An Analytical Approach of the Cultural Context in Language Teaching and Learning

Muna Mohammed Abbas Alkhateeb
Faculty of Basic Education, Babylon University, Iraq
munaalkhteeb2003@gmail.com

Abstract

The crucial and repeating subject in reference to cultural setting is the possibility of the importance, structures connected with time, place, individual and conditions. This paper will examine Gage's Dictionary of Canadian English that comprised two different meanings for culture which are appropriate to our discussion. The former definition covers the usual classic studies i.e., formal culture and the latter refers to deep culture. The paper recommends a need for implicit knowledge of these elements and their relation to communication through language. The paper also discusses two types of cultural contexts that are crucial in multicultural communication, (1) the external context and (2) the internal context .The paper also examines three important issues that are vital for quality language learning (1) How far is the classroom a natural setting for both language and culture learning? (2) To what extent is the classroom a setting for both language and culture learning? (3) And how is second or foreign language learning viewed by the society, especially in the multicultural milieu?. The paper reports that a mere ritual of adding cultural component to a basic language course is not sufficient. It is the mutual fitting that counts which the paper attempts to improve language learning through cultural immersion in ELT classroom.
Keywords*: ELT classroom, Culture Shock, formal and deep culture, internal and external culture, multicultural communication

الخلاصة

الموضوع المهم والمتكرر فيما يتعلق بالمشهد الثقافي هو احتمالية الاهمية والتراكيب المرتبطة بالوقت والمكان والفرد والظروف.يتناول هذا البحث تحليل لقاموس كاج الخاص بالانكليزية الكندية كونه يقدم معنيين مختلفين لكلمة ثقافة بشكل يتناسب مع طرحنا في هذا البحث. التعريــف الاول يغطــي الدراســات التقليديــة المتعارف عليها ..الثقافة الرسمية بينما الثاني يشير الى الثقافة المتجذره . توصي الدراسة بضرورة التعــرف وبعمق بتلك العناصر وعلاقتها بالثقافات:(١) البيئة الخارجية،(٢) البيئة الداخلية. كما تتناول الدراسة المسائل المهمة والحساسة فيما يتعلق في نوعية تعلم اللغة.(١) الى اي مدى يكون الصف بيئة طبيعية لكل من اللغـة وتعلم الثقافة؟،(٢) الى اي حد يكون الصف مكان ملائم لكل من اللغة وتعلم الثقافة؟،(٣) ماهي وجهة نظــر المجتمع تجاه تعلم اللغة الانجليزية من حيث كونها لغة اجنبية او ثانية وخصوصا فــي مجتمعــات متعـددة الثقافات؟. ويشير البحث الى ان مجرد اضافة العنصر الثقافي الى دورة تعلم اللغة المبسطة ليس كافيــاً. انــه التبادل المناسب الذي تحاول هذه الدراسة من خلاله تحسين تعلم اللغة عن طريق ادخال عنصر الثقافة في تعلم اللغة الانجليزية داخل الصف.

الكلمات المفتاحية: صف تعليم اللغة الانجليزية،الصدمة الثقافية،الثقافة العميقــة والرســمية،الثقافة الداخليــة والخارجية، تواصل متعدد الثقافات.

1. Introduction

Language is not an entity invented in isolation. It is rather a means through which cultural realism is transmitted. At the outset of this paper, we want the reader to note the earlier models of culture which were static, stereotyped, accumulated, classified and observable, hence teachable and learnable. But with the advent of globalization the latest models consider culture to be dynamic and variable. This major transformation has put culture at the core of the language and more importantly no function can be found for language to be considered separate of the context, and what's more, all the time it is cultural setting. Thus both are interrelated language and culture and comprehension of language without culture is impossible.

However, amid the most recent forty years there have been moves in how language instructors saw cultural setting. The argumentative issue has been to find out the settings i.e., classroom or field (real world), where one could best promote language and culture alike. Thus since 1980s, language have paid much attention to cultural context. No doubt, study abroad programmers and culture simulation in the classroom programmes have grown popular but still it is difficult to find the language learners in the real cultural setting. The world has changed in many ways and culture has become a superpower in maintaining stability and equilibrium. In maintaining the equilibrium, persuasion rather than armed force has needs to know the values and manners of others societies. But our schools today are failing to envisage this aspect which is so vital and crucial. Undeniably all societies and institutions are aware of the linguistic and cultural features that are at the front of our persistently recoiling world, still they shun addressing these very real global aspects. In the light of the above facts, this paper will discuss how to inspire learner's interest in culture in the language classroom by focusing on the underlying theory, practice and development. Culture as classroom content can involve students on many levels, enabling them to think deeply on worthwhile issues. No doubt we are long past a period when foreign language learning was cast in a "behaviouristic mould", a abridgment of rules and series of words used to shape proposition. In the most recent decades, there has been a resurgence of concern for the investigation of language in connection to society and its culture, yet there are some deeply ingrained convictions that decide the approach and additionally the subject matter of foreign language programs and curriculum, which have steadily thought up to decide the instructing of culture.

This paper tries to dissolve the misconception that language is simply a code and once mastered by dint of linguistic principles and a few parts of the setting in which it is found ,it can be translated into another. To a specific degree this conviction is instrumental but very often it leads to cross cultural miscommunication. Whatever the case may be, foreign language learning is foreign culture learning and what is debatable is how the latter is integrated into language learning in an ELT classroom. Here Politzer's keen observation should not go unnoticed "If we teach language meaningless symbols or symbols to which the student attaches wrong meaning…" (Polizer,1959: 100-101).All this can lead to culture shock. In such a case learners tend to become passive or even aggressive. The more different the culture, the greater is the shock. Often such learners fail to receive any support from their parents, classmates or other companions who are in a similar situation too. To understand this situation there is a need to analyze culture shock and its psychological stages. This knowledge of culture shock can entangle many problems related to language learning and cross culture in the ELT classroom.

2. The History of Culture Teaching

Culture in a foreign language classroom has given a major concern of many educators and researchers where significant debate has started, and has showed a considerable controversy, yet its validity as an equal complement to language learning has regularly been disregarded or even condemned. Previously, individuals studied the literature of a foreign language, and this was the primary medium of culture. Through reading the students learned the development connected with the dialect target language (Flewelling,1993:339, cited in Lessard-Clouston,1997). Brooke (1968) emphasized the vital role of culture not for the study of literature but for learning a language. There was a great shift of focus from teaching geography and history as part of language learning to an anthropological approach to the study of culture (Ibid).

Adopting the same path of Brooks, Nostrand (1974) developed an Emergent Model scheme, which involved six principle classifications. First, culture, regraded value systems and habits of thought; second, society included organizations and families, religious, and different institutions. The third category of conflict contained interpersonal conflict. Ecology and technology included knowledge of plants and animals, health care, travel,etc.,while cross-cultural environment had to do with attitude towards other cultures.

Communication is not only regarded a sharing information ,but also a highly cognitive, affective and value-laden activity, Melde(1987) holds that foreign language teaching should foster 'critical awareness ' of social life.

3. Is Culture Important?

Culture in language learning is not an expendable fifth skill, tacked on, so to speak, to the teaching of speaking, listening, reading ,and writing. It is always in the background, right from day one, ready to unsettle the good language learners when they expect it least, making evident the limitations of their hard-won communicative competence, challenging their ability to make sense of the world around them (Melde ,1987)

Culture can be defined as all the behaviours ,arts, beliefs and institutions of a population that are passed down from era to era (Clarke & Sanchez, 2001. Culture has been called the way of life of an entire society . Accordingly, it includes codes of behavious, dress, language, religion, rituals, and gastronomy. Cross-cultural communication is a process of exchanging, negotiating, and mediating one's cultural differences through language, non-verbal gestures, and space relationships. It is the process by which people express their openness to an intercultural experience (Clarke & Sanchez, 2001).

Linguists and anthropologists have since a long time ago perceived that the structures and uses of a given language mirror the cultural values of the society in which the language is spoken. Linguistic competence alone is insufficient for learners of a language to be competent in that language (Krasner,1999). Language learners should know ,for instance ,of the culturally suitable methods for address individuals, express appreciation, address people, express gratitude, make requests, and agree or disagree with someone. Learners have also to know that behaviours and intonation patterns are appropriate in their own speech community and by comprehending them, they may have a successful communication, where language use must be associated with other culturally appropriate behaviour.

Language is a form of expression or communication among humans. Spoken and written communication with pre-set meanings for each word written or uttered is what we refer to as language. Culture ,on the other hand, is defined by the activities of

people, sometimes governed by a geographical boundary. Every culture is unique in itself. It includes language, art, music, mannerisms, religion, games, dress, rituals, law and belief. Having two such expansively defined fields, how far would one have to go to observe the effect that culture has on language? As far back as man himself.

Second/Foreign language learning includes grammatical competence ,communicative competence, language proficiency, as well as a change in attitude towards one's or another culture. Cultural competence, is indisputably an integral part of foreign language learning. Knowledge of the grammatical system of a language has to be complemented by the understanding of culture-specific meanings (communicative or rather cultural competence) (Byram, Morgan et al., 1994:4).

Language is a social institution, both shaping and shaped by society at large, or in particular, the cultural niches (Eleanor Armour-Thomas & Sharon-annGopaul-McNicol,1998) in which it plays an important role. It is not autonomous construct but social practice both creating and created by the structures and forces of the social institutions within which one lives and functions. Everyday language is tinged with cultural bits and pieces. By the very act of talking, we assume social and cultural roles, which are so deeply entrenched in our thought processes as to go unnoticed.

Impact of native culture on L2/FL acquisition: People learning L2 usually introduce discrepancies into the second language, derived from their cultural and traditional effects. Since their exposure is limited, natural substitution takes place in grammatical, colloquial and diction domains. This seriously impinges on the ability of students to take-in the spirit and substance of the topic that they study.

The background knowledge that it is related to culture influences L2/FL reading and has been discussed by Bernett(1999),Carrell and Eisterhold(1983),and Johnson(1982). Steffensen and Joag-Dev (1984) conducted a study using two descriptions of weddings both written in English. One was a description of an American wedding, while the other was of an Indian wedding. Both the Indian students, for whom English was L2, and the American students, for whom English was L1, read the descriptions and were asked to recall the descriptions. It was found that readers comprehended texts about their own cultures more accurately than the other. While the readers indicated that the words were easy to understand, the unfamiliar cultural protocol of an Indian wedding made the passage more difficult to remember.

Impact of culture associated with L2: Cultural awareness should be viewed as an important component informing and enriching communicative competence. By communicative competence, we mean verbal as well as non-verbal commination, such as gestures, the ability (or lack thereof) to integrate with a specific group or avoid committing any faux pas, and so forth. For instance, in the United States formal communication does not require people to maintain a distance between them, whereas, in Arabic counties it is considered infringement of personal space and inappropriate. Also, the openness, dogmas, practices, beliefs, etc. differ from culture to culture largely influencing interpersonal relations. This makes the knowledge of culture an essential component. More than aiding the leaner in acquisition of correct language usage , cultural knowledge prevents one from social disasters as being known " Culture shocks".

4. Culture Shock and its Stages

In cross cultural communication the communicators normally undergo a culture shock which is further classified into four stages. The psycho analysis of these stages is as follows:

1. Euphoric stage: In this stage the new learners are in an excited and enthusiastic stage, ready to acquire anything that the new environment offers them. The teachers and other learners of the ELT classroom can both benefit from this situation supports cross culture learning.

2. Culture Shock Stage: In this stage the differences between the new and the native cultures become noticeable. Unlike the euphoric stage, the learner is frustrated due to the bombardment of unfamiliar surroundings, signs, symbols ,signals and an unrelenting barrage of new sounds and habits. The new learner is aggressive and acts out his frustrations. In this stage of shock all they need is the attention of the teacher who cannot only pacify the effect but also enhance language learning through mutual sharing of information and culture.

3. Integration Stage: Here the new learner begins to deal with the differences lying underneath cross cultures.They begin to replace the old culture or continue to survive with both old and new cultures. At this stage, the teacher in the ELT classroom can chisel the personal and professional aspects through careful observation, listening rapport building and developing empathy for each other's culture.

4. Acceptance Stage: At this stage, the learner is comfortable in the new culture.His contribution and behavior towards language and culture may vary from one situation to another and from the ELT classroom to society. Very often in the ELT classroom, the learner may accept the new culture and continue to stick to the old culture outside classroom settings. Hence at this stage, cultural exchange sometimes is difficult in the classroom and easier on the field i.e., outside the ELT classroom.

5. ELT Classroom in Juxtaposition with Culture Shock Stages

In the light of the above facts, the paper tries to answer the three important issues raised earlier i.e., (1) How far is the classroom a natural setting for both language and culture learning? (2) To what extent is the classroom a setting for experimental learning? and (3) How is second or foreign learning viewed by the society, especially in the multicultural milieu?

Teaching can be moulded by restructuring the pedagogical aspects of ELT. When viewed closely language and culture learning take place satisfactorily in the first stage i.e., the Euphoric stage. Here the ELT classroom is viewed as a natural setting for both language and culture learning. The learning environment can be further enhanced if the teacher is successful in establishing mutual trust and affinity for one another's culture. However, the teacher and the learners are in a dip in the second stage i.e., Culture shock stage. At the beginning of the second stage, the classroom is set for experimental learning. At this stage, due to strong disagreement for another's culture, teaching becomes further challenging. But with the advent of the third stage (the integration stage), the track of language and culture learning gets smoother. Language learning in the ELT classroom is at the peak in the fourth stage, but advancements in culture are seen on field i.e., real world settings like the work place or other professional platforms. Thus by restricting language learning to ELT classrooms, we are failing to create a cross culture or a multi culture environment that is most desired by corporate, industry and business worlds. As a result both foreign and native language learners fail to accommodate themselves into the multi culture milieu. Hence, the paper suggests going beyond classroom settings to incorporate both culture and language. This approach still has certain limitations as it can only equip learners with cultural knowledge. The learners in this case are left to use their own devices so that they integrate the cultural knowledge with the assumption and mindsets of people in society. In order to combat this situation, learners must also be made aware of certain cultural factors that influence time, distance, gestures, expressions, eye contact

age, gender, social class, etc. Thus, instead of viewing cultural knowledge as a prerequisite for language learning or an embodiment of the ELT classroom, it can be viewed as society's store of established knowledge (Fowler,1986).

6. Grammar of Culture

This section deals with the grammatical structures and sentence patterns typical in some cultures. To enhance language teaching in the ELT classroom, the teacher must identify the grammatical structures that frame a clear cultural image of any society or country. Grammar of culture has its own patterns of behaviour (Howell &Vetter,1976). The following example
(refer to Howell & Vetter,1976) assists in achieving a deeper understanding of grammar of culture. When an American sees a bus coming, he frames the sentence in 'the present progressive tense' (" the bus is coming") whereas the Japanese use 'the present perfect' (" the bus has come"). In this case, the difference lies not in the perception and conceptualization of thoughts ,but in the manner they are conditioned and adhered to. Further, if you reflect on UK and US grammar you can add some more differences to your list , e.g. according to UK grammar: " I wish you could have got there sooner", whereas according to US grammar : " I wish you could have gotten there sooner". Such practices and notions can be assessed against a culture specific yardstick with partial or complete acceptance to the person's culture. Therefore, to overcome the given problem, teachers of ELT should work (meticulously) upon the following elements of language and culture.

- The content and grammar of new utterances.
- Paralinguistic and grammar and the kinesics of his/her culture.
- Help students to develop an understanding that all people exhibit culturally conditioned behaviours.
- Students' empathy and intellectual curiosity for the target language.

7. Formal Culture and Deep Culture

Another interesting activity is to inform the learners about formal and deep culture through non-verbal communication. Here the teacher displays the charts with many gestures and expressions (joy, anger, pain, sadness, happiness) of diverse cultures. Learners with the help of their own knowledge and assumption will discuss on various ways in which people express their feelings. The teacher can explore the learner's background knowledge of culture. The teacher can also organize simulation programmes. The interpreters will analyze the text in context to formal culture i.e., attire, symbolic meanings of colours ,physical distance and gradually these interpretations will move on to deep culture i.e., art and literature. The number of interpretations may now increase with the learners' experience. Also, the big size of ELT classroom with more than 50 or 60 students is disadvantageous as they can draw a variety of interpretations both at home and of the target culture. Often, the teachers have complaints about the large number of students in a classroom, but such activities of language learning often demand large sized classrooms. Thus culture, rather than being a fifth adjunct to the four skills of language (reading, writing, speaking and listening),can best find its expression through art and literature. For acquiring a deep culture as Valdes (1986) notes, literature is a practical component of the foreign language where its main function is to work as a medium to transfer the cultures of different and various societies. Thus literary texts, documentaries, charts, slide shows are the untapped resources of language that learners can avail both in the ELT classroom and society. The following responsibilities are to be kept in mind while teaching culture in the language classroom:
- Setting an environment for individual and group learning.

- Creating an environment of competitive learning.
- Establishing an environment for cooperative learning.
- Exploring the inner process of the learner and raising it to the conscious level.
- Gradually shifting the responsibilities onto the learner.

8. Language Learning through Cultural Errands: Internal and External Contexts

Language learning activities like role plays, slide shows, gesture reading, group discussions, audio-video,DVDs etc. are better avenues for cultural awareness. Accordingly, these activities have to be designed with the age and level of the learners. Beginners and learners of the intermediate level should be assigned the activities that are associated with their own culture. Further in order to improve the vocabulary of the learners teachers can divide the students into small groups and send them on cultural errands to malls, hotels, hospitals, supermarket, departmental stores, electronic fairs, banks, financial houses , etc. where they learn foreign words,jargon, synonyms, names of imported goods, etiquette, manners and social behavior. The teacher can later ask later ask the learners to list the words distinguishing the home and target culture. This activity can stimulate both language and culture and also help in identifying stereotypical lapses. After establishing the major differences learners are introduced the key words in different cultures. For e.g., the study of the word "cow" has different interpretation for people of different communities in India and the scared feeling Hindus assign may not be understood by some groups of home as well as target cultures. Here,the role of the ELT teacher is vital in solving the problems related to internal and external contexts i.e., an individual's perception (internal context) and social meaning (external context). Here, the highest degree of learning is possible as the learners are inquisitive and proactive in knowing the differences, sometimes even without the involvement of a teacher. To promote more learning ,the teacher should involve learners of different backgrounds ,so that the real learning of both language and culture takes place under one roof.

9. Practical Considerations for Incorporating Culture in the ELT Classroom

In the past, insights into the targeted society were acquired through "lecturettes" or "homilies" where issues like festivals, ceremonies, customs, rituals ,etc. were discussed based on geographical, political and historical divisions. Such a practice of incorporating culture into the ELT classroom was often impractical and unrewarding. But with the advent of globalization, electronic media., study-abroad programmes, cultural exchange programmes and culture simulation in the classroom programmes teachers and learners are able to negotiate on both linguistic and cultural competence. According to Straub (1999) and Grove (1982) before venturing into strange or unknown provinces, learners must first get familiar and conversant with their own culture, which is very often ignored or not taken seriously by the teacher and the learner. Therefore, Meyer (1991) suggested certain ideas by which teachers can integrate culture in a FLT classroom:

- The teacher must shape intellectual objectivity and foster understanding of the target culture which is essential in cross cultural analysis.

- The teacher must also make it clear that stepping into another culture is not denying their own being but seeking the common and uncommon issues or even lacunae within or between cultures.

- A teacher should teach the language learner how to investigate a variety of issues, methods to retain new words, phonemic transcription, use of different dictionaries and encyclopedia.

Again, it should be strongly perceived that one language is not always tied to one culture and English represents many cultures. If the ELT classroom restricts language teaching to UK or US culture, it can only cause a feeling of dejection and resentment in people belonging to other English speaking countries. This can influence the learning part negatively and a gradual slowdown in pace is also possible.

9.1. Some Activities

Using 'authentic sources' from the native speech community helps to engage students in authentic cultural experiences . These materials may be adapted by the teachers to adapt the students' age and proficiency level:

• To develop a 'mental image' of the target culture ,bring into class symbols and images of the target culture, such as maps, newspapers, photographs, etc. Encourage students to examine these objects and discuss their meaning and significance. These objects will help students to get a background of the target culture.

• Divide students into pairs and nominate one student as a guide and one as a tourist. The aim is to encourage discussion of famous cultural places in the target language. First teach students the necessary vocabulary and interesting facts in advance and then ask them to role play a conversation between the guide and the tourist.

• Introduce the students to some of the popular dishes in the target culture. Show them the pictures of food and then ask them about the ingredients and taste etc. Then ask students to compare them to the cuisine of their country. Discuss the similarities and differences in taste, etc.

• Films are a good way of exposing students to behavior that is not obvious in texts. They act as an authentic source for students to know about the way of life, clothing, food habits, etc. of the target culture. They also attach the individuals with language and culture matters simultaneously.

10. Conclusion

Culture can be enriched by restructuring the pedagogical aspects of language, thus the present paper strongly suggests textbook writers and the researchers of elite educational institutions to supplement material through the print and electronic media, offering guidelines to teachers, in the form of a handbook. To know more about culture the teachers should follow the textbooks written by various diasporic writers. They can also research and include cultural notes and use discussion forums available online to share issues related to culture and language. If the above methods are taken seriously there won't be any end or pitfalls to the exploration of language and culture. Thus, the immersion approach discussed in this paper may sometimes be psychologically stressful, but it is effective and the methods suggested above will definitely transmit language and culture into long term memory. Thus culture forms the matrix within which human life develops and language being considered a medium within which culture is transmitted in a very perfect manner. A fine balance maintained in this context carries with it the demarcation between culture and language, and this demarcation in course of time might get blurred, thus merging language and culture into one entity.

11. References
Books
Bernett, M.A.(1999). *More than Meets the Eye: Foreign Language Reading Theory and Practice*. Englewood Cliffs,NJ: CAL &Prentice Hall.
Brooke, N. (1968). The Analysis of Foreign and Familiar Cultures. In Lafayette,R. (ed.). *The Culture Revolution in Foreign Language Teaching*. Skoki, Illinois : National Textbook Company.
Fowler,R.(1986). *Linguistic Criticism*. Oxford : Oxford University Press

Howell,W.R. &Vetter, J.H. (1976). *Language in Behaviour*. New York: Human Sciences Press.

Melde, W.(1987). *Zur Integration von Landeskkude und Kimmunikationim Fremdsprachenunterricht*. Tubingen: Gunter NarrVerlag.

Nostrand, H.L.(1974). A Second Culture: New Imperative for American Education .In Michel, J. *Foreign Language Teaching. An Anthology*. London: Collier-MacMillan

Polizer,R. (1959). *Developing Cultural Understanding Through Foreign Language Study Report of the Fifth Annual Round Table Meeting on Linguistics and Language Teaching*, PP 99-105.Washington,D.C. : Georgetown University Press.

Steffensen,M.S.,& Joag-Dev, C. (1984). 'Cultural Knowledge and Reading' In J.C. Alderson & A.H.Urquhart (eds.), *Reading in a Foreign Language*, PP.48-61.New York: Longman

Valdes,J.M. (ed.). (1986). *Culture Bound: Bridging the Cultural Gap in Language Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Journal Articles

Johnson, P.(1982). 'Effects on Reading Comprehension of Language Complexity and Cultural Background of a Text'. *TESOL Quarterly*,15(2), 169-181.

Krasner,I. (1999). 'The Role of Culture in Language Teaching' .*Dialog on Language Instruction*,13(1-2),PP 79-88

Singhal, M. (1998).Teaching Culture in the Foreign Language Classroom. *Thai TESOL* Bulletin,11(1),February,1998.

.