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Culture in Language Learning: Its Implications

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ABSTRACT

Culture is an indispensable part of our lives and it extends too to language learning. Cognition bestowed by one's culture is incredibly responsible for learning and discovery of the world. This cognition helps in learning and amalgamation of knowledge through networking and associations of the world around. Learners' cognition is more fine-tuned to their cultural world than those which are not in the mental mapping in regard to absorption of knowledge. This holds true for language learning and acquisition too as the learners acquire and competently use their first language due to hard wiring of their cultural cognition. The knowledge and awareness of cultural wherewithal, expressed and performed through language, enhance efficient learning of languages by virtue of its approximation in the mental lexicon. Hence, culture is regarded as a crucial factor in achieving success in language learning.

Keywords- Language learning, culture, cognitive concepts, mental mapping, knowledge, communicative competence

INTRODUCTION & DISCUSSION

Language learning is an area where numerous variables are intertwined in helping one to learn successfully. These variables could be of social, psychology or even physical aspects. Culture is one such socio-psychology aspect that is of great significance in language learning. By virtue of living within a certain culture, the knowledge of the world is consciously or unconsciously imprinted in one's cognition. With that cognition, learning and discovery is enhanced through networking and associations of the world around. As such, incorporation of culture in the learning of languages can be a very productive means in achieving competency and proficiency in the language. It is said that the learners' cognition is more fine-tuned to their cultural world than those which are not in the mental mapping in regard to absorption of knowledge. This holds true for language too as the learners acquire and competently use their first language due to hard wiring of their cultural cognition. The knowledge and awareness of cultural wherewithal, expressed and performed through language, enhance efficient learning of languages by virtue of its approximation in the mental lexicon.

The word 'culture' is used by all members of the society a number of times in everyday discourse even in matters non-related to learning and teaching. Its significance in everyday life pervades every aspect of knowledge and existence. Likewise, the consideration of culture as integral to success in language learning has become a sort of the keyword in researches related to language learning and teaching. In line with the available researches, the article centres around some important issues and concepts that benefit culture based language learning. It is to be remembered that all learning activities in life takes place through language, so culture based language learning becomes more pertinent to researches in language education.

In a multilingual country like India when one starts formal schooling, English as a second or third language is introduced. In many states, English eventually takes over as the medium of instruction at the higher level of schooling as most of the materials are organized and readily available in the language. In some states like Nagaland, it is the sole medium of instruction from day one when one begins formal schooling. Hence, the language is of great importance to every Indian as its knowledge provides access to modernization and to partake in globalization. The language opens up a world of opportunity to modern means and employment. Its knowledge and use is indispensable to the country's multi-linguistic milieu and nature.

By school age, concepts in the mother tongue befitting his/her age and cognition are ingrained in the child and he/she begins to think of the world around with the concepts that have already been given through his/her mother tongue. His/her cognition does not go beyond his/her cultural world at that young age and so one has no or very less exposure to the target language or culture. In many cases especially in the rural or semi-urban settings, he/she solely depends

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on the school to give him/her the exposure and the experiences of the target language to which he/she is being introduced to. So it happens that as any student in India, he/she is taught the poem "Daffodils" by William Wordsworth at a certain point in school life. The teacher explains it beautifully taking him/her imaginatively to its magical beauty. He/she enjoys in imagining its mesmerizing spell but alas somewhere, he/she falls short of the objective of the learning of the poem thereby failing to integrate it successfully to his/her language learning experiences. It is because the flower is not a part of his/her culture and hence its teaching is unable to give him/her a total benefit of learning. He/She is unable to fit and accommodate the word 'daffodils' in his/her cognitive schema in its right place. This kind of an experience in different ways is what many language learners go through when cultural contextualization is missing. This shows that the failure in enhancing maximal language learning arise out of the culture disconnect that lay between the learner, the teacher as the facilitator and the text.

Culture is defined in many similar ways by different scholars and it boils down to the central idea of one's behaviour and manifestation of life. To take a simple definition, culture can be said to comprise of our way of life. This way of life comprises within it our beliefs (religious, superstitions, ideologies, etc), assumptions of people (on life, death, afterlife etc), the things that we see around us (nature, animals, stones, rain etc), and the different ways that we communicate as social beings, all of which are ingrained in us as part of cultural transmission of the concepts. 'It is a system of integrated patterns, most of which remain below the threshold of consciousness, yet all of which govern human behaviour just as surely as the manipulated strings of a puppet control its motions (Condon 1973:4). These integrated patterns are those that we have gathered in our mental lexicon and that which enable cognition of the world around us. It centres around our whole being, and the cognition of the culture that we practice and live helps us get to the interpretation of what we understand as and what they mean. The interpretations generally differ from culture to culture and to varying degrees and levels. So in that sense, learning a language is best benefitted and successful when it is in alignment with our cultural concepts to which our cognition is fitted or mapped.

Learning a language has its objective as communicative competence (Dell Hymes, 1972). It was with the introduction of competence as integral in the theory of linguistics (Chomsky, 1965) and further development of its concept as being important in accounting for the study of language that its implications became significant to language learning. Knowing a language rule alone does not mean one would be able to use it in communicative interaction. The Latin grammar and the structural approaches until then had not much studied the importance of cultural cognition till the 1960s. A simple term as 'communicative competence' opened up an all important and encompassing path of research in the quest for a linguistic theory. It is defined as knowing what to say, to whom, when and how in the appropriate manner as befitting the cultural context in which it is being used. This means that linguistic or structural competence as part of language learning is not enough to impart one with competence in the language. Only if cultural considerations are incorporated in the learning process then would it lead to communicative competence in the learners. This is because culture specifics would result in his/her cognition and experiences aiding in language learning effectively. Communicative competence is the ultimate goal of learners as they struggle with function, discourse, register and non verbal aspects of human interaction and linguistic negotiations.

We often come across cases where learners of English language produce a sentence like for instance 'The girl is wearing a green coloured dress' instead of 'The girl is wearing a green dress'. If we dissect the sentence and check out where the incorrect sentence is emanating from, we will see the role that cultural interpretation has something to do with it. Like it was said at the beginning, our thoughts which are expressed through language and the assumptions that we have, all revolve around our culture. So in this case the learner may have in his/her cognitive schema as given by the mother tongue attuned to a word/structure like 'leaf colour' to refer to 'green'. Whereas his/her language may not have the lexeme 'green' like English has, the cultural imprint of her language and culture is being reflected in the production of such a sentence. The gap has occurred as the learner is caught in lack of knowledge between the differences in the two cultures. This shows that culture influences our ways of thinking and production and that is reflected in the way we use language. In that sense, our culture helps shape our cognition and this view with its significant implication for language learning is famously known as the Sapir and Whorf's Hypothesis. (Carroll, J. (ed.). 1956)

So much so is incorporating culture into our language learning important then, to help in achieving the ideals of communicative competence. The knowledge comes out of the learners' ability to cognitively comprehend and process in the culture of the target language. This implication comes from researches on first language acquisition where learners because of their attunement of their psychological concepts to their own culture are able to use their language communicatively competent. When learning is absent of cultural touch, we see products who may produce fluent sentences with linguistic competence because of pumping in rules of English but with words and structures bereft of cultural connections due to memorizations. This leads to a shortfall in communicating the precise thought and intended meaning which may give rise to structural errors in the target language, ambiguous interpretation or maybe even miscommunication due to lack of cognitive imprinting and integration in their mental schemas. Herein the objective of communicative competence remains half-baked in learning a language owing to the fact that the cultural distance between one's language and the target language is farther. Bereft of culture incorporation, learning becomes monotonous and boring and a half hearted exercise in the absence of culture relatedness whereby the integration of knowledge in order for learning to take place falls short leaving a jumbled and fuzzy kind of learning.

Woolfolk (2004) makes an interesting observation on language learning in the works of Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky. Cognitive development in children, as Jean Piaget advocates for in first language development, is crucial to language acquisition and learning studies and it extends too to second language learning. Piaget's conception of cognition is much significant but it is more complete with Vygotsky's take on cultural cognition which accounts for the blueprint of successful language learning. Learners learn through social interactions and their culture. Since we socially interact and communicate with others to learn the cultural values of our society, the importance of cultural interaction in enhancing language learning is an improvement to language

learning studies beside the cognitive considerations. All human activities take place in cultural settings and therefore cannot be understood apart from cultural interactions. Brown (1994:168) too mentions that, 'Second language learning is often second culture learning.

Moreover, the ultimate goal of language learning is to communicate with structural aptness embedded with accurate sense words in the target language. The utterances in communication are a representation of our thoughts in the form of words. Words carry meaning but in making ourselves understand we cannot fully depend on the dictionary type of meaning. According to Lakoff (1987) in the interpretation of meanings of words, sense in its essence requires an encyclopaedic –type entry of cultural knowledge. That means meaning is derived out of a dictionary type of meaning as well as our cultural knowledge. Meanings and its dictionary interpretation falls short if cultural meaning is not taken into account. In that way, culture gives us a categorized ready-made system of the world around us. This ready-made system comes heavily laden with cultural experiences and interpretations of the people and their social lifestyles and thoughts. He calls these experiences rooted in their culture as Idealized Cognitive Models (ICMs). With the words we acquire, we learn to recognize the types of category distinctions that are relevant in our social world. Within a category, we see certain features in common. As such, words that we acquire comprise the inherited set of category labels. For instance, take the simple English word 'hotel' which means to speakers of English an accommodation usually for travellers on payment. For a learner learning English, a different sense or connotation may set in on encountering this word in his or her lesson. Among some communities in the Northeastern state of Nagaland in India, the conceptualization is also extended to a place where people go and have tea, a simple tea shop. This meaning is derived of their cultural experience that is hooked on to the word as per their world and categorization. Thus more often, going by the dictionary meaning makes us feel that there is a fixed relationship between the set of words we have learned (categories in a language) and the way external reality is organized, but it is not so.

Further evidences from studies on different languages suggest that the organization of external reality actually varies to some extent according to the language being used to talk about it. Scholars of linguistic anthropology like Sapir and Whorf, have shown through their study of Amerindian languages that peoples' thoughts are determined by the categories available to them in their language which is reflective of their cultural world (Caroll, J. (ed.).1956). As such, the inherited words with which we have categorized the world are influenced by cultural interpretation- the ICMs. These ICMs help in giving sense of categorization to the word meaning/structure which the learners have to be guided towards for their cognitive development that would enhance their learning. Cultural transmission being a fundamental characteristic of language provides this cultural knowledge which after the acquisition of the word shapes one's thoughts and reality. In the study of signs too, language articulates or makes categorization of concepts possible. Words and objects have no natural relationship between them, so the relation between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary. And hence, meanings correspond in practice to different words across languages. (<http://faculty.smu.edu/nschwartz/seminar/Saussure.htm>). In relation to language learning, bridging the cultural gap in language learning and teaching will evoke the kind of mental concept that is intended to convey or mean. Culture is hooked on to our minds and being and is significant to language learning. This means that words or language in general is not just a set that we find in the dictionary; it is interpreted based on contexts and contexts are culture sensitive. Language learning hence is a cognitive activity where comprehension and processing has to be culturally integrated in line with that of the target language.

Many a times, learners are disadvantaged and what would have been an easy exercise is instead taken along the long winding path to learning in an insensitive and difficult manner because of the inadequacy of knowledge in theory and practice coupled with the uninformed teaching strategy of an ill equipped teacher, or due to the texts being not culturally oriented. Through the long winding road, the learner through years of trial and error method may or may not get there in the end depending on his/her levels of motivation and perseverance. Getting there, that is achieving communicative competence, requires much of rearrangements and setting of the mental schemas through long experiences of oneself if cultural aspects are ignored. Two scenarios experienced frequently are played out in support of the view.

Scenario1: The learner reads the lesson in English, followed by in thought self-explanation to himself or herself in his/her language to understand and mark it in his/her lexicon or grammar. This practice is so rampant among learners. Culture and competency in his/her first language helping in retaining learning is at play here. The learner has to understand and process cognitively the content and meaning, and then recalling his/her competence in the language the learner goes forward and frames the structure using the correct words. The teacher here can help the learner build up competency in the target language where shifting from one to the other is bridged and made easy through experiences and knowledge of the target culture.

Scenario 2: A lesson in the text which revolves around a 2BHK house in the context of teaching English language in Nagaland. Most of the learners are alien to the concept of a 2BHK house. What follows for the rest of the lesson is blurry as the mind tries to figure out what it means or looks like thereby hampering concentration and connections in the learning process. Anticipating it, a simple explanation from the teacher that it means a house with 3 rooms (of which one usually is kept as the sitting room and the other bedrooms) according to the Naga culture would suffice because in Naga concept the kitchen automatically includes as part of the word 'house'. This elucidation is a simple example that would enhance cognitive development in the target culture. Moreover, if culture based language learning is adhered to, culture appropriate mental lexicon is set whereby the learner can proficiently and competently communicate his/her thoughts. Take another instance where the notion is to maintain phatic communication in English for a Naga learner. As a form of greeting in Naga culture, the listener is asked if he/she had had her food/meal. Such a construction as a form of greeting would be awkward and weird in English and would leave the listener irritated or perplexed. But with the setting and imprinting of the second language culture in the mental schema the learner would be able to easily shift to its equivalent form of greeting in the target language and produce it as 'how do you do' or 'how are you?'

Harvard professor Jerome Bruner also notes that it is culture that shapes the mind by providing us with the tool kit by which we construct not only our worlds but our very conceptions of ourselves and our powers. In his own words, he states that “you cannot understand mental activity unless you take into account the cultural setting and its resources, the very things that give mind its shape and scope. Learning, remembering, talking, imaging: all of them are made possible by participating in a culture” (Bruner, 1966, pp. x-xi). As such, learning a second culture is an integral part of learning a second language. Understanding the culture of the target language gives our mind its shape and scope in the larger context by enabling us to think and process in the target language. If that is so, considerations on the impact of culture becomes imperative for language learning programmes to consider lessons and texts centred around cultural objects and nuances. Folktales, indigenous songs, flora and fauna, to name a few, of the target language culture are treasure groves to imbibing the cognitive schemas of learners. Visiting and living in the culture if possible, provides for first hand and authentic knowledge. These enhance interest and motivation in the learners thereby leading to successful learning.

Furthermore, we know that language always operates in a speech community or culture. So participation in the target language culture aids language learning in multiples ways provided the teacher as the facilitator guides the learners productively in the following manner:

1. Helps in overcoming intolerance and developing respect for other cultures and communities.
2. Helps in the acculturation process to build up positive attitudes towards the people and the language
3. Aids in immersion into the target language culture in order to give a firsthand knowledge into the registers, styles and nuances of language use and usage that is specific and typical of the culture.
4. Builds up an attitude of appreciation for the culture to enhance interest and motivation to know and learn further on the language.
5. Helps in active participation which slowly trains to build up cognitive schemas in the target language.

In retrospect, English plays an important role as a lingua franca, language of trade and commerce, of media and law, of informational technology and so on and so forth. It has become an indispensable part of our lives as partakers in globalization. Especially in the north eastern part of India, English is the only official language in a state like Nagaland where none of the indigenous languages occupy an official status. In the name of English language education, language learning happens haphazardly due to drawbacks in terms of policies, curriculum development, material production, teacher development etc. It is taken for granted that anything that works for the western world would also be successful in other parts of the world in ditto, sans the cultural considerations. As the situation remains the silver lining can be seen if teachers who play the main role, don on the mantle of knowledgeable educators in the real passionate sense and give touches of cultural nuances however difficult the texts, tasks or situations maybe. Contents can be learned with reference to both cultures where the learners can through associations and integrations figure out ways to get their learning cognitively mapped. Language skills can be greatly enhanced if acquaintance with the target culture is boosted through development of the right attitude and learning strategies. After all, language skill is not a subject like any other subjects but it is all about developing the different language skills to achieve communicative competence. Language learning requires fine tuning of cultural differences to arrive at successful language learning. In language education, different factors and variables abound, yet cultural contemplations perhaps remain absolute of all the considerations.

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