The Importance of Teaching Culture in Second Language Learning

Fatemeh Azizmohammadi[1]
Behruz Mansuri Kazazi [2]

1.Science and Research Branch, Islamic Azad University, Arak, Iran
2.Department of English Literature, Islamic Azad University, Arak Branch, Arak, Iran

Abstract

Culture is a crucial phenomenon in various social contexts which should be taken account as an effective medium in shaping subjects' identity and its significance cannot be ignored. Language as a social process which is acquired by subjects unconsciously has a deep relation with the culture in which a language is obtained. However the element of culture in learning a second language has been a problematic and challenging issue in curriculum of language pedagogy. On the one hand, learning the culture accompanied by Second language in different contexts is so profound that a large aspect of teaching should be bound to this issue and its vital role cannot be denied in any learning models due to pragmatic reasons. On the other hand, culture of each context varies according to ideology, policy, religion and believes of its people. Therefore a right method or methods should be used accordingly in order not to create any tension and crisis in terms of identity and attitudes particularly for children since their identity has not been shaped yet and they can be influenced and socked very easily. These methods should serve both contradictory arguments mentioned above to some extent. Hence the aim of the following essay is to focus on cultural importance and its fundamental role in learning a second language and then to focus on teaching culture in different contexts and analysis and criticism of current methods and suggesting new methods that can be considered for teaching culture.

Key Words: Culture; Language; Teaching; Context; Identity

I. Introduction

Culture can be defined as a social pattern of behaviors in 'collective unconscious' of group of people in a shared context. Ke and Chavez (2013) claim that "A common definition of culture characterizes it as the sum of rules or ways of doing and thinking within a social group" (5).

Each culture has its own values and attitudes that gives a unique way of thought to a subject which shape the identity and judgment of that subject. "Cultures have their own value systems, and individuals within a culture are judged and shaped by those values. The values you hold influence your actions and your views of others" (Settlage and Southerland 3).

There are different elements regarding the concept of culture. It is believed that culture is bound to a special race however it is not necessarily true; there are different components which can be effective in shaping a culture. Nieto (2010) writes:

Because culture is not simply ethnicity, even among specific cultural groups there are many and often conflicting cultural identities. Skin color, time of arrival in the United States, language use, level of education, family dynamics, place of residence, and many other differences within groups may influence how one interprets or "lives" a culture. (138)

In realizing a culture, the context in which that culture exists is significant since it influences that culture directly. "To say that culture is embedded in context is to say that it invariably is influenced by the environment in which it exists" (139). It is the society and social forces that shape a culture so it is the product of society and is always changing. "As discussed previously, culture often is thought of as a product-in-place, and as something handed down that must be kept the way it is…culture is constantly evolving, and the reason that it evolves is because human beings change it" (142). Hence it can be said that culture is a dynamic process within which all its component change according to conditions of its context. Nieto (2010) goes on:

The point of this story is to emphasize that culture does not exist in a vacuum but rather is situated in particular historical, social, political, and economic conditions, another major tenet of sociocultural theory. That is, culture needs to be understood as dynamic; multifaceted; embedded in context; influenced by social, economic, and political factors; created and socially constructed; learned; and dialectical…That is, culture is dynamic, active, changing, always on the move. Even within their native contexts, cultures are always changing as a result of political, social, and other modifications in the immediate environment. (10)

The complication of culture is not uncommon since it has a complex relation with other elements in society as Nieto (2010) imposes that "Culture is complex and intricate" (9). History, policy, economy and other socio-political elements influence culture; "…culture is bound to a particular context, is that it is greatly influenced by the political, historical, and economic conditions in which it is found. It exists not in isolation but through concrete relationships characterized by differential access to power" (140).

Also cultures are mistakenly labeled as good and bad by people. Across the world cultures are different so they cannot be judged. "A culture is neither "good" nor "bad" in general, but rather embodies values that have grown out of historical and social conditions and necessities" (144). Once a culture is realized and understood, the view of people towards that culture and its stereotypes would change. However learning and teaching a culture is not a simple task "Because culture is complex, "learning" a culture that is not one's native culture is an exceedingly difficult task…" (144); it requires interaction and involvement with that culture. "Culture…is learned through interactions with families and communities. It usually is not consciously taught, or consciously learned" (143).

Nonetheless in any society culture can be source of different conflicts and challenges as it is mentioned that "…cultural conflict is sometimes little more than political conflict" (12). Sometimes people are bewildered by the way different cultures operate and they may suffer from identity crisis since culture and identity are connected as "Another important aspect of identity has to do with how interactions with people of other cultural groups may influence culture and identity" (39). Having raised such problems, neither accepting nor ignoring of different cultures cannot be acceptable as "assimilation or cultural preservation are not the only alternatives" (12).

In modern era cultural differences should be accounted for since people are no longer separated from by geographical and political boundaries' rather they are connected with each other through different process in a way that culture plays an important role in education. Palfreyman (2007) reminds that "At the same time the growing pace of globalization is highlighting a cultural dimension in all these areas:…contact zones are created in which cultural factors become more salient, providing new challenges and new resources for teaching and learning" (1).

Therefore globalization makes people to communicate with each other and to do so people need to learn other languages other than their own languages. In classical teaching of second language, the focus was on fixed elements of the language such as grammar and pronunciation. However after modern era, the ability to use language was given a higher priority and different models have been devised based on the 'communicative acts'

as Richards and Rodgers (2001) claim that "He [Widdowson] focused on the communicative acts underlying the ability to use language for different purposes" (160). The reason for this claim was that although many people learn all the elements of language, they fail to communicate since they do not know the pragmatic element of language which is intended meaning as Ishihara and Cohen (2010) believe:

Having pragmatic ability means being able to go beyond the literal meaning of what is said or written, in order to interpret the intended meanings, assumptions, purposes or goals, and the kinds of actions that are being performed.4 The interpretation of pragmatic meaning can sometimes pose a challenge – even to natives of the language – since speakers do not always communicate directly what they mean and listeners do not always interpret the speakers' meaning as it was intended. (5)

In order to learn a second language effectively, culture of that language should be learned since "Language is one of the most salient aspects of culture" (Nieto 116). It is the culture which transfers the meaning through medium of language as Chastain (1988) mentions that "Language is used to convey meaning, but meaning is determined by culture" (298).

Despite old views, contextual aspect which is directly related to culture cannot be ignored in learning. Nieto (2010) claims that "Accepting this idea means that it is no longer possible to separate learning from the context in which it takes place, nor from an understanding of how culture and society influence and are influenced by learning" (15). Hence based on this modern view the one who seeks to learn communicative aspect of language should focus on context and culture accordingly and this makes use of language more proficiently. Byram and Grundy (2003) quote from Holme that "The communicative view is derived from the communicative approach with its stress on giving the student language that can be put to quick use in a specific context. This approach detracts from any belief that a language may be inherently valuable" (18).

Each word which is articulated by the speaker shows the culture of that native language since these two elements – language and culture – are deeply connected. Nieto (2010) reminds that "As we have seen in several examples above, language is deeply implicated with culture and an important part of it. That is, the language, language variety, or dialect one speaks is culture made manifest…" (146). Hence in learning a second language, culture should be considered as an important aspect as "…it is indisputable that culture, language, and learning are connected" (148).

However teaching culture is a problematic issue in second language teaching since learning an unfamiliar culture confronts the dominant ideology. This claim holds true since "Anthropologists agree that individual behavior in any culture lies within the limits of a overall system of learned patterns" (299). This can cause problems for young learners since they are not cognitively mature and have no idea about the target culture as well as their own culture. "…They [students] know little about the basic aspects of their own culture…" (298). Hence a lot of precautions should be taken in transferring a culture to younger learners because it can make identity crisis for those students as "They are young, inexperienced and struggling to develop a self-identity within their own culture" (301).

II. Current Methods

Although culture is a very important issue that should be preserved, because of mentioned reasons it cannot be ignored. Also it has been rejected that each subject owns a unique culture; rather that subject can have multiplex of cultures as Chastain (1988) claims that "In fact Damen (1987) feels that the term…because most people are multicultural even in their own culture…" (303). However there are a lot of aspects and points all of which teachers must be aware. It is necessary that the culture of the native speakers respected by the teachers even if the culture is not rich as it was mentioned there is no good or bad culture since disrespecting a culture means ignoring the subject. Moore (1999) claims that "It seems not unreasonable to suppose that if students'

cultures are marginalized in the classroom, those same students are likely to feel that their presence and contribution will be considered marginal in the wider community" (2)

To teach a culture, the students and the capacity of them should be regarded it has been said that "…entering into the new culture and new language depends on the individuals capacity" (Chastain 299). If the students are not old enough just giving a superficial familiarity is sufficient. "In the elementary schools, the teacher should be concerned with comprehension and familiarity" (300). Also the attitude of teacher can make an impression on students about cultural teaching as it is mentioned that "The attitude of the teacher is a crucial factor in determining the extent which cultural objectives are attained" (301). Also the teacher can give information to students regarding culture. "The teacher's task is to make students aware of cultural differences" (301).

Teaching culture is a very difficult and important task for the teacher as it is categorized as "one of the five principal objectives of second-language study" (305) which is not given a due attention as Chastain (1988) believes that "…culture continues to receive relatively minor attention in most classes" (305). To reduce the burden of this responsibility, sometimes students can be asked to be responsible for their own learning since "Students are capable of gaining a great deal of information on their own with guidance" (308).

General speaking and based on these points there are different methods devised by thinkers that some of them here are going to be presented and analyzed.

One of the techniques which have been used among people is 'culture aside' which is a brief summary of comparison of two cultures when students are confronted with a word which has cultural background. Although this technique can be very effective, it has disadvantages. It is not planned and also requires information about two cultures as Chastain (1988) believes that "The disadvantage is that overall the culture information is presented to class is likely to be disorganized and incomplete" (309).

As the name suggests, a 'slice-of-life technique' is a comparison of two scenarios about a cultural aspect in two different cultures. After presenting the culture, student can discuss it. Though this method is effective and interesting, it is essential for students to have some background knowledge about it.

Another technique is called 'critical incident' which brings up some misunderstanding and miscommunication. The awkwardness of situation is important since the students are going to comment about it. "Students consider the situation and the reactions of the people involved and comment on cultural values…" (311). This approach is great since real life situations are challenged however it requires a strong pragmatic ability of students.

All the methods which have been presented have their own advantages and disadvantages and it is no surprise that nothing is perfect. In the following of this paper some other techniques with different technologies will be suggested that they have no special name and they are just devised by the researcher. Maybe most of them are practiced nowadays however the way in which these techniques are presented seems different.

III. Suggested Methods

One way which can be used as a tool to transfer knowledge and learning can happen is use of technology. "Technology can act as a mediating factor between learners and learning" (Ke and Chavez 8). Also in recent decades, technology could result in social interaction of people directly and indirectly "According to Vatrapu (2008，2009), technology-mediated learning environments are characterized by socio-technical interactions (conceived as the social-technical affordances of the learning environment) in which individuals interact with technologies and with other individuals via technologies…" (8). Here there will be presented some techniques based on this theory.

As it was mentioned earlier, culture is an integral part of each society that characterizes a society based on shared context. Sometimes failure in learning could arise from non-existence of a social bond between teacher and student or existence of other pressures. Smith et al. (2010) quote Robson 〝Lack of community may be just the cause of the rift between students and teachers. Students do not feel comfortable having in-depth conversations with relative strangers (their classmates) about bizarre subjects like rhetorical modes, personal narratives, and peer review〞 (9).TV and its effects on its spectators could form such bonds based on shared interests that may be created for spectators during the process of watching. 〝So the question is, how do we build community among our students in the expository writing classroom? Seeking a diversion from this seemingly impossible question, I turned my eyes to the television set overhead〞 (9).

Since context and culture are bound together, this tool makes students to analyze and leads them into critical thinking. 〝Television can provide text for our students to critically analyze and contextualize both the worlds inside and outside the composition classroom〞 (2). So television as a discursive media can be used as a medium in which identity and social aspects of life are influenced. Smith et al. (2010) quote Robson:

"To quote Philip Auslander, "television can no longer be seen just as an element in our cultural environment, one discourse among many, but must be seen as an environment within itself" (10). Our identities, both at the personal and social levels, are influenced by what, when, and where we watch—and of equal importance, what we choose not to watch" (10). It can be claimed that TV can be used as a technique to teach culture.

Recent years have witnessed a social phenomenon which is called 'social networking' and it is getting more poplar each day in a way that a lot of soft wares and applications are being designed every day. Although some criticisms are directed towards them, they can be very effective in class room especially in writing courses. Smith et al. (2008) quote from Vie: networking sites become more familiar As social to our students, writing instructors should consider the ways in which they could—and already do—impact the writing classroom and our pedagogical frameworks for approaching the teaching of writing. Indeed, students engage in a multitude of composing processes online, including in online social networking sites. They produce a great deal of writing in these spaces through their blogs, comments, the personal profile, and messages to each other. (19)

Also social networks can be a context in which various cultures exist so it can be used as a kind of technique for transferring cultural values through computers. "Understanding the complex sets of cultural beliefs and values that influence our understandings of what it means to read, write, and communicate with computers" (19). In second language teaching particularly regarding writing it can be used. "As noted in the previous section, online social networking sites can be brought into the writing classroom in various ways to teach technological literacy and rhetorical awareness" (20).

Novels are broadly speaking literature is a discourse in which different voices and cultures can be heard. However maybe reading a novel is boring for many students. In recent decades thanks to technology and creative minds, 'graphical novels' are getting popular; not only do they have simple language but also they can be very attractive for many young learners. People are completely involved with all the elements of the novel. Smith et al. (2008) quotes from Kaiser that "Gretchen Schwarz argues that "to read and interpret graphic novels, students have to pay attention to the usual literary elements of character, plot, and dialogue, and they also have to consider visual elements such as color, shading, panel layout, perspective, and even the lettering style" (59)." (66).

Graphical novels are rich sources that can be used in class to transfer culture; they are completely diifernt that give a new experience for students. Smith et al. (2008) quotes from Kaiser:

To be clear, it cannot be said that all graphic novels are more complex than traditional novels. A graphic novel is a very different entity from a novel by Henry James or Edith Wharton. Yet graphic novels do provide another avenue towards literacy and critical analysis. Given its inclination towards worthwhile themes, "the graphic novel offers teachers the opportunity to implement critical media literacy in the classroom—literacy that affirms diversity, gives voice to all, and helps students examine ideas and practices that promulgate inequity" (Schwarz 62)..(66)

These techniques that were introduced were just a general overview of what the approach could be. They need to be elaborated and analyzed to give details; however this review paper is limited and more space needed.

IV. Conclusion

As it was mentioned earlier, culture and language are deeply bound and it is as important as communication skills as Chastain (1988) claims that "culture is one of two areas (the other being communication skills) in second-language education in which the greatest need and the greatest potential for improvement exist" (317). There have been a lot of investigations regarding teaching culture and teacher must use this information since "Great strides have been made, but the knowledge generated by anthropologists, sociologists, and other experts in the second culture must be disseminated to language teachers" (317).

Also teaching culture can improve learning a second language as Brown (2007) claims that "A number of recent research studies have shown the positive effects of incorporating cultural awareness in language classrooms" (200). Hence in each class a great deal of emphasis must be put on cultural aspect in a way that it enhances the awareness of students of cultural differences.

References

[1]Brown, Douglas H. Principles of Language Learning and Teaching. New York: Pearson Education Inc., 2007.

[2]Byram, Michael and Grundy, Peter. Context and Culture in Language Teaching and Learning. Great Britain: Short Run Press Ltd., 2003.

[3]Chastain, Kenneth. Developing Second Language Skills, Theory and Practice. United States of America: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc, 1988.

[4]Moore, Alex. Teaching Multicultured Students, Culturalism and Anti-culturalism in School Classrooms. New York: Falmer Press, 1999.

[5]Ishihara, Noriko and Cohen, Andrew. Teaching and Learning Pragmatics. Great Britain:Pearson Education Limited, 2010.

[6]Ke, Fengfeng and Chavez, Alicia Fedelina. Web-Based Teaching and Learning Across Culture and Age. New York: Springer Science and Business Media, 2013.

[7]Nieto, Sonia. Language,Culture, and Teaching: Critical Perspectives. New York: Routledge, 2010.

[8]Palfreyman, David and McBride, Dawn Lorraine. Learning and Teaching Across Cultures in Higher Education. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

[9]Richards, Jack C. and Rodgers, Theodore S. Approaches and Methods in Language and Teaching. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

[10]Settlage, John and Southerland, Sherry A. Teaching Science to Every Child. New York: Routledge, 2007

[11]Smith, Allison D. and Smith, Trixie g. and Bobbitt, Rebecca. Teaching in the Pop Culture Zone. United States of America: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, 2009.