How to Integrate Culture in Second Language Education?

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Abstract
Whether culture should be taught as a separate subject is a controversial issue in the field second language education. Another equally important question is what the main aims of teaching culture are. Regarding the importance of teaching culture in second language classrooms, many scholars today believe that culture and language are inseparable and culture learning must be an integral part of language learning. The present study is to give an account of the important place that culture holds in foreign and second language education. It further elaborates on what culture is and different approaches to teaching it. Finally, some key and practical issues concerning integrating culture into second language classrooms will be addressed.
Key words: Second Language Education, Culture, Culture Teaching

1. What is culture?

Culture according to Brown (2007a, p.122) might be defined as: "… the ideas, customs, skills, arts, tools which characterize a given group of people in a given period of time." He (Brown, 2007b) further likens culture to the "glue" that binds a group of people together.

Seelye (1993) maintains that culture is a broad concept that embraces all aspects of human life. It includes everything people learn to do. It is everything humans have learned. Culture shapes our thoughts and actions, and often does so with a heavy hand.

2. Importance of culture

Although the theory of language teaching today has undergone drastic changes by acquiring a sociolinguistic aspect, but a well-designed socio-cultural emphasis is still missing.

Culture, as Vahdany (2005) mentions, "has always been touched but not hugged dearly enough: its relevance and contribution to language teaching has grown blurred and mystic." (p.93)

There is a lot of discussion among scholars e.g., Chastain (1988), and many others who strongly advocate the idea that the culture of a foreign language must be taught alongside the language itself. This idea has been actualized and reflected in a number of commercially developed textbooks such as Interchange, Top Notch, and Headway series, to name a few. However, the school textbooks used in some developing countries like Iran the role of target language culture has not fully been considered. For instance, the authors of Iranian school textbooks have tried to use only Iranian names, ceremonies, and the like. This decision might have been made on political grounds but it anyhow impedes the teaching of the target culture.

Brown (2007b) provided a series of principles for teaching a foreign language, one of which pertains to integrating culture into language classroom. He suggests that the language-culture connections must be highlighted by teaching not only the language but cultural customs, values, ways of thinking and acting.

Along the same line, Kumaravadivelu (2003) suggests raising cultural consciousness to shed light on classroom processes that acknowledge their power and knowledge structure.

Although some scholars call "culture" the fifth language skill, Kramsch (1993) goes even further by saying that:

> "Culture in language learning is not and 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 the ability to make sense of the world around them." (1993, p.1)

3. Why should we teach culture?

Kramsch (1993, p.3) identifies three ways how language and culture are bound together. First, language expresses cultural reality (with words people express facts and ideas but also reflect their attitudes). Second, language embodies cultural reality (people give meanings to their experience through the means of communication). Third, language symbolizes cultural reality (people view their language as a symbol of their social identity).

Tomalin and Stempleski (1993, pp.7-8) have enumerated the goals of cultural instruction. According to them, the teaching of culture should help students

- To develop an understanding of the fact that all people exhibit culturally-conditioned behaviors;
- To develop an understanding that social variables such as age, sex, social class, and place of residence influence the way in which people speak and behave;
- To become more aware of conventional behavior in common situations in the target culture;
- To increase their awareness of the cultural connotations of words and phrases in the target language;
- To develop the ability to evaluate and refine generalizations about the target culture, in terms of supporting evidence;
- To develop the necessary skills to locate and organize information about the target culture;
- To simulate students' intellectual curiosity about the target culture, and to encourage empathy towards its people.

Along the same vein, Stern (1992) indicates that the aim of teaching culture should be:

- Knowledge about the target culture.
- Awareness of its characteristics and of differences between the target culture and the learner's own country.
- A research-minded outlook.
- An emphasis on the understanding socio-cultural implications of language and language use
- Affective goals; interest, intellectual curiosity, and empathy.

CEF (2001) as cited in Saluveer (2004) offers a list of seven categories that are considered characteristic of a particular European society and its culture. These include everyday living (e.g., food and drink, holidays and working practices), living conditions (e.g., housing conditions), interpersonal relations (e.g., class structure, family structures and relations between generations), values, beliefs and attitudes (e.g., social class, wealth, regional cultures, minorities and arts), body language, social conventions (punctuality, dress and behavioral and conversational conventions) and ritual behaviors (e.g., birth, marriage and death).

4. Ways of teaching culture

Many researchers have put forward numerous approaches and techniques associated with the teaching of culture. However, we cannot jettison the fact that the choices we make depend on various factors, the most important ones being:

- The context in which the language is being taught (EFL or ESL);
- Learners' age and their language competency;
- The teacher.

Stern (1992, p.223) distinguishes between three situations in which the teaching of culture can take place:

1. Culture is taught in language courses, where students are physically and often psychologically removed from reality of the second culture. In this case, culture teaching provides background and context and helps the learners visualize the reality. This seems to be the most common situation for teaching culture in many countries where there is no access to the target language's native speakers.

2. Culture is taught in a situation, which prepares a student for a visit or work in a new environment. Even though the student is physically far away from the culture, he/she is psychologically better prepared and also more motivated to learn.

3. Culture is taught in the cultural setting (e.g., to immigrants, students studying in a target language community). In this case, students need more help to come to terms with the foreign environment to avoid cultural misunderstanding.

Each of the situations discussed above determines the goals and objectives of culture teaching and the topics to be covered throughout the course. For instance when the aim of the curriculum is to fill the students with some information about the new culture, the most suitable activities might be, reading and discussing literary and newspaper texts, watching videos and films. For the second and third situations, learners need different skills of cultural practices. These skills can be best developed through role plays, drama, and dialogues.

While devising and utilizing these activities, teachers have to take the students' age and language proficiency level into account. Byram (1997, pp.55-56) emphasizes that "teaching and learning aims which

include understanding, tolerance, empathy, and related notions presuppose a psychological readiness in learners which may be age-dependent, may be influenced by social factors, may be furthered or even inhibited by exposure to a foreign culture and language."

If the approaches and activities that the teacher chooses are to be successfully implemented, the teacher must have a thorough grasp of the context, the situation, and the people involves. Byram (1997, p.62) in this regard states that "the teacher should be aware of the nature of the challenge to learners' understanding of their culture and identity."

5. The most common approaches in teaching culture

Throughout the history of language teaching and learning, different approaches to teaching culture have come into vogue and gained importance. Among these approaches some have lost popularity; some others had been and remained dominant. These approaches can be classified in different ways. Saluveer (2004) has divided them into two broad categories: 1) those which focus only (or mostly) on the culture of the country whose language is studied (the mono-cultural approach) and 2) those which are based on comparing learners' own and the other culture (the comparative approach).

Risager (1998, pp.243-252) describes four approaches to the teaching of culture, namely, the intercultural approach, the multicultural approach, the trans-cultural approach, and the foreign-cultural approach.

The intercultural approach draws upon the idea that culture is best learned through comparison of the target and the learners' own culture. Though the main focus is on the target culture, the intercultural approach pinpoints the relations between the learners' own culture. This approach is aimed at developing learners' understanding of intercultural and communicative competences, enabling them to act as mediators between the two cultures. However, Risager (1998, p.246) considers this approach inadequate as it is "blind to the actual multicultural character of almost all existing countries or states" and suggests that teachers should use the multicultural approach.

The multicultural approach is based on the idea that in every country a number of sub-cultures exist within one culture. This approach not only includes a focus on the ethnic and linguistic diversity of the target country, but also on the learners' own culture. Similar to the intercultural approach, comparison is an important factor here. Risager (1998, p.246) stresses that a balanced and anti-racist view of cultures should be involved. This approach emphasizes the principle that cultures are not monolithic.

The third approach propounded by Risager is called the trans-cultural approach. The fundamental tenet behind this is that due to mass communication, World Wide Web, globalization, and the ensuing phenomena, the modern world cultures are intricately interwoven. Since a large number of people use the foreign languages as lingua-francas, this approaches considers the foreign language as an international language, so that it is not necessary at all to link the foreign language to any specific culture. However, Byram (1997, p.55) asserts that although it is possible to introduce topics which are of universal significance in all cultures, such an approach leaves learners without topics which are characteristic of a particular country, that is the ones which "characterize its uniqueness for the language learner".

Foreign-cultural approach is shaped upon the concept of a single culture and focuses on the target culture. It solely focuses on the target culture and neither takes the learners' own culture into consideration nor does it compare the two cultures together. What is important here is to develop the target language's communicative competence and cultural understanding. However, this approach has been criticized on the grounds   that it does not focus on the relations between the two cultures.

Stern (1992, p.223-232) presents eight approaches and techniques to teaching culture, which include:

- Creating an authentic classroom environment (techniques include, for example, displays and exhibitions of realia);
- Providing cultural information (for example, cultural aside, culture capsule and culture cluster);
- Cultural problem solving (for example, culture assimilator);
- Behavioral and affective aspects (for example drama and mini-drama);
- Cognitive approaches (for example student research);
- The role of literature and humanities (for example, literary reading and watching films);
- Real-life exposure to the target culture (for example, visits to the class by native speakers, pen-pals and visits to other countries);
- Making use of cultural community resources (for example, when a foreign language learning takes place in the target-language community, the everyday environment can be used as a resource).

6. Materials for teaching culture

If a language instructor desires to have an efficient integration of culture in language teaching, he ought to pool a lot of resources to make this desire come true. These resources include textbooks, surveys, songs, interviews, biographies, photos, literature, adverts, television programs, histories, music, films, maps and the Internet. The list can go on and on, but not all of them are at the teachers' disposal specifically in an EFL context.

7. Different types of textbooks

According to Saluveer (2004), most foreign language textbooks used in language classrooms fall into two categories: international/global textbooks and local/locally produced textbooks.

The first category covers materials provided for the international use. Such textbooks address issues which appeal to people from different cultural backgrounds and include topics that can be set anywhere.

The second type, local textbooks, includes materials which are consistent with the requirements of the national curriculum used by a particular country. Such textbooks usually foster learners' awareness of both their own cultural identity and the target culture.

Textbooks can be classified on the basis of their cultural component and how language and cultural syllabi correspond to each other, as enumerated below:

- Those which have a cultural syllabus but make no claims to be language coursebooks – offering themselves in a supplementary role;
- Those which aim to be fully-functioning language coursebooks but claim to have a serious cultural syllabus;
- Language coursebooks which make wide use of cultural input (but almost always have very little learner cultural output).

(Coursebook Reviews from a Cultural Angle cited in Saluveer (2004))

8. Conclusion

As mentioned above, culture (as many scholars call it "the fifth skill") should be an indispensable component of every single language curriculum. To do so, the teacher should set clear and realistic goals and consider an appropriate approach as well as suitable techniques and activities for teaching culture. Nevertheless, the teacher must bear in mind that the ultimate goal of teaching culture is to promote intercultural communication among the students.

Today, there is a unanimous agreement among scholars (Kramsch, 1993, Byram, 1997, Seelye, 1993, Chastain, 1988) that teachers should integrate language and culture into their classrooms and they should not perceive them as two separate entities. Language is seen as part of culture and culture as part of language, which is why they cannot be separated and should be taught together (Brown 2007a, p.177).

Although the importance of culture in language classes is known to any teacher and anyone who has something to do with language teaching, teaching of culture is somewhat limited and is not optimally fulfilled. The primary reason behind this is some practical issues including lack of time, the issues of designing a cultural syllabus and choosing appropriate techniques and, finally, the presentation of culture-related topics and activities in teaching materials.

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