

CULTURE IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING

Mohsin Ali Shreeb
University of Ahlulbait

CULTURE IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING

By: Mohsin Ali Shreeb

Abstract

Any language is embedded in a particular culture and when you learn a language you inevitably learn about its underlying culture .

It would appear that the question of 'culture' is often relegated to the end of a language teaching plan. It seems as if it were always something of a bonus if the teacher manages to find time to introduce a bit of the culture of the foreign language into the classroom.

Language and culture: introduction

Most English language teachers in Iraq do not have much knowledge of the target culture of the language they teach.

They consider target language isolated beyond its culture. They, therefore, stress the interdependence of language and culture.

Before I go further, the words "language "and "culture" must be defined and their relationship must be justified.

Language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols which permit all people in a given culture, or other people who have learned the system of that culture, to use it in human communication (Finocchiaro, 1964:8; Brown, 1987:4).

Language is a set of acquired knowledge system that is built up through the touch of social environment .Every language is corresponding with a given culture and is part of the culture .To a great extent, the structures, patterns and meaning of any language are influenced and restricted by a specified cultural concept. Therefore, the same words or expressions may not mean the same things to different people, which may lead to misunderstandings .As such, language, can not but serve and reflect culture needs(googluck ,2007: 1; Finocchiaro,1964 :9-11).

So "what is culture?"

Nemini (1992) and street (1993) agree that it is no easy to answer a question such as mentioned above . Krobeber and kluckohn (1954) finds over three hundred definitions of culture in their study (Clouston ,2007 :4).

Culture is a term with a considerable extension. It is learned and shared by members of a group and facilitate human interactions. It concentrates on reflecting almost all aspect of human civilization. In a narrow sense, culture contains customs, living patterns, social organizations, inter-relations, etc, and it is regarded as a series of traits. Culture is concept that is learned and transmitted through communication and learning.

Culture is a common agreement between the members of a community on the values, norms, roles expectations and meanings which guide the behaviour and communication of the members. Furthermore, it includes the deeds and products which result from the interaction between the members (kaikkonen ,1997 :49).

Hudson (1980:74) state that " a society's culture consists of whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members " and to do so in any role that they accept for any one of themselves That knowledge is socially acquired, the necessary behaviors are learned and do not come from any kind of genetic endowment (kilickaya ,2007 :1).

Samovar and Porter define culture as " the cumulative deposit of knowledge , experience , beliefs , values , attitudes , meaning ,hierarchies, religion , notion of time , spatial relations , concepts of the universe and material objects and possessions acquired by a group of people in the course of generations through individual and group striving " (Meloni :2007:1).

In broad terms, culture can be divided into:

- 1-High culture, including politics, philosophy, education, literature, art, etc.
- 2-Deep culture , including sense of value , made of thinking , code of conduct , religious beliefs , criterion of morality , etc ;
- 3- Popular culture, including the patterns of customs, ceremony and propriety of social contact, way of life, family patterns and even concrete catering culture. Tea culture. Football culture, etc. (Muir, 2007:1).

One long standing claim concerning the relationship between language and culture is that the culture of a people finds reflection in the language they employ , so cultural requirements do not determine the structure of a language , but they certainly influence how a language is used and perhaps determine why specific bits and pieces are the way they are (wardhaugh , 1986:212).

Language and culture are inexorably intertwined .Our language reflects and reinforces our cultural patterns and value systems. A culture and the language used by it are inseparable .The language is a product of the culture, but simultaneously the culture is shaped by how the language allows us to view it. So language and culture reinforce each other (Byrne, 1980:xx111).

Also Berman (2002:5) states that languages are embedded in cultures and are born in cultures.

So the relation of language to culture is then a relation of part to whole, they are interdependent(Dechert and Kastener ,2007:1 ;Muir ,2007: 2).

Yule (1996:246) asserts the foregoing discussion by saying it has become clear that different groups not only have different languages, they also have different world views which are reflected in their languages.

To end with Lado (1964:23) who insists "that language does not develop in a vacuum. A language is part of the culture of a people and the chief means by which the members of a society communicate". Therefore, according to Lado, a language is both a component of culture and a central network through which the other components are expressed .

Language Teaching is Culture Teaching:

According to the arguments put forth, people in different language groups view the world in a deferent manner because their language causes them to see the world from a different perspective and to interpret it in ways consistent with their language.

To learn a foreign language is not merely to learn how to communicate but also to discover how much the target language allows learners to manipulate a certain system of ideas that involves a particular articulation and structure of the world. This is what is called the "inner form" of a language (Palmer, 1972:374).

Culture and communication are inseparable because culture not only dictates who talks to whom , about what , and how the communication proceeds , it also helps to determine how people encode messages , the meanings they have for messages ,and the conditions and circumstances under which various messages may or may not be sent, noticed or interpreted. So culture is the foundation of communication (Clouston , 2007:3).

When a student learns a foreign language, he or she is not only learning an isolated system of linguistic symbols, but a cultural system which leads people to a metaphorical intercultural sphere. Subsequently, learners will develop a series of intercultural skills and abilities which will allow them to open to the world , to new language and new cultures (Ojeda,2001 :4)

Brown (1980:128) goes with Ojeda saying that foreign language learning in some respects involves the acquisition of a social identity .So foreign language learning is often foreign culture learning.

From the foreign, we are sure that language learning is culture learning, and in one form or another, culture has, even implicitly, been taught in the foreign language classroom, so by teaching a language, one is inevitably already teaching culture implicitly. So the language teacher does in fact teach culture when he teaches a language and since in teaching a language he must touch upon the culture content that language serves to communicate, he should welcome the information and understanding that the cultural study of man supplies (Nasr ,1972 :157).

However, we know that all language come with some cultural associations attached. By speaking the language,one automatically aligns oneself with the

culture of the language ,so to speak a language well , one has to be able to think in that language ,and since the elementary meaning units of the native language are different from those of the foreign language , so the study of the cultural content of the foreign language through the native language of the student gives him no experience in understanding the elementary meaning units of the foreign culture. He merely learns about the foreign culture in terms of the cultural units of his native culture. Furthermore, information about the foreign culture given in native language books tends to be presented from the point of view of the native culture of the student.

The only way we suggest is to learn cultural content through the foreign language. The language teacher teaches a language and the cultural content of that language. This will not only distinguish the elementary meaning units of the foreign culture but will give the students freedom to develop their understanding of the foreign culture independently according to their interests (ibid: 162; Tang, 2007:2).

To conclude we must admit that language teaching is indeed culture teaching.

Intercultural Language Learning:

In recent times, intercultural has become an increasingly important component in English as a foreign language area.

Intercultural language learning is an attempt to raise student's awareness of their own culture, and help them to interpret and understand other cultures .In this method, no specific culture has been paid attention, but a variety of cultures has been included in the curriculum .

Ojeda (2001:2) state that cultural awareness is of paramount importance for the notion of intercultural communicative competence. This new concept implies understanding of both first language and foreign language cultural systems.

So the aim of intercultural language learning is to develop with learners an understanding of their own language (s) and culture (s) in relation to an additional language and culture. It is a dialogue that allows for reaching a common ground for negotiation to take place, and where variable points of view are recognized, mediated and accepted. It involves the learner in the ongoing transformation of the self, his /her ability to communicate, to understand communication within one's own and a cross language and cultures and to develop the capability for ongoing reflection and learning about language and cultures.

Paige et.al. (1999) provide a useful working definition of culture learning .They state that culture learning is the process of acquiring the culture- specific and culture general knowledge, skills and attitudes required for effective communication and interaction with individuals from other cultures. It is a

dynamic, developmental and on-going process which engages the learner cognitively, behaviorally, and affectively (Research center; 2007:20)

Byram et.al (1998: 12) support what is said indicating that intercultural communicative competence entails an understanding of the differences in international norms between different speech communities and an ability to "reconcile or mediate between different modes present "

Intercultural language learning seeks two basic principles:

1. Every language and culture are inseparable.
2. People are unique in expressing their own culture and in responding to another culture.

We can conclude that intercultural language learning takes the following issues into consideration :

1. Successful bilingual teachers with intercultural insights and knowledge.
2. An awareness of differences and strategies for coping with such differences.
3. Global and local speakers of English.
4. Materials related to familiar and international context.
5. Discourse samples related to native-nonnative, nonnative –nonnative speakers.
6. Interactions.

So the features of this new trend can be grouped into knowledge, skills, attitudes and cultural awareness.

The cultural preparation of foreign language teachers:

Teaching culture is considered important by most teachers but it has remained insubstantial and sporadic in most language classrooms.

Omaggio (1993:357) present several reasons for this including lack of time, uncertainty about which aspects of culture to teach and lack of practical techniques.

The well- prepared teachers must have a high degree of independence and linguistic understanding. There are two sides to linguistic understanding: scientific knowledge of the structure of both the foreign and the native language. The teacher of any foreign language must have a well rounded knowledge of the culture or cultures represented by his students.

Teachers should make the learners learn about the cultures and why certain things happen in other cultures. They should not try to make their learners think or become like people in the cultures presented .they should not give the idea that one's own culture is better than the target culture or vice versa. They should point out that cultures differ.

For intercultural language teaching, there is not a unique model to be reproduced in the every praxis .what is more important is to foster the role of the teacher as an attitude-mediator which certainly implies the power to

influence students .The teacher can thus be seen as one of the most important figures for pre-adult new comers to a new society.

Edelhoff (in Ojeda , 2001:5) presents the following points to have into account by foreign language teachers for intercultural teaching :

1. Teachers must acquire knowledge about cultural history and context of the foreign language target community.
2. Teacher must acquire knowledge of their own cultures and the way they are perceived by others.
3. Teachers must know the constraints of language and the use of it by foreign speakers ,and the way to avoid wrong interpretations.
4. Teachers must have communication skills for negotiation in the classroom and in international communication in the own country and others.
5. Teacher must be ready to consider the way they are perceived by others and be curious about knowing more about themselves and about others.
6. Teacher must be ready to share meanings, experiences and feelings with their students and with people of other cultures.

Muir (2007:3) says that teachers are "ambassadors of culture" but he adds that most teachers in high schools do not have much knowledge of the target culture. They even don't have a systematic study about the source culture .Constantly; the way of teaching is not solely influenced by their professional training but also by their culture of learning.

Incorporation of culture into the class:

The ideal is to develop language classes in which basic cultural information is integrated systematically and completely into the course content. However, until cultural materials become available , language teachers will have to be responsible for incorporating as much culture as possible for their classes while continuing to use language- based texts.

But how teachers incorporate culture into the class? Most linguists agree that culture must be thought implicitly. i.e. .culture is embedded in the linguistics forms that students are learning .To make students aware of the cultural features reflected the language, teachers can make those cultural features a topic of discussion in relation to the linguistic forms being studied (Peterson et.al ,2007:1) .

How much time should be spent teaching culture? The point is that the amount of culture introduced is not so important as the degree of familiarity the students have with the foreign culture at the end of the course besides the daily culture topics should be short and the concise (Chastain, 1988: 306).

Kramsch (in Ojeda ,2007:4) summarizes four main premises of culture which are to be considered in education:

1. Establishing an sphere of interculturality, i.e. to relate first culture to foreign culture and to reflect on conceptions of first culture and foreign culture.
2. Teaching culture as an interpersonal process ,i.e. to present not only cultural facts in a structural way ,but to present understanding processes ,values , beliefs ,or attitudes .
3. Teaching culture as difference, i.e. culture is not only national traits, but race, gender, social class, etc.
4. Crossing disciplinary boundaries. In order to carry out this approach, teachers need to have wider knowledge on subjects related to culture such as ethnography, psychology, sociology, or sociolinguistics.

Thus language teachers must list culture as one of the five principal objectives of foreign language study ,I.e. attaching the same value to culture as to each of the four language skills listening ,speaking ,reading and writing .

How do teachers teach culture?

Most standard foreign language activities can be easily adapted for use in the culture classroom .The most important points is to ensure that the students are active engaged in the target culture and language.

Cultural activates should be carefully organized and incorporated into lesson plans to enrich the teaching content.

Some ideas for presenting culture in the classroom are described below

Information sources:

In order to get a comprehensive picture of the target culture, teachers need to present their students with different kinds of information which can be used as materials for teaching culture.

Some of these sources are:-

- Video
- Cds
- Readings
- Internet
- Newspapers
- Relia
- Fieldwork
- Guest speakers
- Anecdotes
- Souvenirs
- Photographs
- Literature

Discussion Activities: -

Besides that students need some preparatory activities with clear goals some of these activities are:

1- Quizzes:-

Quizzes can be used to test materials that teachers have previously taught and are also useful in language new information. For example:

With a partner, answer true or false to the following:-

- a. The statue of liberty is in loss Anglos.
- b. The United Kingdom includes the republic of Ireland.
- c. The population of Britain is less than that of Iraq.

Teacher should ask the students to answer the questions in pairs or groups, because they will share their existing knowledge and common sense to give answers.

2- Reformulation:-

Reformulation means: explain what you just learned to your partner in your own words. It is a very simple technique, but has proved very successful for learning both culture and language. When students have read an activity or listened to a story, teachers may like to use reformulation to allow the students to check what they have learned and to reinforce it by retelling it to a partner (Cullen, 2007:3).

3- Prediction:

Prediction can engage the students more actively. For example, when a teacher is telling a story, he can stop at a certain point and ask the students to predict how it will continue .This will force them to review their existing knowledge and raise their curiosity about whether their prediction is correct or not.

4- proverbs:-

Discussion of common proverbs in the target language could focus on how the proverbs are different from or similar to proverbs in the students' native language, and how differences might undercourse historical and cultural background.

5- Culture Capsules:-

Students can be presented with objects (e.g. figurines , jewelry, art)or images that originate from the target culture .The students are then responsible for finding information about the item in question , either by conducting research or by being given clues to investigate (Peterson et.al , 2007:3).

Of course there are many other activities that be used to introduce culture content in the classroom .This depends on the teacher and the students themselves.

Conclusion:-

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 a foreign language curriculum.

This article has centered on culture in foreign language teaching and learning in an effort to provide an understanding of culture in foreign language education.

Culture must be fully incorporated as a vital component of language learning .Foreign language teachers should use key cultural items in every aspect of the language only if cultural issues are an inherent part of the curriculum.

While inserting 'culture' in the curriculum and using textbooks having cultural content , teachers should be aware of the factors such as socio-cultural information, learners' needs, stereotypes ,generalizations and intercultural communication. Before using any source of cultural content such as textbooks ,teachers should take these factors into consideration and analyze the material to understand whether it is appropriate for their learners and whether it tries to impose specific cultural information on the learners.

Language teachers must attach the same value to culture as to each of the four language skills, listening, speaking, reading and writing.

At last language itself is already culture, and therefore it is something of moot point to talk about the inclusion or exclusion of culture in a foreign language curriculum.

References:-

- Berman ,Russell A.(2002) Foreign language and Foreign Culture. ADFL Bulletin. 33 ,no.2.
- Brown ,H.Douglas (1987) Principles of Language Learning and Teaching. New Jersey : prentice-Hall Inc.
- Byram ,M. and Fleming M.(1998) Language Learning in Intercultural perspective: Approaches through Drama and Ethnography.Cambridge :Cambridge university press.
- Byrne,Donn (1980) English Teaching Perspectives. London: Longman Group LTD.
- Chastain,Kenneth (1988) Developing Second Language Skills Theory and Practice .San Diego :Harcourt Brace Tovanovich ,inc.
- Clouston ,Michael Lessard (retrieved on 2007)" Towards an Understanding of Culture in L2/FL Education." WWW.iteslj.org/articles.
- Cullen ,Brain (retrieved on 2007)"Practical Techniques for Teaching Culture in the EFL Classroom.". WWW.iteslj.org/Techniques
- Dechert,Christiane and Kastner Peter (retrieved on 2007) "Understanding Students Interests and the Cultural Content of Text books," WWW.Jstor.org/jstor/gifcvtdir.

-
- Finocchiaro, Mary (1964) *English As A Second Language: From Theory To Practice* .New York :Simon and Schuster Inc.
 - goog Luck (retrieved on 2007). WWW.Lead.Webloog.com.
 - Hudson, R.A. (1980) *Sociolinguistics* .Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
 - Kaikkonen, Pauli (1997) Learning a Culture and a Foreign Language at school – aspects of intercultural learning .*Language learning Journal*, March 1997, No15, 47-51.
 - Kilickaya, Ferit (retrieved on 2007) "Guidelines to Evaluate Cultural Content in Textbooks" . WWW.metu.edu.tr/~kilickay.
 - Lado, Robert (1964) *Language Teaching* .New York :Mc Graw –Hill, Inc.
 - Meloni, Christine (retrieved on 2007). "Teaching Culture in the ESL/EFL Classroom" . WWW.eslamg.com/modules.
 - Muir, Peter (retrieved on 2007). "Toward Culture: some Basic Elements of Culture –based Instruction in China's high school" .*Sino –Us English Teaching* ,Apr.2007, volume 4, No.4.
 - Narsr, Raja (1972) *Teaching and Learning English* . London :law and Brydon Ltd.
 - Ojeda, Juan Ramon Guijarro (2001) *Training EfL Teachers to become Interculturally Competent* . Spain: University of Granada press.
 - Omaggio-Hadley, A.(1993) *Teaching Language in Context* Boston ,MA: Heinly and Heinle Publishers .
 - Palmer, R. Leonard (1972) *Descriptive and Comparative Linguistics, (A critical Introduction)*.London: Faber and Faber limited.
 - Peterson ,Elizabeth and Bronwyn Coltrane (retrieved on 2007) " "Culture in Second Language Teaching". WWW.Calorg/resources.
 - Research centre for language and Cultures Education at the University of South Australia " Report on Intercultural Language Learning. (retrieved on 2007) WWW.curriculum.edu.au.
 - Tang, Ramona (retrieved on 2007) " the place culture in the Foreign Language Classroom :A Reflection". WWW.iteslj.org/Articles.
 - Wardhagh, Ronald (1986) *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell Inc.
 - Yule, George (1996) *The Study of Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University press.