The Effect of Teaching Culture on The Foreign Language Learning

Israa Burhanuddin Abdurrahman

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1. Introduction
Foreign language learning is comprised of several components, including grammatical competence, communicative competence, language proficiency, as well as a change in attitudes towards one’s own or another culture. For scholars and laymen alike, cultural competence i.e., the knowledge of the conventions, customs, beliefs, and systems of meaning of another country, is indisputably an integral part of foreign language learning, and many teachers have seen it as their goal to incorporate the teaching of culture into the foreign language curriculum. It could be maintained that the notion of communicative competence, which, in the past decade or so, has blazed a trail, so to speak, in foreign language teaching, emphasizing the role of context and the circumstances under which language can be used accurately and appropriately (Straub, 1999: 2).

Kramsch (1993: 1) states that to learn a foreign language is not merely to learn how to communicate but also to discover how much flexibility the target language allows learners to have as their goal to incorporate the teaching of culture into the foreign language curriculum. It could be maintained that the notion of communicative competence, which, in the past decade or so, has blazed a trail, so to speak, in foreign language teaching, emphasizing the role of context and the circumstances under which language can be used accurately and appropriately (Straub, 1999: 2).

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manipulate grammatical forms, sounds, and meanings, and to reflect upon, or even flout, socially accepted norms at work both in their own or the target culture.

2.1.1 The Definition of Culture
On a general level, culture has been referred to as ‘the ways of a people’ (Lado, 1957). This view incorporates both ‘material’ manifestations of culture that are easily seen and ‘nonmaterial’ ones that are more difficult to observe, as Saville-Troike (1975: 83) notes. Anthropologists define culture as ‘the whole way of life of a people or group. In this context, culture includes all the social practices that bond a group of people together and distinguish them from others’ (Montgomery and Reid-Thomas, 1994: 5). According to Peck (1998: 45), culture is all the accepted and patterned ways of behavior of a given people. It is that facet of human life learned by people as a result of belonging to some particular group; it is that part of learned behavior shared with others. Not only does this concept include a group’s way of thinking, feeling, and acting, but also the internalized patterns for doing certain things in certain ways…. not just the doing of them. This concept of culture also includes the physical manifestations of a group as exhibited in their achievements and contributions to civilization. Culture is our social legacy as contrasted with our organic heredity. It regulates our lives at every turn. It could be argued that culture never remains static, but is constantly changing. In this light, Robinson (1988) dismisses the above behaviourist, functionalist, and cognitive definitions of culture and posits a symbolic one which sees culture as a dynamic ‘system of symbols and meanings’ whereby ‘past experience influences meaning, which in turn affects future experience, which in turn affects subsequent meaning, and so on’ (ibid.: 11). It is this dynamic nature of culture that has been lost sight of and underrated in foreign language teaching and ought to be cast in a new perspective.

2.1.2 The Goals of Teaching Culture
According to Tomalin & Stempleski (1993: 7-8), the teaching of culture has the following goals:
1- To help students to develop an understanding of the fact that all people exhibit culturally-conditioned behaviors.
2- To help students to develop an understanding that social variables such as age, sex, social class, and place of residence influence the ways in which people speak and behave.
3- To help students to become more aware of conventional behaviour in common situations in the target culture.
4- To help students to increase their awareness of the cultural connotations of words and phrases in the target language.
5- To help students to develop the ability to evaluate and refine generalizations about the target culture, in terms of supporting evidence.
6- To help students to develop the necessary skills to locate and organize information about the target culture.
7- To stimulate students’ intellectual curiosity about the target culture, and to encourage empathy towards its people.

3. How to Teach Culture
Learners must first become familiar with what it means to be part of a culture, their own culture. By exploring their own culture, i.e., by discussing the very values, expectations, traditions, customs, and rituals they unconsciously take part in, they are ready to reflect upon the values, expectations, and traditions of others ‘with a higher degree of intellectual objectivity’ (Straub, 1999). Depending on the age and level of the learners, this task can take many forms. For example, young beginners or intermediate students should be given the opportunity to enjoy certain activities that are part of their own tradition, such as national sports, social festivities, or songs, before setting about exploring those of the target culture. Here, we will only be concerned with the latter. ‘Beginning foreign language students want to feel, touch, smell, and see the foreign peoples and not just hear their language’ (Peck, 1998). At any rate, the foreign language classroom should become a ‘cultural island’ where the accent will be on ‘cultural experience’ rather than ‘cultural awareness’ (see Byram, Morgan et al., 1994: 55-60). From the first day, teachers are expected to bring in the class posters, pictures, maps, and other things in order to help students develop ‘a mental image’ of the target culture. According to Peck (1998), an effective and stimulating activity is to send students on “cultural errands” to supermarkets and department stores and have them write down the names of imported goods. Moreover, teachers can also invite guest speakers, who will talk about their experiences of the foreign country. Another insightful activity is to divide the class into groups of three or four and have them draw up a list of those characteristics and traits that supposedly distinguish the home and target cultures. Tomalin & Stempleski (1993: 16) provide a sample of the kind of list students could produce:
- music
- race
- national
- origin
- geography
- architecture
- customs
- arts and crafts
- clothing
- physical features
- food

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In this way, it becomes easier for teachers and students to identify any “stereotypical lapses” and preconceived ideas that they need to disabuse themselves of. To this end, once major differences have been established, students can be introduced to some ‘key words’ (Williams, 1983), such as “marriage,” “death,” etc., and thus be assisted in taking an insider’s view of the connotations of these words and concepts. In other words, they can query their own assumptions and try to see the underlying significance of a particular term or word in the target language and culture. For example, in English culture, both animals and humans have feelings, get sick, and are buried in cemeteries. In Hispanic culture, however, the distinction between humans and animals is great, and bullfighting is highly unlikely to be seen as a waste of time, as many western spectators are apt to say. Besides, the way language and social variables interpenetrate should inform culture teaching in the foreign language classroom. The main premise is that language varies according to social variables, such as sex, age, social class, location, and the concomitant register differences should not go unnoticed. For example, students can be taught that there are certain words used more by women than by men, and vice versa, and that there are also different dialects which may not enjoy equal adulation and prestige.

Through exposure to the foreign civilisation, students inescapably draw some comparisons between the home and target culture. ‘Cultural capsules’ attempt to help in this respect, presenting learners with isolated items about the target culture, while using books and other visual aids. Yet a more useful way to provide cultural information is by dint of cultural clusters, which are a series of culture capsules. Seelye (1984: 66) provides such capsules, such as a narrative on the etiquette during a family meal. With this narrative as a springboard for discussion and experimentation, students can practice how to eat, learn how, and to what extent, the members of the target culture appreciate a meal with friends, and so forth. A word of caveat is called for, though. Students must not lose sight of the fact that not all members of the target community think and behave in the same way. Henrichsen (1998: 78) proposes, among others, two interesting methods: culture assimilators and cultoons. Culture assimilators comprise short descriptions of various situations where one person from the target culture interacts with persons from the home culture. Then follow four possible interpretations of the meaning of the behaviour and speech of the interactants, especially those from the target culture. Once the students have read the description, they choose one of the four options they think is the correct interpretation of the situation. When every single student has made his choice, they discuss why some options are correct or incorrect. The main thrust of culture assimilators is that they ‘are good methods of giving students understanding about cultural information and may even promote emotional empathy or affect if students have strong feelings about one or more of the options’ (ibid.). On the other hand, cultoons are visual culture assimilators. Students are provided with a series of four pictures highlighting points of misunderstanding or culture shock experienced by persons in contact with the target culture. Here, students are asked to evaluate the characters’ reactions in terms of appropriateness (within the target culture). Once misunderstandings are dissipated, learners read short texts explaining what was happening in the cultoons and why there was misunderstanding. Nevertheless, much as cultoons ‘generally promote understanding of cultural facts they do not usually give real understanding of emotions involved in cultural misunderstandings’ (ibid.).

Cultural problem solving is yet another way to provide cultural information (see Singhal, 1998). In this case, learners are presented with some information but they are on the horns of a dilemma, so to speak. For example, in analysing, say, a TV conversation or reading a narrative on marriage ceremonies, they are expected to assess manners and customs, or appropriate or inappropriate behaviour, and to employ various problem-solving techniques—in short, to develop a kind of “cultural strategic competence”. For example, students are in a restaurant and are expected to order a meal. In this way, learners are given the opportunity to step into the shoes of a member of the target culture. Indisputably, conventional behaviour in common situations is a subject with which students should acquaint themselves. For instance, in the USA or the United Kingdom, it is uncommon for a student who is late for class to knock on the door and apologize to the teacher. Rather, this behaviour is most likely to be frowned upon and have the opposite effect, even though it is common behaviour in the culture many students come from. Besides, there are significant differences across cultures regarding the ways in which the teacher is addressed; when a student is supposed to raise her hand; what topics are considered taboo or “off the mark”; how much freedom students are allowed in achieving learner autonomy, and so forth. Alongside linguistic knowledge, students should also familiarize themselves with various forms of non-verbal communication, such as gesture and facial expressions, typical in the target culture. More specifically, learners should be cognisant of the fact that such seemingly universal signals as gestures and facial expressions—as well as emotions— are actually cultural phenomena, and may as often as not lead to miscommunication and erroneous assumptions. Green (1968) furnishes some examples of appropriate gestures in Spanish culture. An interesting activity focusing on non-verbal communication is found in Tomalin & Stempleski (1993: 117-119): The teacher hands out twelve pictures showing gestures and then invites the students to discuss and answer some questions. Which gestures are different from those in the home culture? Which of the gestures shown would be used in different situations or even avoided in the home culture? Another activity would be to invite learners to role-play...
emotions (Tomalin & Stemplenski, 1993: 116-117): The teacher writes a list of several words indicating emotions (happiness, fear, anger, joy, pain, guilt, sadness) and then asks the students to use facial expressions and gestures to express these emotions. Then follows a discussion on the different ways in which people from different cultures express emotions as well as interpret gestures as “indices” to emotions. As Straub (1999: 6) puts it, "by understanding how cultures and subcultures or co-cultures use these signs to communicate, we can discover a person’s social status, group membership, and approachability". According to him, it is important to encourage learners to 'speculate on the significance of various styles of clothing, the symbolic meanings of colors, gestures, facial expressions, and the physical distance people unconsciously put between each other’ (ibid.), and to show in what ways these nonverbal cues are similar to, or at variance with, those of their culture. Herein lies the role of literature in the foreign language classroom.

Rather than being a fifth adjunct to the four skills (reading, writing, speaking, and listening), culture can best find its expression through the medium of literature. As Valdes (1986: 137) notes, literature is a viable component of second language programs at the appropriate level and one of its major functions is to serve as a medium to transmit the culture of the people who speak the language in which it is written. First of all, literary texts are an untapped resource of authentic language that learners can avail themselves of. Exposure to literary works can help them to expand their language awareness and develop their language competence. Moreover, trying to interpret and account for the values, assumptions, and beliefs infusing the literary texts of the target culture is instrumental in defining and redefining those obtaining in the home culture. Of course, literature can extend to cover the use of film and television in the FL classroom, for they ‘have the capacity…to present language and situation simultaneously, that is, language in fully contextualized form’ (Jalling, 1968: 65). A major shortcoming, though, is that the viewer can only be an observer, not a participant. There is only reaction but no interaction. In a sense, cultural knowledge and experience should make us aware that, far from becoming members of the same ‘monocultural global village’ (Kramsch, 1993: 56), we can actually become observers and participants at the same time and bridge cultural gaps.

4. Conclusion

The teaching of culture should become an integral part of foreign language instruction. Culture should be our message to students and language our medium.

On a practical note, culture teaching should allow learners to increase their knowledge of the target culture in terms of people’s way of life, values, attitudes, and beliefs, and how these manifests themselves or are couched in linguistic categories and forms. More specifically, the teaching of culture should make learners aware of speech acts, connotations, etiquette, that is, appropriate or inappropriate behaviour, as well as provide them with the opportunity to act out being a member of the target culture.

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