Developing Socio-Cultural Competence in ESL Learners: Some Practical Techniques

K Venkat Reddy

ABSTRACT

The paper is based on Agakar's concept of "languaculture" which states that language, and culture are inseparable units and that teaching one in the absence of the other will render the learning incomplete. Consequently, teaching a language should not be limited to merely imparting LSRW, vocabulary, grammar, and rules of pronunciation. The curriculum should incorporate socio-cultural content to boost cultural awareness. In India, often teaching materials are designed with little attention to sensitizing students about the culture of the English language and, as a result, cultural training remains conspicuously absent in classroom practices. The paper argues that apart from developing grammatical and communicative competences of English, simultaneous efforts must be made to enhance socio-cultural competence. Such an inclusion would foster a broad cross-cultural awareness and understanding in addition to encouraging tolerance for other cultures. In this paper, firstly, I explain the general concepts of language, culture, their definitions, Agakar's concept of 'languaculture', Friedrich's term 'linguaculture', the need, and the how of incorporating the cultural content into the ESL curriculum. Secondly, I identify and present an inventory of 'cultures' that the native speaker routinely experiences, and finally, based on the inventory, I present a few cross-cultural activities to develop socio-cultural competence in Indian ESL learners.

Keywords: culture, 'languaculture', 'linguaculture', grammatical competence, communicative competence, sociocultural competence, cross-cultural communication

Introduction

In the past language experts believed that all the natural human languages were identical, and one could convey exactly the same meaning in two different languages by accurately translating the vocabulary and grammar. Today, perceptions related to how languages work have radically altered. Research in Ethnography, Sociolinguistics, Cultural Linguistics, and Anthropology, in particular, convincingly point out that language and its socio-cultural contexts are not distinct categories to be addressed separately, and that they are indistinguishable. For example, the discoveries revealed by Benjamin Lee Whorf, who studied the language of the Hopi people in the United States of America, have significantly changed our views on language. Hopi language had more words carrying shades of meaning for the English word <u>snow</u> because the areas where the Hopis lived were very cold. Whorf also pointed out that the Hopis did not know

how to count time; they did not know how to say one o' clock or two o' clock because, for them time was an indivisible entity that couldn't be split into units, and the language had no past or future tenses. Further, for the Hopi people, there were no words in their language to distinguish seasons such as summer, autumn, and winter as they experience principally only one season, winter. Observations such as these have prompted Whorf to draw conclusions that have revolutionised the way people think about language, society, and culture. Influenced by Whorf's linguistic relativity theory, Rebecca Fong notes:

"Languages are different and not just in the way they sound, or the words they use. The customs of a language, its grammar, the words themselves, are a product of the way the people of a culture experience the world. And we do not all experience the world in the same way. This means that accurately translating words from one language to another may not be enough for us to understand the cultural meaning that lies behind the words."

Expanding on Whorf's observations, Kress (1985), Paul Friedrich (1989), and Michael Agar (1994) concluded that the socio-cultural aspects and language cannot be understood as separate units. In fact, they are two sides of the same coin; they are one and the same, and one cannot be understood without the other. Langacker (1999:16) describes language as "an essential instrument and component of culture, whose reflection in linguistic structure and use is all pervasive and quite significant". He suggests that language and culture are two sides of the same coin; inseparably intertwined to the extent that one cannot be understood without the other. He goes so far as to say that even the structure of language is not devoid of the cultural content.

'languaculture' Vs. 'linguaculture'

The term '*languaculture*" was coined and disseminated by the American Anthropologist Michel Agar through a book that he had written and published in 1994: *Language Shock: Understanding the Culture of Communication.* The purpose of creating this term is to make minor adjustments to a similar sounding term, *"linguaculture"*, coined by Paul Friedrich, the American Linguistic Anthropologist. The purpose of both these terms is 'to define the essential tie between language and culture'. Agar was of the view that in Friedrich's *"linguaculture"*, there is more of Linguistics than natural language. Although Linguistics uses language as material for the study, it is not language proper, it is about language, a subject that uses language as subject for a systematic study. Agar therefore corrected this mistake by changing the vowel from 'i' to 'a' thereby coining '*languaculture*" making language sit next to culture.

Both these terms focus on culture in language or the cultural dimension of language. Agar states that language users draw on multiple things besides grammar and vocabulary such as past knowledge, local and cultural information, habits and behaviours as they negotiate *'languaculture'*. When Agar talks about the *'languaculture',* he defines it as the necessary tie between language and culture. He stresses that languages and cultures are always closely related, and it is not possible to distinguish languages from cultures.

Therefore, you cannot really know a language unless you have an informed understanding of the culture of that language

Thus Agar gave us a novel way of describing language and culture. This paradigm of conceptualising language as *'languaculture'* does not reduce language to its mere instrumental function: as an instrument of communication. But it also recognises that besides performing the instrumental function, each language communicates its culture. When language and culture are closely related, how can we teach one without looking at the other as a reference point? Teaching ESL/EFL should not be limited to equipping learners with lexical, grammatical, pronunciation and communicative competences alone. Alongside these abilities, cultural competence should also be developed for an appropriate use of language. That is precisely why we need to find ways and means to offer a sense of the cultural context in language learning situations.

Definitions of Culture

The term 'culture' is a complex term filled with numerous connotations. Kaplan (1986, taken from Thanasoulas, 2001) points out, "we do not have good definitions for either culture or language; because we are enmeshed in both, it is hard to get outside of them enough to try to define them". This complexity is further compounded by the fact that certain manifestations of culture are visible and explicit, while others are implicit. Harris sees this through an analogy of an iceberg saying *lifestyles, food, music, artefacts, architecture, forms of discourse, routine, leisure activities* and so on are explicit or visible forms of culture and *attitudes, norms, values, customs, basic assumptions and beliefs* are implicit or deep structures of culture.

An inclusive and comprehensive definition suggests that culture is an amalgamation of ideas, values and assumptions about life. It is widely shared among people and directs behaviour and language of the people who are a part of that culture. A practical way of looking at culture is to say that 'culture is the sum total of the way of life of people'.

Against the backdrop of this argument on the nature of language, as language teachers we stand at a vantage point from where we could develop the students' broad cross-cultural awareness and encourage tolerance as well as acceptance of members of other cultures, while "at the same time, as an intrinsic part of language teaching, we need to make students aware of how cultural elements can affect communication in a foreign language" (Harris, 2008).

Diverse Competences

The word 'competence' is an important word in formal as well as applied linguistics. It is mainly used to discuss the aims and procedures of teaching a language. It is appended to a number of crucial terms in diverse disciplines: lexical competence, grammatical/linguistic competence, discourse competence, phonological competence, communicative competence and now socio-cultural competence. Its use is normally associated with Chomsky, who proposed a classic distinction between competence and performance. "By 'competence' Chomsky (1965) meant 'the monolingual speaker-listener's knowledge of

language' and by 'performance' he meant 'the actual use of language in real situations''.

Grammatical Competence

Grammatical or linguistic competence in the L2 situation constitutes the ability of a learner to produce and receive grammatically well-formed sentences as well as the ability to distinguish them from the unacceptable ones. The learner knows the rules that form words and how these words string together to construct phrases, clauses, sentences and larger texts. In addition, the learner also knows the rules of pronunciation. Such an ability equips a learner to apply such knowledge and skills for better understanding to grasping the literal meaning.

Lexical Competence

Lexical competence in a second language can be described as the ability of the learners "To recognize and use words in a language in the way the speakers of the language use them. Lexical competence includes understanding the different relationships among families of words and the common collocations of words" (Thanasoulas, 2001). The learners of English need to be able to recognize the concept of *chair* and what makes it different from a *stool*, a *sofa*, or a *bench*. They need to know that a *chair* is a piece of *furniture*, and that there are various kinds of *chairs*, including *easy chairs*, *deck chairs, office chairs, rocking chairs* and so on. They also need to understand how *chair* is used in an extended sense for what used to be termed a *chairman*, especially when referring to a woman, as in *Malini is the chair of the committee.*

Elaborating on this, Meral Ozturk further comments that there is a general agreement in the literature that knowledge of vocabulary is a continuum between receptive knowledge and productive knowledge. Having receptive knowledge of a word entails "understanding the most frequent meaning" (Laufer & Paribahkt, 1998) of the word when encountered in written or spoken language. Productive knowledge is "the spontaneous use of a word in a context generated by the user" (taken from Thanasoulas, 2001).

Communicative Competence

Dell Hymes coined the term in the 1970s. The term 'communicative competence', like the other terms discussed above, is composed of two terms, 'communication' and 'competence'. Together these words stand for 'competence to communicate' or 'ability to communicate'. From its original use by Hymes (1971), there have been numerous attempts by Canale and Swain (1980-81), Widdowson (1983), Bachman (1990), and Bachman and Palmer (1996) to clarify what the term actually signifies in second language pedagogy. Bagaric and Metodika (2007) provide an inclusive, non-complex definition: "tacit knowledge of language (rules of word formation, grammar, pronunciation) and an ability to use it appropriately in a communicative event" (taken from Thanasoulas, 2001).

For some time, there has been a surge of interest in teaching English the communicative way rather than through the mechanical learning of vocabulary, grammar and the structure in isolation from social contexts. Through the inclusion of contextualized communicative functions in

the English curriculum, critical attempts have been made to develop a general communicative competence or fluency. By teaching English through communicative activities in conjunction with the communicative functions of the language, it is hoped that the learners will not only acquire context-driven, function-driven vocabulary, structures, segmental and supra segmental features, but also learn what language is to be used where, when and how. While summing up these three predominant abilities that mainstream scholarship is preoccupied with in foreign language learning, Dimitrios Tanasoulas says that grammatical and lexical competences underscore the conviction that language is merely a code and, once mastered – mainly by dint of steeping oneself into rules and some aspects of social context in which it is embedded - "one language is essentially translatable into another" (Kramch, 1993).

"To a certain extent this belief has been instrumental in promoting various approaches to foreign language teaching-pragmatic, sociolinguistic, and communicative-which have certainly endowed the study of language with a social 'hue'; nevertheless, paying lip service to the social dynamics that undergrid language without trying to identify and gain insights into the very fabric of society and culture that have come to charge language in many ways can only cause misunderstanding and lead to cross cultural miscommunication" (1993).

Cultural Competence

Language is a social product wherein a society's symbolic practices are conditioned by its verbal repertoire. English speakers cannot think and give expression to their thoughts in more meaningful ways than what their vocabulary permits. Similarly, Indian speakers' linguistic action is limited by the stock of words their vernacular language possesses. Learning the other tongue with the help of cultural content is essential to avoid miscommunication. To define cultural competence, we need to go back to what we have said about communicative competence. Cultural competence is precisely 'plus communicative competence' or 'communicative competence PLUS. The plus element is 'the socio- cultural' aspect of the language.

As Trisdo (1996) suggests, a learner to become culturally responsive needs to acquire the knowledge of the culture, history, traditions, values, and family systems of culturally diverse people. These in turn have an impact on behaviour, attitudes, values (personal and professional) and lifestyles. They also influence the language, speech patterns and communication styles. Hanley (1999) defined cultural competency as "the ability to work effectively across cultures in a way that acknowledges and respects the culture of the person or organization being served."

Attempting to teach one competence in the absence of the other makes the broth half cooked. This paper argues that these two competences, though essential, should be made available to ESL learners only in proper socio-cultural contexts. That is why the emphasis on teaching cultural competence must necessarily be maintained in ESL contexts. By cultural competence, I mean the aspects of culture and society that would embody linguistic expression. Social

contexts, customs, traditions, beliefs, values, histories, habits, world views, daily routine, leisure pastimes, entertainment activities (which are different to each language community) are factors that come into play in expressing context-appropriate meaning.

Gaye (2000) says that teaching cultural competence is to take cultural knowledge, prior experiences and performance styles of the heterogeneous group of students into account to make learning more effective and appropriate. Such a holistic approach, an approach that integrates cultural contexts (the culture of the target language and the culture of the learners) into the structural and the communicative aspects of language use must find its way into ESL learning spaces stating that learning a language involves, apart from several linguistic categories, learning the culture, traditions and the social aspects of the language. Lamentably, a large portion of ESL activity displays a serious lack of understanding of this phenomenon. As a result, most of the ESL teaching materials, methodology, teachers and learners in India are far from being inclusive of the socio-cultural phenomena that is vital to produce verbal expressions and make them meaningful native-like speech.

From the above discussion, it can be concluded that grammatical competence that includes lexical competence is the basic layer of learning a language. The next layer is communicative competence that makes learners context-sensitive wherein learners develop sensitivity to the responders, their levels of language competence and the contexts in which they speak. The last layer is the socio-cultural competence where learners are to be culture-sensitive in addition to being context-sensitive. Though each layer appears distinct, together they produce the intended communication which redeems the chances of communication failures or miscommunications.

Why Teach Culture in the Language Classroom?

To answer this question of 'why to teach culture in the language classroom', we must turn to Tomalin & Stempleski (1993). They say that we should be aware of the reality that if we teach language without simultaneously teaching the culture in which it operates, we are teaching meaningless symbols or symbols to which the learner attaches the wrong meaning.

"We should be mindful of the fact that if we teach language without teaching at the same time the culture in which it operates, we are teaching meaningless symbols or symbols to which the student attaches the wrong meaning" (1993).

Thanasoulas (2001), while quoting earlier works (Seeley, 1988; Tomalin & Stempleski, 1993) offers seven goals of cultural instruction:

- To help students develop an understanding of the fact that all people exhibit culturally-conditioned behaviour.

- To help students develop an understanding that social variables such as age, sex, social class, and place of residence influence the ways in which people speak and behave.

- To help students become aware of conventional behaviour in common

situations in the target language.

- To help students increase their awareness of cultural connotations of words and phrases in the target language.

- To help students develop the ability to evaluate and refine generalisations about the target culture, in terms of supporting evidence.

- To help students develop necessary skills to locate and organise information about the target culture.

- To stimulate students' intellectual curiosity about the target culture, and to encourage empathy towards its people.

How Much Culture?

Language teaching involves teaching the four skills of LSRW and elements such as grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation. Will culture in the English classroom be the fifth element? Kramsch's (1993) observation should not go unnoticed in this context.

"Culture in language learning is not an expendable fifth skill, tacked on, so to speak to the teaching of speaking, listening, reading, and writing. It is always in the background, right from day one, ready to unsettle good language learners when they expect it the least, making evident the limitations of their hard-won communicative competence, challenging their ability to make sense of the world around".

Kramsch maintains that to learn a foreign language is not merely to learn how to communicate but also to discover how much flexibility the language allows members to manipulate grammatical forms, sounds, and meaning, and reflect upon, or even flout, socially accepted norms at work both in their own and in the target culture.

While the cognitive aspects of learning a language involves the above-mentioned grammatical and communicative competences, the affective domain (Krathwohl, Bloom and Masia,1973) includes emotions, feelings, values, appreciation, enthusiasm, motivation and attitudes that should support the cognitive learning of an individual, language learning in this context. In other words, the social competence of an individual is dependent on the linguistic competence in addition to cultural and emotional aspects. As seen above, culture and language are tied together. It needs to be acknowledged that language is not just a tool to help people from the same culture communicate effectively.

Developing socio-cultural competence

There are many subtle but complex issues which the teacher has to keep in mind while giving training in socio-cultural competence. In the Indian context, the cultural variations are wide and divergent. The culture of people speaking different languages varies (from that of the target language culture) along with different socio-economic constituents, though there are striking similarities as well. In addition, if a 'foreign' culture has to be carried into the classroom by the teacher, the teacher has to equip herself/himself with a sense of the 'foreign' culture to make it a part of classroom discourse and enlighten the learners of a multi-cultural classroom on cultural variations they inherit.

If a learner has to be culturally competent, then s/he has to first identify the qualities of his/her own culture. This includes recognizing the unique features of one's culture, the way relationships are defined, along with the language nuances in dealing with different contexts and people. Second, the learner has to be able to analyse, understand and accept other cultures, appreciate their qualities and be responsive to them.

Classroom Activities to Enhance Cultural Sensitivity

The study follows the 'comparative study of cultures method/model' suggested by Kramsch (1993), and Tavares and Cavalcanti (1996) to devise the learning activities. In this context Kramsch says: "putting the target culture in relation with one's own", and Tavares & Cavalcanti announce, "The aim of teaching culture is to develop their (learners) curiosity towards the target culture and their own, helping them to make comparisons among cultures".

There are numerous activities (Harris 2008; A sample activity

Gill, Cankova, and Maley, 2001) proposed by various textbook writers/materials producers and classroom practitioners that could make the learners socio-culture sensitive. Group work/discussions, role-plays, case studies, critiquing culture-based stories and films are some of them.

'Culture in everyday life' must be the content of the curriculum because all other forms of cultures are cultures written with a big 'C' and non-accessible to all and sundry. That is why I am using everyday activities as cultural forms/themes around which learning activities are built in a comparative format. I borrow these socio-cultural themes from an E-book *Oxford Basics: Intercultural Activities* edited by Alan Maley (2001). The themes and language functions that can be used to compare and contrast with the learners' own language habits are as follows: *Greeting, apologising, complementing, appreciating, thanking, leave taking, enquiring, narrating, describing festivals and leisure activities, routines* and many others.

Stage I. Class plan will be prepared well in advance; when prepared, it will look like this:

S. No.	Item/Function	Explanation
1	Skill	Speaking
2	Sub skill	Dialogue
3	Cultural component	Complimenting
4	Grammar item	Use of adjectives
5	Vocabulary/formulaic expressions	*Good dress, nice bag, look pretty, look fresh* etc.
6	Pronunciation	Contractions
7	Activity	Pair work

Stage II. The teacher explains that members of the pair are not strangers but known to each other very well. One member of the pair compliments the other saying "nice dress". The other will have to say, 'thank you'.

Stage III. Learners are told to check if the practice of complimenting is there at all in their culture. They are encouraged to list out the occasions and the language used to respond to a compliment. They are also encouraged to study who in their culture is socially entitled to compliment whom and for what effects.

When they compare the socio-cultural act of complimenting between English and their first language, Telugu learners of English find out to their utter dismay that 'complimenting as a phatic formulaic communicative act' is absent in their socio-cultural terrain. The comparative learning of 'language-culture' helps these learners understand that complimenting is an important element of speech in the English culture.

Conclusion

In this paper I worked on the premise that language is not a transparent medium that acts as an innocent tool of communication. On the other hand, I have shown that language is an inflected tool with culture certainly being the most noteworthy inflection. A language learning curriculum must indispensably create a space for thinking about culture. I propose that ESL teaching activities be activated against the backdrop of the proper cultural content in a comparative manner for a more inclusive inter-cultural communication.

References

Agar, M. (1994). *Language shock: Understanding the culture of conversation*. New York: William Morrow.

Bagaric, V. (2007). Defining communicative competence. *Metodika*, 8(1), 94-103.

Campbell, L. (1997). The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. http://venus.va.com.au/suggestion/sapir.html

Canale, M. & Swain, M. (1980). Theoretical bases of communicative approaches to second language teaching and testing. *Applied Linguistics*, 1(1), 1-47.

Chomsky. N. (1965). *Aspects*. MIT.

Fong, R. (*n.d.*). BBC Learning English: Talk about English – 'Who on Earth are we?' Parts 1-7.

Harris, M. (2008). Culture in the classroom: Developing cross-cultural awareness in the secondary school foreign language classroom.

www.pearsonlongman.com/professionaldevelopment/downloads/articles/adults-young-learners/culture-in-the-classroom.pdf.

Hanley, J. H. (1995). Beyond the tip of the iceberg: Five stages toward cultural competence, in *Reaching Today's Youth,* 3(2), 9-12 (Winter 1999).

Hofstede, G. (1988). The Confucius connection: From cultural roots to economic growth. *Organizational Growth*. (Spring).

http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/

learningenglish/webcast/tae_whoonearth_archive.shtml

Hymes, D. H. (1972). "On communicative competence" In: J. B. Pride and J. Holmes (eds.) *Sociolinguistics: Selected Readings (Part 2)*, pp. 269-293. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

J. B. Carroll. (Ed.). Language, thought, and reality: Selected writings of *Benjamin Lee Whorf* (Original work written in 1940) Whorf, B. L. (1956).

Kaplan, R. B. (1986). Culture and the written language. In: *Culture bound*, J.M. Valdes (ed.). Cambridge: CUP.

Krathwohl, D. R., Bloom, B. S., & Masia, B. B. (1973). *Taxonomy of educational objectives, the classification of educational goals. (Handbook II: Affective Domain)*. New York: David McKay Co.

Kramch, C. (1993). Context and culture in language teaching. Oxford: OUP.

Kress, G. (1985). *Language and power*.

Langacker, R. W. (1999). *Grammar and conceptualization*. Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter. https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110800524

Politzer, R. (1959). *Developing cultural understanding through foreign language study*. Report of the Fifth Annual Round Table Meeting on Linguistics and Language Teaching, pp. 99-105. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press.

Reynolds, S and Valentine, D. (2011). *Guide to cross-cultural communication*. New Delhi: Pearson Prentice Hall Inc.

Sapir, E. (1921). Language: An introduction to the study of speech. London: RH.

Stith-Wlliams, V and Haynes, P L M. (2007). For cultural competence.

http://www.doe.virginia.gov/special_ed/tech_asst_prof_dev/self_assessment/disproportionality/cultural_competence_manual.pdf

Tavares, R. & Cavalcanti, I. (1996). Developing cultural awareness in EFL classrooms. *English Forum*, 34(3) (July-September).

Thanasoulas, D. (2001). Radical pedagogy: The importance of teaching culture in the foreign language classroom. http://radicalpedagogy.icaap.org/content/issue3_3/7-thanasoulas.html

Tirsdo, M. D. (1996). Tools for monitoring cultural competence in health care. San Francisco, CA: Latino Coalition for a Healthy California.

Tomalin, B. & Templeski, S. (1993). *Cultural awareness*. Oxford. OUP.

Zion, S. and Kozlesky, E. B. (2005). *Understanding culture and culture responsiveness*. Denver, CO: National Institute for Urban School Improvement.

Dr K Venkat Reddy, Professor & Head, Department of Training & Development, The English & Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad, India.

Email: venkatciefl@gmail.com