

Importance of Socio-Cultural Awareness in Foreign Language Learning

Sedigheh Haghjou, M. A.

Department of English Language and Literature, Tabriz University, Tabriz, Iran

Abstract: *Incorporating socio-cultural norms and awareness into foreign language classes can enhance proficiency of the language learners in utilizing the language appropriate to the context. Through the study of related journals, books, and sites, the author applied descriptive-analytical method to consider ways of incorporating required socio-cultural norms into the class. Also, Critical Linguistics was applied to provide critical awareness of socio-cultural norms. It shows that teaching of a foreign language isn't to provide students with syntactic structures or lexis, but should mainly concentrate on the ways of incorporating cultural elements which are inseparable from language. So the author discloses the fact that to communicate effectively in foreign language classes requires more than just linguistic competence and that is socio-cultural competence which creates understanding and respect to divergent culture and promotes accuracy and fluency in classes. The author suggests that if language teachers aim to teach cultural aspect of the target language to create empathy with the socio-cultural norms of the community and provide consciousness of the native language norms, language learning can be facilitated very easily.*

Keywords: *Socio-cultural awareness, Language learning and teaching*

1. Introduction

The author tries to shed light on the ways of incorporating socio-cultural norms of the target language community into the language learning classes, but with critical awareness. This study can be meaningful and interesting when it is done in the context of Iran and over the people of West Azerbaijan, for example, where native culture and language are totally different from target community's culture and language. The contributions are interesting because language learners, through being exposed to authentic experience and socio-cultural insights, may get sociocultural inputs. Also, providing language learners with socio-cultural norms offers understandings into various verbal and non-verbal communications typical of the target culture through using certain expressions or gestures naturally in language learning classes. Of course, there are moments that teachers should get the chance to teach spontaneously.

The author clarifies the fact there is another aspect of understanding socio-cultural norms. This involves ways of developing socio-cultural awareness and skill. This is how you create socio-

cultural consciousness, what requirements you need to meet to cope successfully with other cultures, and how to communicate successfully with people from other communities. According to Tomalin (2008), culture teaching in language teaching classes should include:

1. Socio-cultural background: here language is considered as institution which conveys socio cultural information, and in language classes knowledge of culture's institutions should be provided.
2. Socio-cultural values: it includes the ways people conceive the world, communicate with each other in the family and community.
3. Socio-cultural behaviour: this can contain knowledge and background of daily works and behaviour.
4. Socio-cultural aptitudes: this can be defined in terms of intercultural consciousness and sensitivity, and using of English as a medium of communication not as an aim.

Several works have been done through the scholars like Kramsch (1993); Pachler and Allford (2000); Phuntsog (2001), etc. to disclose the role and importance of socio-cultural factors in foreign language learning. The shortcoming of done works is that they didn't provide students with descriptive-analytical perspectives to concentrate on the socio-cultural values of their own and target community which can trouble language learning attitude of the language learners. This implies the fact that in pedagogical camps we as teachers must raise the consciousness of the students to the underlying structures and information backgrounded in the materials (Clark and Ivanic, 1997). The author uses principles of Critical Linguistics to raise the consciousness of the students toward the lexis and matters that are culture-ideology-laden. Lack of attention to these factors can lead to the cultural attrition during the course of foreign language learning.

2. Importance of socio-cultural knowledge and awareness

As it is generally recognized, learning a foreign language involves a lot more than the actual acquisition of grammatical forms. The structures, the rules and the contexts that the learner comes into contact with in the learning process will, in fact, inevitably reflect the culture of the people in their spoken language, including factors from the way of life of the members of that community through the historical background to the moral value system dominating the social and personal life of that particular population. In accordance with this more holistic approach to language, Omaggio (1993) believes that the relevance of the language used by the speaker in communication is chiefly dependent on the social settings and circumstances imposed on a given situation.

Robinson (1988) considers culture as ideas, behaviours and products which are shared by the members of a group. From Robinson's discussion of cultural studies three distinct orientations

emerge corresponding to three different foci of inquiry. Behaviourists concentrate on what is observable, while functionalists are predominantly interested in the underlying structure or rules which govern and explain observable events. Conversely, cognitive anthropologists view culture as an internal mechanism responsible for organizing and restructuring inputs. Paraphrasing but at the same time expanding Robinson's definition of culture, Peck (1998) postulates that culture is composite consisting of values, beliefs, attitudes, customs and traditions, which manifest in hierarchies, rules, time and space relations and verbal and nonverbal communication strategies. As for the major principles of the teaching of cross-cultural awareness, both Peck and Robinson agree that the transmission of culture in the classroom can materialize in a number of learning modes all of which promote learners positive self-concept and the recognition of the equal legitimacy of cultures through the application of both field- sensitive and field-independent methods.

This emphasis on the cultural awareness raising component of language teaching is also backed by applied linguists and sociolinguists when it delineates the most fundamental tenets on which the objectives of the document are predicated: individuals are social agents and intend to form relationships with extended social groups and networks to gain identity of language learners in response to the promoting experience of otherness in language and culture. And it is duty of the instructors and language learners to move themselves into a developing whole.

3. Methodology

Through study of the related journals, books, and sites authors have applied descriptive-analytical method to consider importance and ways of incorporating required socio-cultural norms into the class. Also, the author applied Critical Linguistics pioneered by Fowler (1991) in order to acquaint teachers with the ways of raising awareness toward the socio-cultural norms and provide critical-analytical framework for language learners to focus on their own socio-cultural norms and on the cultural norms of target language. So, the research was designed to address the following question and hypothesis:

1. Can incorporating Socio-Cultural factors into foreign language learning classes facilitate proficiency of the students in utilizing the language appropriate to the context?
2. Target culture affects students' beliefs and culture during the course of language learning in foreign language learning classes.

3.1. Incorporating culture into the foreign language classroom

A question pertaining to this study is how can we integrate socio-cultural norms into the foreign language learning classes, with a view to raising socio-cultural consciousness and communicating integrity into the target culture? Language instructors can familiarize learners with target culture and the ways its people behave in different contexts rather than provide a particular way of seeing the world and things which can damage the attitude of the learners in classes. When teachers incorporate socio-cultural norms into language classes and teach students about the traits and characteristics of the target community, they can raise the awareness of the learners to the point that languages are not superior or inferior to others and even within the target community the norms and values can differ too. Teachers shouldn't be observers who affirm the prejudice of the language learners toward the target community nor convict them of involving with foreign culture. Teachers should motivate students to understand target culture, and aid them with a view that language learning classes are not a place where they get information about the language, but as one where they are offered with opportunities to learn various kinds of things through the use of language for interaction and communication purposes.

According to Straub (1999), in teaching culture teachers should keep in mind that providing students with metalanguage information and cultural awareness of their own and target one is necessary and provides a degree of intellectual objectivity required in cross-cultural analyses. To provide students with an opportunity to have a better understanding of the target culture from an insider's perspective will aid them to have empathic perspective toward the target community and allows them to analyse and interpret foreign language behaviours very carefully-and this should be main object in foreign language learning classes. Before considering some practical techniques for teaching socio-cultural factors in language learning classes, the author tries to answer the question raised at the beginning of this section by explaining some guidelines:

First, culture incorporating should be appropriate with the dynamic aspects of socio-cultural norms. According to Lessard-Clouston (1997), students are required to gain insights about the foreign language and culture, but this receptive perspective of socio-cultural competence is not adequate. To develop better understanding of the target socio-cultural norms and their own culture, students need to have socio-cultural consciousness which facilitates culturally suitable communication and interaction. Second, as a teacher it is very important and necessary to design your curriculum in language learning classes in a way to have systemic and structured approach for foreign language learning. Third, evaluation of target socio cultural norms is a necessary part of the foreign culture syllabus, providing students with feedback and keeping instructors responsible in their teaching. Fourth, according to Cruz et al. (1995) in global village political, social and economical identities of the nation lie in linguistic-cultural competence and without learning these norms communication can fail.

Singhal (1998) believes that cultural problem solving is an interesting approach to provide students with sociocultural norms. In this way, language learners are provided with some information and are challenged to speak the target language. Here students are located in real situations, for example in a restaurant, and are expected to place an order. In this case, students are offered with the chance to imagine themselves as member of the target community.

3.2. Critical Linguistics and data analysis

Data are gathered from *Interchange*, a course book for Payame Noor University students in West Azerbaijan, Iran, and to be unbiased they are gathered from different parts and levels to clarify how native English speakers' culture is different than native Turkish/Persian speakers' culture. Here the author has chosen some topics from *Interchange* series and analyzed them on the basis of Critical Linguistics which gets attention of the students and learners to the cultural differences. According to Critical Linguistics, every aspect of language is ideology-laden and represents beliefs, customs, and cultures of the speakers. On the basis of this principle, a topic of greetings which include: handshake, kiss on the cheek, hug, etc. have different forms in different cultures. So, as educators we should raise the consciousness of the language learners to the fact that in target culture these greetings have different norms and linguistic forms and violation of these can lead to misunderstanding. Related to these topics we should clarify the fact that contrary to the English speaking culture, because of cultural norms, in Iran girls and boys can't shake hands, kiss, or hug with each other.

Consider the following dialogue from *Interchange 1*: **Emily**: I hear you have a new friend, Randy. **Randy**: Yes, her name's Ashley, and she's gorgeous! **E...**: Really? What does she look like? **R...**: Well she is very tall. **E...**: How tall? **R...**: About 6 feet 2, I suppose. **E...**: Wow that's tall. What colour is her hair? **R...**: She has beautiful red hair. **E...**: And how old is she? **R...**: I don't know. She won't tell me. Here according to Critical Linguistics, the author some interpretation for the lexis and meta-linguistic features utilized in the dialogue. First, the dialogue is between girls and boys which is against the norms of native culture because in Iran it is illegal to have this kind of conversation with relaxed tone and with the opposite gender. Second, here the girl calls the boy with the first name and without any title (Mr.), which is against the social, religious, and official rules and norms dominant in Iran- if they are caught talking with together they will be punished. Third, asking questions from the opposite gender about his/her beauty, height, weight, age, and personal affairs is totally forbidden, both by families and society, and is considered as the violation of social norms. So, providing students with these norms can prepare them for real life communication and prevents misunderstanding between Turkish/Persian people and English people. On the other hand, as educators we should provide critical awareness of these differences and lack of attention to these norms can lead to the replacement of target culture with native one.

4. Results and discussion

The result of the study conveys the fact that teaching culture has a positive influence on students' attitudes about English language, English language learning issues, and English culture. They also become more motivated to learn English language to build a link between their native culture and target one. Equipping learners with socio-cultural knowledge of target language helps them to enhance their competence and proficiency in utilizing the language appropriate to the context. Providing this opportunity for them in the class helps them to learn how to have communication with target language speakers without getting into trouble in making themselves understood. So, this provides answer to the research question raised in this study and demonstrates that teaching a foreign language isn't to provide students with syntactic structures or lexis, but should mainly involve some cultural norms which are part of the language. Analysis of dialogue in methodology part clarifies the fact that beyond linguistic features there are lots of social, cultural, and political norms and are implicit and out of ken of ordinary people, language learners, and lack of attention to them can lead to misunderstanding between the native and target culture. Also, if the educators don't raise the consciousness of the students to these facts, they can influence students' beliefs and customs and there is a risk that they can be replaced with target norms. This confirms the research hypothesis and shows the fact that foreign culture can influence native culture.

5. Findings and conclusion

In this paper, the author found that culture is an integral part of language and should be part of foreign language learning curriculum to enhance appropriate communicative ability of the students. If we induce students to be interested with target culture, they will gain sense of friendship and integrity with target community and this will enhance socio-linguistic competence of the learners necessary for appropriate communication. To sum up, the following advices can be useful both for teachers and learners in foreign language learning classes:

- In foreign language learning classes culture should be considered as a message and language as a medium for conveying it (Peck, 1998).
- Teachers should familiarize students with target etiquettes, appropriate or inappropriate social behaviors and give them opportunity to act out being a member of the target community.
- To teach language, teachers should be proficient in target culture and experience the life in it. And this is necessary for creating integrity between the target and native cultures.
- Teachers should be cognizant of the fact that cultural bias can plague the very aspects of the target culture which teachers choose to indict or advocate (Cormeraie, 1997).

References

- Clark, R., & Ivanic, R. (1997). *The politics of writing*. London: Routledge.
- Cormeraie, S.(1997). From Theoretical Insights to Best Practice for Successful Inter-Cultural Education: The Crucial Transmission. *Proceedings of the conference at Leeds Metropolitan University, 15-16 December 1997*.
- Cruz, G. I., Bonissone, P. R., & Baff, S. J. (1995). *The Teaching of Culture in Bilingual Education Programs: Moving Beyond the Basics*. In New York State Association for Bilingual Education Journal, 10, 1-5.
- Fowler, R.(1991). *Language in the news: Discourse and ideology in the press*. London: Routledge.
- Lessard-Clouston, M. (1997). *Towards an Understanding of Culture in L2/FL Education*. In Ronko, K.G. *Studies in English*, 25, 131-150. Japan: Kwansai Gakuin University Press.
- Omaggio, A. (1993). *Teaching language in context*. Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle.
- Peck, D. (1998). *Teaching culture: Beyond language*. Yale: New Haven Teachers Institute.
- Robinson, G. (1988). *Crosscultural understanding*. New York: Prentice-Hall.
- Singhal, M. (1998). *Teaching Culture in the Foreign Language Classroom*. Thai TESOL Bulletin, 11 No. 1, February 1998.
- Straub, H.(1999). *Designing a Cross-Cultural Course*. English Forum, 37, 3, July September, 1999.
- Tomalin, B. (2008). *Culture - the fifth language skill*. Available at <http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/think/articles/culture-fifth-language-skill>