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Definition of Culture

It is appropriate and vital that the second/foreign language teachers talk about the significance of culture in second language teaching situation and what exactly we mean by culture? For instance: Is culture the way an Indian serves the dish to a guest, a da Vinci handsomely reposing in the marble hallways of the Louver, or a technique using which a craftsman produces a rug in a hamlet, or a style a writer composes his literary work in? Or is it only the way an Indian peasant leads his way of living?

For sure, none of these understandings of culture would satisfy one's desire to deeply grasp it. This frustration experienced by the early researchers led them to survey and investigate to find out more about culture.

Influence of the Anthropological Definitions of Culture on Second Language Learning

There have been several attempts on the part of the researchers and experts to define culture, but anthropologists first proposed the most comprehensive definition. They reasoned and believed that culture was what their science was all about. So it was obligatory to define and elaborate on the term with a different and more profound look.

Accordingly, two very well known anthropologists, Kroeber & Kluckhohn, initiated to examine nearly 300 definitions in a study entitled *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions*, cited by H. Ned Seelye, 1972. However, they couldn't come to a solid conclusion about the definition of culture. What they ultimately extracted out of these varying definitions was stating and formulating culture with capital "C," which referred to the fine arts and literature of high-scope writings, not in detail including all the ways a people adopt to lead their life.

Hence, language teachers and educators tried to follow this definition in their career and neglected the reality that culture is not merely with capital "C".

Capital "C" Culture

What one could find out in the capital "C" culture were the ways big shots and myths lived their lives, which were not, in general, considered to be communal and communitary; however, small "c" culture approached itself so close to the community comprising the majority by stating that a community does not consist of only the minority but majority.

Small “c” culture is supposed to comprise the real culture or deep culture. It is added that culture is what a people thinks of and acts accordingly.

Brooks (1965), linguistically speaking, elaborates his idea on culture by stating that “speech and act”(ibid) do not individually exist, rather one other component supports them, and that is nothing but thought, then coming to this chain: “Thought, Speech and Act”. It is what that can be referred to as “culture”. So culture is the manifestation of inner and outer realities.

A Comprehensive Definition

To sum up the definition of culture, we would refer to the definition proposed by the National Center for Cultural Competence in America, which defines culture as an *"integrated pattern of human behavior that includes thoughts, communications, languages, practices, beliefs, values, customs, courtesies, rituals, manners of interacting and roles, relationships and expected behaviors of a racial, ethnic, religious or social group; and the ability to transmit the above to succeeding generations"* (Goode, Sockalingam, Brown, & Jones, 2000).

It is worth mentioning that, embedded in those patterns, kinesic behaviors develop to their own true nature to facilitate communication, which are basically culture-influenced. This means that language is not only part of how we define culture it also reflects culture. Thus, the culture associated with a language cannot be learned in a few lessons about celebrations, folk songs, or costumes of the area in which the language is spoken. Culture is a much broader concept that is inherently tied to many of the linguistic concepts taught in second/foreign language classes.

Communicative Competence

One of Dr Sam Mohan Lal’s students from Iran narrates his cultural conceptualization as following:

When coming out of Mumbai Port, I was awfully shocked at the understanding of the Rickshaw driver of what I asked him. I spoke the few Indian words and expressions I knew with the driver and, through his facial expression which was so similar to that of an Iranian, when one fully understands something, I judged that he fully understood what I told him: ‘Will you take us to the main Bus Stand? We want to go to Pune’. He shook his head from side to side (intercultural similarities and differences).”

As in the summation of the definition of culture we mentioned right above regarding gestures and bodily signs as a very crucial componential element of culture, this student had interpreted the driver’s headshaking as ‘NO,’ since the same shaking of head from side to side in Iranian culture expresses absolute ‘NO’.

“I passed,” he continues, “on to the other driver, and he did the same, adding to my surprise why they were ignoring me. The third driver came to me on his own and spoke with me accepting to take me to the bus stand, while making me understand their gesture as indicative of ‘YES’.

Similar kinds of culture specific gestural incompatibility can be seen in the behaviour of the people from North Eastern part of India. In their case also the horizontal nod mostly expresses ‘Yes’ and the vertical nod express ‘No’.

An Essential Condition for Successful Communication

Successful communication rarely takes place unless a Foreign or Second language user has, if not completely but mostly, adopted and acquired the culture of the language he/she uses. He must be not only linguistically but also culturally competent in the F/S language. One’s meaningful cross-cultural communication depends on the acquisition of abilities to understand different modes of thinking and living, as they are embodied in the language to be learnt, and to reconcile or mediate between different modes present in any specific interaction. This mode of understanding can be labeled as “intercultural communicative competence.”

Cultural Component in Bi- and Multi-lingualism

Broadly speaking, bilingualism or even multilingualism requires the foreign or second/third language learner to pick up the cultural component to help the process of becoming a bilingual or multilingual which may load a heavy burden on him. In order that he/she can witness a successful establishment of connection, he must increase his cultural awareness and competence in the milieu. What is particularly interesting is learner grows in his or her self-culture awareness through being exposed to the second or foreign language culture (Michael Byram and Michael Fleming, 1998). They may seldom question the way they live since they take it for granted, and this cross-cultural awareness seems a very noble innovation in many nations picking another language and its culture.

Pragmatic Approach to Teaching Foreign Languages

Byram, M. and Fleming, M. (1998) clearly state that UK has recently been trying to penetrate the foreign or second language culture to invoke and promote the students’ own culture, as well as getting them adapt to and adopt the culture of the people whose language is being taught as second or foreign language. They also firmly emphasize that without cultural awareness, a language cannot be properly understood: “A growing awareness of the people who speak the language of study is intrinsic to the learning of it. Without the cultural dimension, successful communication is often difficult: comprehension of even basic words and phrases (such as those referring to meals) may be partial or approximate, and speakers and writers may fail to convey the meaning adequately or may even cause offence” (cited as DES, 1990).

We Need to Move from the Traditional Approach to the Newer Culture-centered Language Teaching

Most F/S language teachers are unconsciously and indirectly heavily sticking to the traditional second language teaching methods through which they themselves had acquired the language where there had been little attention paid to the role of culture. In their method, they usually follow the capital “C” culture, which was discussed above. This may be due to teachers’ insufficient training in culture or some other criteria as curriculum and materials they are handling. Therefore because of this insufficiency in the domain of teaching culture and culture free materials, second/foreign language teaching would appear something raw and meaningless, only presenting the unrealized body of language.

What Should the Learners Do?

To get culturally aware in the second language classroom, learners should:

1. Work with authentic materials derived from the communities who use the language,
2. Be able to contact with the native speakers of the language,
3. from these contacts and materials appreciate the similarities and differences between their own and the second culture,
4. Get a quasi identity with the people of the second culture,
5. Use this knowledge to develop a more objective view of their own customs and ways of thinking (cited in Byram, M. & Fleming, M., 1998).
6. Make the second language teachers pledge to take more responsible role in presenting C2.
7. Identify the subtle differences in their own culture when compared to the culture of the second language they are learning and behavioral modification exercises can be given in the class.

The Role of a Second Language Teacher in Teaching Culture

If teachers want the teaching processes they favor to receive recognition, they must be certain that their people, advocates, legislators, and students believe in what they do. They should set objectives, goals and prospective outcomes and devote themselves to obtaining them at their own expense as teachers. They should consciously and unconsciously grow and follow the non-stop activity, observable and non-observable, to lead their students closer and closer to the determined goals so that they can play one of their roles as creating a public personae of themselves as professionals who are articulate about what they do well and who have specific plans for their continuous growth. To play the appropriate role as teachers, they should know who their students are, what they know, and what they are looking for. Teachers should analytically survey the cultural topics mentioned, and based on their findings they should start teaching.

So teachers, terminologically speaking, can find and establish the relationship with culture presentation and language teaching in such a way as to be presenters with cultural awareness, culture mediators, culture facilitators, culture innovators, dispellers of cultural misperception and mal-interpretations, be aware of their own culture characters, function as material designers, be able to introduce context-sensitive changes, and be facilitators; and finally they should be deep and thorough thinkers and reflectors.

Ralph Ellison's statement: "You ache with the need to convince yourself that you do exist in the real world ... that you are a part of all the sound and anguish, and you strike out with your fists, you curse and you swear to make them recognize you ..." might appear emotional, but it really works with the ones who take and accept some responsibility to conduct and lead a group of people to a destination.

Teachers in general and second language teachers in particular can make a difference in the second language learners. Teachers must be culturally aware of the language they are teaching and they must see themselves and students as being participants in and products of a culturally diverse society and world.

Presentation of Culture Materials

Presenting the materials without incorporating culture into them will soon prove boring and frustrating. This is to suggest that teachers play a great role in leading a prosperous, communicative, productive, promising and happy classroom, especially if they are determined to produce successful communicators in the society with the second language users or foreigners. Teachers can make a difference by understanding that all individuals seek validation and historic and current reactions to a cultural and ethnic presence acquiring something new (of cultural type, of course).

Initiate Analysis and Integration

Mainly, teachers, with well designed materials and analyzed situational factors, first initiate appreciating and incorporating culture into the second language classroom by analyzing students' needs and their own needs at the same time. Through getting familiar with the aspects relating to products (e.g., foods, games, literature and laws), practices (e.g., customs, patterns of social interactions) and perspectives (e.g., beliefs, values and ideas), they can provide a better second language milieu. Also, if the teachers keep themselves up-to-date with the cultural change(s), as a result of political, economic and social impact, they can represent the community whose language they are teaching. They should, as a part of teaching program, explain everyday cultural practices and products in places where the target language is being spoken, and dispel stereotypical images associated with the culture. A successful S/F language teacher is the one who deeply understands and models culturally appropriate social behaviors such as ceremonies, bartering and interpersonal relationships in places where the target language is spoken, and analyzes historical and contemporary literatures and the arts in order to explain the cultural practices and perspectives of the people of the target culture.

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