

Exploiting heterogeneity: Culture awareness and the EFL classroom

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ABSTRACT

Can the EFL classroom be perceived as a space to raise cultural awareness and strengthen the idea of multiculturalism? Culture is considered as the domain of literature, and language teachers generally tend to shy away from any nuanced discussion concerning it. Even when we include concepts like critical reading and critical thinking in the EFL classroom, there is a resistance to introduce contested or controversial areas like what constitutes cultural awareness and the place of multiculturalism. However, perceptions are changing and prominent applied linguists have even described “culture” as the fifth skill placing it along with the four major skills, namely LSRW (listening, speaking, reading and writing).

Language is an expression of the culture that engenders it and carries embedded within it the markings of that culture. Therefore, if one approaches the question putting aside preconceived notions of what is viable within an EFL setting, one realizes that language teachers are situated in a unique position – they are already teaching a seminal aspect of culture! This paper proposes to examine the viability of introducing culture and intercultural communication and multiculturalism in the EFL classroom. It will also attempt to explore pedagogical tools and practices that can be used in the EFL classroom to facilitate such a study.

Key words: Cultural awareness in language learning; intercultural communication; multiculturalism; socio-cultural sensitivity.

1. Introduction

Culture has always been an integral part of the literature classroom. Literary texts have been scrutinized based on their cultural coding from the time of Plato. When Plato emphasized the impact of literary works on the mind of the readers, and questioned its desirability, he was acknowledging the influence of literary texts on human behaviour. Critical thinkers who examine

the nature of language and literature also concur with the idea that language and literature can impact behaviour. In fact, the point of departure for theorists who study language as a unit of discourse and the linguists is that while traditional linguists focus on the form, structure and patterns undergirding language, discourse analysts treat language as existing beyond the “sentence boundary” and having implied

functions and embedded connotations. Language does not exist in a sociologically and psychologically neutral space. Any utterance carries embedded within it genetic markers that flag its origin and location of production. Even the study of linguistics incorporates this aspect as is evidenced by the so-called “critical linguistics” (van Dijk, 1984; Fowler, 1986; Halliday, 2009). They argue that discursive structures or linguistic usage encodes ideological patterns that reflect different ideologies. For instance, Pierre Bourdieu observes that through education one not only acquires language but also “socially constituted attitudes towards language” (Dillon, 1994).

1.1 Marxist thinkers such as Louis Althusser, Michel Pecheux, and Fredric Jameson have studied discourse as a tool for exerting power, the manner in which language is used to perpetuate and legitimize oppression. Feminist thinkers have also deconstructed language to expose embedded misogyny and the devaluation of the feminine. Critical thinkers, other than Marxist and Feminist thinkers, have pointed out the biases inherent in the manner in which language is used. For instance, postcolonial theorists have attempted to unpack the cultural associations that have accrued to words connected with non-white races. However, while uncovering ideological underpinnings of a language is a legitimate endeavour, thinkers like Foucault have also consistently warned against the silencing and controlling aspect of hegemonic discourses that threatens, silences and challenges deviant discourses.

2. Analysing discourse might not come under the purview of language studies in an EFL setting but if one needs to sensitise the learner regarding the ideological implications embedded in a discourse and the writer’s choice of words, one needs to explore the role of culture. If one accepts the basic premise that language emerges from a group of people and as such is culturally coded, one cannot but become aware of the insidious manner in which language perpetrates belief and value systems. Given this fact, a teacher of a language has an important role to play. One can even claim that a language teacher is in an enviable position: she can use the opportunity of teaching a language to explore questions of culture, challenge deeply ingrained prejudices and create an opportunity to promote multiculturalism.

2.1 The link between language and culture was recognized in the early half of the twentieth century. Edward Sapir claimed in the 1920’s that language and the culture of its speakers cannot be analysed in isolation. Researches into L2 curriculum not only explored the possibility of including cultural components in language teaching (Sysoyev & Donelson, 2002) but also examined the possibility of using L2 as a means to encourage acculturation and assimilation among the migrant communities (Kramsch, 1996). Lado, the linguist, highlighted the advantages inherent in comparing the cultural systems in the native language with those of the target language. In his influential book (1957), he states: “in the comparison between native and foreign

language lies the key to ease or difficulty in foreign language learning.” The book outlines methods for comparing two systems of sound, grammar, vocabulary, writing, and significantly, culture.

2.2 However, with increasing emphasis placed on the communicative aspect of language, the cultural aspect has been effectively marginalized. After years of focus on conversational skills, language teachers have become increasingly dissatisfied with the importance placed on the functional uses of language. The recognition that language embodies culture brought about a rethink on the manner in which language is approached. When one uses literary texts or authentic materials to teach a language, one is also teaching the cultural values inherent in the target language. The only option they realize is to do it consciously.

2.3 The impetus to include “culture” in the EFL classroom in the west is the desire to promote acculturation among the immigrants to the new culture as pointed out by Kramersch. In Asia, Africa and Latin America, the motivating factor to encourage multicultural competence is to package it as part of skill enhancement in a world where business interest and travel inevitably lead to cross-cultural encounters. The fact that it might encourage tolerance for diversity within home communities appears to be a collateral advantage.

2.4 Given the fact that learning a new language exposes one to the culture of the speakers of that particular language, one can safely assume that the EFL classroom

can facilitate multiculturalism. However, teaching “culture” and “cultural awareness” is phenomenally difficult. The difficulty begins with our understanding of the word “culture.” “Culture” denotes different things to different people. To a social scientist, it can denote the customs, beliefs and traditions of a group of people; to a cultural anthropologist, it denotes the norms and values that govern societies; and to a teacher of literature in the culture studies department, it can refer to different and suppressed streams of cultures that lie beneath a monolithic façade called *culture*.

3. In the second language classroom, culture is more often than not treated in a reductionist manner. “Over the years, the many explicit and implicit definitions of culture in second language pedagogy have led to what Schollan calls ‘miniaturization of the concept of culture so that researchers study and write about the culture of the school or even the culture of the classroom,’” observes Hinkel (1991). In fact, in most classrooms where there is an attempt to introduce culture as part of language learning, culture is reduced to the four “f’s” – food, fairs, folklore, and (statistical) facts, remarks Kramersch (1991: 218).

3.1 To counter such a stereotypical approach, it is necessary to begin with a questioning mind. A good starting point appears to be inculcating an awareness of one’s own cultural heritage. Because of the pervasive familiarity of the members to a particular culture, their assumptions may appear self-evident and axiomatic. Therefore, a starting point would be to define

culture as including two aspects – products and processes. Discussing products created by a culture gives one an easy point of entry to initiate discussion about culture. They include food, clothes, artefacts, folklore, myths, etc. The difficulty is more pronounced when we come to ideas and beliefs. Hence, it might be more suited to the upper-intermediate or advanced, as the challenge would be in terms of both vocabulary and conceptual understanding. The task will become even more difficult when one moves from an examination of culture associated with L1 to an alien culture that the learner is being exposed to through L2.

3.2 The instructor in L2 should recognize that culture has a significant role to play in the learning of a language. Moreover, it will sensitize the student about appropriate modes of usage and behaviour. For instance, when a person learns a language but is ignorant of the cultural practices of the people who speak that language, the possibility of him/her displaying inappropriate language behaviour is very high. This can have significant implications. Many scholars have observed that non-native speakers often display inappropriate language behaviour. They appear to be unaware of what is acceptable or not. This problem can be addressed to a considerable extent in the EFL classroom and the students can become much more socio-culturally sensitive.

3.3 It is, therefore, desirable that the practising language teachers should develop a pedagogy to realize this. Then the language

classroom becomes truly multicultural and the students are able to break the shackles of narrow parochialism and resist xenophobia. In a world that is increasingly becoming polarised along nationalistic ideologies, such an endeavour will go a long way in creating a more inclusive and tolerant society. The language teacher can exploit the different cultural backgrounds of her students to initiate a discussion about commonalities and differences between cultures and to expose students to the concept of acceptance of differences and multiculturalism.

4. My EFL classroom provided an ideal situation to explore the question of multiculturalism because there were students from more than 20 nationalities. The class consisted of a group of adult learners who were in India as part of the International Training Programme at The English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad. Learning about multiculturalism and tolerance can begin only with oneself. A good starting point to integrate multicultural competence is to ask students to identify two products and two processes from their own culture. Once they wrote down two products and processes from their culture they were asked to note down a process that they liked and one that they disliked. This proved challenging because there were a few students who were uncomfortable with identifying processes from their country that they dislike. These students appeared to feel that criticising their country in front of other nationalities was tantamount to betraying their country

and culture. So I initiated the discussion by identifying a process that I liked in India and one that I did not like. Then the students too shared with the class processes that they approved and disapproved. This was followed by a group discussion because many of the processes needed elaboration because of their unfamiliarity. If it is an advanced group, this could be followed by a written activity wherein the students are asked to justify/give reasons for their choice. Allied activities like learning vocabulary and presentation can also be integrated into this module.

4.1 Food can be used to sensitize students about prejudices. Kramersch describes food as one of the most commonly used starting points to initiate a discussion about multiculturalism. A lot of prejudices and reactions are centred on food. One way to make students aware of inherent prejudices is to expose them to different eating habits. In my EFL classroom, I put up a slideshow of different birds and animals – chickens, geese, peacocks, dogs, horses, pigs, cows, snakes, locusts, grubs and beetles. Then I ask the students whether they recognize any common factor. The common factor is that they are all eaten by human beings in different parts of the world. The initial reaction is disbelief, sometimes disgust. I follow it up with a general discussion explaining that, what one group considers disgusting can be looked at very differently by another group and what dictates our taste is actually the culture we grow up in.

5. Conclusion

The L2 classroom has a unique advantage.

It can facilitate intercultural communication and become a meeting point between two cultures: one represented by L1 and the other represented by L2. In such a setting, students will be more receptive to examine ideas that they have taken for granted because it is part of their culture. When correctly explored, exposure to multiculturalism will encourage teachers and students to examine the shared and the unique aspects on the one hand, and, on the other, the affinities and the reactionary aspects of the cultural spaces they occupy. This will give them an opportunity to identify and comprehend the central and the marginal, the relatively stable and the volatile, the cohesive and the subversive elements in those spaces. The exposure to other cultures can encourage tolerance and appreciation of diversity among the students. This appears to be the need of the hour.

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