

CULTURE AND LANGUAGE TEACHING THROUGH MEDIA

Bekmirzayeva Dilorom

Andijan State Institute of Foreign Languages

Faculty of English language and literature Studies

Student of group 323

Scientific supervisor: G'aniyeva Tohira

Abstract

The topic of teaching and learning culture has been a matter of considerable interest to language educators and much has been written about the role of culture in foreign language instruction over the past two decades. ESL students whose success in a new environment is conditioned not only by their mastery of the new language, but also, and especially, by their ability to negotiate the new culture.

Media sources significantly affect students' of attitudes and dispositions towards themselves, other people and society especially in English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. Building on the argument that learning a second language cannot be separated from the acquisition of the culture that it embodies, this paper argues that the design and adaptation of written media should reflect multiple perspectives and avoid prejudices in order to engage students in a process of uncovering and confronting cultural biases and facilitate cultural learning. The paper presents prejudices and other cultural biases learners have about target culture and discusses the positive effects of media on students. The paper suggests that media sources should be integrated into ESL curriculum in order to avoid prejudices, to enhance students' critical thinking and language skills and cultural biases, and to have a better understanding of new culture.

Key Words: Culture and Language Teaching, Media Sources, Developing Language Skills, Critical Thinking Skills

Introduction

Culture is often neglected in English as a Foreign Language (EFL), and ESL teaching/learning, or introduced as no more than supplementary diversion to language instruction. Yet changes in linguistic and learning theory suggest that culture should be highlighted as an important element in language classrooms. Efforts linking culture and language learning are impelled by ideas originating in sociolinguistic theory. From a sociolinguistic perspective, competence in language use is determined not only by the ability to use language with grammatical accuracy, but also to use language appropriate to particular contexts (Tsenk, 2002). Thus, successful language learning requires language users to know the culture that underlies language.

The National Center for Cultural Competence defines culture as an “integrated pattern of human behaviour that includes thoughts, communications, languages, practices, beliefs, values, customs, courtesies, rituals, manners of interacting and roles, relationships and expected behaviours of a racial, ethnic, religious or social group; and the ability to transmit the above to succeeding generations” (Goode et al., 2000). This means that language is not only how we define culture, it also reflects culture. Thus, the culture associated with a language cannot be learned in a few lessons about celebrations, folk songs, or costumes of the area in which the language is spoken. Culture is a much broader concept that is inherently tied to many of the linguistic concepts taught in second language classes.

A glance at most textbooks, on the other hand, is ample to show what educators must first combat and eradicate: stereotypes. As (Byram&Morgan et al. 1994: 41) observe “textbook writers intuitively avoid bringing learners’ existing hetero-stereotypes into the open and hope that [their] negative overtones will be counteracted by presenting positive images of the foreign country”. As a matter of fact, stereotypes are extremely tenacious, in so far as people from different cultures have their own schemata through which they conceptualise and understand the world, and to step into another culture is ‘to deny something within their own being’ (ibid.: 43).

Seelye (1993) maintains that the mass media is a good source for current data. It offers real interaction with the target language and culture, and is a valuable instructional resource. They are superior to the simplified language in edited texts, and contribute to the learning of coping skills. Newspapers also offer “snapshots” of the segments of the target culture, making them a logical medium. Teachers must be aware that newspapers and magazines are commercial enterprises aimed at a particular target readership; and as such they may reflect the values, interests and biases of the readership; as well as those of the owners, editorial staff, and the political milieu. Understanding audience needs helps producers decide on the content and delivery of messages (Blatchford, 86). Writing articles for newspapers and magazines also requires a sense of who the readers will be. For example, the headlines and first paragraph of a news article have to contain information about the what, when, where, who, and how of an event to provide the gist of a story for busy readers.

Conclusion

In order to evaluate the course, two open-ended questions were conducted to the students in the last week of the course (week 14):

1. To what extent has the course helped you to improve your understanding of your culture and the target culture?
2. To what extent has the course helped you to improve your language skills?
3. To what extent has the course improved your critical thinking skills?

The results were analyzed in three categories that seemed to emerge from the data. The points below indicate common responses raised by students.

1. Understanding of the target culture

Students declare that they learnt new things about English people, English culture and England. After they learnt about the social, historical and religious background of the target language, some prejudices have been turned out to be irrelevant. They realized the biases they had about target culture did not reflect the truth. Since they have learnt about the social, political and educational background of the language and culture they are learning, some prejudices have been turned out to be irrelevant. After the course they have realized what “think in English” means.

2. Language skills

Writing news and preparing advertisement workshop provided them with a motivating context through which they could practice their English by reading and writing. They had to read a lot of newspapers in English in order to prepare their workshop, which improved their reading skills, and helped them to learn some new vocabulary. The most significant contribution of the course and the workshop is to improve their vocabulary, especially thematic vocabulary, knowledge. During the workshop itself they had a variety of opportunities to discuss perspectives of different people living in the same society and the language they use, which helped them to realize different usages of words, conjunctions and phrasal verbs.

Learning a second language cannot be separated from the acquisition of the culture that it embodies. That’s why, the design and adaptation of written media should reflect multiple perspectives and avoid prejudices in order to engage students in a process of uncovering and confronting cultural biases and facilitate cultural learning. Since the media reflects the society and it is easy and cheap to access them, utilizing media sources in ELT curriculum in a separate course or integrated with the other courses will help the learners to have a real understanding of the other societies and, will motivate learners to learn a language. By doing so, they can develop their abilities to draw conclusion what they read or see.

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