

Language and Culture

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Abstract

This paper describes the significance of culture in language teaching and how language and culture are closely related. It also presents various definitions of 'language' and 'culture' discussed by several outstanding authors. Because teachers of English as a Second Language (ESL) cannot teach the language without touching upon the culture of the people who speak the language, they have to be aware of details of the lifestyles, attitudes and beliefs of the native speakers of that language. Moreover, ESL learners should be taught to get acquainted with various aspects of cultural differences to avoid culture shock. To assist ESL teachers in realizing that they should take into consideration *culture* while teaching English, much of the relevant literature has been presented.

Introduction

As an ESL teacher who has been teaching for a number of years, I strongly believe that language and culture are inextricably interwoven. The study of language cannot be independent of the study of culture. Learning a language is learning another way of thinking and understanding the culture is learning how to bring that language alive.

Over the past few decades, there has been a growing realization of the importance of culture within English language teaching and a call for teachers and learners to be aware of the complexity of culture. This even became the main focus of the 2003 Thailand TESOL conference entitled *ELT 2003: Culture, Content, Competency*, in which several ESL scholars discussed the significance of raising cultural awareness among Thai learners of English.

Owing to this, it seems that our view of language learning should encourage learners to see themselves as acquiring the understanding of a new culture which enables them to take a cross-cultural stance both in terms of their own and the target language culture. Such a view should generate more diversity in English language learning, especially during this time when English is being considered a world language.

I. The Significance of Culture in Language Teaching

Culture influences us from the very day we are born, so it plays a very important role in our lives including our ability to speak one language instead of another. Thus

ESL teachers should realize that they cannot teach a language without teaching culture. The following are examples showing how numerous teachers pass on cultural messages while teaching language. Culture is shown through poems, proverbs, and everyday conversation—greetings or goodbyes.

Samovar and Porter (1995) indicated that a very powerful set of instructions can be derived from proverbs which are found in almost every culture. Often called ‘maxims’ or ‘adages’, these sayings create striking images that are easy to learn and difficult to forget. As we become mature, they are repeated

so regularly that they soon become part of our beliefs and attitudes. Because all people, despite their culture, share common experiences, a number of similar proverbs can be found throughout the world.

Look at these English proverbs; we can see how culture teaches us significant lessons.

Proverbs	Meanings
<i>Speech is silver but silence is golden.</i>	-On certain occasions, it is better to keep silent.
<i>One does not make the wind blow but is blown by it.</i>	-People are guided by fate rather than by own devices.
<i>A man's tongue is his sword.</i>	-We are taught to value words and use them in a powerful and forceful manner.
<i>A single arrow is easily broken but not a bunch.</i>	-A group is stronger than an individual.
<i>One man's meat is another man's poison.</i>	-Different people have different tastes.
<i>Birds of a feather flock together.</i>	-People of similar tastes and habits like to associate with one another.
<i>A stitch in time saves nine.</i>	-A small repair at the beginning will save a lot of trouble later.
<i>All that glitters is not gold.</i>	-Do not trust appearances.

II. How We Define Culture

Hoebel and Frost (1976:6) point out that culture is an “integrated system of learned behavior patterns which are not the result of biological inheritance.” We can see that all of the messages, whether they are about religion, cuisine, dress, housing, playthings, or books are culturally based; therefore, everything that a person experiences is part of his or her culture. Since it is transmitted and maintained only through communication and learning, culture is learned through language.

Bates and Plog (1990:7) assert that “culture is a system of shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviors, and artifacts that the members of a society use to cope with their world and with one another, and that are transmitted from generation to generation through learning.” Similarly, according to Samovar and Porter (1995), culture is defined as the deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes and meanings.

III. What is Language?

The meaning of language has been a widely debated topic over the past decades. The following are some definitions of language by some renowned researchers and scholars.

“Language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols.”

Sapir, E. (1921)

“A language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which the members of a society interact in terms of their total culture.”

Trager, G. (1949)

A language is *“a set (finite or infinite) of sentences, each finite in length and constructed out of a finite set of elements.”*

Chomsky, N. (1957)

Language is *“the institution whereby humans communicate and interact with each other by means of habitually used oral-auditor arbitrary symbols.”*

Hall, R. A. (1964)

“Language is a range of possibilities, an open-ended set of options in behavior that are available to the individual in his existence as social man. The context of culture is the environment of any particular selection that is made from within them ... The context of culture defines the potential, the range of possibilities that are open. The actual choice among these possibilities takes place within a given context of situation.”

Halliday, M. (1973)

IV. Culture and Meaning

Samovar and Porter (1995) mention that linguists have estimated that the five hundred most used words in English can produce over fourteen thousand meanings. This significantly suggests that words not only refer to different things to different people, but can also have different meanings with respect to various times and contexts. When we are communicating with someone from our own culture, it seems easier and we are less likely to have cultural misunderstandings, as within a culture people share several experiences alike.

The following are some examples of how culture determines what the world looks like to various people.

Example 1: If we perceive openness as a positive attribute while another culture values privacy, we then have perceptual differences.

Example 2: If we value individual decision-making and other cultures highlight cooperation, we might misinterpret the way problems are solved.

V. Culture Shock

What is culture shock?

Furnham and Bochner (1989) state that culture shock is "...when a sojourner is unfamiliar with the social conventions of the new culture, or if familiar with them, unable or unwilling to perform according to these rules."

As a result of cross-cultural contact, Bock (1970) considers cultural shock as the signs of anxiety that can result from this contact. There are, of course, multiple effects caused by cultural shock. Brislin (1993) examines both the causes and effects of this. He reasons that stress arises when people cannot meet their everyday needs as they would in their own culture. They may become stressed out when they cannot communicate, cannot make themselves understood, cannot figure out why hosts behave the way they do. As a result, they experience a sense of loss and a sense of shock that others behave so differently and seem to have such a different world view.

VI. How to Create Cultural Understandings in ESL Teaching

As an ESL teacher, some certain cultural topics should be explicitly taught in class to avoid possible cultural shock such as notions of time, personal contact, and social manners. In Western cultures (American, Australian, German, English, and Swiss) time is treated as a valuable, tangible, and limited resource and must be used efficiently. Moreover, greetings and parting remarks are common practice in everyday conversation. ESL learners should be instructed to familiarise themselves with these aspects of cultural differences. In case of encountering a new, offensive culture different from their own, to

remain calm, observe and learn from that way of conduct unquestionably serves them for as learners of language and culture.

Conclusion

Politzer (1959) stresses the significance of culture in language teaching. In his proposition, he urges that ESL teachers be interested in the study of culture not because teaching the culture of the target language is needed but because it is 'necessary.' I am in complete agreement with him that if we teach language without teaching at the same time the culture in which it operates, we are teaching meaningless symbols or symbols which the student attaches the wrong meaning to.

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