

## **Investigating the Relevance of Language and Culture: Language Teaching in Cultural Context**

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***Abstract:** The current study examines the literature linked with the significance of culture in learning a second language .In the last few decades there has been considerable research on the role culture plays in language education. It is not possible to divorce cultural phenomenon from language instruction in modern times. The basic thesis of the study is that successful communication is not just about language ability but about cultural understanding as well. Thus, Language teaching has to focus not just on improving and enhancing communicative competence but cultural competence also has to be inculcated among the learners. The teaching of culture has the potential to create compassion and reverence among the learners toward diverse customs of the world. The integration of culture in language learning can promote cultural insightfulness and a broader outlook.*

***Key Words:** Culture, Language Education, Communication, Cultural Understanding.*

### **Introduction**

When it comes to learning a second language, culture appears as a neglected aspect both in curriculum and pedagogy. Learners enter the Second Language class room with their own distinctive culture and it is important for them to get acquainted and even to acquire the culture of the second language to succeed at the new language. Since culture is embedded in the very language we speak, second language learning is connected with cultural acquisition at the very core.

The present research aims to examine the relevance of the knowledge of culture in language teaching and learning. Through an overview of relevant literature in the field, the importance of cultural understanding in language classrooms has been highlighted.

### **Research Question**

1 What is the significance of cultural education in language learning?

## **Culture: Defined**

In the view of Brown (2007) culture consists of “*the ideas, customs, skills, arts, and tools that characterize a given group of people in a given period of time*” (p.380). According to Díaz-Rico and Weed (2006) cultures stands for:

*“the explicit and implicit patterns for living, the dynamic system of commonly agreed upon symbols and meanings, knowledge, belief, art, morals, laws, customs, behaviors, traditions, and/or habits that are shared and make up the total way of life of a people, as negotiated by individuals in the process of constructing a personal identity”*(p.232-233).

The significance of the above quote lies in the fact that it sees culture as a vibrant practice not as an abstract set of rules to adhere to. Culture, thus, can be learnt through day to day mundane activities or through the superior experience of language, as language and culture are both indispensable for each other. Acquiring an L2 means the adaptation of its linguistic aspect as well as cultural mores. Learners do need cultural underpinning to be proficient at English as a second/foreign language.

Culture can be broadly described as the man-made aspect of the society (Herskovits, 1955) comprising of objects such as tools, houses and other infrastructure and subjective elements consisting of a “*group’s characteristic way of perceiving its social environment*” (Triandis, Malpass, & Davidson, 1972, p. 3).

The subjective aspect of culture contains a multifaceted selection of communal convictions, social mores and value systems of a society (Thomas, 1994). They are nurtured, passed on, and rendered purposeful through ages. Culture is both, a product of age old behavior and a shaper of future behavior. Humans cultivate culture and are affected by it in turn. (Segall, Dasen, Berry, & Poortinga, 1999).

## **Perception**

Perception is “*the internal process by which we select, organize and interpret information*” from the physical environment (Klopf & Park, 1982, p.26). We form perceptions of the world around us through the things we observe, perform and confront during our day to day life. Since perception is related with each individual’s lived experience, therefore, no two people perceive the world exactly the same way. How we view the world forms our cultural experience, be it the choices we make for food or our responses to various ceremonies or rituals, we are taught all these things culturally. Our insights are culturally established and they affect our interaction with others.

## **Beliefs**

Our understanding about what is plausible, right and accurate forms our beliefs.

Beliefs tend to be connected with things and occurrences that possess some definite qualities which we consider factual even in the absence of evidence (Samovar & Porter, 1997). Price (2000) believes that our beliefs represent our perception of the way things work, where they belong and justification of the way they are.

Our beliefs also aim at explaining events that are otherwise irregular or incomprehensible such as climate conditions and life and demise etc. cultural backgrounds and experiences shape our beliefs to a large extent. Consequently, beliefs form our values, which determine our overall outlook on life.

### **Values**

Values may be described as a lasting system of beliefs that guides conduct (Klopf & Park, 1982). They stand for the culture and customs of a society. Ideas about good or evil, correct or erroneous, discourteous or gracious, suitable or inapt all are of a cultural nature. Such values affect our choices and decisions in life greatly. Our interpretations of things and events reflect our value judgments, which mirror our specific culture.

Saying and Proverbs in every culture reveal the importance attached with its distinct value system. Here are some examples:

“Time is money” (American), “A zebra does not despise its stripes” (African) or “No need to know the person, only the family” (Chinese). Sayings like the ones above convey values specific to a certain culture from one generation to another.

### **Cultural Teaching**

Researchers like Jorstad (1981), Seelye (1981, 1994), Crawford-Lange and Lange (1984), Byram (1988) have integrated the study of culture to language learning. The current models of culture view it as a vibrant and dynamic force which is always changing. The members of each cultural group show a variety of behavioral patterns and varying degrees of attachment to their value systems and cultural mores. In this ongoing process meaning is constantly being created and altered through communication. Language in this course performs a very interesting and intricate dual role as a medium for and a mold of culture.

Two perspectives regarding cultural teaching are prominent in SL classrooms.

- 1) The first perspective concerns “*the transmission of factual, cultural information, which consists in statistical information, that is, institutional structures and other aspects of the target civilization, highbrow information, i.e., immersion in literature and the arts, and lowbrow information, which may focus on the customs, habits, and folklore of everyday life*” (Kramsch, 1993, p.24).

However, if there is much preoccupation with facts rather than meanings then such an approach can be derogatory for the understanding of L2 related values and attitudes and it blinds the learners. Such an education only offers “*mere book knowledge learned by rote*” (Huebener, 1959, p.177).

- 2) The second perspective regarding cultural teaching is drawn from cross cultural psychology. It places culture within an interpretive structure and aims to establish associations between the learner’s own culture and the one they want to learn.

1960s and 1970s onwards renowned researchers like Nostrand (1974), Seelye (1984) Brooks (1975) and Hall (1959), attempted to establish learning of a second or foreign language on a combined physical and affective stand in such a way that “*the foreign culture [would appear] less threatening and more accessible to the language learner*” (Kramsch, 1993, p.224). Similarly Steele (1989, p.155) “*emphasized the importance of culture not for the study of literature but for language learning*”.

### **The Role of Context in Culture**

1970s and 80 are called “*sociolinguistic decades*” as they brought a new focus on cultural Teaching and learning. Culture came to be identified as the context in the absence of which language can convey no sense. Saville-Troike (1983) argues that “*interpreting the meaning of linguistic behavior means knowing the cultural meaning of the context within which it occurs*” (p.131-132).

In language learning culture is not like a fifth skill that needs to be acquired separately, it’s rather always there in the background. It exists in the form of attitudes and points of view of the learners. Byram (1988) states that outside the context language has no meaning of its own as, language always refers to something other than itself. Heath (1986) believes that human communication results not out of shared knowledge of one another; it rather springs out of shared acceptance of the context of this interaction.

The understanding of context means the appreciation of cultural mores linked with time, place, individuals and social conditions. This in turn creates the attitude suitable to those conditions. Words and their implications are connected with the context in which they are uttered. Language and norms and values of culture alter and change with time and place.

Gudykunst and Kim (1992) state that two kinds of contexts are relevant with intercultural encounters; *External context*: It stands for the physical settings or milieu where communication occurs and the meanings that society relates with them. It stands for social values and meanings on a broader level. *Internal context*: stands for cultural meanings. Hall (1976) proposes that many cultural variations affect the way individuals perceive social reality and their identity.

### Why should Culture be taught?

Language is a cultural phenomenon; it both shapes the society and is shaped by the society in return. Language is a form of social practice not an '*autonomous construct*'. It is affected by the force of the social institutions within which we operate (Fairclough, 1989). We become members of a certain society largely by the way we choose to live, talk and communicate with the world around us. Culture is the accepted, learnt and collective behavior of a society. According to Paige (1997), cultural learning should contain:

- 1) Knowledge about the self as a cultural organism.
- 2) Knowledge of culture and its impact on human contact, conduct, and identity.
- 3) Knowledge about universal and cross-cultural phenomena such as cultural modification; called *culture-general learning*.
- 4) Knowledge about a specific culture with its language; called *culture-specific learning*,
- 5) Knowledge about how to develop learning efficacy, i.e., becoming a good learner of language and culture.

### Culture and Communication

Culture is the foundation of all communication. It determines who to talk to, why and under what circumstances. It enables us to decode meanings. Bourdieu (1990) views language not an independent construct but as a structure established by various social and political practices. Bourdieu presented the concept of *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 52), as a system of performances which comprises of not just a network of words and grammatical items, but also a concealed struggle over the representational power of a certain method of communication.

In the 1980s researchers started investigating cultural dynamics and their crucial role in "*successful language learning*" (Byram, Morgan et al., 1994, p.5).

Duranti has described the affinity between language and culture in these words,

*"to be part of a culture means to share the propositional knowledge and the rules of inference necessary to understand whether certain propositions are true (given certain premises). To the propositional knowledge, one might add the procedural knowledge to carry out tasks such as cooking, weaving, farming, fishing, giving a formal speech, answering the phone, asking for a favor, writing a letter for a job application"* (Duranti, 1997, p.28-29).

Samovar & Porter (1997) state that the interaction and conduct of a group of people varies in accordance with their cultural differences. Intercultural communication, can thus be accurately

defined as the learning of interaction between people whose “*cultural perceptions and symbol systems are distinct enough*” to alter their communication (p.70).

Samovar and Porter (1997) demonstrate the progression of how meaning is uncovered when the message is encoded by a person in one culture and decoded by another from a different culture according to their own cultural affiliation.

### **Significance of Cultural Teaching**

McKay (2003) asserts the influence of culture in language teaching in two ways: *linguistic* and *pedagogical*. Linguistically, it influences the semantic, pragmatic, and discourse levels of language. Pedagogically, it affects the selection of language items as cultural material. Additionally, teaching methodology is to be comprehended according to its cultural foundations.

Ethnocentricity limits the self; therefore individuals can perceive themselves from a different perspective to overcome these limitations through culture. For this reason cultural teaching is crucial in allowing individuals to perceive themselves altogether from a different perspective. Culture has delimiting influence on language learners and teachers in this unique way.

The commonly shared norms and values that exemplify culture guide us about the meaning of things, their significance and the importance of committing to a certain line of action.

Harris and Moran (1991) believe,

“*culture gives people a sense of who they are, of belonging, of how they should behave, and what they should be doing*” (p. 12). Resultantly, “*culture is not one thing, but many*” (Hall, 1959, p. 169). Culture is like our skin we wear it in our day to day lives and even while travelling abroad. It is a collection of the subjective as well as objective elements that shape our awareness of the world around us. It helps us form our worldview.

Today the world has become “*a global village*” where no nation or cultural group can live in isolation (Samovar & Porter, 1991). Since the world is shrinking in terms of distances, we are in communication with more and more people from different cultures. However, such exchanges can be problematic if we do not know how to tackle individuals different from us. Many cultural and linguistic mistakes can be avoided if we include cultural teaching in our curriculum.

Cross-cultural communication satisfies this very need by investigating the communication between people of different cultural backgrounds. Basic to cross cultural communication is the principle that people learn to communicate through culture. A Pakistani, an Indian, or an American, for example learns to communicate like any other person. Their conduct transmits meaning because it is shared and learned, in short it is cultural. Thus, the way people converse, their language patterns, styles, and nonverbal behaviors are all formed by culture (Klopf & Park, 1982).

## Acculturation

*Acculturation* is the process of adjustment carried out by people to become accustomed to a different culture. Learning a new language involves coming to terms with the new culture while living in the old one; this is called acculturation. Acculturation may be defined in two ways: The broad meaning of acculturation is to align oneself to a new culture. Whereas Díaz-Rico and Weed (2007) specify acculturation in these words: “[t]o acculturate is to adapt to a second culture without necessarily giving up one's first culture” (p. 246).

This is different from other concepts such as assimilation, which means being totally engrossed into the new culture, with the native culture eventually fading away. Schumann (1986, p. 379) defined acculturation as, “*the social and psychological integration of the learner with the target language (TL) group.*” To Schumann (1986) less acculturation means lesser learning of L2.

Cultural homogeneity results in *cultural tightness*, whereas *cultural heterogeneity* guides one to cultural looseness as the individuals cannot easily agree on what conduct is suitable. The level of coordinated action required for effective language learning also affects the scale of *structural tightness* practices by a certain group. In tighter cultures there is greater need for coordinated action as compared to looser cultures which need less coordinated action (Triandis, 1994, cited in Schmidt et al, 2006). Acculturation provides necessary guard against this sort of cultural tightness. It creates room for learning, improvement and adjustment.

## Awareness and insight about differences between cultures and communication patterns

Intercultural communication can be difficult at times due to the differences between the speaker and listener's cultural background. In order to develop cross-cultural understanding education can provide a good humane and intellectual base. Certain objectives of education within this context are:

1. General information regarding cultural similarities and differences should be considered. This prepares the learners for what can happen in cross-cultural communication.
2. Specific knowledge of the target culture can be acquired which will complement the learner when he gets in touch with the people of the target culture.

## Flexible attitudes toward differences in culture and communication

If there is not certain sympathy and desire to understand the other party communication will not be fruitful. Emotion plays a major part in communication patterns, thus it should be given due importance. Positive attitudes can curb negative biases in cross-cultural interaction.

Swaffar (1992) asserts that in order to challenge, ‘*cultural distance*’, learners should be taught foreign literature which will enable them to question and assess the cultural constituents of L2 books. A consequence of this changing perspective of culture is to sight culture as a means of,

“developing an awareness of, and sensitivity towards, the values and traditions of the people whose language is being studied” (Tucker & Lambert, 1972,p.26).

## Conclusion

To conclude, cultural teaching has a humanizing and inspiring effect on the language learner and the learning process itself. Learners examine similarities and differences of their culture with other cultural groups. If not properly trained in cultural patterns the L2 learners become culture-bound, who may not be able to appreciate cultural uniqueness. As a matter-of-fact, cultural education should increase the understanding of the L2 culture in terms of people’s life styles, values, outlooks, and faith, and how they become evident in linguistic forms. The central premise of this article has been to highlight cultural instruction as an integral part of language learning. The representation of a second culture (L2 culture) inculcates among the students sympathy and fosters understanding towards other cultural groups. “Culture *should be our message to students and language our medium*” (Peck, 1998.p.106).

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