

CULTURE TEACHING IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSES

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To begin with, the relationship between language and culture has occupied many linguists and philosophers since ancient times. In order to investigate this relationship, it is important to gain insight into what they refer to. On the one hand, according to Duranti, culture is... something learned, transmitted, passed down, from one generation to the next, through human actions, often in the form of face-to-face interaction, and, of course, through linguistic communication (Duranti, 1997:24).

Given this definition, it seems that language is considered as a prominent subpart of culture as it plays a major role within it. On the other hand, language is a social institution, both shaping and shaped by society at large or in particular the “cultural niches” in which it plays an important role (Armour-Thomas & Gopaul-McNicol, 1998). In the light of this definition, on its part, language can be understood as being a cultural practice that is highly related to culture. Hence, one can easily draw the conclusion that language is related to culture because it conveys the ideas of a particular culture and represents what a particular group experiences.

Culture in second language teaching and learning has always been a debatable issue in the field of applied linguistics. In the history of teaching culture, different approaches can be noticed. These approaches are divided into two: “the monocultural approach” which focuses on the culture whose language is studied, and “the comparative approach” which is built upon comparing the learners’ own and the other culture (Bada, 2000). Moreover, many scholars and linguists, such as Fairclough (1989), Durkeim (1997), Kramsh (1993), and others, have addressed this issue since culture is undoubtedly an essential part of foreign language teaching. Thus, the present essay intends to explore how culture holds an important place in language education. Its first part is devoted to discussing the relationship between language and culture. The second one highlights the importance of integrating culture in language teaching and learning. Finally, the third part suggests some tips of integrating culture in the process of language learning.

As a matter of fact, language is always perceived as a verbal expression of culture, which is confirmed by Fairclough. He points out that language is not an “autonomous construct”; however, it is a social practice both creating and created by “the structures and forces of the social institutions within which we live and function” (Fairclough, 1989). This confirms that language is also a means through which people belonging to a particular society express their beliefs, customs, and practices. Indeed, they may reveal them through verbal communication, via signs and symbols, or rather via hand or body gestures. Sapir has also been concerned with this issue as

he maintains that language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas. He also believes that language is a part of culture and a part of human behaviour (Sapir, 1921). After all, language remains one of the prominent pillars of culture. Moreover, language does not only shape the culture, but it also determines people's identity. That is how language is related to culture, which indicates that it is quite important to integrate culture within the process of teaching a language.

In addition, what is believed by Durkheim and Politzer is once again confirmed by Seelye in the following quote: "All students will develop the cultural understanding, attitudes, and performance skills needed to function appropriately within a segment of another society and to communicate with people socialized in that culture" (Seelye, 1974: 188). One can deduce that Seelye conveys through this quote that learners of a language should be taught how to use language within a particular speech community. That is to say that teaching culture to language learners makes intercultural communication and understanding easier for them.

Integrating culture in language teaching is, indeed, of a prime importance. In fact, the sociologist Durkheim gives much importance to teaching children language along with showing them the possible circumstances under which it can be used (Durkheim, 1997, as cited in Thanasoulas, 2001) Furthermore, Politzer (1959) believes that it is important to teach language in connection to culture; otherwise, students would be taught only meaningless symbols. That is to say that without the study of culture, foreign language instruction is inaccurate and incomplete (*ibid*). For foreign language students, language study seems meaningless if they have no idea about the people who speak it or the country in which it is spoken. That is why language teaching should be more than teaching syntax, lexicon grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. In essence, it should be the process of achieving the ability to communicate with people of other cultures.

Moreover, teaching culture through language helps second language learners to understand native speakers and the proper way to express themselves in certain situations and at the same time to avoid the possibility of conveying wrong messages (Hinkel, 1999). Indeed, language learners need to be aware of the culturally appropriate ways of addressing people, making requests, or expressing apology...etc. Language learners should also be taught how such speech acts differ from one culture to another and from a social context to another, and what can be considered appropriate in their culture, may be considered rude in another. (*ibid*) This kind of lesson can be quite useful as it helps language learners achieve an effective and successful communication with people who belong to a different society.

In fact, generally speaking, culture is taught implicitly, imbedded in the linguistic forms that students are learning. This is demonstrated through the following quote:

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 least⁵, making evident the limitations of their hard-won communicative

competence, challenging their ability to make sense of the world around them (Kramsh, 1993:11).

Teaching culture through language is also important as it teaches learners how to change attitudes towards others' cultures. Indeed, students who live in monolingual and monocultural societies may become culture-bound individuals. Consequently, they may make inappropriate value judgments and hold negative attitudes toward the language they are learning (Peck, 1984). This can also make them consider the foreign peoples whose language they are learning as lacking moral values. Therefore, the study of different cultures helps language learners to recognize the similarities and differences in the life of various cultural groups (Robinson, 1981). It also aids them to understand, respect, and be tolerant with other peoples and their ways of life. More than that, teaching language learners about cultures develops their ability to refine generalizations about the target culture and reject stereotypes about that culture (Thanasoulas, 2001). So, as integrating culture in language is so important, one can wonder about the efficient ways and materials through which a teacher can teach culture to language learners.

In order to teach cultural aspects to students indirectly, teachers employ several ways. One of these is using media sources including films, news broadcasts, and television shows. The sources help teachers create with their students a kind of discussion about cultural traditions of music, food, and rituals for instance. This discussion can also revolve around nonverbal communication, as it is conventional in every society (Peterson & Coltrane, 2003). Literary texts are another way of integrating culture in language classes. In fact, they are full of cultural information and depict to students how people of another culture live and how they interact with each other. What is more special about literary texts is the fact that they contain cultural proverbs and idioms that vary from one society to another. However, though discussions about media and literary texts can be quite useful, they should be involved in activities. These activities can include games, songs, short plays, or even meeting people from foreign countries (ibid).

Overall, the first part of this essay explains the relationship between language and culture. This relationship is manifested in how language is one of the important elements of culture, and how the latter is expressed through language. The second part deals with the importance of integrating culture in language teaching and learning. First, it is important since it helps students achieve an effective communication. Second, it is important as it makes it easier for them to change attitudes towards other cultures. Concerning the last part, it addresses efficient ways of integrating culture in language teaching. These ways can be implicit during teaching linguistic forms while they can be explicit through cultural discussions and activities.

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