

Teaching Culture in the ESL Classroom

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Abstract

This article is intended to discuss prominent issues in teaching culture to second language students. The concepts of language and culture will be defined, respectively. Next, the characteristics and components of culture is presented. Moreover, importance such as teachers, curricula, and textbooks that have an impact on the success and failure of teaching culture to second language students is highlighted.

Keywords: ESL, culture, language relationships, communicate

I. Introduction

Today it is time of information and technology explosion, peoples in the world come into contact with one another more often and more easily than ever before. The need for mastering a foreign language besides someone's own seems to dramatically grow. More people are learning languages for their personal and professional needs. Although the field of language teaching has done an excellent job to increasingly better accommodate the needs of language learners, the field may have to do even more and better to address the various needs of language learners. Specifically, cultural aspects of the language being learned must be taught concurrently with the linguistic aspects, which have traditionally been emphasized.

Before any discussion on the relationship between language and culture can be carried out, firstly it is necessary to discuss some common terms such as language and culture. An understanding of these basic terms will enable one to realize the importance of culture in language learning and teaching.

Language has been around since human beings started to communicate with one another for their daily life needs. The term language is so familiar that few people would ever try to define it. It is superficially not hard to define it, but in fact to have a comprehensive definition of language is an extremely daunting task.

Generally speaking, language can be regarded as a system of verbal and nonverbal signs used to express meanings. Besides language, another closely related concept that is sometimes mentioned in the literature of language teaching is culture.

And according to the National Standards for Foreign Language Learning (1996), culture is typically understood to include the philosophical perspectives, the behavioral practices, and both tangible and intangible products of a society.

II. Materials and Review

Both language and culture are concepts that seem to have posed great difficulties for scholars to define. Besides, there seems to be an inevitable relationship between these two concepts. As Wardhaugh (2010) postulated, the nature of the relationship between language and culture has fascinated, and continues to fascinate people from a wide a variety of backgrounds.

Shaul and Furbee (1998) stated that languages and cultures are systematic to a large degree, and are thus observable and describable. These authors added that whereas the systematic description of language is called linguistics, the description of cultures is called ethnography. Furthermore, many authors that's to say Ardila-Rey, Kuang, Kramsch, Tang, Brown, Wardhaugh have pointed out that language and culture are closely related. For example, Ardila-Rey (2008) maintained that: "Language and culture are inextricably linked with each other" (p. 335). Likewise, Brown (2007) pointed out the interrelatedness of language and culture:

Language is a part of a culture, and culture is a part of the language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture. The acquisition of a second language, except for specialized, instrumental acquisition (as may be the case, say, in acquisition of reading knowledge of a language for examining scientific texts), is also the acquisition of a second culture" (pp. 189-190).

In the same way, Kramsch (1998) held that language is the main means whereby people conduct their social lives and when it is used in context of communication, it is bound up with culture in various and complex ways. Tang (1999) went even further by equating the concept of language with that of culture. In other words, this author claimed that language is synonymous with culture. Another author, however, considers one as the container of the other. Kuang (2007, p. 75) wrote: "Language is the carrier of culture and culture is the content of language."

Wardhaugh (2010) pinpointed three main claims concerning the relationship between language and culture. Firstly, it is claimed that the structure of a language determines the way in which speakers of that language view the world. Secondly, a relatively weaker version is that the structure of a language does not determine the world-view, but it is still greatly influential in predisposing speakers of a language toward adopting a particular world-view. Thirdly, it is also claimed that there is little or no relationship between language and culture.

III. Discussion and Result

Indeed, teaching a foreign language does not only require providing students with syntactic structures, new vocabulary and expressions, but also to incorporate major cultural elements and pragmatic meanings, which are intertwined with the language itself. Singhal (1998) claims that it is evident that one would have to be quite knowledgeable in the culture under study to be able to present all of these aspects accurately to second language learners. However, teaching cultures in language classrooms is generally neglected. There are a number of language programs focus on the development of skills, i.e. (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) but the teaching of cultural context has not been introduced in any of the language learning programs. As a result, students do not have sufficient cultural demand to understand English texts thoroughly as well as become effective communicators in English.

Therefore, teaching culture is suggested as a way to enhance authenticity of communication. If students know the foreign language and foreign culture, they may be more successful comprehend English texts and using the language. Culture is considered a fifth language skill, in addition to listening, speaking, reading and writing, due to the international role of the English language and globalization (Tomalin, 2008).

Much of the literature suggests that teaching culture plays a very important role to help students become successful language learners. Teachers, therefore, should carefully organize and incorporate teaching culture in lesson syllabuses. Teachers, therefore, need to be versatile to play various roles. Teacher has to be able to perform: “to present and elicit cultural information, coach and model cultural behaviors, guide and conduct cultural research and analysis” (Moran, 2001, p.138).

Language teachers can prepare themselves by being knowledgeable about their own as well as their students’ culture. Reading books that are written purposely to explain a

certain culture and travelling are great ways to become culturally aware. Asking questions and talking to successful bilinguals is another effective way.

Successful bilinguals are individuals who speak two or more languages and feel very comfortable in each of them. They are an invaluable resource because they have intercultural insights and knowledge (Alptekin, 2002) that may not be as readily available in monolinguals.

This preparation is relevant because teachers are often the students' special model and source of information about language. For this reason, it is critical that teachers present cultural facts in a way that does not place a higher value on the students' own culture (Peterson & Coltrane, 2003).

Learning about another language should be an enriching experience and contribute to the learner's positive sense of themselves. Supporting students in the realization that all cultures are different and equally essential is a step in that direction.

Lessons about cultures and holidays that are different from your students own culture can be important in their English language learning. It can provide a great chance for students to learn words they otherwise wouldn't have chance to learn. Also, it can be a great opportunity for students to enhance their understanding of English speaking countries which can give them different perspectives that can make learning English easier.

IV. Conclusion

All in all, teaching culture is very important and should become a more vital part of foreign language instruction. In this way, new borders will be opened and nations come closer to one another in order to avoid cultural disintegration and foster empathy and understanding. If language learners have positive attitudes about the target language, this will motivate and arouse their interest to learn at best.

Teachers should try to always keep lessons fun and keep things interesting, informative, and exciting and you have a sure recipe for success when teaching lessons about different cultures.

Language teachers need to be interested in the study of culture, because they have to teach it. Refusing to deal with cultural issues in an explicit and overt manner may indirectly weaken learners' ability to communicate both linguistically and culturally successfully in their future, which is definitely not an intention of any conscientious educators. Not teaching culture or not being aware of culture learning in the second language classroom simply on the grounds that language learning is culture learning is a wretched excuse, because culture

can easily be forgotten, ignored or given passing attention in the classroom when teachers are not consciously aware that cultural learning can tremendously benefit their students in second or foreign language learning and using.

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