

Developing Cultural Awareness in Language Instructional Materials

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Abstract. Every language has its cultural norms, some of which can be completely different and conflict with other cultures' norms. Consequently, communication problems may arise among language users who do not know or share the norms of other cultures. Perhaps one solution for such problems is to help language learners to learn the target culture within the syllabus. Raising the learners' cultural awareness in a language course, as Tomlinson and Masuhara (2004) note, can facilitate language acquisition too. This paper aims at presenting a general understanding of cultural awareness and surveying different ways through which it can be developed in language instructional materials.

Key words: cultural awareness, language instructional materials, sociocultural differences

1. Introduction

Inevitably, understanding a language involves not only the knowledge of grammar, phonology, and lexis but also a certain features and characteristics of the culture. To communicate internationally involves communicating interculturally as well. In other words, language is a part of culture and culture is a part of a language. The two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture (Brown, 2007).

Also language teaching and learning involve issues of sociocultural meaning, and as Pulverness (2003) notes, approaches which disregard the cultural dimension of language are fundamentally flawed. He continues that in circumstances where English is seen as a lingua franca, it must necessarily be inappropriate to situate the language in a particular cultural context. However, every culture has its own cultural norms for communication and these norms differ from one culture to another. The more effectively we observe the norms of other cultures, the better is our communication with people of the target culture. Consequently, to achieve success in second language acquisition, the learners need to learn the target culture, and the teachers should provide them with materials which focus on both language and sociocultural components. This would lead to viewing culture as an essential part of a syllabus.

A teacher who views culture as an integral part of a syllabus, as Craves (1996) emphasizes, might incorporate into the instructional materials the development of awareness of the role culture plays in human interaction, how to understand and interpret the cultural aspects of language, and the development of skills in behaving and responding in culturally appropriate ways in addition to knowledge of the target culture. Moreover, as Cakir (2006) notes, the teachers should be sensitive to the learner's attitudes and values so as not to cause them to lose their motivation. The purpose of this study is to survey the position of cultural awareness in language syllabus design and how effectively it can be incorporated into language instructional materials.

2. What Is Culture?

Culture may mean different things to different people. Culture, according to Graves (1996) provides a broader context for how one determines what is valued, appropriate, or even feasible and why. The fact that no society exists without a culture reflects the need for culture to be incorporated in social context within

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which people communicate. This is why Damen (1986, cited in Graves, 1996) calls culture the fifth dimension of language teaching. Also Kramersch (1993) suggests that culture is not just a fifth skill or an aspect of communicative competence; it is the underlying dimension of all one knows and does.

Similarly, Brown (2007) suggests that language –the means for communication among members of a culture- is the most visible and available expression of that culture. Therefore, a person’s world view, self-identity, and systems of thinking, acting, feeling, and communicating can be disrupted by a change from one culture to another. By the same token, Tang (1999) propounds the view that culture is language and language is culture. He suggests that to speak a language well, one has to be able to think in that language, and thought is extremely powerful.

Culture is also briefly defined by Brown (2007) as “a way of life. It is the context within which we exist, think, feel and relate to others. It is the glue that binds a group of people together.”(p. 188) Culture governs our behavior in groups and helps us to know what others expect of us and what will happen if we do not live up to their expectations. In other words, culture helps us to know what our responsibility is to the group with which we are communicating.

3. What Is Cultural Awareness?

The shift towards a communicative approach to EFL teaching has coincided with a developing awareness of the growing role of culture in second language acquisition. In this climate, the acquisition of a second language is actually the acquisition of a second culture. However, Cunningsworth (1984) states the case against ‘the culture-specific coursebook and claims that a limitation of the culture-specific coursebook is that it will only be of relevance to students who understand the cultural background in which it is set. “Indeed a strong portrayal of British life might well prove to be an impediment rather than a help to the learner” (p. 62).

Kramersch (1993), on the other hand, argues that entering into a foreign language implies a cognitive modification that has implications for the learner’s identity as a social and cultural being. This suggests the need for materials which privilege the identity of the learner as an integral factor in developing the ability to function fully in sociocultural settings.

On the whole, it is useful to include cultural awareness activities in a language course, as doing so, according to Tomlinson and Masuhara(2004), can not only increase the educational value of the course but can also facilitate language acquisition. To do so, they present a general understanding of ‘cultural’, ‘awareness’, and ‘cultural awareness’ as follows:

3.1. Definition of Cultural

While talking about the value of activities for cultural awareness, Tomlinson and Masuhara (2004) define ‘cultural’ as: “(a) referring to the totality of a way of life shared by a group of people linked by common and distinctive characteristics, activities, beliefs, or circumstances (e.g., Australian culture, Arab culture, Liverpool culture);” and “(b) referring to the beliefs and behavior of a community of people who share inclinations, attitudes, interests and goals (e.g., pop culture, football culture, wine culture)”(p. 1).

3.2. Definition of Awareness

Tomlinson and Masuhara (2004) make a distinction between cultural knowledge and cultural awareness as follows:

Cultural knowledge. It consists of information about the characteristics of our own and other people’s cultures. This information is typically :

- external: it is given to us by someone else
- static: we do not modify it from experience
- articulated: it is reduced to what words can express
- stereotypical: it refers to general norms rather than specific instances
- reduced: it has been selected from all the information available and it typically omits information about variation and exceptions.

The information is normally given to us in the form of: (a) facts, (b) statistics, (c) generalizations, and (d) examples.

Cultural knowledge can be useful in helping us to understand ourselves and other people. However, it can also be misleading because it: (a) is dependent on other people's expertise, objectivity and integrity; (b) is fixed in time (often out of date); (c) is inevitably simplified; and (d) often conceals as much as it reveals. For example, it is useful for a visiting businessman to be told that the Japanese are hard working and serious but this generalization by itself can conceal the reality that many Japanese people like to go out and enjoy themselves after work.

Cultural awareness. According to Tomlinson and Masuhara(2004), cultural awareness consists of perceptions of our own and other people's cultures. These perceptions are:

- internal: they develop in our minds
- dynamic: they are constantly being added to and changed
- variable: they are modified from experience
- multi-dimensional: they are represented through sensory images (mental pictures), mental connections, and affective associations, as well as through the inner voice (Masuhara, 2003; Tomlinson, 2000a)
- interactive in that they connect with and inform each other

Cultural awareness involves a "gradually developing inner sense of the equality of cultures, an increased understanding of your own and other people's cultures, and a positive interest in how cultures both connect and differ. Such awareness can broaden the mind, increase tolerance and facilitate international communication." (Tomlinson, 2001, p. 5)

Increased cultural knowledge can give us increased credibility and expertise, and increased cultural awareness can help us to achieve cultural empathy and sensitivity. It can facilitate language acquisition, as being positive, empathetic and inquisitive. It can also contribute to one of the optimal conditions for language acquisition: motivated exposure to language in use (Tomlinson, 2000b).

4. Cultural Awareness Approaches

An integrated approach to teaching language and culture will focus additionally on culturally significant areas of language and on the skills required by the learner to make sense of cultural difference (Pulverness, 2003). The principles, objectives, procedures, and materials of such an approach are described by Tomlinson and Masuhara (2004) as follows:

4.1. Principles

The main learning principles of a cultural awareness approach involve the encouragement of:

- learning from experience
- apprehension before comprehension, in that the learner is helped to become aware of something before trying to achieve conscious understanding of it
- affective and cognitive engagement with an encounter, text, or task
- intake responses to an encounter, text, or task in the sense of developing and articulating representations of the experience
- discovering clues to the interpretation of an experience by reflecting on that experience
- tolerance of ambiguity. That is, not worrying about not being able to interpret an experience, or not fixing an immediate and absolute interpretation.

These principles, as Tomlinson and Masuhara (2004) believe, are coherent in the sense that they connect with each other and have been developed to facilitate the deep processing of experience which can lead to informed awareness, sensitivity and empathy, and to the acquisition of language too.

4.2. Objectives

Tomlinson and Masuhara (2004) also state that the main objectives of a cultural awareness approach are to help the learners to:

- discover assumptions, values, and attitudes that underlie utterances and behaviors in other cultures
- discover assumptions, values, and attitudes that underlie utterances and behaviors in their own cultures
- notice implicit conflicts and analyze the causes
- identify options for conflict solutions
- try out options, observe the consequences, and take necessary measures
- resist falling back on stereotyping and ethnocentrism
- develop sensitivity to cultures
- develop empathy with other cultures
- acquire cross-cultural skills
- develop the ability to use language appropriately and effectively in various cultural contexts

4.3. Procedures

In order to apply the mentioned principles to achieve the objectives, Tomlinson and Masuhara (2004) recommend the following procedures:

- Start and finish an activity in the minds of the learners (e.g. by getting them to think about an experience in their own culture before providing them with a similar one in another culture; by getting them to ‘translate’ a new experience in another culture into an equivalent experience in their own culture)
- Provide cultural encounters (e.g. through visits, video, songs, literature, simulations)
- Facilitate connections between the old and the new (e.g. by encouraging the learners to constantly think of comparable personal experiences)
- Stimulate multi-dimensional representation of cultural experiences (e.g. through visualization and inner voice activities)
- Provide focused discovery activities which guide the learners to find out things for themselves
- Contribute your personal interpretations but don’t provide them as definitive answers
- Contribute your personal experiences of other cultures

4.4. Materials

To develop cultural awareness alongside language awareness, the acknowledgement of cultural identity is not sufficient. One way of raising this kind of awareness in learners, as Pulverness (2003) suggests, is through literary texts that more directly represent experiences of cultural engagement. Besides, an enhanced language syllabus that takes account of cultural specificity would be concerned with aspects of language that are often neglected in course materials: connotation, idiom, the construction of style and tone, rhetorical structure, critical language awareness and translation.

In order to teach culture to foreign language teenage students who usually do not have close contact with native speakers of English and have little opportunity to discover how these speakers think, feel, and interact with others in their own peer group and to stimulate their curiosity about the target culture, Tavares and Cavalcanti (1996) developed a set of activities. These activities arose from the fact that although the teaching of EFL has become widespread in all levels of Brazilian education, teachers still lack resource material for exploring the target culture in the classroom. The aim of these activities is to increase students' awareness and to develop their curiosity towards the target culture and their own, helping them to make comparisons among cultures. These comparisons are not meant to underestimate any of the cultures being analyzed, but to enrich students' experience and to make them aware that although some culture elements are being globalized, there is still diversity among cultures. This diversity should then be understood and respected, and never over or underestimated. This variety of cultures was grouped under predetermined cultural topics. Tavares and Cavalcanti (1996) developed these activities by using authentic materials, their own personal experience as EFL teachers, and contributions from colleagues through ideas that were adapted to their needs and objectives.

5. Developing Cultural Awareness in Language Instructional Materials

Both learners and teachers of a second language need to understand cultural differences in order to recognize that people in the world are not all the same. Language teachers cannot avoid conveying impressions of another culture because language cannot be separated completely from the culture in which it is deeply embedded. Teacher's task is to make students aware of cultural differences, and learners should be exposed to these distinctions in FL/SL classrooms. Therefore, the reasons for familiarizing learners with the cultural components should be (a) to develop the communicative skills, (b) to understand the linguistic and behavioral patterns of both the target and the native culture at a more conscious level, and (c) to develop both intercultural and international understanding, and (d) to facilitate the process of target language learning.

Moreover, language instructional materials need to help the learners become communicatively competent, and communicative competence is believed to incorporate linguistic competence, pragmatic competence, and sociolinguistic competence. The sociolinguistic component of communication refers to rules of speaking which depend on social, pragmatic, and cultural elements. Thus, which linguistic realization we use for a particular function in any language, such as making an apology or a request, might depend on the social status of the speaker or hearer, on his/her age, sex, or any other social factor. These might call for the performance of a certain speech act in one culture but not in another.

Teachers play an important role in acting as an intercultural mediator and in compensating for the missing sociocultural components of language coursebooks. There are different ways in which teachers can make use of appropriate extra materials which enable them to go beyond the coursebook. Some of which suggested by Pulverness (2003) include: a teacher's own photographs or posters, students' own photographs and posters, extra texts, and video extracts. Listening to the utterances of native speakers, reading of original texts, or picture of native speakers engaged in natural activities will introduce cultural elements into the classroom. These materials can compensate for cultural dimensions that are totally absent from some coursebooks.

While developing cultural awareness in the EFL materials, the materials developers should keep in mind that the native language is learned along with the norms and attitudes of the social group which can be manifested through the words and expressions that are commonly used by members of the group. Therefore, learning to understand a foreign culture should help students of another language to use words and expressions more skillfully and authentically; to act naturally with persons of the other culture; and to recognize their different reactions.

Another point that needs to be addressed is that while most language learners find positive benefits in learning the target culture, some of them experience certain psychological blocks, or inhibiting effects of the second culture. Thus, in teaching foreign language teachers need to be sensitive to the students' attitudes by using techniques that promote cultural understanding. In other words, as Cakir (2006) notes, teachers have to play a key role in breaking down cultural barriers prior to initiating teaching-learning activities. Perhaps one way to effectively begin teaching culture is to emphasize similarities between people. Moreover, the topics to be used to teach the target language should be presented in the contexts accompanying the native ones. That is, while teaching a culture specific topic in the target language, first language equivalent can also be given in order to enhance learning.

To sum up, the use of culture-based tasks in language instructional materials will help learners to get familiar with the target culture, and performing these tasks should involve the cultural values of the target language, accompanied by the native ones, designed for every level.

6. Conclusion

The students' awareness about the sociocultural differences between the target language and their own will help them to succeed in their studies and to join in a real-life language setting as well. To this end, language instructional materials must include sociocultural components, and language teachers have a vital role in providing some of the cultural components missing from the coursebook. They can provide their own materials to compensate for whatever they think are absent from the coursebook.

Another suggestion for teachers is to select topics which focus on both language and content. To do so, as Pulverness (2003, p. 435) states, "the primary objectives can be clearly to develop critical thinking about

cultural issues, resisting the tendency of the materials to use content only to contextualize the presentation and practice of language items” (p. 435). However, when the primary focus of language classrooms is language learning, cultural learning is appreciated as an integral part of language education and not restricted to the cultural studies lessons.

Putting into practice the presented suggestions will hopefully help teachers to succeed in combining language learning and cultural learning, so that overall purpose would be to provide units of lessons in which students are able to develop both kinds of knowledge as interrelated parts of language knowledge. Moreover, all this does not mean that target language learning will change the learner’s identity. Students should be enabled to discuss their native culture at the same time they are provided with a real- life content of the target culture. Using the target language perfectly does not require the target language users to change their values and beliefs. Their ethnic, religious, and national backgrounds will remain the same even if they will be appreciated as successful target language users.

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