has also been defined as people's 'qualitative characteristics that enables them to get over their unsophisticated biological nature in order to give preference to their more natural social nature' (Richenkova, 2008). While some definitions talk about how the individual helps in shaping the meaning of culture there are some definitions which refer to the importance of culture from a social point of view. '*Culture* is the composite of economic, industrial, social and spiritualachievements. It is the high level of development achieved; a skill; mastery' (Cooke, 2008) this definition views culture as a societal function which is contrary to the individual development as mentioned in the definition by Richenkova .

Culture has been defined as having 'patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behaviour acquired and transmitted by symbols' (Adler, 1997). Theodore Schwartz explained 'Culture consists of the derivatives of experience, more or less organized, learned or created by the individuals of a population, including those images or encodements and their interpretations (meanings) transmitted from past generations, from contemporaries, or formed by individuals themselves.'(1992). Authors such as David Matsumoto define culture as '... the set of attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors shared by a group of people, but different for each individual, communicated from one generation to the next.' (1996).A common thread that one sees in these definitions is that they talk of culture in close relation to communication and transfer of symbols. It can be deduced that culture does encompass in it the concepts of sharing. This sharing can be done only if there is a system of language that permits exchange of ideas and this is where language and culture are closely connected.

CULTURE AND LANGUAGE

The most appropriately defined meaning of culture is 'membership in a discourse community that shares a common social space and history and common imaginings' (Kramsch, 1998). Traditionally the word culture is related to the art forms, the customs and traditions of a particular region and is seen as a term that is governed by a particular clique. However, the definition by Claire Kramsch ideates that culture is not limited to only the art forms; it is the way through which a person can gain access to any community. This definition of culture proves to be apt for the language teaching classroom because the purpose of any foreign language classroom should be to enable students to be a part of the foreign language discourse community. It was generally believed that culture is a separate entity which may be introduced in a language classroom once the syllabus has neared completion. However there have been many researchers who protest against the idea of looking at culture and language as two varied facets, they promote a combination of both due to their interdependent nature. The futility of teaching language without teaching the culture of the target language has been effectively pointed out by Robert Politzer when he mentions ' if we teach language without teaching at the same time the culture in which it operates, we are teaching meaningless symbols or symbols to which the student attaches the wrong meaning' (1959).

The interdependence of language and culture are deep rooted and one may even assert that the existence of one depends on the other. 'A language is a part of a 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, 2000). This observation would warrant the fact that in a foreign language classroom the teaching of L2 should be coupled with the teaching of the target culture for effective language competence to be developed. Mitchell and Myles have asserted that 'language and culture are not separate, but are acquired together, with each providing support for the development of the other' (2004). There are many researchers who have consistently advocated the teaching of culture along with the teaching of a foreign language. Culture influences language teaching in two different dimensions- linguistic dimension and pedagogical dimension. Semantic, pragmatic and discourse levels of each language are different and they change with the change in culture. Hence awareness about this linguistic dimensions and its dependence on culture must be incorporated in a foreign language classroom for successful learning and teaching to happen. Secondly, the pedagogical dimension takes into account the choice of materials and the cultural basis of teaching. (McKay, 2003) Language teaching involves teaching the structure and its use. This use of language is largely governed by the culture to which it belongs. The choice of vocabulary and the grammatical structures to be used by the L2 learner is closely associated with the culture in context.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING AND CULTURE

Having established the importance and interdependence of culture and language, the deliberation presented in this research examines the theories associated with second language teaching of English. Practitioners of second language teaching have used the acculturation model for successful teaching of English in their classrooms. Acculturation is defined by Brown as 'the process of becoming adapted to a new culture'. This model is important because it takes into account how the learner's community and the target language community view each other through the use of their language. The central premise of the acculturation model is 'the degree to which a learner acculturates to the target language group will control the degree to which he acquires the second language' (Schumann, 1978).

The acculturation model is determined by the degree of social and psychological distance existing between the learner and the target language. Social distance includes variables such as (1) the social equality between L2 group and the target language, (2) the willingness of the target language to incorporate with the L2 group, (3) the L2 group wants to stay in the target language area and the extent to which it wants to use the target language, (4) both groups have a positive attitude towards each other, (5) there is congruency in the culture of both groups. A 'good' learning situation might be possible if these variables are working in favour of the learner. On the other hand the

psychological distance depends on variables such as (1) language shock, (2) culture shock, (3)motivation and (4) ego boundaries (Ellis, 2012).This implies that for the language classroom,the methodology and the materials selected should try to incorporate these variables as much as they can in order to create a more conducive environment for teaching & learning.

Acculturation goes through four stages as identified by H.D.Brown (1980). The first stage is initial excitement and euphoria, wherein the student of English feels excited to learn the new language as it is a new skill that (s)he is developing and the learner also understands the importance of learning this skill for their professional and personal growth. The second stage is culture shock in which the learner feels estranged and hostile towards the target culture owing to the difficulties experienced in language learning. This phase has to be dealt with carefully by the teachers of English because once the learner concretes their estrangement, then it may be difficult to motivate them further to learn. The third stage of acculturation is called culture stress. There is a gradual recovery shown by the learner which according to Brown is a crucial phase because 'some problems of acculturation are solved, while other problems continue for some time'. The fourth & the final stage is assimilation and adaptation to the new culture. These stages mentioned above point to the understanding that the role of language teachers and the environment of the language classroom are extremely critical in aiding learners to master L2. Every language classroom should ensure that the progression between these four stages is noted and measures are taken to help the development and to remove the roadblocks as experienced in the second stage.

CHALLENGES

The relevance of cultural assimilation in language teaching have been firmly established, however there are many challenges that need to be overcome in the language classroom for effective learning and teaching to happen. The first challenge that faces a language teacher is to define which culture to teach. English language teaching has classified culture into two types. The Big "C" refers to culture as 'the culture that represents a set of facts and statistics relating to the arts, history, geography, business, education, festivals and customs of a target speech society' (Lee, 2009; Peterson, 2004) whereas little "c" refers to the routine aspects of life and encompasses everything as a total way of life, which can be considered as the combining themes such as opinions, viewpoints, preferences (Lee, 2009). Essentially one might say that teaching of language should combine both the worlds in order to effectively prepare students for assimilating with the target language.

Posed with the question of which culture to teach, teachers and administrators are left with no choice because most of the materials available tend to use British or American culture. These internationally accepted materials have been called ethnocentric and have been criticized for their one dimensionality (Baxter, 1983; Pennycook, 1994). Coupled with rise in the number of people migrating to these countries, it may be safe to say that most of the materials used in the classroom are either British or American. The challenge that one faces is that there is no singular universal culture and hence the promotion of either British or American culture through the material is not advised. English is no longer the property of the Inner Circle countries (Kachru, 1992). There are as many 'Englishes' as there are countries speaking it and there is an increasing call for addressing the need of including these varied cultures into the teaching of English.

Another challenge observed is that in their attempt to assimilate with the target language, students may lose their own identity or may lose touch with their own cultures. The reason behind this is unlike in first language acquisition, wherein learning culture happens naturally, in second language acquisition the student is making a concentrated effort. The sheer resolution, on part of the student and scaffolding received in the language classroom makes the target culture more dominant than the source culture. As a remedy to this many researchers have suggested a combination of both to be taught in the classroom so that students can compare and contrast their source culture and the desired target culture (Ariffin, 2006).

EMERGING PERSPECTIVES

Traditional academic discourse on culture and teaching has seen C1 and C2 as two different aspects and has promoted a movement from the source culture to the target culture. It was popularly believed that language learninghappened as a result of this movement. However, in the last decade there has been an emergence of newer perspectives.

The first line of thought that has emerged is that of the 'sphere of interculturality', this line of thought includes a 'reflection on both the target and the native culture'; focusing on making meaning in the target culture by aligning it with the native culture to derive understanding. This approach has been termed as an eminently educational process (Zarate, 1982; Porcher, 1986; Kramsch and McConnell-Ginet, 1992). The second emergent view is to teach culture as an interpersonal process. Meaning emerges through social interaction and hence it is futile to teach fixed, standardized phenomena of language use. The need is to teach the process that can be applied to understand

foreignness or 'otherness' and promote student interpretation and understanding of culture as the focal point of culture and language learning.

Criticism against internationally accepted British and American culture-heavy materials has prompted many to call for a more culture specific pedagogy for each classroom. The reaction to this hegemony is an unnatural nationalism in the pedagogy. There is a wave of nationalistic influence, in terms of culture, in the methodology and materials used in second language classroom. However, one must understand that there is more to the culture than just nationalistic identity. Nationalism is but one aspect of culture; age, gender, regional background, social class and so on make up the rest. For a country like India where this diversity is vast one must deliberate on including as many facets as possible while defining culture in the language classroom. The last, but most important line of thought that has emerged recently is the call for broadening the disciplinary boundaries. Language teachers need to widen their horizons, go beyond literature and read other disciplines such as anthropology, sociology and semiology to better understand what culture is and how it helps in language learning. (Debyser,1981; Kramsch, 1988; Byram, 1989). Incorporating these emerging perspectives into the language classroom will help create a more conducive milieu for language learning through the aid of culture.

CONCLUSION

English has become the dominant international language and its presence cannot be negated. With more learners coming into contact with this language and using it for the professional and personal development, research has to focus on developing competence in a more organic manner. An understanding of culture and its dynamic nature can help language teachers to include it in their syllabus which would help their learners to learn a more natural form of language than a normative one. Clarity on what culture isand how it coincides with language learning together with the awareness of challenges present and incorporation of emerging perspectives will aid better language learning in the classroom.

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