Approaches to Culture in Foreign Language Teaching

Abstract

Language and culture are inextricably tied: they cannot be separated without losing their essence and significance. What is language if not a means of communication operating in a defined socio-cultural context? Without language, communication would be very restricted; without culture, there would be no communication at all. A crucial implication is that one cannot be taught without the other.

Notwithstanding the inseparability of language and culture, the foreign culture is not always welcome in the foreign language class. Some teaching professionals put forward heated arguments against incorporating it in language curricula and textbooks. Others believe it to be a 'taken-for-granted' component in foreign language pedagogy, for several other arguments.

The object of this paper is to shed light on the place of culture in the foreign language class, drawing on seminal works in the field of language and culture teaching / learning. Adopting a convincing stance towards this issue is, no doubt, a prerequisite for effective teaching / learning.

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ملخص

يرى بعض المختصين أن هناك ارتباطا وثيقا بين اللغة والثقافة وأن محاولة الفصل بينهما تؤدي إلى فقدان كل عنصر لقيمته. فاللغة هي أداة اتصال ضمن سياق اجتماعي– ثقافي معين وبدونها يصبح الاتصال ضيقا، وقد ينعدم مع غياب الثقافة. هذا يعني انه عند تدريس اللغة، لا بد من تدريس الثقافة المتعلقة بها. يعارض بعض الخبراء من جهة أخرى، تدريس الثقافات الأخرى لمتعلمي اللغات الأجنبية لأسباب لا تقل أهمية.

يحاول هذا المقال تسليط الضوء على الدور الجوهري الذي تلعبه الثقافة في تعلم وتعليم اللغات الأجنبية.

Introduction

The culture in which each of us lives shapes our feelings, experiences and sense of identity. It affects the thoughts which make the furniture of our minds. It regulates our attitudes and behaviours, linguistic and non-linguistic. It embraces all the facets of our life: dressing, marrying, child rearing, schooling, professional training, working, communicating, worshiping, etc.

A language is an aspect of a culture, and a culture is an aspect of a language. The view of language as a system of structures has long since been transcended. The birth of Sociolinguistics in the early seventies, and later of disciplines which derive from it, such as Ethnography of Communication, has led to an increasing focus on language as a socio-cultural phenomenon.

The fact that language and culture mutually act upon and depend on each other is more and more supported by research evidence.

Though the importance of culture is increasingly recognized in foreign as well as second language learning settings, several relevant questions are still debatable: Is culture an integral component in language teaching / learning? Should it not be dealt with merely incidentally, or as supplementary optional material? Are foreign language learners / teachers bound to be foreign culture learners / teachers as well? Is it really important to do more than what is (or used to be) done in language classrooms? Can learning a foreign culture be detrimental to one's native culture?

How we address these concerns and others affects greatly how we engage in the enterprise of language teaching.

1. Against Culture Teaching

To begin with, Altan (1995:59) thinks that foreign culture – based situations such as "finding a flat in Manchester", "purchasing a pet", "playing rugby", "watching a game of cricket", … and their ingrained values, beliefs, and norms are irrelevant to the learners' native environment and background. Coursebooks depicting the culture of, for example, English speakers are, in his opinion, "stubbornly Anglo-centric". In addition, he thinks that teaching the literary and cultural aspects of a foreign language is of little use in a world where foreign languages are basically needed for science, technology, business and international communication. On these grounds, the foreign culture as a target is unfit for today's schools and universities; it does not meet their needs and aspirations.

Further, foreign culture – based textbooks are, for Altan, culturally biased in the sense that they implicitly or explicitly belittle the learners' native culture. In the specific context of Africa, Turum-Barima (1986: 92) writes:" the impression is given that Africa has been 'all void or full of sin and shame' and must be filled with European knowledge and ideas". Altan raises the issue of the likely incompatibility or conflict between the native culture and the foreign one, the fact which makes learning the latter a threat to the former, for one runs the risk of having one's own culture overwhelmed and mind warped when immersed in a new cultural system. In other words, it is thought that instruction in a foreign culture would be detrimental, since it would entail reshaping the native patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving to fit the foreign culture patterns. Holly (1990:16) explains that learning a foreign language whose corresponding culture is politically and economically dominant usually results in what he calls "ideological colonisation", i.e., "not a willing submission but, rather, a hopeless sense of inadequacy in the face of vaunted excellence. It is 'alienation' in the basic sense of a loss of self-confidence to an 'other' set of experiences which are felt to be somehow superior". Holly points out that, in the contemporary world, English is the best example of a language that serves as a means of ideological, economic, technical and military imperialism – an evil influence leading to Westernization. The Western culture is not only depicted as 'superior', 'more powerful', 'more dominating' and 'more compelling' than that of the developing world. It is equally viewed as 'racist', 'reductionist', 'prejudiced' and 'hostile', conflicting with the learners' native cultural codes and values, particularly in the Arab world (Obediat 1997). It is, thus, a concern

over the gradual Westernization of the younger generation, accompanied by a perceived loss of native and traditional values, which make some language teaching professionals decide against foreign culture teaching.

In case the target language is English, Altan advocates the perspective of 'international' English, a variety of English that is emptied of the English cultural themes, beliefs, values and norms. Similarly, for Post and Rathet (1996), learning English, nowadays, means learning a lingua franca, just like what used to be the case of learning Latin in Europe, during the medieval period. Actually, English enjoys the status of an international language used for specific purposes, in various cultural environments. It is no longer viewed as a vehicle of the English-speaking people's culture and way of life. Put otherwise, it no longer belongs uniquely to them, but to anybody who knows it. Through time, it has been emptied of its cultural connotations and particularities. Some educators refer to teaching English as a purely 'functional' or 'instrumental' tool: "nothing more than a linguistic means to certain ends, such as fuller employment and a stronger economy, as in tourism, international banking, […] [so that] the cultures behind the language can be 'contained' and the unwanted side-effects of English learning reduced" (Hyde 1994: 296). Hyde observes that language as a system of communication is to be distinguished from the ideology it is used to convey. It is this ideology which can be dangerous or harmful, according to him. He explains that:

> the idea that any particular language is intrinsically 'good' or 'bad' is discarded. Language is seen as a tool for communication, and as such is not to be confused with ideology, that is, the subject matter of specific messages that people choose to convey through the medium of that particular language. To believe that a language per se is dangerous is to hold a confused and ill-founded notion of language.

This approach to English encourages the learners' 'instrumental' rather than 'integrative' motivation which denotes the learner's identification with the foreign culture and its people.

Other educators recommend the 'nativization' of the target language, that is to say, to use it to reflect the local native culture, to make up, for example, a kind of "Algerian English". Altan (op.cit:58) is for incorporating elements from the learners' native culture in the foreign language teaching curriculum: "if cultural elements of learned native countries are integrated into ELT (English Language Teaching) materials, these elements will certainly strengthen the learner psychologically for the learning situation to be encountered". For Post and Rathet, the adoption of the learners' native culture as cultural content in foreign language classrooms does not only enhance their self-confidence and motivation to learn, providing them with the opportunity to explore their own identities and interests through a new 'linguistic environment', but it also supports the findings of the schemata theory research, that familiar content positively affects the learners' comprehension and assimilation of the target language, and vice versa. Thus, to use a foreign cultural content instead means "to overburden our students

with both new linguistic content and new cultural information simultaneously" (Post and Rathet, op.cit:12). Altan notes that a foreign cultural input might even cause misunderstanding and confusion about the foreign culture. He adds that learners seek just 'to learn' English and not 'to master' it. Only the latter, he argues, requires knowledge of the target culture: "there needs to be an understanding of the difference between mastering and learning a foreign language. Mastery necessitates native-speaker proficiency in language use and cultural knowledge [...] most learners do not aspire to become masters of another language, they simply desire to function with communicative fluency" (p 60).

2. For Culture Teaching

2.1. Culture and Language Teaching

"Except for *language*, *learning*, and *teaching*, there is perhaps no more important concept in the field of TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) than culture. Implicitly or explicitly ESL (English as a second language) teachers face it in everything they do" (Atkinson 1999: 625). For language teaching professionals and lay people alike, learning a foreign language does not merely mean mastering an academic subject, but it more appropriately denotes learning a new means of communication, a new culture. It is now increasingly recognized that it is impossible to operate a divorce between language learning and learning about the target language culture (Robinson, 1976; Byram 1989; Valdes 1990; Harrison 1990; Kramsch 1993). De Jong (1996:17) puts it clearly that "learning norms and values is part of the language learning process". Hirsh (in Malkina 1995) advances the notion of "cultural literacy" acquired essentially through language learning. In return, cultural aspects make of language learning a meaningful, rich and versatile experience.

Though the concept of 'communicative competence' has highlighted the role of context (immediate and large) in language use, and hence in language learning / teaching, it did not provide genuine help in language classrooms. Attention shifted to 'cultural competence' on the basis of which language patterns and structures are to be taught with their culture-specific meanings. Many language teachers, nowadays, put it as their goal to include culture in their courses. Many others, however, still focus on vocabulary and grammar. Thanasoulas (2001) notes that though language pedagogy has transcended the behaviourist and structuralist era, some of its old beliefs are still sensed in modern classroom methodologies and curricula, undermining the role culture should play in foreign language courses. He defines foreign language learning 'deterministically' in culture terms: "foreign language learning is foreign culture learning, and, in one form or another, culture has, even implicitly, been taught in the foreign language classroom – if for different reasons" (p 2). He insists, further, that "language teaching is culture teaching and teachers do their students a great disservice in placing emphasis on the former, to the detriment of the latter" (p 7).

2.2. Arguments For Culture Teaching

Proponents of the cultural component in foreign language teaching usually advance one of two central arguments. The first argument has to do with the very nature of language: linguistic forms acquire unique colouring and bias, depending upon the

beliefs, values and practices of the speakers. This intrinsic interweaving of language and culture makes it impossible to separate them in teaching / learning. Hence, dealing with the target language culture is indispensable, if not unavoidable, in all stages of the language teaching / learning process. The second argument is geared to instrumentality, in that cultural understanding is advocated as a prerequisite to communicate effectively with the target language speakers, and to function appropriately in the cultural context in question. Another argument that is often put forward, in this regard, has to do with Psychopedagogy. It is believed that cultural pursuit stimulates language learning, in that it awakens interest and curiosity even in less-motivated learners, broadens their intellectual horizons, develops their imaginative powers and critical thinking, and sustains their motivation to work at a productive rate.

2.2.1. Interdependence of Culture and Language

Byram (1989) has explored the role of cultural studies in foreign language education. To him, as well as to other scholars, cultural awareness contributes to language awareness and proficiency. He believes that a language curriculum necessarily includes (whether implicitly or explicitly) elements of the culture of its speakers, because language invariably reflects their knowledge and perception of the world, and their cultural concepts and values. Thus, one cannot learn a language and disregards its culture: "to speak a language is to speak a culture, to exchange language which embodies a particular way of thinking and living" (Byram 1992:169). Byram believes that cultures do share 'translatable' similarities, but there are also cultural differences which need to be learned, to be understood. In a like manner, Seelye (1993: 6) makes it clear that "unless the student is learning the language in the target culture, the cultural referents necessary to understanding a native speaker must be learned in addition". Corder (1973:77) states that as long as cultures overlap, as long as translation from and into languages is possible, learning a foreign language is not an impossible task, yet it is more or less difficult, depending on how close are one's native language / culture, and target language / culture. He adopts a middle position in that he acknowledges that a language reflects a culture, that cultures are different, but he argues that they are not categorically different to make learning a new language impossible, or to equate it to acquiring a drastically new worldview. There are similarities between cultures, as there are differences. After all, we are all human beings who have similar needs and who live in the same world.

Tang (1999) subscribes to the view that language and culture are two sides of the same coin. For her, the question of including (or not) culture in the foreign language classroom is pointless: "questions of this sort and research of this sort appear to me to presuppose that culture can be separated from language, that culture is something that needs to be introduced into the language classroom and to the learner, and that learner and teacher have some sort of a choice as to whether 'cultural integration' is to be included in the syllabus or not." (p1). In her opinion, language is not merely interwoven with culture, but "language is culture" (p1). Speaking a language implies thinking in that language, hence taking on the identity of its speakers. She suggests going beyond the question of the inclusion (or not) of culture in a foreign language curriculum, to consider "deliberate immersion" versus "non-deliberate exposure" to it.

In the fifties, this question was analyzed by H., Nostrand (1956; in F.B., Nostrand 1974:196) who put it plainly that:

> we cannot help teaching the foreign culture… As we teach a people's language or literature, we unavoidably form our students' ideas of that people's way of life. The factual curiosity of our students impels them to find answers to their common-sense questions in whatever we say, even if we were never able to indulge in a single explicit generalization about the foreign people's values, or worldview, or strengths or weaknesses. What is worse, our students are bound to practice the fallacy of judging any fragment of the foreign culture as though it were intended to fit into their own scheme, unless we are prepared to help them draw an informed comparison instead.

According to Valdes (op.cit: 20), in a foreign language curriculum, language and culture always go together "like Sears α Roebuck or Mark's α Spenser". From the very beginning, culture is introduced along with language, even though some teachers may ignore or deny it. To illustrate this point, Valdes refers to the communicative function of greeting:

> whatever approach, method, or technique is used, greetings are usually first on the agenda. How can any teacher fail to see the cultural nature of the way people greet each other in any place in any language? Not calling it a lesson in culture does not prevent its being one. Every language lesson, from repetition drills and fill-in-the-blanks to sophisticated compositions in advanced classes, must be about something, and almost invariably that something will be cultural, no matter what disguise it travels under.

This is identical to what is advanced by Ladu (1974), who affirms that language cannot be separated from the culture in which it is deeply embedded, on the grounds that any authentic use of the former entails the introduction of cultural 'concomitants' into the classroom, whether the teacher is conscious of them or not. In other words, mere fluency in the production of foreign language utterances without any awareness of their socio-cultural implications, or reading texts without a realization of their underlying values and assumptions cannot be viewed as language learning. If it is the case, that culture is unavoidable in a language class, it seems reasonable to make the most of it, for the ultimate benefit of the learner.

2.2.2. Interdependence of Culture and Communication

The impact of cultural knowledge on the success of intercultural communication is undeniable. Misunderstandings and communication difficulties may be solved or alleviated by the resort to further information-giving and-requesting on both sides of the communicative interaction: "does not cross-cultural communication involve a lot of give-and-take on both sides of the cultural divide?" (White 1993: 201). Nevertheless,

one's effectiveness as an intercultural communicator is, no doubt, a function of one's knowledge of other peoples and their cultures. One needs to adopt a culturally appropriate style to meet the expectations of foreign interlocutors; for instance, to speak up or in a low tone, to make or not eye contact, to be more or less confident, to state one's opinions, to act dependently or independently from others. Lack of cultural knowledge results in inappropriate language use, misunderstanding, and breakdowns in communication. Accordingly, it seems imperative to design a teaching curriculum that would meet these needs and give learners insights into what communicating in a new culture might be like. Peck (1984:1) explains:

> Knowledge of the codes of behavior of another people is important if today's foreign language student is to communicate fully in the target language. Without the study of culture, foreign language instruction is inaccurate and incomplete. For FL students, language study seems senseless if they know nothing about the people who speak it or the country in which it is spoken. Language learning should be more than the manipulation of syntax and lexicon.

2.2.3. Culture and Learning Motivation

Research in the field of language learning and motivation has shown that among the most important variables that affect learners' motivation, positive perceptions of the target language people and culture hold a major place. Kitao (1991: 4), reporting the outcomes of a culture training programme, notes that "they [trained learners] demonstrated a more international outlook with greater understanding of the target culture and they understood themselves better, showed more self-confidence, and had increased motivation for foreign language study". In other words, the benefits of teaching about the target language culture, as revealed by this work, are twofold: to enable learners to have a better understanding of others and of themselves, and to motivate them to learn more of the target language. According to the professional experience of Mavi (1996), young learners become more motivated when they learn about the life style of the foreign people who speak the target language. Similarly, Niederhauser (1997) notes that one of the best ways to motivate foreign language learners is to give them the opportunity to know about life in foreign countries and cultures. In Bal's study (1971; in Kitao, op.cit), two groups of American learners of German were compared. The first group relied only on a textbook to study the target language, but the second had additional cultural instruction. It was found out that in the former, three learners dropped the language course, while no one did so in the latter. Besides, learners who were taught about culture achieved better (in terms of grades) than those who were not. These findings reinforce the belief that learning about foreign cultures may serve as a motive to learning foreign languages. Kitao gives an account of a number of other studies: Keller and Ferguson (1976), Klayman (1976), Leward (1974), Steiner (1971) which all demonstrate that learning about a foreign culture results in learners' short – and long – term motivation to study the corresponding language.

Culture may also serve to arouse the learners' instant motivation, giving light relief, or pervading lessons, where language learning is sometimes felt to be boring or limited: "When pace lags, when the eyes drop, when the heat comes, the smart teacher will have the cultural unit" (Steiner, ibid.). This is due to the fact that cultural matters usually stimulate learners' interest; they increase their curiosity about the foreign culture country, people and way of life. Furthermore, activities based on culture as singing, dancing and role playing are generally entertaining and enjoyable.

For Valdes (op.cit), recognizing and highlighting the cultural component in a language lesson promotes and completes learning. He believes that it is more effective for the learner if the teacher is aware of the cultural dimension of what he is teaching, and adds elucidation of underlying views and values, along with grammar and pronunciation. According to him, attention to the cultural component increases the usefulness of the lesson, not only in enlarging its scope, but also in making it more engaging and hence easier to learn.

Likewise, Kitao (op.cit) thinks that culture instruction makes of language learning a meaningful and a purposeful enterprise. He demonstrates that studying culture facilitates comprehension and assimilation, in that it helps students relate abstract linguistic structures of sounds and forms to real people, lives and places. H., Nostrand (op.cit) was among the first scholars to draw language teachers' attention to this fact. He argued that culture contextualises language learning and language use and brings authenticity to the language class.

2.2.4. Intercultural Understanding

Culture study does not only enlarge the learners' horizons and general knowledge, it also promotes cross-cultural understanding, tolerance of diversity, and perhaps even a liking for others and others' cultural ways. It helps, thus, to overcome stereotypes and ethnocentrism. Peck (op.cit:1) states that "the study of different cultures aids us in getting to know different people which is a necessary prelude to understanding and respecting other peoples and their ways of life.'' The Islamic thinker Imara (2003) points to the need to read about others, to raise one's awareness about them, and about their civilizations, cultures and religions. On the one hand, this awareness is, according to him, a step to overcome the others' potential hostilities. Put otherwise, to consider the others' standpoints is a means to defend and protect oneself, if need be. On the other hand, Imara asserts that it is only through the others' view of oneself (even if 'these others' are one's enemies) that one may come to truly know oneself and one's failings, hence the need to open up to the world, rather than be isolated and restrained within the limits of one's culture and language.

This window on the world would be a mirror to reflect one's persona, to cite Goethe (in Limbach 2002: 25), "Compare yourself! Recognize who you are!" One can better understand one's thoughts and behaviours, when comparing and contrasting them with others'. For Tavares and Cavalcanti (1996), when people develop cultural awareness, they develop at the same time critical understanding of their own and other communities. As we learn more about other people from various cultures, we also discover more about ourselves. Elements of our own culture we may not be actually aware of would be brought out when the others' models are studied. Indeed, the

experience of entering a new culture prompts many questions not only about 'others', but also about ourselves and our native culture; it points to differences and similarities which question or confirm our beliefs and feelings. It is what strikes us most in another culture which will be most revealing about ourselves and our society and its functioning mode. As far back as 1956, H., Nostrand (op.cit:195-196) concluded, rightly, that " it would advance the understanding between peoples, as well as self-knowledge, if we could make comprehensible the essential content of each culture".

On this basis, Byram, Zarate and Neuner (1997) deem it 'essential' to equip foreign language learners with information about the people of the target country, about their routines and rituals, and about their attitudes and beliefs, so that they might reflect upon their own position and handle successfully communicative interactions. Following this line of thought, Cortazzi and Jin (1999: 219) affirm that a cultural focus does not only have communicative ends, it may also encourage the development of one's sense of self, and awareness of one's own as well as of the other's identity; it could, thus, be viewed as ''an element of stabilization in a world of rapid change''. One's identity as a member of a national culture is so crucial to cater for that it can stand as a sufficient justification for incorporating the study of foreign languages and foreign cultures in schools (Brière:1991).

Being teachers of language and culture and encouraging reflection on self and on the foreign culture is "being much more than teachers of language knowledge and skills"; it denotes undertaking "the responsibilities of *educating* young people" (Byram 1992: 175). Harmer (1991; in Cheung 2001: 60) puts it so aptly that "language teaching is not just about teaching language". This is to say that it is equally about educating. Porto (2000: 90) thinks that teachers have to conceive of their role as being educators and not just language trainers, for "language teaching is bound to be educational". The foreign language classroom is ideal for cultural education since the subject matter lends itself for the discussion of everyday issues and of a variety of topics that make up culture. It is probably true to say that the cultural component plays a more influential role in a language class than actually recognized. Suffice it to say that it contributes to the overall learners' linguistic, social and cognitive development.

3. What Attitude to Adopt

We hold the viewpoint of those who believe in the interlocking of language and culture; hence, learning the latter along with the former is a matter of fact. Language learners do not need to study culture just to cope with intercultural communication problems; they need to study it because it is an inherent feature of the target language. Besides, learning another culture enlarges their general knowledge and incites them to understand better their own culture.

We do not agree, however, with those who believe that to learn a foreign language and its corresponding culture means to take on the foreign identity of its speakers. An Algerian, for instance, does not become 'suddenly' French or "less Algerian" when speaking or learning French or about the culture of the French, as long as one knows who one is and what one's native language and native culture are. Learning a new culture, as noted by Byram (1992:170), does not mean letting down our own culture, for by the time we engage in learning a new language, we would have internalized a set

of values, beliefs and attitudes which pertain to the language and the culture of the people we belong to. He explains that

> when learners discover, in the part of the circle of culture which does not overlap with their own, contradictions of and differences from the values and meanings of their own culture, they cannot simply cast off their own and adopt the other. Since their own identity is in part formed through their internalisation, in secondary socialisation, of the values and meanings of the social group to which they belong, they cannot simply 'put aside' one set of values and meanings as if it were separable 'cultural baggage'.

Although language learning may uncover different dimensions in the perception of reality, this does not entail undermining one's views and values. Language teaching does not alter the learner's cultural perspective dramatically, since one may appreciate what is different and still remain within one's culture.

We do not exclude the possibility that a language may be used to refer to cultures other than the one it corresponds to, and to international concepts and phenomena. A foreign language can, for example, be used to reflect aspects of the learners' native culture, though not authentically as when the native language is used instead. This is not to be understood as an urge to 'nativize' the target language, that is to curtail it to a tool to refer exclusively to one's native culture. The nativization process is, in our viewpoint, only conceivable in contexts where the target language is a second language, enjoying a specific historical background. In the case of English, reference is being made to regions which witnessed a past English-speaking colonist, i.e., ESL countries. And even in these contexts, we believe that such a 'nativized' language would not escape artificiality. At the same time, we cannot concede that a language can be 'emptied' of its cultural content. As aptly put by Hyde (op.cit: 297), "stripping English of its cultural baggage would also strip students of invaluable knowledge". It would mean also causing language to lose its essence, i.e., "dehumanizing" it. This disassociation of language and culture is possible only theoretically, for if this is manageable in class, how could it be so outside, in a world essentially characterized by a revolutionary global information technology?

> Information, mostly in English, is flooding the world, through advertisements, magazines, newspapers, books, instruction manuals, satellite television, films and rock music, videos, radio, telephones, the post, fax and telex machines, computers and information technology in general, tourism and migration for economic and educational reasons, and business relations. (Hyde op.cit: 297)

Conclusion

It appears that culture is unavoidable in language classrooms. The instrumental approach and the nativization approach do not offer a sensible solution to the issue of what cultural content to teach. Being based on 'censorship', they fail to address the core of the question of cultural imperialism. They above all ignore the intimate relationship a language has with its culture.

Language teachers, in our viewpoint, need not be exhorted to teach culture since this need has long been felt by them, though not always actually applied. What they rather need is to see clearly what is meant by culture, and how it can be incorporated in their daily classroom tasks. They need as well materials specially designed for this purpose, and tests to assist them in evaluating learners' progress in this area.

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