The Importance of Teaching Culture in the Foreign Language Classroom

By:
Dr. Salwa F. Ben Amer
(PhD in Language Education)
Email. drsalwabenamer@gmail.com

Abstract:

''Language is not only the product of culture, but also is the symbol of culture'' (Gleason, 1961). Understanding the nature of the relationship between language and culture is fundamental matter in language teaching. In order to interpret language within a cultural framework, teaching culture should be at the heart of teaching a foreign language. This is because the essential aim of teaching a foreign language is achieving high levels of intercultural communicative competence. In doing so, integration between grammar, phonology, lexis and culture should be obtained. This paper addresses the concepts of language and culture while examining the relationship between them. In addition, it covers some disciplines which focus on the interaction of language and culture such as sociolinguistics and ethnolinguistics. After that, the paper suggests some teaching strategies to enable learners to bridge the culture gap, and hence, achieve a high standard in foreign language acquisition.

المستخلص:

اللغة ليست فقط نتاج الثقافة، بل هي أيضًا رمز الثقافة ففهم طبيعة العلاقة بين اللغة والثقافة أمر أساسي في تدريس اللغة. ومن أجل تفسير اللغة في إطار ثقافي، يجب أن يكون تدريس الثقافة هو محور تدريس أي لغة أجنبية. وذلك لأن الهدف الأساسي لتعليم لغة أجنبية هو تحقيق مستويات عالية من الكفاءة التواصلية بين الثقافات. وعند القيام بذلك، يجب الحصول على التكامل بين قواعد اللغة وعلم الأصوات والمعني والثقافة. وتتناول هذه الورقة مفاهيم اللغة والثقافة عند دراسة العلاقة بينهما. بالإضافة إلى ذلك ، فإنها تغطي بعض التخصصات التي تركز على تفاعل اللغة والثقافة مثل علم اللغة الاجتماعي وعلم اللغة الإثني. وتقترح هذه الورقة أيضا بعض استراتيجيات التدريس لتمكن المتعلمين من سد الفجوة الثقافية، وبالتالي تحقيق مستوى عال في اكتساب اللغة الأجنبية.

Introduction

Teaching culture should be an essential part of teaching a foreign language, it is impossible to teach a language without its culture as was explained by Stern (1992, p.205) "culture is the necessary context for language use". Therefore, there have been concerns among foreign language educators throughout history about understanding the logical connection between language and culture and whether the culture of targeted language should be integrated within language teaching.
This paper will introduce some concepts of language and culture and display a historical view of the relationship between them, while analyzing the impact of culture on language skills acquisition. In doing so, it will cover some possible ways to introduce culture into language teaching in classroom settings.

Finally the paper aims to increase awareness among foreign language teachers about some difficulties that their students may face due to cultural differences, and how to narrow these discrepancies to enable students to use the language for communication more effectively.

Culture and Language

Traditionally, language was viewed as a code made up of words and a series of rules connecting words together. However, nowadays this concept is considered out-dated, because it only conveys a narrow understanding of language while not taking into account the complexity involved in using language for communication. This has been demonstrated clearly by Wardhaugh (2000, p.2 cited in Elmes, 2013) who defines language as a knowledge of rules and principles of saying and doing things with sounds, words, and sentences rather than just knowledge of words and sentences . Whereas Bakhtin (1981, p 294) explained language as

> not a natural medium that passes freely and easily
> into private property of the speaker's intentions; it
> is overpopulated with the intentions of others.
> Expropriating it, forcing it to submit to one's own
> intentions and accents, is a difficult and complicated
> process.

This means the usage of language has extended beyond just a way of communication, but also it has a role in maintaining social relationships, which is pivotal since humans are sociable creatures. Language has been viewed by some scholars as a divine gift of God that distinguishes human beings from animals, whereby humans use the language as collection of words that are connected

together to form sentences. Each sentence has a meaning and identity to offer a highly systematic order from which we get the overall meaning.

On the other hand, Moran (2001, p.25-26) defines culture as 'a cultural phenomenon'—"A cultural phenomenon involves tangible forms or structures (products) that individual members of the culture (persons) use in various interactions (practices) in specific social circumstances and groups (communities) in ways that reflect their values, attitudes and beliefs (perspective)". All of these definitions emphasize that culture is the driving factor that shapes humans' life and determines who we are.

Another definition of culture was attempted by John Lyons (1981, p,301-302) "Culture maybe described technically as acquired knowledge .i.e. as the knowledge that someone has by virtue of his being a member of a particular society". When it comes to analyzing the culture, 3P approach can be used as demonstrated by (Frank, 2013) who explained the 3 P's as perspectives (people's thought, feel and value) , practices (ways of interactions and communication within community) and products (which includes things that people create and transmit to the younger generation, for example, technology , music , art , food and literature.

The Interrelationship between language and culture

The history of teaching culture

In the past, language learning was limited to the traditional ways of teaching through textbooks. Students were getting informed with the target culture through literature, such as novels or poems without combining between language and culture. Cultural awareness began in the 1960s and 1970s. Brooks asserts the importance of culture, not in relation to literature, but in the means of language learning. Surely, Brooks made progress in the way for modern teaching of culture nowadays. During the 20th century, culture had always been moved from its unity with literature to an equal position in relation to language to achieve complete foreign language acquisition.

The connection between language and culture, incorporating culture into language teaching, has always been a concern for foreign language educators. They advised learners of the target language to understand and learn about people who speak the language. In addition, acquiring a new language means more than just manipulation of syntax and lexicon. Language is not a collection of arbitrary linguistic forms applied to a cultural reality that can be found outside of language,

in the real world. Without language and other symbolic systems, the habits, beliefs, institutions, and monuments that we call culture would be just observable realities, not cultural phenomena. To become culture, they have to have meaning. It's the meaning that we give to foods, gardens and ways of life that constitute culture. (Kramsch 2013).

It is important to assimilate that Culture teaching within language teaching increases students' awareness, and develops their curiosity towards the target culture, which helps students to make comparisons among cultures. In regards to communication, both language and culture play a role in communication, where both carry meanings. However, on the one hand, language carries syntactic, semantic and pragmatic meanings for language users to communicate; while, on the other hand, culture carries meanings that are expressed through patterns of behavior.

When the culture of the target language is to be incorporated into the target language, teaching has become subject of rapid change throughout language teaching history. Holmes (2001, p.337), asserts that "cultural environment in which it develops influences the vocabulary and grammar of language and also influences our perceptions, values, beliefs, and attitudes". In addition, learning culture would help learners relate the abstract sounds and forms of a language to real people and places (Chastain, 1971).

Sun (2013) describes language as a primary vehicle by which a culture emanates its beliefs, values and norms. Similarly, language is influenced by culture – "If there is no culture, language will be like water without a source or a tree without roots" Sun (2013, p.371). Thus, the connection between language and culture must be considered in foreign language teaching because the aim is to learn the customs and traditions of the speech community, and to become competent in communication with speakers of the foreign language (Sun, 2013).

In conclusion, the language culture link is important in foreign language education because culture plays an essential role in helping foreign learners to be proficient in the target language.

Cultural influence on foreign language teaching

As Cook (2003, p.52) points out:

> "The successful interpretation of language (spoken or written in context depends upon the degree to which the participants

share conventions and procedures, including those related to paralanguage. Such as conventions and procedures, together with the values and beliefs behind then, are elements of cultural background knowledge".

In order to understand the importance of including the culture in the process of language teaching and to what extent cultural knowledge influences language learning, it is vital to demonstrate the functions performed by the skills of language learning and teaching which work together to create meaningful communication among individuals.

Cultural Influence on Reading

The reading process is a complex procedure for any written material, since readers most decode, recognize, analyze, judge, infer and interpret all of the given written material. Actually, in the reading comprehension process, there will be an interaction between the writer's language and the reader's background knowledge. (Anderson, 1997, p.369).

In reading comprehension, the reader's linguistic elements are very important, but reading between the lines needs some knowledge about the culture, to enable fully understanding the words within the context.

Reading helps in expanding the vocabulary bank and registers them in mind for later use .So, having good reading skills enable the individual to understand written works more efficiently and within a short period of time. Moreover, linguistic knowledge affects one's reading with cultural factors play an essential role in reading process. Most of miscommunications are not only from the language knowledge, but also from the cultural differences between the target language and the mother tongue. These differences can be found in background information, words, sentences and text structure.

Culture Influence on Listening

Nunan (1998, p.1) stated that "listening is the basic skill in language learning. Without listening skill, learners will never learn to communicate effectively. In fact over 50% of the time that students spend functioning in a foreign language will be devoted to listening". This implicates that listening is an active process in communication that can help in understanding the connotation of the words beyond their simple meaning.

When we are listening to the events which sound familiar, it is easier to guess the meaning of unknown words from the context, whereas, it will be difficult to understand these unknown words if the material we are listening to are closely related to the culture that we are not familiar with. Therefore, having background cultural knowledge is pivotal for any kind of listening material.

In order for language learners, to improve their listening comprehension, they should have greater exposure and understanding about the targeted culture.

In a word, the cultural background knowledge can help the learners to actively listen and understand the spoken language within the context without knowing each individual word. This again proves why we should appreciate the importance of culture knowledge in foreign language learning and teaching.

Cultural Influence on Speaking

Johnson (1996, p.55) considers speaking as the ‘‘high element of doing various things at the same time ’’ which indicates that speaking is a complex process that starts from the mechanical production of the voice to the production of speech that is appropriate in time and place. Therefore, in order to speak competently, a combination of linguistic knowledge, core speaking skill, and communication strategies, is needed to produce fluent and intelligible speech (Goh and Burns 2012).

The ability of speaking is not only concerned with pronunciation or intonation, but is also concerned with understanding the cultural background knowledge f the target language. So teachers and educators should emphasize the practical use of the language from the daily life using proper sentences in proper contexts.

It is essential to know that the lack of related cultural background knowledge causes misunderstanding between speakers. So, during language speaking sessions, teachers should emphasize the practical use of the language using material from the daily life.

Disciplines Studying Interaction of Language and Culture

The increasing awareness of the importance of language and culture interaction encouraged the emerge of humanitarian disciplines which in one way or another combining the two essential components: language and culture. Among these disciplines that study this interaction are: Ethnolinguistics and Sociolinguistics.

Ethnolinguistics (sometimes called Cultural Linguistics)

It is a field of linguistics, which was widely developed in the American linguistic environment, which studies the means of interaction between language and culture. It studies how ethnic groups perceive the world and how culture of various ethnic groups are reflected in a language. It studies the way that perception and conceptualization influences language learning and shows how this can be linked to different cultures and societies (Heine and Bernd, 1997). It is a complex science which studies the interaction of linguistic, ethno-cultural and ethno-psychological factors in the functioning and development of the language.

When people are exposed to a foreign language within the concept of culture, they react in different ways. Some will accept this culture and speak its language fluently and participate in its culture naturally. These people are recognized to have high self-identity that can adapt culturally, but at the same time can preserve a strong framework of personal values that give them the ability to integrate the new cultural knowledge into their existing one. In this situation, identity can play an important role in limiting negative cross-linguistic influence on someone's mind. On the other hand, other group of people find the situation very difficult and their views towards culture is correlated with the feeling of being estranged and being a traitor to their identity. Therefore, it is crucial to emphasize that flexible cultural and linguistic identity can play an important role in limiting negative cross-linguistic influence on someone's mother tongue.

Sociolinguistics

Sociolinguistics is a developing branch of linguistics that analyzes the effects of social and cultural factors upon language patterns within a speech community. The knowledge of social factors that affect targeted language is important to avoid. These factors are shown by (Gumperz, 2008) when he defined sociolinguistics as "the descriptive study of the effect of all aspects of society including cultural norms, expectations, and context, on the way language is used. And society's effect on language". Hence, one may produces perfectly grammatical sentences yet the context or the overall meaning may be viewed as inappropriate. Therefore, cultural knowledge, which is defined as knowledge of ideas and beliefs shared by members of a community and transmitted through language, would be a solution to this sort of misunderstanding. (Noguchi, 1987). Thus, language is not just a group of letters and characters to be learnt, but it is what people do in their daily lives and what

they use to express, create and interpret meanings while establishing social and interpersonal relations.

This branch of linguistics focuses on how we speak in different social contexts, and how we may use specific functions of language to convey social meaning or aspects of our identity. In the sociolinguistic perspective, language is seen as a means of interaction in human society. Therefore, all information regarding sociolinguistics was provided by experts, according to language relations with the activities of social aspects.

Introducing Culture in the Language Teaching Classroom

Implications for Language Teaching and the Intercultural Dimension

Kramsch (1993, p.1) discussed how culture integrated into language learning.

> "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"

Knowledge of culture is important for facilitating communication with people. Therefore, language learners need to broaden their cultural knowledge about the targeted language and this can be achieved if the culture was introduced into their study curriculum. Hence, this will enable the students to acquire cultural knowledge while learning the language which will have positive outcome in terms of using the language more competently. In addition, it is important to emphasize that learning the culture is more than just knowing about another culture, but it involves understanding how one's own culture shapes perception of oneself, the world, and the relationship with others. This means learners of foreign language need to become familiar with how they can personally engage with linguistic and cultural diversity. Otherwise, they may use the language inappropriately within the wrong cultural context, which apparently contraindicates with the purpose of learning a language. In doing so, language educators must realize that understanding the exact meaning of the word or sentence is subjected to interpretation which is bound to the cultural context in which it is placed. This has

been manifested by Valdes (1986) who concluded that understanding cultural similarities and contrasts between the native and target languages is as useful as knowing the linguistic similarities and contrasts between both languages when it comes to acquiring language skills. This indicates the need for effective intercultural learning environment with students' engagements at the heart of the process.

Practical Approaches to Introduce Culture in Language Classroom

Language teachers should be trained to formulate concrete objectives and develop specific cultural activities according to their objectives and offer the best materials for all skills including culture. Peterson and Coltrane (2003) state that teaching materials can simulate cultural environment for language learners to experience. These materials may include news broadcasts, television, films, printed materials such as magazines, photographs, travel broachers etc. The information acquired from these sources can be accommodated to the proficiency level of the learners. Also, learners can be given different tasks to fulfill while watching, listening or reading such as completing a diagram or outlines, or discussions of cultural norms and values of the target language community should follow, which may include non-verbal behaviors such as eye contact or mimicry. It means learners should be encouraged to describe the observed behaviors using strategies for communication in the target language.

Strategies for Teaching a Foreign Language within a Cultural Framework

Understanding the relationship between culture and language helps in developing instructional strategies for teaching foreign languages. Foreign language learning involves a number of different dimensions, including grammatical competence, communicative competence, language proficiency, and cultural understanding (Thanasoulas, 2001). There are six strategies to incorporate cultural elements into foreign language classrooms and they are described as below.

Strategy 1. Provide culturally learning materials

This strategy is concerned with the use of appropriate materials to help students engage in real cultural experiences. Teachers should adapt the use of these material to suit the learners' level. The materials may include newspapers, magazines, television shows, Web sites, films, songs, news broadcasts, etc. Teachers can also add a translation or chart diagram or outlines to complete while listening or watching a video.

Strategy 2. Using common proverbs as a transferred tool

Proverbs are simple but concrete old sayings that sometimes express truth, which comes with experience (Ciccarelli, 1996). Proverbs tend to be short, and their sentences don't require a lot of time to understand linguistically. What is more important, is the discussion in class about how the proverb might be important in the targeted culture and how might can be used and what circumstances are used. Using proverbs actually, is a great opportunity for students to reflect on cultural similarities and differences and discover the values which are illustrated in the proverbs of both the target culture and native one.

Strategy 3. Apply the role play as a sociocultural approach

According to Savingnon (1997), sociocultural strategies can be seen as one of the most effective ways for learners to achieve sociocultural and communicative competence. Tomalim and Stempleski (1993) pointed out that role-play activities can examine cultural behavior and patterns of communication. This indicates that role-play is a useful instructional techniques in a sociocultural approach. In the context of the foreign language classroom, the sociocultural approach can be practiced through social activities which stimulate the cultural context of language. This approach maintains that language can be acquired by allowing the students to socialize with other learners as a kind of interaction within the context of the target language.

Strategy 4. Encourage students search through cultural capsules

This strategy is one of the best-established and best-known methods for teaching culture (Jerrilou, 1979). The concept of cultural capsules was developed by Taylor and Sorenson in 1961, who described it as a brief description of some aspects of the target culture with contrasting information from the students. Students, here, can be presented with objects or images from the target language then they are responsible for finding information about them by conducting research or by giving them clues to investigate. Then they write a short summary to present their work to the class.

Strategy 5. View students as cultural resources

Teachers can invite exchange students into the classroom as expert sources to present aspects of their cultures. In this learning activity, students learn the diversity of cultures and make connection between their native culture and target culture through this presentation.

Strategy 6. Use computer technology to help students gain cultural information

Many Educators (Salaberry, 1999; Rost, 2002) advise that computer technology with its attached language learning programs has advantages for foreign language and cultural learning. It can provide learners with more independence in classrooms and they can work at any time of the day. The use of computer technology can provide multicultural interactivities without students having to come to the classroom. Learners can find resources written in the target language about countries' cultures. Those websites cover many topics about health, sports, entertainment, news, etc. These websites provide various cultural learning opportunities for students to achieve their cultural understanding.

Conclusion

For achieving true linguistic comprehension, culture and language should be learned together, as this has been shown to have a profound effect on language skills acquisition. Foreign culture teaching should move from passing information of target cultures to teaching the language within the context of culture, to give meanings to the language and increase cultural awareness among the language learners.

This paper is a modest attempt to prove that cultural awareness will increase learners' language skills and address the opportunities where students can practice these skills with educators being the providers for these opportunities. The paper also highlights that assimilation of the relationship between language and culture can be a good starting point for any approach to language education in order to help learners to achieve high competence in the target language. In addition, the relationship between language and culture leads to the emergence of many disciplines such as Ethnolinguistics and Sociolinguistics. Also, the understanding of this relationship between culture and linguistics helps in developing some instructional strategies for teaching foreign languages. Finally, it is important to realize that the implications for language teaching and strategies are wide-ranging and understanding them is necessary to achieve appropriate use of language and increase cultural awareness.

References:

- Anderson, RC. (1997) Frame works for comprehension discourse [J]. *American Education Research Journal*, 14: 369.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail M. (1981). *The Dialogic Imagination: four Essays.* Ed. By M.Holqui Translated by Emerson, M. Holguist. Austin: University of Texas press.

- Brooks, N. (1968) " Teaching culture in the Foreign Language Classroom. " *Foreign Language Annals,* 1,204-217.
- Chastain, K. (1971) *the Development of Modern Language Skills: Theory to Practice.*
- Ciccarelli, A. (1996) Teaching Culture through Language: Suggestions for the Itallian Language class. Italica, 73 (4).
- Cook.G. (2003) *Applied linguistics.* Oxford : Oxford University Press.
- Elmes, D (2013) *the relationship between language and culture. National Institute of Fitness and Sports in Konoya*. International Exchange and Language Education Center.
- Frank, Jerrold. (2013). Raising Cultural Awareness in the English Language Classroom. *English Teaching Forum* 51. 4 (2013).
- Gleason, H. S. J r. (1961) *an Introduction to Descriptive Linguistics.* New Delhi: Oxford and I B H publishing company.
- Goh, c.c. M, & Burns, A. (2012) *Teaching Speaking: A holistic approach*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Gumperz, John J; Cook Gumperz, Jenny (2008) Studying Language, Culture, and Society. Sociolinguistics or Linguistic anthropology? *Journal of sociolinguistics.* 12 (4)
- Heine, Bernd (1997) *Cognitive Foundations of Grammar*. Oxford New York: Oxford University Press.
- Holmes, J. (2001). *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics* (2nd ed.). Essex, U.K Longman Group.
- Jerrilou, J. (1979) *Living Language*: USA Culture Capsules for ESL Students: dialogs on life in the United States for students of English as a foreign language. Rowley, MA: Newbury House Publisher.
- John Lyons, (1981). *Language and Linguistics*, p.301-302 by Cambridge University Press.
- Johnson, K. (1996). *Language Teaching and Skills Learning*. Oxford: Black well.
- Kramsch, Claire, (1993). *Context and Culture in Language Teaching.* Oxford : Oxford University Press.
- Kramsch, Claire, (2013). Culture in Foreign Language Teaching. *Iran Journal of Language Teaching Research* 1 (1): 57- 78.
- Maslova, V.A. (2001) Linguokulturologiya Moscow: Akademiya. [Linguoculturology] (Rus).
- Moran, P.R. (2001). *Teaching Culture : Perspective in Practice* Ontario, Canada Heinle & Heinle.
- Noguchi, R. R. (1987). The dynamics of rule conflict in English and Japanese Conversation. *International Review of Applied Linguistics*, 15, 15 – 24.
- Nunan, D. (1998) Approaches to Teaching Listening in Language Classroom. In Proceedings of the 1997 Korea TESOL conference.
- Peterson, Elizabeth. Coltrane m Bronwyn. (2003). Culture in Second Language Teaching. *Eric Clearing House on Languages and Linguistics.*
- Rost, M. (2002). *New Technology in Language Education*: Opportunities for Professional Growth. Retrieved October 12, 2006.

- Salaberry, R. (1999). Call in the year 2000 still developing the research agenda. *Language Learning and Technology* 3/1: 104 – 107.
- Savingnon, S (1997). *Communicative Competence: The Theory and Practice* (6th ed). N. Y.: McGraw Hill.
- Stern, H.H. (1992). *Issues and Options in Language Teaching*. Oxford Oxford University Press.
- Sun, Li. (2013) *Culture Teaching in Foreign Languages Teaching*. Theory and Practice in Language Studies 3.2.
- Taylor, H.D. & Sorenson, J.L. (1961). Culture Capsules. Modern Language Jounal 45: 350-354.
- Thanasoulas, Dimitrios. (2001). The Importance of Teaching Culture in the Foreign Language Classroom. *Radical Pedagogy* 3.3: n, page.
- Tomalim, B, & Stempleski, S. (1993). *Cultural Awareness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Valdes, J. M. (1986) *Culture Bound: Bridging the Cultural Gap Language Teaching* Cambridge University Press.
- Wardhaugh, (2000) p.2 cited in Elmmes 2013.