

Cross-Cultural Awareness in Teaching British and American Literatures

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Abstract

In the world of multi-polarization/globalization use of English has become increasingly predominant. Hence, training is particularly important to focus on cross-cultural awareness. The teaching of English and American Literature from the perspective of cross-cultural awareness is the need of the hour. With the international economic, cultural, political and other fields, exchanges become more frequent to accelerate the pace of development. In the contemporary world of multi-polarization and economic globalization, it is increasingly clear, more frequent international exchanges are increasingly used in a variety of cultures. In this environment, if the teachers do not understand the customs and cultures, habits, ideas and values, intercultural misunderstanding and even conflict will affect any smooth communication.

As a result, foreign language teaching, attention to the target language culture, improving cross-cultural awareness and focusing on cross-cultural communication ability is particularly important. Knowledge of foreign language teaching is not just language learning, Language is the carrier of culture, hence learning of language is also a process of knowing a culture. Literature is a special form of culture. Literature has always been concomitant with the culture. Therefore, understanding literature, specifically English and American Literature and their cultural ethos is an essential one and it would have a great impact on teaching. This paper aims to identify the barriers that a teacher encounters in the cross-cultural scenario and suggests solutions. His article was presented on an international seminar on “Teaching Literatures in English for cross culture, the Dept. of Communications” on 08 – 10 August 2011 organized by the Dept. of English & Communications, Dravidian University, Kuppam (A.P).

Key words: Culture, teaching culture, teaching foreign language, cultural awareness, culture-based activities techniques, British and American Literatures' cross cultural Awareness.

Introduction

English Education in India has largely depended on the teaching of literature. It is only in recent years that there has been a shift of emphasis from the teaching of literature to language. Even so, most Universities still lean easily on literary texts and often on great masterpieces of literature to give college students a good command over elegant English. Literature as discipline uses language, also the primary raw material of our business as teachers of language. Literature means the process of the development of the individual, training the intellectual, the affective, ethical and imaginative faculties. It is in a sense a history of the development of the culture of a whole people who speak that language. It has the ability to produce a maze of every complex feeling interwoven with rational and psychological justifications which often defy analysis. Yet the growth of a child is bound up with the literature of his social group and unfolds the process of adjustment and harmony with his environment. Every child listens to stories. He/she is very fond of them and these stories often condense the wisdom of the people, the cumulative expression of which is literature. Influenced by literature, people have cultivated gentleness, tolerance, forgiveness, warm friendliness and all these can be inculcated among the students by good teachers of literature. Many of the finest utterances one hears in a good speech or writing come from the deepest philosophical notions embedded in great literature,

The teaching of literature has not yet received the attention it merits. All too often learned lectures are delivered to students who are unable to follow them. It is true that literature itself and the lectures of the teacher present difficulties of language difficulties of complex situations, difficulties of the bewildering turns of emotive expressions and so on. It is not really the experience of the literary artist that is sought to be transmitted to the students but only the plot, characterization and such stock elements. These the students can get more easily in an easily digestible form in the bazaar guides. Experienced teachers know that students get good marks in the examination without attempting the literary texts even once.

The main thing in the appreciation of literature is the intimate knowledge of the text. Unless the student is asked to go to the text several times - one can use the seminar method, group discussion; one can have exposition from select students and questions from the rest and so on. It is no use pretending that we are teaching literary appreciation. If it is simply the story element, the teacher can supply the simplified version of the text. If it is the study of the inherent beauty of the language and expression of the deepest feelings, the teacher should relate them to the personal experience of the students and explain the specialist vocabulary and phrases literature uses. He/she should printout how the words are irreplaceable and turns of expression defy any modification or change. Putting out appropriate questions to evoke the requisite feelings in the students and get them respond appropriately is an art. Teachers of literature should develop the sensibility to appreciate and enjoy literature. It should be possible for them to devise ways and means of transmitting this experience to their students. Very often, questions like, "what could have happened if this event had not taken place" and a host of such other questions, bring out not only finer points of a literary piece but also create sensitiveness in the students for the subtle nuances of the language. Literature can thus be used for teaching language.

Literature can play a significant part in acquiring a foreign language. Literature and literary competence should no longer be separated from language acquisition in foreign language curricula. Literature aims to provide a source of ready-to-use classroom material for any teacher working with young or adult learner. It may be used as a set of interactive language materials.

In terms of the language, literary texts offer genuine samples of a very wide range of style registers and text types at many levels of difficulty. An appropriate choice of text will provide the learners with examples of many features of the written language, the structure of the sentences, the variety of form and the different ways of connecting ideas. It provides a rich context in which individual lexical or syntactical items are made memorable. Literature reveals a higher incidence of certain kinds of linguistic features which are tightly patterned in the text, features like metaphor, simile, alliteration, double or multiple meanings of a word and unusual syntactic patterns.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 14:8 August 2014

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What Is Culture?

Culture may mean different things to different people. In the anthropological sense, culture is defined as the way people live (Chastain 1988:302). Trinovitch (1980:550) defines culture as "... an all-inclusive system which incorporates the biological and technical behavior of human beings with their verbal and non-verbal systems of expressive behavior starting from birth, and this "all-inclusive system" is acquired as the native culture. This process, which can be referred to as "socialization", prepares the individual for the linguistically and non-linguistically accepted patterns of the society in which he lives.

Culture is Language and Language is Culture

In a word, culture is a way of life (Brown, 1994:163). It is the context within which we exist, think, feel and relate to others. It is the "glue" that binds a group of people together. It can be defined as a blueprint that guides the behavior of people in community and is incubated in family life. It governs out behavior in groups, makes us sensitive to matters of status, and helps us to know what others expect of us and what will happen if we do not live up to their expectations. Thus, culture helps us to know how far we can go as individuals and what our responsibility is to the group.

Developing Cultural Awareness in Foreign Language Teaching

Regardless of different points of view, culture has taken an important place in foreign language teaching and learning studies. It has been widely recognized that culture and language is used as a main medium through which culture is expressed. However, "pure information" is useful, but does not necessarily lead to learners' insight; whereas the development of people's cultural awareness leads them to more critical thinking. Most frequently students, to a great extent, know the rules of language, but are not always able to use the language adequately, as it requires a good knowledge of the target culture which knowledge they do not seem to have, to a certain depth.

Language is a part of culture and a culture is a part of a language. The two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture (Brown1994:164).

However, as the use of language in general is related to social and cultural values, language is considered to be a social and cultural phenomenon. Since every culture has its own cultural norms for conversation and these norms differ from one culture to another, some of the norms can be completely different and conflict with other cultures' norms. Consequently, communication problems may arise among speakers who do not know or share the norms of other culture.

Teaching Culture through Language

Students' intellectual curiosity is aroused and satisfied when they learn that there exists another mode of expression to talk about feelings, wants, needs and when they read the literature of the foreign country. For depth of cultural understanding it is necessary to see how such patterns function in relation to each other and to appreciate their place within the cultural system.

The teaching of the target culture has to serve the development of cross-cultural communication. The achievement of this goal is possible with the preparation of an organized inventory that would include both linguistic and extra linguistic aspects of the target culture. This way the language could build bridges from one cognitive system to another (Seelye, 1968). The culture of a people refers to all aspects of their shared life in a community.

If language is described as a mode of human behavior and culture as "patterned behavior", it is evident that language is a vital constituent of culture. Each culture has a unique pattern and the behavior of an individual, linguistic or otherwise, manifested through that culture is also unique.

Some Key Considerations in Developing Cultural Awareness in EFL Classrooms

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 **14:8 August 2014**

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Language cannot be separated completely from the culture in which it is deeply embedded. While developing cultural awareness in the EFL classroom, it should be kept in mind that the native language is learned along with the ways and attitudes of the social group, and these ways and attitudes find expression through the social group. Learning to understand a foreign culture should help students of another language to use words and expressions more skillfully and authentically; to understand levels of language and use it appropriately to suit different situations; to act naturally with persons of the other culture, while recognizing and accepting their different reactions, and to help speakers of other tongues feel at home in the students' own culture.

While most learners indeed find positive benefits through cross-cultural living in their learning experiences, nevertheless a number of people experience certain psychological blocks and other inhibiting effects of the second culture. Teachers can help students to turn such an experience into one of increased cultural and self-awareness.

The use of role-play in EFL classrooms can help students overcome cultural "fatigue" and it promotes the process of cross-cultural dialogues, while at the same time it provides opportunities for oral communication. Numerous other techniques such as readings, films, simulations, games, culture assimilators, culture capsules and culture-grams can be used by language teachers to assist them in the process of acculturation in the classroom (Chastain1988).

Teachers can play a therapeutic role in helping learners move through stages of acculturation, while teaching a culture-specific topic. First language equivalent can also be given in order to enhance learning. The use of culture-based activities used abundantly in the classroom helps learners become familiar with the target culture. The activities and the materials should involve the culture values of the target language designed for every level. A cultural series usually begins at the elementary stage with discussions of the daily life of the peer group in the other language community - their families, their living conditions, their school, their relations with their friends, their leisure-time activities, the festivals they celebrate, the ceremonies they go through, dating and marriage customs.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 14:8 August 2014

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At intermediate and advanced levels attention may be drawn to geographical factors and their influence on daily living, major historical periods, how the society is organized, production, transport, buying and selling, aspects of city and country life, the history of art, music, dance and film and so on.

Raising Cultural Awareness through Literature

"The person who learns language without learning culture risks becoming a fluent fool" - the importance of developing intercultural communicative competence alongside linguistic competence is rooted in the need of students interacting effectively with people from other cultures. In fact, what is considered appropriate in one culture is usually inappropriate in the other. Today, it is widely accepted that literature in the EFL classrooms can be a medium to transmit the culture of the target language. Besides, literature in the EFL classroom can provide a powerful tool in students' language development.

The Signification of a Text

Simplification produces a 'homogenized product in which the information becomes diluted' (McKay, 1982). McKay (1992), offers two solutions: select easy texts according to students' readability, based on vocabulary difficulty and syntactic complexity, or select literature suitable to students' age as regards authenticity. It provides a rich source of authentic input and portrays the outer world in a contextualized situation. It is a means that leads to a competent look on the foreign culture.

How to Introduce Literature in the EFL Classroom without Panicking Students?

It is always interesting to know how much a person knows about something. Most of the time students like challenges, so this is a good source that needs to be exploited when faced with literature. Teachers can start by asking their students to answer a short quiz about those famous movies which are based on famous books, or about the latest and most famous songs or about the latest events or news. A short quiz can work as a hook to attract students' interest or attention towards literature. The Lord of the Rings, Things fall apart, Shakespeare in Love, Alice in Wonderland etc. are all pieces of literature which can help us.

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Literature Circles are discussion groups in which students meet regularly to talk about books. Forming literature circles is a good idea to promote collaborative and cooperative learning in the EFL classroom as well as to stimulate social interaction. Through literature circles, students feel motivated to use the target language, especially when they are challenged, as a group, to understand and give opinions about a book with the idea of doing a specific project or task. Students can focus on the author's style, the different events or characters in the book, or their own personal experiences related to what the book talks about.

Literature also appeals to students' imagination, especially when they are faced with the analysis of fiction, drama or poetry. So, why not to take advantage of that? Students can create comics, short stories, poems, or they can act out some plays, which will motivate them to value the cultural context of the pieces of literature, considering and appraising the differences between the target language culture and their own.

No doubt, literature is a voice that expresses values, beliefs and shows how we live as individuals, groups or simply human beings. Within this perspective literature is the ideal tool to show our students the English speaking world. Students discover English culture through it.

Students can realize how easy it is to understand *Freedom Writers*, a book close to their routine ways and familiar through movies; they can realize how the word choice is more descriptive grammar than prescriptive, opposed to *The Virtue of Selfishness* where every word has a precise meaning. It would not be difficult for them to realize how ideas are conveyed through the whole book and show the American value: Freedom of Speech. While reading or after reading students can disagree and debate about the controversial ideas expressed in the different books. Dickens works show English Variance as well as English Society in its structure and tradition to send children to boarding schools, etc. However, we should be aware that such depictions may not be current reality.

It is quite revealing for students, as well as it is for teachers - the cultural awareness that comes up by simply reading a book. Activities should help teachers to involve their students in the learning process. So, teachers have to choose the activities very carefully. If teachers stress out students, they may feel that literature is just not for them. All the hints given to avoid panicking students must be read.

In conclusion, raising cultural awareness through literature is a great opportunity for the students to increase their world knowledge, as they will have access to a variety of contexts, which are inevitably related to culture. By raising cultural sensitivity, students will not only prefer an openness to diversity. But they will also develop cross-cultural communication to understand and interact effectively with people of other parts of the world.

Teaching American Little-c Culture to Prospective Teachers of English

The development of cross-cultural competence, as an integral part of communicative competence, is one of the main objectives of teacher training. The competence in question should be consistently developed at each level of the system of the prospective EFL teacher training.

Generally, the departments that train prospective teachers of English as a foreign language, are aimed at producing well rounded specialists and they tend to cope with the task rather well. Not only can our students communicate in English, but they are also well read in British and American literature and can also, for example, explain the historical premises for the Civil War in the US and how it changed the nation. Our students may be aware of the social problems facing American society, as well as being informed about the latest political issues in that country.

1. On the basis of the cultural differences, build up student's awareness of their own native cultures.
2. To develop students' understanding of cultural differences and similarities, that exist between the two cultures.
3. To install the idea of the importance of cross-cultural knowledge for successful

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language learning and teaching.

Hence, literary language is not completely separate from other forms of Cross cultural communication. It is a field of study that looks at how people from differing cultural backgrounds communicate in similar and different ways among themselves, and how they endeavor to communicate across cultures.

Conclusion

In developing cultural awareness in the classroom it is important that we help our students distinguish between the cultural norms, beliefs, or habits of the majority within the speech community and the individual or group deviations from some of these norms. Students should be enabled to discuss their native culture with their foreign-speaking friends at the same time that they are provided with a real experiential content.

The development of an awareness of socio-cultural and socio-linguistic differences that might exist between the students' first language and the target language is necessary. Such awareness often helps explain to both teachers and students, between whom at times there is unintended pragmatic failure and breakdown in communication.

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Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 14:8 August 2014

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