Language, Culture and ELT

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Abstract: *There is, however, a rather old view which considered culture as something which is found only in the "cultured circles": opera houses, universities and literary salons. A balanced definition of culture, however, must set aside the traditional dichotomy between the sense of culture as something that is found in every aspect of life and the other sense according to which culture is only found in belles letters. Culture "must consist of the end-product of learning: knowledge in a most general. Sense of the word" (Good enough: 1957, in Hudson: 1980]. This means that the study of the works of art and literature cannot be ignored as an important source of cultural knowledge. It can even be said that for students learning foreign languages outside the natural environment, literature may be the only source of introducing the culture of the target language.*

Keywords: *Cultured circles, cultural knowledge, language acquisition, language, target culture foreign languages.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The goal of this article is twofold: to find out how language and culture are related, and to see whether or not it is possible to learn an additional language (foreign or second] without learning about the culture of that particular language. The last few decades have witnessed a radical change in the direction of applied linguistics and educators have changed their perspective regarding language acquisition. Before the 1970's, linguists were occupied with the formal aspects of language such as grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary building. The optimal aim of language teaching was to enable students to produce pure linguistic structures as well as unmistaken "native like" pronunciation. With the development of sociolinguistics as an independent and distinct discipline of language study, linguists started paying more attention to the study of culture believing that "the relation of language to culture is that of part to whole" (Good enough 1957: in Hudson 1980].

Kramsch [1989] identifies two factors that led to the unprecedented interest in putting language teaching in its cultural context: First, the economic and political developments of the 1970's which led language teaching to quit its "ivory tower and become involved in communicating with real people in real environments" [p.l]. Second, language acquisition researches have shed more light on the importance of sociolinguistic competence as an essential part of communication.

2. DISCUSSION

Culture is generally understood in its anthropological sense: "something everybody has" (Hudson: 1980:73]. In this sense, it is defined as a way of life which reflects how we think, feel, and relate to others. It is the glue that binds a group of people together. Larsen and Smalley (1972] define it as a "blueprint" that guides the behaviour of people in a community and is incubated in family life. It governs our behaviour in groups, makes us sensitive to matters of status, and helps us know what others expect of us and what will happen if we do not live up their expectations. Understanding culture helps us balance our roles as individuals and social beings.

Americans simplify the dichotomy between the two senses of culture by distinguishing between "big C, the culture of literary classics and works of art, and small c, the culture of the four Fs: foods, fairs, folklore and statistical facts" (Kramsch: 1989, p.l).

At this point, an important question should be raised: To what extent are language and culture related? Literature provides a vast amount of work which deals with the relation of language to culture. Brown (1994] points out that language is the most "visible expression of ...culture" [p.170]. The reason that a person's world view, self-identity and ways of thinking differ from one culture to another is due to differences in languages. For example Arabic is written from right to left. Part of Arabic and Islamic culture is that people of the right are better than people of the left It is also not likeable for people to eat or drink using their left hands. As a matter of fact, language and culture are so interwoven that they cannot be separated without losing the significance of either language or culture.

The relationship between language and culture is also dealt with in the light of linguistic relativity, the way people view the world as determined wholly or partly by the structure of their native language (Whorf 1956]. Some languages express certain meanings that cannot be expressed by others. Translators face this problem especially when dealing with culturally-bound texts. They encounter some .words which has no equivalents either in the language or the culture of the language they translate to. For example, Fantini (1991] refers to the example of "pasta" which is an essential part of the Italian food culture. He counts four subdivisions of pasta according to the mode of preparation: pasta asciutta, pasta ripiena, pasta brodo and pasta a! forno. Furthermore, each of those categories is subdivided, depending on additional characteristics. Arabic has many examples—like the words jazoul, hashi, and hewar for camel meat in the Gulf— indicating how it reflects the specificity and individuality of its culture. To overcome such problems, translators have to have a subtle and deep understanding of both the languages and the cultures they deal with.

To emphasize the inseparability of language and culture, Attinasi and Friedrich (1988] coined the term "linguaculture." They believe that both language and culture constitute one and the same universe or domain of experience. If culture is knowledge which is learned from other people and if language is the tool of expressing this knowledge, then the area of overlap between language and culture must include all those parts of language which are learned from others: that is to say, both language and culture are learned or transferred from the previous generations to the later ones.

The dilemma that ESL/EFL teachers face is to include and integrate culture in their language curriculum without hegemonizing (Johnson, 2005}. But, can language learning take place independent of any influence of the target culture? ESL/ EFL learners and teachers realize the fact that language learning consists of more than the ability to understand new linguistic structures. The coding and decoding of communicative acts require an understanding of the cultural contexts in which they occur. One of the results of ignoring culture in the process of foreign language teaching (FLT) is intercultural miscommunication (Chick 1996). Chick attributes such miscommunication to "the distinctive nature of the value systems, pervasive configuration of social relations, and dominant ideologies of cultural groups" [p.33-2]. These are the dimensions of the social context which shape the communicative conventions which, as a result, become culturally bound. Chick talks about sociolinguistic transfer as an example of intercultural miscommunication. Sociolinguistic transfer is the use of the rules of speaking of one's own speech community to interact with the members of another community group. This occurs, for example, when the interlocutors use the foreign language in their speech, whereas they employ the rules of speaking of their native languages and cultures. This process is similar to the process of linguistic interference in the course of developing second or foreign language proficiency. In the first case, interlocutors consciously or unconsciously borrow the rules of speaking from their native culture; and in the second, they borrow the grammatical structures of their native languages.

Kramsch (1989) and Robinson (1981) discuss the goals of language teaching and suggest ways of achieving them. Foreign language teaching may be said to have three goals. The first of these goals is the linguistic goal which is to acquire the automatic behaviours of the language and its four traditional skills: reading, writing, speaking and listening. Another goal of language teaching is the cultural goal. It is to acquire the knowledge of daily life, the political, social and economic organization, of artistic and literary production and of the major historic events of the country under study. The third goal of FLT is the educational goal. It is to acquire the mental structures which represent the local community of the speakers of the language under study. German, for

example, should "broaden students' intellectual horizons ... and refine their intellectual aesthetic and moral judgment and stability" (Kramsch: 1989: p.4). The educational goals are, then, connected with achieving the cultural goals; i.e. making learners aware of the cultural values associated with the target language.

3. CONCLUSION

So far our discussion revolved around the fact that culture is an important factor that has to be taken into consideration when teaching or learning an additional language. However, the teaching of culture as part of the ELT curriculum must be handled carefully Phillipson (1992) and Skutnabb-Kangas [2000] criticized hegemonic tendencies in ELT material; where American and British cultures are portrayed a< dominant and superior to the culture of the L2 student

Learners are affected by their perception of the target culture. L2 proficiency will be enhanced if learnen perceive the target culture as well as the native culture in positive terms. As Schumann (1976) notes, a back language learning situation occurs when L2 learner: perceive the target culture as dominant or if they perceive their own culture to be in competition witl the target culture.

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