

The Cultural Aspect of Foreign Languages Teaching at Primary School in Turkey

Türkoğlu Sadık

Atatürk University, Erzurum, Turkey

Koçer Ömer

Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University, Çanakkale, Turkey

Learning a foreign language is a new concept at primary school in Turkey. Even if the Minister of National Education has been thinking of it for a long time, it has only been compulsory since 2006. Pedagogues are still doing research on the way to teach a new language to children. One of the ideas is to base this new learning on cultural contents. This method respects the close link between language and culture. Moreover, using a cultural base is an efficient way to interest children and open their minds. This method can be efficient if we join together some parameters: a motivated teacher (who works alone or with a staff), cultural contents adapted to the age and the interests of children, a frequent use of foreign language as a way of communication, a work in link with other subjects of the primary school and the use of genuine and varied supports. Such a work helps pupils to build their personalities and progress with the foreign language.

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Introduction

What is understood generally by saying the concepts “culture” and “language”? The term of culture is described as many lives styles and one of the most used terms in all societies. As to language, it is a complete system of signs according to Ferdinand de Saussure (1916). But these two terms have been a controversial subject regarding their interaction. Which one affects the other one? This can be thought of as a dilemma question which cannot be answered yet and also will not be answered. When we look at the relationship between the language and culture, it is a fact that a close relationship occurs between them (Klippel, 1995). Pulverness (1999) emphasized this relationship by putting stress on social circumstances which shape language. A similar view was expressed by Bassnett-McGuire (1980) to indicate the inseparability of language and culture:

No language can exist unless it is steeped in the context of culture; and no culture can exist which does not have at its center, the structure of natural language. Language, then, is the heart within the body of culture, and it is the interaction between the two that results in the continuation of life-energy. (p. 14)

According to Akarsu (1988), culture and language cannot be separated from each other and both terms develop in a unity. A society being superior in one area is bound to be superior in another, too. In fact, the relationship between language and culture becomes obvious when the definitions provided for them are carefully examined.

Türkoğlu Sadık, assistant professor, French Language Teaching Department, Faculty of Education, Atatürk University.

Koçer Ömer, assistant researcher, Turkish Language Teaching Department, Faculty of Education, Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University.

Torop (2002) wrote that culture has its own languages or sign systems which members of the culture use to communicate. According to Peterson and Coltrane (1995), language reflects culture and hence cultural knowledge is a must in learning a foreign language. Klippel (1995) drew attention to the same point by stating that “learning a language therefore implies learning something about culture as well” (p. 25). Students can have a better command of the foreign language if they gain background knowledge and understand about the cultures using the language they learn.

The language does not exist apart from culture. For this reason, different people learning each others’ languages are actually creating a mutual understanding among themselves regarding culture. From this definition, we can clearly see the relationship between language and culture when a language learner tries to understand any situation or transmit any desire to others and when he/she cannot succeed it although his/her all grammatical phrases are correct (Courchêne, 1996; Vogel & Cormeraie, 1996). As a conclusion, we can state that the history of language is basically the history of culture.

Over the last two decades, with the increase of the studies related to the relationship between culture and language, a lot of researches have been carried out on the subject of making language courses with cultural contents of a new language (Singerman, 1988; Galisson, 1991; LeBlanc, Courtel, & Trescases, 1990; Flewelling, 1994; Courchene, 1996; Laforge, 1993; Mitchell, 1995). Over the last decade, Turkish researchers have made many studies supporting language education based on cultural contents (Bada & Genç, 2005; Elyıldırım, 2008; Türkan & Çelik, 2006).

Cultural Content in Language Teaching Process

It is often mentioned by researchers that designing language courses with cultural contents can be a new approach in foreign language education. Actually, when we looked at the other factors accelerating this new approach as a new language teaching method, the existing language teaching methods take their places on the first order. Today, in literature publications, the most used language teaching methods tested their applicability are mentioned as translation method, natural method, auditory-linguistic method, contact method, selective method and audio-visual method. Many other methods are mentioned besides these. It is said that there have been 40 language teaching methods across the world (Tarcan, 2004). However, many of these methods fell behind in practice (Tarcan, 2004). It was stated that these deficiencies in language teaching are as a result of anthropology studies in USA, especially during the period of World War I and II, and it was seen obviously the relationship between language and culture (Demircan, 1990).

Understanding and comparing cultures have been a significant part of language teaching and a new language cannot be taught in isolation from its culture (Rivers, 1981, p. 315). In Europe, when we looked at the cultural studies developed in foreign language teaching, and in the 1990s, the cultural syllabus was supported by research in the National Core French Study of Canada (Flewelling, 1994).

Cultural Content in Language Skills

According to Xue-Wei and Ying-Jun (2006), accounting for the roles that cultural contents play in language learning and teaching, it is necessary to demonstrate the functions it may perform in the components of language learning and teaching, such as listening, speaking, reading and translating. They said that listening activity is closely related to the culture, politics, and economy of the language which students learn. For example, if a student hears a sentence like: “Il conduit comme un Marseille” which means in English “He

drives the car like a native of Marseille”, he will not find it difficult to understand the structure of the sentence. But, if he does not know that a native of Marseille sometimes does not obey the traffic rules by driving, he cannot understand the exact cultural meaning.

They explain the influence of cultural contents on speaking skills by giving an example as mentioned follow:

There is a young interpreter whose pronunciation is standardized and natural. The first time he was appointed to accompany a foreign guest, he tried to do everything he could to show he was enthusiastic, kind, considerate, and competent. He tried to be attentive as possible by saying “You come this way.” “You sit here.” “Don’t go too fast.” “Follow me.” “Don’t be late.” But the next day, it came to him as a shocked surprise that the foreigner didn’t want to go with him, because the foreigner thought the young interpreter was not polite. In the foreigner’s eyes, the interpreter is not helping him, but scolding him as scolding a child. There is no problem in the interpreter’s English, but the lack of the cultural background knowledge makes him incompetent for this job. (p. 4)

The story is simple, yet it says something important. In the course of oral communication, speakers should pay a lot of attention to the context, i.e., what you are saying, to whom you are saying it, when and where you are saying it, etc..

They explained the influence of cultural contents on reading skills by giving a meaningful example as mentioned follow:

After dinner, when I was thinking on the croquet lawn with Mr. Churchill, he reverted to this theme, and I asked whether for him, the arch anti-Communist, this was not bowing down in the house of Rimmon. Mr. Churchill replied, “Not at all. I have only one purpose, the destruction of Hitler, and any life is much simplified thereby. If Hitler invaded Hell, I would make at least a favorable reference to the devil in the House of Commons”. (p. 5)

In the above paragraph, Churchill quoted three religious allusions: The first one is “bow down in the house of Rimmon” which comes from the *Bible* meaning “Doing things against one’s willingness”; The second one is “Hell”; and the third one is “the devil”. If we do not know the three allusions, we can not fully understand that Churchill likened Communist USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) to “Hell” and the Soviet Communist to the “devil”.

As to the effects of cultural contents on translating, for example, “je n’étais pas Pygmalion, j’étais Frankenstein”, there are two points that may puzzle us: One is “Pygmalion” and the other is “Frankenstein”. We can see that they are the names of two persons, but who are they? In fact, Pygmalion is the King of Cyprus in Greek fairy tales. Once he carved a statue of a very beautiful young lady and fell in love with “her”. Because of his pious love, Aphrodite, the Goddess of Love gave the statue life, and at last, Pygmalion married her. Frankenstein was a character in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, who was a young medical college student. He invented a monster, but that monster destroyed him. From the above background knowledge, we can see that “Pygmalion” means “to enjoy one’s own creation”, while “Frankenstein” means “to suffer from one’s own actions”. So, the success in translating this sentence does not solely depend on understanding its structure but is determined by the knowledge of the cultural load of the two terms carried respectively.

When we look at the effects of cultural contents in foreign language teaching, the question becomes very meaningful to ask that whether a new language can be learnt without being familiar with its culture.

Culture is perceived as a means of communication among societies. And it is an important key for international cooperation (Byram, 1989). According to him:

- (1) The one learning a foreign language must learn required information and get communication skills in

terms of communication;

(2) Learning the cultural elements of communication does not mean to get rid of his/her own culture. That type of transformation can be facilitated by state policies. For instance, cultural studies in Germany are so-called but for providing cultural communication;

(3) The foreign language needs of Turks are not cultural but technical.

In a conference named *The Meaning and Role of Culture in Foreign Language Teaching* at Georgetown University (USA) in Institute of Linguistics in 1961 and in a text "Report on Results of French Group Work Session" written by a professor, Alphonse V. Roche from Northwestern University, it was stated that the necessity of cultural contents will be a language teaching approach. Roche showed how the French language can be learned by this approach. By taking into consideration about the age range of students, he has arranged subjects related to the culture of that society for teaching French with this approach:

(1) Age 1-7: Life in Paris, rural and urban life, French nationality, history of France, etc.;

(2) Age 8-13: Structure of French society, the clergy, middle class, national education, the community, the past and today France.

On analyzing the cultural contents prepared by Roche for teaching French, it can be said that prescribed subjects for students have been chosen according to the interests and age of the students. According to the report prepared by the French ministry of education (ONISEP, 2003), cultural contents contribute to the development of general formation of learners. These contents facilitate the information and make the thoughts restructure. That is to say, they enable learners to acquire diversity in their thoughts.

When we looked at language teaching in Turkey, foreign languages which have been taught in school curricula are Arabic, German, Chinese, French, English, Spanish, Italian, Japanese, and Russian. Though English language does not seem as a compulsory one, many students learn English. Percentage of foreign languages taught in Turkish primary schools are German (0.036%), French (0.005%), English (99.9%), and Russian (0.013%), and in Elementary schools German (0.507%), French (0.109%), English (99.3%), and Russian (0.019%).

It has long been a matter investigated by researchers that foreign languages have not been taught properly for years in educational institutions. The most significant point remarked by experts in this matter is that general education is mostly based on teaching grammar. According to Demirel (1999), this is a big mistake in foreign language teaching. He added that he has been studying this subject for 30 years and witnessed many problems in language teaching, and for these reasons, a new approach must be applied in solving these language teaching problems.

From this point of view, it can be said that new approaches can be applied for teaching foreign languages in Turkey. Moreover, by beginning to teach children a foreign language with the help of the Neurolinguistic approach and selecting appropriate cultural contents according to the age and interest of children, learners can be motivated to learn. For example, according to Tseng (2002, p. 2), reading a foreign language text and having the cultural background of that language not only motivates the learner but also enables him/her to understand the text easily and rapidly. According to Rosberg (1995), the foreign language courses with cultural contents and a motivated teacher motivate the students to learn. For this, foreign language courses must be actual and meaningful. He also emphasized that students could be more inclined to learn a foreign language only if the teachers are more attentive in choosing course books which do not include stereotype views of that language but ones including supplementary cultural contents (Rosberg, 1995, p. 6).

When we look at the situation in Turkey, cultural content is often neglected in the textbooks. To illustrate the cultural content of an English foreign language textbook for Turkey, “Spotlight on English” by Dede and Emre (1988) is totally Turkish. The main themes include Turkish food, history and weather, and all topics discussed in English. When the textbook characters travel, this is done only in Turkey, even though some characters are English-speaking visitors to the country. The implication is that students learn English to talk with visitors who come to their country, but they are not expected to travel to English-speaking countries or learn about English-speaking cultures. If they speak with visitors, they can only do so within their Turkish cultural framework, because they have not encountered cultural alternatives, and are, therefore, likely to carry their home culture with them in their use of English. Thus, paradoxically, unless native speaker visitors are already familiar with the Turkish culture, they may have problems understanding the Turkish speakers of English due to potentially conflicting cultural norms. In other words, native and non-native speakers use the same language, but communicate on different cultural wavelengths, uninformed about each other’s cultural views and values—a classic setup for miscommunication.

According to Çakır (2006), some teachers in foreign language courses are hardly aware of the necessity of cultural contents in Turkey. Communication is seen as the application of grammatical rules in oral and written practice. In some case, learning about the culture contents of a new language is taken as a threat to the native values and the importance of linguistically relevant information is neglected. Since having close contact with the cultural contents of the new language and its speakers is a rare opportunity for all language learners in our country, learners cannot appreciate the importance of learning the cultural aspects of communication unless they visit a foreign country and experience the difficulties (Çakır, 2006).

One other parameter paying attention to foreign language education realized by cultural contents is an interdisciplinary approach. For example, in a text taken from “Bridging the Cultural Gap” by Carté and Fox (2008), it is stated that:

It is normal when the children discover many way of live of other countries adopting a transdisciplinarity attitude. The connection established between learning foreign culture and assembly of the program can be beneficial at the same time for other disciplines and knowledge of the countries. (p. 60)

As to Turkey, there could be four reasons why not teach foreign language education with cultural contents of that language.

(1) Selected books: In selecting the course books, most being inadequate on cultural contents and two phenomena occur in our mind, either the state hesitates that the students will be affected by other cultures and they will lose their own culture. For this reason, the state consciously selects these books or the state cannot figure out the significance of cultural factors in language teaching. When we think of how many people have academic skills among the state’s staff who are responsible for selecting these books, the second option seems less possible;

(2) Teachers: Many teachers being educated from their childhood in the Turkish education system apply their early methods to their students. As a result, the teachers overlook the cultural contents in their lessons. Moreover, teachers have no opportunity to go abroad and communicate with a native person speaking the target language they aim to teach. Hereby, it needs extra effort for teachers who cannot experience the importance of cultural contents via real life. It will be difficult for them to be aware of this cultural awareness;

(3) Point of view: Understood by students, teachers, parents, and many people learning a foreign language

and those thinking of learning a new language, this false point of view in Turkey is perceived as if a new language were learned by vocabularies and grammar rules.

The results of inadequate cultural contents in lessons appear like making fun of people being different from them, perceiving the others as if they were horrible ones and being misunderstood when doing someone a favor. It seems that there are many examples related to this situation:

(1) Our people make fun of men coming from abroad because of their earrings, long hair or clothing styles;

(2) Our people are prejudicial to women coming from abroad because of their clothing styles perceived as ordinary in their culture;

(3) Our people want to give a seat to an old lady when abroad, and as a result, they are blamed for being rude;

(4) Our people leave the tray on the table in a fast food restaurant, but abroad they have been warned for this, because that is self-service custom in abroad.

Some significant points for transferring the cultural contents effectively in foreign language classes are:

(1) Teachers should make their students watch films including natural situations and native people and then those situations taking place in films must be staged by the students;

(2) Though course books are sometimes deficient, teachers must bring to the class materials including cultural items for a discussion among students, and as a result, the awareness of students can develop.

According to Dunnett, Dubin, and Lezberg (1986, pp. 157-160):

(1) The top management should lay stress on transferring the cultural contents as well as in other subjects like teaching grammar and vocabularies; (2) Foreign language courses should be ordered in order to transfer cultural contents effectively or other courses should be organized for this transferring out of official courses; (3) The concept of culture must be also stated in teacher training programs; (4) Teachers should investigate whether cultural contents are transferred successfully or not while selecting the course books.

Conclusions

Learning a foreign language is compulsory at primary school in Turkey since 2006. If experts come to an agreement on how the courses can be organized for fourth and fifth grades and how and which lessons can be taught, if teachers improve the foreign language teaching strategies and if the foreign language teaching approaches in abroad aiming at teach cultural contents are supported by pilot studies, it can minimize the problems to some degree in foreign language education in our country.

For the culture in which a person lives is different from another, having knowledge about that culture for communicating will make communication easy and prevent potential misunderstandings and problems. For this reason, while teaching a foreign language, cultural contents must be the first order. Otherwise, it is possible that students will have difficulties because of not having enough knowledge of cultural contents. In order to avoid these situations, it can be said that the foreign language courses books used in instruction should be overviewed again and books conveying the cultural contents efficiently should be selected.

Cultural contents in foreign language education will increase motivation of students as well as grammatical rules of that language. Doing this, the new language will be more meaningful for learners, but also it will be more enjoyable and takes no more time to learn. Furthermore, having knowledge about the other cultures will make students aware of the other point of view in the world. This will motivate the students and

increase their learning speed. Also, it will contribute to the student's interaction with the other people. In sum, language learning cannot be detached from the cultural content and it inherently carries to the language classrooms.

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