Intertwining Language Teaching with Culture: Promoting Intercultural Communication

Tifour Naima*, Department of English-Tlemcen University, Algeria.
n.tifour@yahoo.com

Pr. Dendane Zoubir, Department of English-Tlemcen University, Algeria
z.dendane@yahoo.com

Abstract

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The era we are living in is characterized by the shrinkage of time and space bringing together different societies with their respective technologies, economies, politics, cultures and languages. That integration, referred to as globalization urged communities to form global citizens in their educational institutions, so as not to fall out of this interconnected world. A global citizen is required, above all, to acquire intercultural communicative competence. Out of those considerations, theorists have begun to develop language teaching approaches that promote intercultural communication. Applied linguists and teachers have started, on their part, to look for appropriate curricula, methods and techniques for the implementation of those approaches. This paper has reviewed the theoretical works in the field of intercultural communication pedagogy. It has compiled some quotations defining culture, and has shed light on the fact that culture is tinged in language. It has recapitulated the approaches, methods and techniques used in the teaching of culture. The article has argued for an eclectic approach which helps the learners accept and straddle different culture.

*Corresponding author

1. Introduction

Among the requirements of globalization is the acquisition of intercultural communication competence. Anintercultural speaker needs to straddle different cultures. He is not required to drop his native culture and completely adopt foreign cultures, but he should be able to select from a third space, constituted from a hybrid culture, those forms of accuracy and those forms of appropriateness that are called for in a given social context of use. A hybrid culture grows in the interstices between the cultures an individual grew up in and the new cultures he or she is being introduced to.

Regarding the importance of incorporating the teaching of culture in second language classes, theorists began to develop language teaching approaches that promote intercultural communication. Applied linguists and teachers started, on their part, to look for appropriate methods and techniques for the implementation of those approaches.

The present article recapitulates briefly the theoretical works in the field of intercultural communication pedagogy, and suggests an eclectic approach from which a number of techniques, that help the Algerian learners of English acquire a hybrid culture located in a third space between their native culture and the British one. The learners will then be invited to navigate in this third space when communicating.

2. Definition of Culture

Culture is a notoriously difficult concept to define. For Arnold (1867), culture refers to special intellectual or artistic endeavours. Avruch (1998) considers this definition as being established on aesthetic rather than scientific basis. He adds that, by this definition, only a portion of any social community has culture and the rest are potential sources of anarchy.As a reaction to Arnold's definition, Taylor (1870) stated that culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by members of a society, pointing out that all folks have culture. However, he claimed that all social groups could be aligned on an evolutionary continuum from savagery through barbarism to civilization. Boas, as stated in Elliot (2002), dismissed the value judgments he found inherited in both Arnoldian and Taylorian views of culture. Peck (1998) defines culture as the accepted and patterned ways of behaviour of a given community. Brown's definition (2007: 122) incorporates both material manifestations of culture that are easily seen, and non-material ones that are more difficult to observe. Indeed, he defines culture as "the ideas, customs, skills, arts, tools that characterize a given group of people in a given period of time".

A glance at the previous historical perspective of some of the ways in which the term culture has been interpreted shows that, during the early years of the nineteenth century, 'culture' was restricted to what we might today call 'high culture'. Later, definitions of the concept of culture began to become more comprehensive, including, besides artistic and intellectual products, other facets of social groups, such as beliefs, customs, and behaviour. However, it was still believed that certain cultures were advanced while others were backward, and some were civilized and polite while others were vulgar and rude, what caused the notion of culture to remain value-laden until the early years of the twentieth century.

3. Some Key Characteristics of Culture

Schein (1984) argues that culture is manifested at different layers of depth. Indeed, when analysing a particular organisation, one observes that the culture of this group manifests itself at three fundamental levels: artefacts, values, and basic underlying assumptions. The observable artefacts are the material objects and possessions acquired by this group of people in the course of generations through individual and group

striving. To analyse why a group members behave the way they do, we often look at the espoused values that govern their behaviour. Nevertheless, as a value leads to behaviour, and as that behaviour begins to solve the problem that prompted it, the value is gradually transformed into an underlying assumption about how things are. As the assumption is increasingly taken for granted, it drops out of awareness and becomes unconscious.

Moreover, and as stated by Ferraro (1998), culture is associated with social groups. Therefore, for an idea, an object, or behaviour to be considered cultural, some type of social group must share it. Culture is not something that an individual alone can possess. He adds that the various parts of a culture are all, to some degree, interrelated. This means that all the components of a culture should fit together in some logical fashion.

No culture ever remains changeless. Ferraro (1998) says that all cultures fall somewhere on a continuum between static and dynamic depending on how quickly they accept change.

Culture is learnt not inherited. It derives from one's social environment, not from one's genes. It is passed along by communication and imitation from one generation to the next. Two babies born at the same time, but in two different parts of the globe will respond to physical and social stimuli in very different ways. The fact that culture is socially transmitted was already stated in Taylor's definition.

Language is the main vehicle of culture, it makes it possible for the present generation to know about and understand the achievements of earlier generations. Conscious awareness of cultural standards is, however, limited.

Another important characteristic of culture is that it affects behaviour and interpretations of behaviour. Seelye (1993) insists that culture shapes our thoughts and actions, and often does so with a heavy hand. Failure to behave within the prescribed norms may lead to sanctions. So

culture is manifested within boundaries of acceptable behaviour.

Matsumoto (1996) observes that culture is both an individual and a social construct. Indeed, while the norms of any culture should be relevant to all the people within that culture, it is also true that those norms will be relevant in different degrees for different people. Individual differences in culture can be observed among people in the degree to which they adopt and engage in the attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviours that constitute their culture.

Culture is gratifying, because it provides proper opportunities for the satisfaction of our biological, psychological, and social needs.[1] What is more, according to Kallenbach & Hodges (1963), is that culture channels biological processes such as vomiting, sneezing, weeping…

To sum up, we may say that culture is manifested at different layers of depth: artefacts, values and basic underlying assumptions. Culture is comprehensive in that it embraces all aspects of human life. It shapes our thoughts and actions and even the biological processes are caught into cultural beliefs. Culture is however not individual, it is associated with social groups, learnt, and transmitted from one generation to the next via language.

4. Language and Culture

It is clear that language is tinged with culture. Indeed, when we talk we assume social and cultural roles, which are so deeply entrenched in our thought processes at a point that we may assume them unconsciously.

As early as in the 1920s, anthropologists started stating that there exists a close relationship between language andculture. Malinowski observed that in the Trobriand Islands in the east of New Guinea, the meaning of the word greatly depended upon its occurrence in a given context. Influenced by this anthropological view of language, Firth developed his theory of

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[1] Retrieved from: http//www. studylecturenotes.com/

'context of situation' in 1957. Halliday (1978:28)[2] delineates his conception of Firth's theory as follows:

> What the 'context of situation' implies is that language comes to life only when functioning in some environment. We do not experience language in isolation- if we did we would not recognise it as language- but always in a relation to a scenario, some backgrounds of persons and actions and events from which the things which are said derive their meaning. This is referred to as the 'situation', so language is said to function in contexts of situation' and any account of language which fails to build in the situation as an essential ingredient is likely to be artificial and unrewarding.

So, for Halliday (1978), culture and communication are inseparable because culture not only dictates who talks to whom, about what, and how communication proceeds, but it also helps to determine how people encode messages, the meaning they have for messages, and the circumstances under which messages may or may not be sent or interpreted.

Sapir (1921) argued that Language does not exist apart from the socially inherited assemblage of practices and beliefs that determine the texture of our lives. In other words, language does not exist outside culture. For Bourdieu (1982: 31):

> Language is a set of practices that imply not only a particular system of words and grammatical rules, but also an often forgotten or hidden struggle over the symbolic power of a particular way of communicating, with particular systems of classification, address and reference forms, specialized lexicon and metaphors'. In other words, language is not only grammar and vocabulary it is

interpreted according to the cultural context in which it is used.

Hall (1981) aligns himself with Bourdieu in considering language as 'one of the dominant threads in all cultures'. In the same line of thought, Duranty (1997) defines culture as 'something learnt, transmitted, and passed down from one generation to the next [...] through linguistic communication'. Duranty's view shows that langue plays a pivotal role in cultural transmission. In fact, most recent ethnographers insist that language and culture are inseparably connected.

Clair Kramsch[3] (1998: 4) uses a poem by Emily Dickinson to provide evidence that language and culture are intertwined.

Essential Oils are wrung
> *The Attar from the Rose*
> *Be not expressed by Suns alone*
> *It is the gift of Screws*
> *The General Rose decay*
> *But this in ladies Drawer*
> *Makes Summer When the Lady lies*
> *In Ceaseless Rosemary*

Dickinson's poem expresses in a stylized way the relationship between language and culture. In the poet's speech community roses signify passion and love. So, drawing upon De Saussure's semiotic theory, 'rose' is the signifier; passion and love is the signified, and the passionified roses are the linguistic sign. There is, however, nothing inherently 'passionate' or 'amorous' about roses. They are viewed as such within the context of the poet's culture. Besides, Anglophone readers of the poem who happen not to be members of the poet's speech community will not associate 'rosemary' with its denotation meaning: death. In other words, meaning that language conveys depends greatly on the cultural context in which it is used.

From what precedes, it may be deduced that the language we speak decides upon our belonging or not to a community of ideas and practices; and our way of viewing, the world decides which language

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[2] Qtd in Horsley (2006: 77)

[3] Professor of German foreign language acquisition at the university of California

we may use to represent that world. In other words, our language reveals our culture, and our culture decides which language we will speak.

4. The importance of Incorporating the Teaching of Culture in Foreign Language Classes

For communication via a foreign language to be successful, a speaker needs to use the language not only correctly but also appropriately. This means that, in addition to competence in using grammatical structures and vocabulary, they also, need to be able to deal with language interaction in a variety of situations, at several pragmatic levels, andto use a variety of language registers. The appropriateness also depends on knowing what the taboos of the other culture are, what politeness indices are used in each case, and how a specific attitude is expressed. For instance, It is considered impolite to ask how much a person earns in America, and in parts of the Arab world, it is rude to ask a man how his wife is. In fact, errors of grammar and vocabulary are ignored provided the message is clear, but a cultural blunder can seriously affect how well a foreigner is accepted into the host society. Seelye (1997: 10) says in this vein:

> Learning a language in isolation of its cultural roots prevents one from becoming socialized into its contextual use. Knowledge of linguistic structure alone does not carry with it any special insight into the political, social, religious, or economic system. Or even insight into when you should speak and when you should not.

Cultural instruction seems to bring a solution to all inconveniences that may impedeeffective communication. Moreover, the teaching of culture prepares the students for the acculturation process by reducing negative attitudes towards other cultures, such as considering acculturation as a threat to the ethnic identity. Tomalin and Stempleski (1993: 7-8) have enumerated the goals of cultural instruction. According to

them, the teaching of culture helps the students to:

- Develop an understanding of the fact that all people exhibit culturally conditioned behaviour.
- Develop an understanding that social variables such as age, sex, social class and place of residence influence the way in which people speak and behave.
- Become more aware of conventional behaviour in common situations in the target culture.
- Increase their awareness of the cultural connotations of words and phrases in the target language.
- Develop the ability to evaluate and refine generalizations about the target culture, in terms of supporting evidence.
- Develop the necessary skills to locate and organize information about the target culture.
- Stimulate intellectual curiosity about the target culture, and to encourage empathy towards its people.

This is why language teachers should also be culture teachers.

6. The Common Approaches to Culture Teaching

Risager (1998:242-54) describes four approaches to the teaching of culture: the intercultural approach, the multicultural approach, the trans-cultural approach and the foreign culture approach.

6. 1 The Intercultural Approach

It draws upon the idea that culture is best learnt through comparison of the target and the learners' own culture.

6. 2 The Multicultural Approach

It is based on the idea that in every country a number of sub-cultures exist within one culture. The cultural instruction includes a focus on the ethnic and linguistic diversity of the target culture.

6.3 The Trans-Cultural Approach

The fundamental tenet behind the trans-cultural approach is that due to globalization. This approach advocates the

introduction of topics which are of universal significance in all cultures.

6. 4 The Foreign Culture Approach

It is shaped upon a focus on the target culture, without comparing it to the learners' own culture.

7. Suggested Methods for the teaching of Culture

Stern (1992) suggests the following approaches to teaching culture:

- Creating an authentic classroom environment.
- Providing cultural information.
- Cultural problem solving.
- Providing behavioural and affective aspects of the target culture.
- Cognitive approaches.
- Using literature and humanities to teach culture.
- Real life exposure to the target culture.
- Making use of cultural community resources.

8. Culture Teaching Techniques

From the first day of class, the teacher should prepare authentic material representing the target culture. For instance, the presence in the learning environment of posters, wallpapers, pictures and maps featuring the British culture help students absorb facts about the British way of life. Displaying an instructed material in the learners' surrounding or **peripheral learning**, is based on the assumption that human beings perceive much more from their environment than from conscious learning. Such learning is then processed unconsciously and effortlessly. For example, a poster representing the British Royal Family may let learners infer that Britain is a kingdom not a republic. The teacher does not have to provide any explanation unless if the learners are inquisitive. There should be pictures representing the most practised sports, to show how people of the other culture entertain themselves. The peripheral material should also include a list of the most common British names. If the learners ask how to pronounce them, the teacher seizes the opportunity to explain that most British names have diminutives, and that the use of diminutives in formal situations would not be appropriate. This peripheral learning is used for cultural initiation. It is referred to as 'the cultural island'.

The concept of **culture capsules**, developed by Taylor & Sorenson (1961), is another device based on minimal contrast of features between the learners' culture and the target culture. This contrast should be prepared by the learners and described using authentic objects, power point presentations or any other media. The capsule can be used for a listening or reading session, and then become the basis of a set of communicative tasks. The proficiency level of the learners is, of course, taken into consideration. The inconvenience with the culture capsules is that they cause learners to build stereotypes about the other culture.

Developed by Meade &Morain (1973), the **culture clusters** are groups of two or more illustrated culture capsules on given themes or topics.

To prepare individuals to function in intercultural contexts, psychologists (Fiedler, Mitchell &Triandis, 1971) developed the technique of **cultural assimilators**. An assimilator is a compilation of a number of cultural incidents which seem to embarrass the participants. The following is an example of a cultural incident:

> *You are in a British restaurant. In the next table is sitting a native customer who ordered a steak and some jam. After he is served, he spreads the jam on the steak and starts eating it.*

> 1. You are disgusted
> 2. You think the customer must be used to that.

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3. You think it might be delicious.
4. You want to try it.

The participants are then smoothly led towards the most plausible answer. (Here answer 4). Different assimilators are needed for each pair of cultures. Assimilators can be general or specific. That is to say, they may train individuals to behave effectively in a narrow set of social situations, or for a broader group of situations. Some assimilators emphasize the interpersonal attitudes, and others emphasize the customs of the target culture, and others concentrate on the value contrasts of the two cultures (fiedler et al, 1961). Admitting that culture assimilators cover the most cultural miscommunications within a culture, it might be assumed that the participants become much more tolerant towards the other cultures.

9. Conclusion

Because learning a language in isolation of its cultural roots prevents one from becoming socialized into its contextual use (Seelye 1997), and because our language reveals our culture, and our culture decides which language we will speak, it is then important to integrate the teaching of culture with the teaching of a foreign language. The ideal way would probably be the use of an eclectic approach with appropriate and realistic techniques which better serve the promotion of intercultural communication.

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