

Culture Understanding in Foreign Language Teaching

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Abstract

In the course of foreign language teaching, the priority should always be given to increase international understanding by enabling the students to enter into the life, thought, and literature of people who speak another language. The objective may vary from one period to another, but it should long be present in the thinking of our minds. The following words attempt to explore the importance of culture teaching and relevant activities so as to raise our awareness of the significance of culture understanding in our teaching.

Keywords: Culture understanding, Culture teaching, Devices, Activity

Cultural understanding has been a program, a vision, a chance of defining a new role for language teachers and the time has arrived when the social significance of this international cultural understanding is becoming more apparent. This inevitably raises the question as to what it is most important to mediate within the cultural dimension - in its new, broad interpretation. We all know that understanding a language involves not only knowledge of grammar, phonology and lexis but also a certain features and characteristics of the culture. In 1904, in his book *How to Teach Foreign Language*, Jespersen stated that “the highest purpose in the teaching of languages may perhaps be said to be the access to the best thoughts and institutions of a foreign nation, its literature, culture—in short, the spirit of the nation in the widest sense of the word.” It maybe well to ask ourselves whether such idealistic aims have been realized in practice, whether international understanding can be said to have been prompted by the considerable amount of language teaching in schools around the world. Realizing it or not, language teachers cannot avoid conveying impressions of another culture. Language cannot be separated from the culture in which it is deeply embedded. By failing to draw students’ attention to the cultural elements and to discuss their implication, the teachers allow misconceptions to develop in the students’ minds. Mere fluency in utterance in a foreign language without any awareness of their culture implications or of their proper situational use, or the reading of a material without a realization of the values would certainly lead to a total failure in language learning in any sense of liberal education. But what and how to teach are still the two problems faced by foreign language teachers. They are more than problems of teaching method because they are also influenced many factors. And the following notes attempt to explore the issue of culture teaching in EFL classroom from several aspects.

1. The importance of culture teaching

Culture is all pervasive and complex, which is reflected in every aspect of life. And obviously, language is the key to the cultural heritage of another people or that knowledge of another language enables individuals to increase their personal culture through contact with great minds and literatures.

The culture of a people, in its broad sense, refers to all aspects of shared life in community. We growing up in a social group learn ways of looking at things, doing things, expressing things and solving certain problems in certain ways. We also learn to value something and despise or avoid other things. These attitudes, reactions and emotions become part of our ways of life without being conscious of them. Yet these culturally determined features actually have rooted in a deeper and more significant social conventions, relations and assumptions which are composed of the main stream of a culture of a people. A language is learned and used within such a context, drawing from the culture distinctive meanings and functions which must be assimilated by language learners if they are to control the languages as native speakers control it.

In a country where there is one predominant culture, students will, as they grow up, react in a certain ways and value certain things. So their first encounter with a different set of behavior patterns may turn out to be a shock, causing them to consider the speakers of the language as offensive or rude. For instance, the friendly Chinese greeting “Where are you going?” may receive surprising refusal from people of foreign cultures. In a society where individuals must never admit what they are wearing is valuable or in good taste, the reply of “thank you” to a compliment may be considered an indication of a certain conceit, whereas it is the normal response to American. In every language, these situations may emerge to puzzle and perturb the monolingual students.

Since most of our students live in monolingual environment, it is not surprising that they are “culture bound.” The

MLA report once define the culture-bound person as one “whose entire view of the world is determined by the value-perspective he has gained through a single cultural environment—who thus couldn’t understand or accept the point view of another individual whose values have been determined by a different culture...He makes premature and inappropriate value judgments. He is limited in his understanding of the world”. So the study of a foreign language should bring students the awareness that there are more than one way of looking at things and expressing things, and differences do not necessarily represent moral issues of right and wrong. The study of a foreign culture thus becomes a liberating experience in that students are encouraged to develop tolerance of other viewpoints and other forms of thinking and behaving while understanding those of their own society or culture better.

2. Culture teaching devices

2.1 Describing and explaining the culture

One of the commonest methods of presenting the cultural information has been by exposition and explanation. For this method, teachers could choose to talk the geography, the history, the literature, the art, the scientific achievements and the small details of a foreign people. These culture talks could be part of their subject teaching or some special topics particularly for foreign culture teaching. Actually, sometimes, it could be replaced by some new approaches. For example, this information could be presented by groups of students or by individual students. In the beginning, when culture readings are supplementing basic language practice, it may be prepared by the students in their native language. As soon as they have a higher command of language, they could present them in target language, which can be an exciting exchange of idea, both in class and at some out-of-class occasions. Of course, these two methods are, to some extent, lack of variety and inspiration. So we suggest that these presentations from teachers or students be accompanied by visual illustration in the form of charts, diagrams, maps, and pictures, with films and slides where it is necessary and available.

2.2 Experiencing culture through language use

While trying the first method, we may encounter such a problem: Can we take time in our language class for the teaching of culture background in this way? There is another approach which doesn’t take time from the essential work of language learning, that is, teaching for culture understanding is fully integrated with the process of assimilation of syntax and vocabulary. Since language is closely interwoven with every aspect of culture, this approach is possible, when the teachers involved are well informed and alert to cultural differences and thus, their students absorb the meaning in many small ways. This awareness should be part of every language teaching classroom where the teacher should orient the thinking of the students so that they will feel curious about such differences and become observant as they listen and read, applying what they have perceived in their active oral work.

2.3 Dialogues and mini-dramas

Usually, in a conventional teacher-student situation, students feel foolish if asked to respond in a foreign way with an accurate imitation of the sounds of the language and with appropriate gestures. In this case, situations are proposed which students then act out in a culturally authentic fashion, a common method used in language teaching called dialogue or mini-drama. Each dialogue should be constructed around an experience compatible with the age and interests of the students. As students become familiar with the dialogue and act it out, they can learn through role playing how to interact with all kinds of people, as they did in their own culture. Such experience are valuable than many lines of comment and explanation.

In terms of the material, some textbooks deliberately began with dialogues reflecting common and everyday experience of the students in their native culture. But acting out dialogues of this type confirms the impression of many students that the new language is the native language in a new dress which students are very familiar with in any case. In other textbooks, one finds the dialogue are deliberately kept “culturally neutral” which will be inevitably interpreted by the students as familiar patterns of their own cultures. The two cases are, to some degree, deprive the students from being exposed to the real situation, and thus should be avoided. So authenticity of situational material is extremely valuable as the dialogue or drama reading faithfully reflects the behaviors in the target culture.

2.4 Role playing

After students have learned acted-out dialogues or dramatized situations from the early stage, they are encouraged to try to use what they have learned freely and spontaneously in communications. They may also use the skills in developing their own skits. If they are encouraged to look upon much of their language learning as role playing, they are more likely to carry this over into classroom conversations with contents, gestures, and reaction to simulate a situation in the second culture. Undoubtedly, the students will be able to do this more successfully as their

knowledge of the foreign culture increases.

Besides, students could invent their own situations based on their understanding of the daily life, or the imitation of a foreign film (their own version), and then discuss which presentation most authentically represents cultural viewpoints, relationships, and general behavior.

2.5 Other popular activities within culture

a. songs and dances

It is always suggested that a sense of reality should be brought into the classroom when students have the opportunity to enjoy the types of activities native speakers of the language enjoy. Some classrooms invite the celebration of native festivals, the national sports, or the local cooking with the language they are learning. If such activities seem to be impossible, it is always possible to introduce the students some songs or dances of the foreign people.

The types of songs or dances people choose in moments of happiness, in moments of fervor, or in moments of depression reflect the things they prize, the things that amuse them, the thing they fear. Students are fond of such experience when they are given the chance to feel the foreign culture with appropriate action and atmosphere, and of course, opportunity should be taken to teach them within a certain context of explanation, illustration and discussion which will breathe cultural life into them.

The lyrics should not be expressed in language too difficult for the students at the early stage of their learning or in language specifically dialectal. Scripts of the words should be available and records or cassettes will prove useful if the teachers cannot lead the singing.

b. pictures

Suitable pictures with authentic cultural setting will bring many of the lessons to life. Many may be found in the pages of illustrated magazines. Often advertisements in magazines portray natural situations and the activities of people of different ages, social groups. In choosing pictures for teaching purposes, we must avoid those that are cluttered with too much detail. The pictures should be illustrative of one main aspect of cultural behavior which is clearly depicted.

c. films

Film is a vivid medium of presentation, so it is imperative that it should not give a distorted picture of the life of the people. Since only a few films are suitable for a program where cultural knowledge is integrated completely with language learning, we should be alert to selection of the subject.

d. bulletin board

Another means of making life in the country where the language is spoken seem real and contemporary is the keeping of an up-to-date bulletin board in the language classroom. On this board will be affixed news of current events, new ventures, works of art, cartoons, proverbs, which usually contain the folk wisdom of a race and are often a significant index to the value system.

The daily news is a rich source of cultural information. News may be recorded from short-wave broadcasts and made available in the language laboratory, or extracted regularly from the foreign magazines and newspapers, or more conveniently, downloaded from the internet. Students are expected to give a brief news report as assignment or to discuss the cultural importance of certain events with the teachers' explanation.

e. inviting native speakers

From time to time, native speakers should be invited to the language classroom. Students can ask them questions that have long puzzled them and thus get a clearer understanding of the background. Regular communication and exchanging views would help to improve the mutual understanding and trust and respect of different cultures which is one of the outmost goals of our language teaching and learning.

More and more, at the advanced level, or for the English majors, students could be offered courses directly concerned with the culture of the countries where the language is spoken. There may be several kinds.

A sequenced presentation of all aspects of the culture, with reading, exposition, discussion, illustration by films, slides, maps and other visual means;

A contrastive study of the target culture and the culture of the language learners;

Interdisciplinary courses in which students study the history, sociology, fine arts, or philosophy of the country;

A conversationally oriented course in which students learn much about the country and the culture so that they may

interact orally in a more effective and sympathetic way with speakers of the language;

Contemporary culture studies through literary texts.

3. Goals for culture teaching

Culture teaching is a long and complex process concerning something more than language use itself. In doing the above activities, the aim is to increase students' awareness and to develop their curiosity towards the target culture and their own, helping them to make comparisons among cultures. The comparisons are not meant to underestimate any of the cultures being analyzed, but to enrich students' experience and to make them aware that although some culture elements are being globalized, there is still diversity among cultures. This diversity should then be understood, and never underestimated. Then where should we go and what to achieve in this field is the next important lesson to deal with. Several goals are thus proposed by Seelye in which student are supposed to demonstrate that they have acquired certain understandings, abilities, and attitudes:

That they understand that people act the way they do because they are using the options the society allows for satisfying basic physical and psychological needs;

That they understand that such social variables as age, sex, social class, and the place of residence affect the way people speak and behave;

That they can demonstrate how people conventionally act in the most common mundane and crisis situations in the target language;

That they are able to evaluate the relative strength of a generality concerning the target culture in terms of the amount of evidence substantiating the statement;

That they have developed the skills needed to locate and organize material about the target culture from the library, mass media, and personal observation;

That they possess the curiosity about the target culture and empathy toward its people.

It goes without saying that foreign language teachers should be foreign culture teachers, having the ability to experience and analyze both the home and target cultures. And teachers of the culture of a linguistic community need informed insight into the culture to be taught and informed insight into the culture of the language learners. Whether native speaker or foreign-language teacher, those wishing to present another culture in a way which may foster intercultural understanding and appreciation will need to acquire special knowledge of how cultures are organized—their value system, their institutions, their interpersonal relationships. Where possible, teachers should live for some time in both the cultures to be taught. If this is not possible, we must compensate for the lack by disciplined reading. We must read what the people living in the culture read (books, newspapers, magazines), listen to the radio and watch the television broadcasts where accessible, and watch films made of local consumption. Whenever possible, we should contact with native speakers, discussing all kinds of subjects with them and in this way we could educate ourselves in cultural interpretation. Finally, by teaching about other cultures, foreign language educators do not necessarily nip prejudice in the bud, so to speak; cultural bias can still plague the very aspects of the target culture which teachers 'choose to indict or advocate', as Cormeraie (1997) insightfully remarks. The teachers of another culture must develop sensitivity toward the attitudes of the students toward their own and other culture, moving delicately toward attitude change. Above all, native teachers and foreign-language teachers alike must overcome the temptation to demonstrate the superiority of one culture over another. Hopefully, the above lines have contrived to clarify most of the issues it set out to investigate, and have helped contribute to a better understanding of culture and its importance in the foreign language classroom.

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