Importance of Culture in Second Language Teaching and Learning

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Abstract
This present article tries to show the significance of cultural elements in language learning and teaching. It provides apparent impacts of cultural efficacy playing roles in language, thereby presenting practical life anecdotes from writer’s and others’ experiences. Further, the presenter exposers how cultural factors interplay in second language - where the present article illustrates some ways to ease cultural constraints. In the same vein, the present article sets some outlines how a teacher can teach elements of culture in the class, elaborating some of the advantages of it.

Key words:
Grammar translation: An approach of teaching in which a teacher teaches English language translating grammar. Strictly to put, it is a way of teaching language whatever is based on grammar.
Intercultural competency: Competence of language of the learner when he begins to adjust with target language
Formal culture: Cultural elements expressed in formal ways, for example in the speech of people
Deep culture: A culture which is expressed in deeper insights of the speaker, for example attitudes, manners and behaviors.
Low culture: Culture which is more individualistic relating to individual needs and goals as that of Western model
High culture: Culture which is something to do with collective responsibilities of the people like that of Eastern culture
Language awareness: Awareness of language in which the learner understands the form and theme as well as function
Communicative approach: Communicative approach means putting efforts in communication rather than rigid grammar or form of language
Participatory approach: An approach of language in which participation of students and teacher among themselves take part in different learning process
Collaborative approach: An approach of language in which all language learners and teacher collaborate in teaching and learning activities.
Cooperative approach: Cooperative approach means cooperation of all in language learning ensuring their cooperation in different activities in learning
Introduction:

Language teaching and learning has gone through substantial transformation over the years. There came a lot of pedagogical diversion prominently in the seventies and eighties, as many researches were carried in this domain, indicating that language should be taught in its real context. The grammar translation method came to be obsolete in the seventies and renewed emphasis was given in new approaches: communicative teaching, functional language teaching, collaborative teaching, cooperative teaching, and participatory teaching, and so on. This point of departure also led to make innovative ways as to incorporate language teaching to make effective and comprehensive. As a result of, culture came to be an integral part of language in teaching and learning. It has been long argued fact that culture and language in most of the cases, are embedded explicitly and implicitly. Explicitly in the fact that they can be reflected in language and human expression. And implicitly in the sense that most of the cultural elements get reflected in the manners and behavior of the speakers, which are not palpable in language utterances. M. Byram (1997) points out the fact that a student starts to interact with another culture from the very moment he enters the second language class because, as being an entity of different culture, he confronts with target culture and gradually moves towards easing his “inter cultural competence, “In this context, cultural context of language teaching may be helpful to take him out from the cultural contrasts, which to some extent, can make his language learning efforts more engaging and participatory. Similarly, Cates (2004) argues:

English education means much more than just the study of linguistic system; it can also be seen as “an international language of education with people from around the world and subject for “learning about” the world’s peoples, countries and problems.”

This view indicates that language study should not be simply confined to language or syntax. We really have to incorporate other aspects of the issue. Broadly to put, these issues could be culture, social values, human behaviors, and attitude.

Even though most educationists universally accept culture to be given priority in language teaching, it has, however, been debatable factor as to how to incorporate this in language class. C. Kramsch (1993) strongly points out cultural context and understanding as important tool to foster communicative competency. Similarly, many linguists have invariably seen cultural elements part of language which are not to be avoided, especially in the case of second language learning. Arguably, it can be plainly said that cultural factors can be essential ingredients of language teaching and learning without which proper outcome envisaged would not get fructified.

What is culture?

Before having some ideas how culture impacts on language learning, it will be beneficial to know about culture. Renowned anthropologist John H. Bodley (1994) sees:

“Culture as a socially transmitted set of common beliefs that include symbolic, mental, behavioral, and material aspects patterned to provide a model for behavior and create a common framework for human society (quoted in Jerrold Frank 3).
From Bodley’s viewpoint, we assume culture to be the larger paradigm where all human actions and interactions take place - whether they are physically reflected or emotionally and psychologically. This definition indicates culture not only those factors which are expressed in language. Rather, cultural elements mean those inherent things which sometimes cannot be expressed in formal language alone. So, learning language, therefore, does not mean apparent features of language explicitly available in syntax. Both teachers and students are required to know the underpinning elements of language that impact directly or indirectly in various processes of language learning.

Similarly, Brooks (1997) makes distinction of culture into two facets: namely “the formal culture” and “the deep culture”. By formal culture, he means the language posed in linguistic elements. However, by “deep culture”, he indicates patterns of social interactions, values, etiquettes and attitudes of the people, which are roughly expressed in broader realm of cultural contexts. To some extent, Boldley and Brooks coincide because the formal and the deep cultural is somewhat the broader realm. Specifically, it can be observed that an individual as a smaller magnitude of culture is set to confront with the larger culture.

Further to note, Edward T. Hall (1976) points out two aspects of culture. These impact language communications. These two impacts, according to him, are low context cultures and high context of cultures. Markedly, he defines the American culture as low context culture whereas the Asian, Middle East, and Latin American cultural contexts are high cultural contexts. He further elaborates that the low cultural contextual situation makes a learner to be direct, individualistic, goal oriented, self reliant, whereas the high cultural context makes one collective, indirect, cooperative. Lack of understanding of these two cultural contexts, the language communication will not be as plausible as it should be.

Hall’s interpretation seems rather innovative and applicable in language teaching and learning because learners of English come from high cultural contexts and confront people of low culture, i.e. American, English, Australian and Canadian ones. These two realms of culture can pose intercultural inefficacy until both of them ease their cultural shortcomings.

Some examples of cultural elements in language:

The teacher: How are you students?
Students: We are fine sir.
The teacher: Is everything all right?
Most of the students: Of course!
One of the students from the back: Sorry sir, I cut my finger yesterday morning!

On hearing this, the class burst into laughing.

This is one example how the innocent student failed to understand cultural context. He simply understood the teacher talking in pure linguistic context.

What is up?
What is going on?
How do you do?
These are not questions targeted to receive answers, but are the initiators to begin conversations. However, many second language learners, in the absence of cultural contextual knowledge, take them as questions and get mired into embarrassment.

On this backdrop, it is assumed that language is not only an utterance reflected in syntactical formation. For example, if a friend told to another friend, “I had nice party yesterday.” This sentence can be simple statement at the first glance, especially in the surface outlook. Underneath the surface, however, the speaker may have wanted to be polite or socially modest. Instead of being a simple statement, it can project a number of meanings in communicative purpose: courtesy, initiation of talk, being polite, or an expression that the speaker and listener got involved in the past time.

In language teaching and learning, cultural contexts are quite important because they, in most of the cases, try to reflect meaning embodied in culture. When a language is taught as second language, the learners lack most of the social context and use it just formulation of grammar. This, in some case, creates ambiguity and confusion because the speaker’s and the listener’s cultural contexts differ. Apparently, this can hinder proper communication. This is not the problem for the students alone, many English teachers, whose native language is not English, are stuffed with this deficiency. As a result, this hinders in holistic approach of teaching and learning.

Suppose, if a native speaker of English and his Asian friend are walking in the scorching heat. The native speaker asks this question to his Asian friend:

Native speaker: “Would you like to drink?”
Asian person: “No, thanks.”
Native person: “Just wait here. I drink a bottle of cola.”

Even though the Asian person might be thirsty or would like to drink, his culture does not allow him to accept the offer for the first time. Accepting an offer for the first time is culturally awkward in Asian context, whereas this is an acceptable in the native western contexts.

Besides, in western culture, direct eye contact, assertiveness, facial expressions are considered good in spoken form of language. Whereas these would be a bit awkward in eastern contexts, especially in Asian culture, namely in Korea and Japan. People don’t see direct face; they bow down; they try to be modest while talking and avoid their eye contact. We can take some other examples:

“You look pretty in your new dress.” The statement to a western girl would be open and direct expression. Her answer would be “Oh, really! But a girl in Asian country would respond probably:

“It is not beautiful. It is simple kind of dress. Thank you for your admiration.”

Another aspect of culture comes: What is the medium of language. Written language has less cultural contexts because it does not directly involve the listener, as compared to spoken form. Spoken language has a large domain of cultural contexts because speaker and listener must have to share cultural contexts otherwise there will be communication misfire. Before actual communication takes place, people initiate weather, and external surrounding so that the speaker and listener get involved into communication. The initiation of conversation,
namely the *phatic communion* comes to interplay which paves the positive environment for communication.

When I was in Korea during my residency writing programs, I met a number of writers. They used to say, "See this is my little car; see this is my little house; see this is my little sister; see this is my little flower vase and so on. In the beginning, I had hard time to actually understand the word little as they used. But later on, I got it that "little" meant an expression of politeness because they don't want to be so much possessive of their things and belongings.

**Cultural factor in language learning:**

We already know that culture is an unavoidable element of language. It is so in most of the cases of second language learning as compared to the learning of first language because the learners in second language confront cultural contrasts. When a learner enters learning a new language, he comes across with intercultural phenomena. D. Brown (1994) observed this as a process which undergoes four stages: a) excitement phase b) phase of cultural shock c) recovery phase and d) adaptation phase. These four factors pass through from one state to another until the learner becomes culturally knowledgeable.

**Intercultural proficiency:**

Intercultural proficiency means understanding of cultures when learners are learning the second language. This is a bit difficult task in the beginning because most of the learners seem to hesitate to learn others’ culture because they have no appeal in it. However, appealing materials and language teaching situations can help a lot. To make this task easy, a teacher can use some strategies like these:

- Finding relevant cultural elements in the text
- Finding their equivalent in the learners’ languages
- Making the list of these materials
- Dealing them in step by step

**How to teach cultural knowledge in language class?**

Many linguists believe that cultural knowledge cannot be imparted language class in customary teaching. For proper display of culture, the teachers should be more careful what cultural constraints are to be exposed in the class of language. As we commonly know that teaching cultural knowledge in language class cannot be remedial sort of teaching phenomenon. Rather, it is time consuming as well. But it does not mean that it cannot be taught. Experience language teachers and educationists unanimously point out that authentic materials, real and lively communication of the native speakers, films, novels, internet materials, and blogs of target language can gradually help the second language learners cope with cultural constraints. However, the teacher can make materials available as per level and need of the classes.

Social media, today, have greater roles in bridging cultural gaps as people from different culture and language converge on using English language, by creating new forums where they
can interact. This process helps them a lot in gaining cultural competence gradually. Besides being a common platform to express language of different cultures used in English, it can also help learners to subdue cultural constraints.

Generally, we don’t find any text book that has balanced approach of culture and language. It is therefore a pain on part of teachers to find materials. However in some cases, it is also considered good to ask students bring some materials in the classes and sort out those which are preferable. But materials should be authentic.

Why authentic materials are instrumental because they are rich in terms of wide ranges of teaching and learning materials of the target language. Obviously, they heighten cultural awareness of the students step by step. The teachers can make use of such materials for all the effective language learning: ranging from writing, speaking, interacting, listening, reading and discussions, group and pair works, collaborative learning and so on. In addition to this exposure, the teachers should adopt some other approaches of teaching and learning as given below:

**Communicative approach of teaching and learning** In this, the teacher makes an environment for communication in the class, without worrying of grammar structure. It is to persuade the students to make as many as they communicate taking real situations. This can have some immediate benefits: one, the learner can harness confidence, and the another they can come out from the cultural constraints.

**Participatory approach of teaching and learning** It is good to participate all the students, no matter they may have weak competence of language learning. The teacher should ensure their participation to take part most of the culturally rich teaching and learning materials. Gradually, it can help them come out from the rigid cultural context through their participation with the speakers of native language.

**Collaborative approach of teaching and learning** Collaboration means making collaboration with the students at the time of learning and openly sharing of ideas and making the class collaborative. Unlike teacher’s control, collaborative teaching demands collaborating among students in different learning stages and make their feedbacks. This collaborative teaching makes every student to collaborative take part. As a result, this helps being the class more interactive. In such class, students of different interest and culture come to learn in group, paired reading, and other activities, thereby reducing cultural shock.

**Cooperative approach of teaching and learning** Cooperative teaching and learning has been quite resourceful in allowing students to take part in cooperative tasks. In this, all the students take part in their cooperative part and learn though their sustained enhancement of understanding of language. And tolerance in language learning. So, this can be an added advantage for the learners to have some grounds for cultural understanding of culture.

**Advantages of cultural knowledge in language learning:**

Cultural knowledge is quite important in language learning. In the recent time, many language teachers are laying emphasis on cultural literacy and linguistic fluency. This is one of the crucial aspects of teaching learning in the wake of technological explosion and globalization which is impacting most of the people. Many linguists see this as an important drive towards gaining the deeper understanding of language because, we already know, culture can be in objective form, artifacts, human attitudes, social and cultural behaviors of the people and so
From this perspective, the linguists find several of the benefits. One of the benefits of the language awareness according to Carter (2003) is understanding comprehensive understanding of language as he defines language awareness as “the development in learners of an enhanced consciousness and sensitivity to the forms and functions of language.” (64)

To elaborate, the awareness of this kind is not only the awareness of formative aspect of the language. Rather, it is one of the thematic aspects which makes a learner to go to the deeper level, in Chomsky’s term, the “deeper structure” of the language. If we precisely elaborate the importance of cultural teaching, we can find the following advantages:

- Language awareness
- Cultural adjustment
- Contextual understanding of target language
- Eradication of fossilization of errors
- Knowledge of humanistic approach of learning
- Understanding grammar gap in language

Conclusion:

Language alone cannot serve communicative purpose – whether it is written or spoken. For appropriate use of language, we need to have a balanced approach of culture so that the second language learner of English may make meaningful communication. Grammar, though the basic feature of communication, becomes incomprehensive when it has to enlist cultural elements. Taking this into consideration, cultural impact of language is envisaged in language teaching in the modern time.

Works Cited:


