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Language in Multicultural Society

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Abstract

Learning a language, is not only learning sounds, alphabets and grammar, but it also means learning the customs and cultural norms. We all grow up in social circles, we informally learn how to use language expressions, gestures, tones. We get to learn the acceptable behaviors or language use in our society. We all speak Languages. We all imbibe Cultures. Language expresses a particular meaning that represents the culture of a particular social group. We interact with a language and culture becomes its reference point.

Krober(1923) expresses, "Culture, then, began when speech was present, and from then on, the enrichment of either means the further development of the others". Hence, language and culture are complex, yet inseparable form of human interactions. Culture is complexly intertwined with language. Human interactions are defined as communication. The communicative force of culture works not only in representing aspects of reality, but also in connecting one context with another.

According to the linguistic relativity principle, the way we think about the world, gets influenced by the language we use to express it and vice versa. Therefore, consciously or unconsciously, we show certain behaviors and carry certain language habits which are deeply rooted in our culture. Thus learning a language means learning and adopting that culture.

This paper deals with this very relationship of language and culture with a cross-cultural interaction, how teaching and learning a foreign language plays a role in learning the target culture. This paper will make recommendations for effective culture education in foreign language classroom to develop intercultural competence.

Language and culture the two faces of human society are two inter-dependent factors.

Language, at a very basic level can be defined as clusters of sounds. When a new born baby makes sounds such as ba-ba-ma-ma, we very gladly call it to be communication, and respond to it by imitating the same. Is that the beginning of language learning?

Then we share the joy and pride when our babies utter the first meaningful word in our own language. How simply remarkable it becomes, when it comes to what is meaningful to one, might be totally senseless to the others, but yes that is what is communication among a set of human communities, which later takes the shape of what we call as culture.

Indeed, learning a language and its culture is an amazing feat, several theories are formed and researches are carried out to explain the significance of language and culture.

Culture and language being two integral parts of communication, have always carried with it in its vocabularies and expressions, local culture patterns, customs and the way of life of the people. Hence Language, with its colloquial terms, subtle usage of synonyms and local proverbs, is a true mirror that gives one a glimpse into a culture and its people.

Wardhaugh(2002)'s claims brought out the three perspectives of understanding the relations between the language and culture. The structure of language determines the learner's world view. Campbell(1997), in support to this claim, suggested that the way we recognize the world around us is highly influenced by the language we use, and this phenomena is defined as 'Linguistic determinism'. 'Linguistic determinism' exists in two forms 'Strong determinism' and 'Weak determinism'. 'Strong determinism' underlines the fact that language determines the thoughts, whereas 'Weak determinism' is where thought influences the language. When a learner is exposed with a foreign language, both strong and weak determinism may occur at the same time.

The second claim suggests that culture defines the certain ways of life and language use to reflect the values and things. The Neutral claim says that there are no direct relations between language and culture.

The legendary 'Saphir-Whorf Hypothesis' debated the relationship between language and culture, concluding that one cannot be appreciated without the knowledge of other. Supporting the first claim of Wardhaugh(2002), this hypothesis brought out the inseparable entity of the language and culture

What is Culture? What is language? As stated by Brown(1994), a language is a part of a culture and a culture is a part of a language. Many other scholars agree with River(1981) in believing that language cannot be separated completely from the culture in which it is deeply embedded. Cultural patterns, customs and ways of life of people are expressed in its language.

Now let's imagine the state of a mixed society with different cultural and language backgrounds. Cultural awareness and language competence becomes one of the most complex

feature or designator of survival. Different languages have, over the ages, established different categories of cultural aspects, which reflect environments, usage of life and world view of people.

With the importance of interaction among, the so-called 'Multi-lingual Society' or 'Multi-cultural Society'¹, when it comes to teaching a foreign language to such group of learners, the very basic aim becomes the acquisition of competency. Teaching communication without teaching Culture becomes quite challenging for them, as the very basis of their own native existence is the cultural understanding. This may be enough for survival and routine transactions but will definitely tend to fall short in terms of complete communication between natives of a certain language and the student that learns that language to communicate (Byram, 1989).

Cultural awareness not just complements the communication process using language, but ensures the right usage of language to communicate. Understanding of a culture not just makes communication more relevant and significant in terms of that context or situation, but also gives the student the ability to understand the fellow natives of that country better to interact with them more successfully.

Hendon(1980) emphasized the importance of introduction of culture with its relation to the motivational factors affecting foreign language learners.

“Cultural activity stimulates the interest in foreign language study. Culture materials provide many topics of personal interest to a student, thereby increasing motivation. The inclusion of culture in the foreign language classroom could well provide an important bridge for the language student in his search for relevance.”

¹ The author prefers calling it 'A mixed Society' the reason being, 'Multi lingual' tends to draw more significance of language over culture, on the other hand, 'Multi-cultural' brings out more of culture and less of language. Hence, when we talk about the co-existence of the two factors with the same degree of relevance, the author prefers using 'Mixed society' to bring out the freedom of both language and cultural, where one is meaningless without the other.)

Most languages, including the many Asian languages are deeply rooted in their cultural protocols. Most of the foreign languages being taught in the class rooms, begin with the basic greetings such as “Hello”, “Namaste”, “Annyeonghaseyo”, “Konnichiwa”. However, if the proper body gestures of these greetings, are not shown to the students, they would wrongly gesticulate (moving their hands together or bring out their right hand for hand shake, or waving to say “hello”) which may be culturally unacceptable in that context. As similar to the case of an Indian, learning a non-native language and culture, such as a female from South India learning Hindi, must have the proper understanding of the right body gestures to convey the right impression. For instance, a very basic Hindi cultural body gesture for greetings, is to touch the feet of an elderly person. However, the learner must have the cultural understanding to an extent that she should not be using this gesture, in case she is unmarried, without this make teaching that expression incomplete. This is how the cultural norms are complemented by the correct usage of words and actions.

Language behavior includes not only verbal behavior and intended behaviors, but also unintended behaviors in case of any action of one person being judged and interpreted by another in that group of conversation. We should pay more significant attention to the cultural settings of the native speakers of that particular language. Mostly, we cannot rule out the possibility that communicative misunderstandings may result from the different modes of thoughts and culture patterns, rather than from our inability to speak the language fluently. The role of gesture and other paralinguistic cues is of vital importance in communication activities. The meanings of verbal signs are largely influenced by the speaker-listener’s preparedness to interpret such non-verbal cues. Non-verbal symbols are connected with facial expressions, eye and hands movements, the use of space and time, and touching, which vary from culture to culture.

Culture patterns and customs largely set the platform of a society, which reflect its ways of life. Chastain(1975) defines culture as ‘the way people live’ , and according to Brown(1994) culture is a ‘way of life’. For developing more natural communication ability, we need to show demos of clearer and better understanding of these integral elements that bind life, people, language and culture inseparably.

River(1964) examined and explained that ‘when students have a certain grasp of the language and a basic understanding of the cultural attitudes of the people, they are able to understand more fully the evolving relationship between the formal culture and aspects of contemporary society, and the relationship and interaction between this ‘formal culture’ and the ‘deep culture²’ of everyday living’. As we come across various different examples and situations, with our students of higher level of foreign language proficiency, we get to notice that culturally conditioned images may also be associated with the most common difference of mother tongue and the target language.

Intercultural similarities and differences cannot be ignored in cultural teaching in foreign language. To teach cultural traits, we should understand both the cultures, the one we live in, and the culture we are attempting to work with. The goal of our teaching should be intercultural understanding in language classes. It means that more awareness of students of their own culture, makes comparative understanding of the difference and similarities of socio-linguistic aspects of their target culture more comprehensible and relevant.

As Bryam Morgan et al. (1994) focused importance of foreign language learning, he also observed that foreign language teachers and learners need to possess the ability to experience and analyze both the home and target culture.

²The ‘way of life’ culture was described as Brook’s term of ‘deep culture’.

As a teacher, when we teach students the greetings, daily life conversations, discussions on family, religion etc., we should make them understand the hidden background behind cross-cultural behaviours, which may be regarded as bizarre or culturally taboo.

We should make students understand the social variable such as age, sex, environment, religion, which may affect their speech or behaviour to the member's of their target society. Teaching the students that even the most common words and phrases of foreign language, have important cultural implications, the language teacher's role is to show the student how to organise and analyse the expressions to suit the sociolinguistic requirements of that foreign culture. At the same time, culture teaching should make the students see their native culture more accurately and objectively from a new perspective. It means that our students should have a more global outlook beyond an ethnocentric perspective. In other words, students may acquire cross-cultural perspectives by understanding foreign culture. These will surely help them to take a more positive attitude towards the learning of a foreign language.

Depending on the aim of teaching and learning a language, an integrated language policy must be adopted to educate the learners in both language and target culture. As suggested by Kramsch(1993), Culture in language learning is not an extended fifth skill, it exists in speaking, listening, reading and writing. It is always in the background, right from day one... challenging learner's ability to make sense of the world around them.

Hence to gain social recognition in the target language, learner seeks an overall competency of knowledge of cultural aspect to be interacting with the target language. When learning Korean as a foreign language an Indian student looks for a basic understanding of social structure of Korea along with the linguistic competency to understand and express their view about various social arenas.

As the beginning level learners need to feel, touch and smell the foreign culture and interact with the foreign speakers and then feel the importance of being able to communicate with them in their native language (Peck, 1998), every beginner level class should not only include through understanding of the target culture but should also include the well structured cultural demonstrations such as making *Kimchi*, wearing *Hanbok*, playing *Samulnori* etc..

Learners should feel that there is more to a language than grammar and vocabularies. Understanding its practicalities, they should be encouraged for expressing and experiencing the Korean way of living on their own. These experiences will lead them to recognize the non-linguistic process which Koreans undergo to interpret communicative experiences, which mostly include the underling cultural knowledge and understanding. Gfinkel (1972) recognizes this as first-hand power of language and paralanguage consistent leads a learner to gain ability to see beyond apparent case specific knowledge.

History shows that all great cultures and languages have imbibed the others' greatness to develop beyond their own limitations. Even today, we the contemporary teachers and students of language are also part of that contributory process in that eternal development.

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