

Language learning and language culture in a changing world

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Abstract

To communicate effectively, learners have to become proficient in both the language and the culture of the target language. Being aware of socio-cultural frameworks does not mean that as an outcome of instruction learners have to become "native-like," but an awareness of L2 cultural norms can allow learners to make their own informed choices of how to become competent and astute language users. This paper provides an overview of practical approaches and techniques to teaching culture in the classroom in conjunction with instruction in the essential language skills. It is important to keep in mind, however, that this brief review of strategies and tactics for cross-cultural teaching and learning is minimalist, and a number of additional sources of pedagogical techniques are currently available.

Keywords: culture; SLA; input; pedagogy; cross-cultural teaching.

Overview

A dramatic change in the real world and in language teaching has taken place in the past couple of decades. The increasing pace of globalization, electronic communication, popular media, the Internet, and social networks has affected all of us to varying degrees, and definitely all young people and language students in profound ways. Today, it is an unavoidable conclusion that the new generations will work, communicate, and socialize with people who are speakers of diverse languages and members of different cultures. For this reason alone, today's language learners will be required to interact and communicate effectively across various types of boundaries and in a range of contexts. To communicate effectively, learners, as members of society, have to become proficient in both the language and

the culture of its speakers (McKay & Bokhorst-Heng, 2008).

While some language learners study English as a Foreign Language (EFL) to pass exams and tests, it is important for their teachers to remember that today's young or youngish learners are likely to be in the employment world and function within various social groups for many decades. Reasonable 18- or 19- year-olds are probably not very concerned with their educational, professional, or vocational opportunities that await them when they are 25, but their teachers must consider the potential and future options of their students. To this end, being proficient in the culture of language speakers may provide economic and social opportunities that, today, to many might seem somewhat unbelievable. For example,

most EFL teachers could probably name a student or two or three among the students in their classes who have obtained employment with a multinational company or a government position that requires these learners to interact with speakers of other languages -- in English -- in the course of their daily functioning. A lack of cultural proficiency, in addition to linguistic proficiency, may make or break such opportunities in a way that today's students, sitting in the classrooms, can't even imagine.

An instrumental objective of teaching social and interactional norms, in addition to the linguistic properties of a foreign language (FL), should focus on cultural pragmatic systems. These represent key variables in students' abilities to negotiate their roles and their ability to participate in -- or be marginalized or even excluded from -- various social, academic, or employment-related groups or interactions.

The original goals of teaching culture in second or foreign language (L2/FL) classrooms were proposed by Ned Seelye (1988). Since that time, these basic objectives have been modified and examined by various researchers, but fundamentally these have remained the foci of much pedagogy in language, culture, and cross-cultural communication. These goals specify that the key accomplishments of culture teaching are to help learners develop the following new perspectives and abilities:

- An understanding that, in all societies, people exhibit culturally-conditioned behaviors
- A realization that, in all languages, social variables such as age, sex, social role, and social status determine the ways in which people speak and interact

- An awareness that, in all societies, people display conventionalized language uses and behavior in common (or typical) situations
- An awareness of the cultural connotations assigned to words and phrases in L2/FL
- An ability to evaluate and refine generalizations (and stereotypes) about the L2/FL culture, based on real-life evidence and experience
- Skills for researching another culture, i.e. how to locate, organize, and evaluate new information about another culture
- Intellectual curiosity about L2/FL culture, as well as insight, respect, and other positive attitudes toward members of other cultures

In later years, some methodologists noted that Seelye's model was not sufficiently specific for classroom teaching and that it provided few techniques for achieving these pedagogical objectives. In the contexts of FL teaching, for example, some teachers are not native speakers of the language they teach and thus themselves may not have a great deal of experience in another culture. Other criticisms contended that Seelye's theoretical model did not provide extensive details about how to integrate the development of learners' cross-cultural skills into language-centered curricula which traditionally cover grammar teaching and learning. Despite these practical issues with Seelye's outlined tenets, his model has stood the test of time and served as a valuable foundation for further elaboration, research, and publications that have been a mainstay of culture teaching for the past several decades. The remainder of this paper provides an overview of practical approaches and techniques to teaching culture in the classroom in conjunction with

instruction in the essential language skills. It goes without saying, however, that this brief review of strategies and tactics for cross-cultural teaching and learning is minimalist, and a number of additional sources of pedagogical techniques are currently available.

Teaching Culture as L2/FL Pragmatics

Being aware of socio-cultural frameworks does not mean that as an outcome of instruction learners have to become "native-like," but an awareness of L2 cultural norms can allow learners to make their own informed choices of how to become competent and astute language users (Hinkel, 1995). Generally speaking, the teacher's task is to provide learners the tools that they need to recognize that they are indeed making choices when they employ particular language features and that these choices will have an impact on the effect of the communication (see Seeley's goals for culture learning noted earlier).

Culture may find its manifestations in body language, gestures, concepts of time, hospitality customs, and even expressions of friendliness. While it is essential for learners to attain language proficiency and to be linguistically competent, in many cases, this is not sufficient. To become proficient and effective communicators, learners need to attain L2/FL socio-cultural competence. Knowing the grammatical form of apologies, such as, for example:

excuse me
I'm sorry
My apologies
 or
I regret (that ... / noun)

does not automatically confer the knowledge of when, to whom, and under what circumstances to use these expressions. In

various circumstances, an inappropriate use of an apology can be disruptive, somewhat offensive, or discourteous, even though many learners typically believe that an expressed apology is always (always) polite. Quite reasonably, learners first apply the standards that exist in the first language (L1) communities where they were socialized. People who interact with language learners, as well as L2 researchers, have commented repeatedly (see the numerous publications on L2 speech acts, including apologies) that misused expressions of politeness or even unintended rudeness are ubiquitous in L2 interactions. Not understanding the socio-cultural norms of a community can impact non-native speakers' (NNSs') ability to function in a L2 community.

According to Hymes (1996), the learning of culture is an integral part of any and all language learning and education because it crucially influences an individual's view of his or her place in the society, the success of everyday interactions, the norms of speaking and behaving, and the socio-cultural expectations of an individual's roles. He further notes that those who do not follow the norms of appropriateness accepted in a community are often placed in a position that exacerbates social disparities and inequality.

Today, when the numbers of EFL students have grown dramatically, it is becoming increasingly clear that the learning of a second culture does not take care of itself. Thus, L2 learners cannot always make the best of their professional, social, and interactional opportunities until they become familiar with fundamental L2 cultural concepts and constructs. Most importantly, an ability to recognize and employ culturally appropriate ways of communicating in speech or writing allows learners to make

choices with regard to their linguistic, pragmatic, and other behaviors. Without instruction in and an understanding of L2 cultural and socio-pragmatic norms, learners by definition do not have and cannot make the essential choices that necessarily have to be made to their own advantage.

Although traditionally courses and texts for language teachers concentrate on teaching L2 linguistic skills, it may be difficult to separate the teaching and learning of any FL, from the culture of its speakers. For example, what represents polite ways of speaking and appropriate ways of writing an essay may depend on culturally-dependent concepts that are closely bound up with the linguistic skills needed to speak or write well in the L2. Realistically speaking, many teachers and learners often overlook the fact that the "knowledge of the grammatical system of a language" must be complemented by understanding the culture-specific meanings in communication (Byram and Morgan, 1994, p. 4).

To be useful and practical, the fundamental teaching of L2/FL culture needs to address how individuals can obtain and manage cultural knowledge in various contexts, under a diverse range of circumstances, and in different places, communities, and interactions (Arens, 2010). It goes without saying that the basics of language have to be taught, but they can be taught in conjunction with appropriate uses of grammar and vocabulary, for example, when it comes to considerations of register or contextually suitable pragmatic behaviors that reflect socio-cultural norms and systems. Teaching culture as L2/FL pragmatics needs to rely on language learning from a cross-cultural perspective, rather than studying grammar and vocabulary patterns. Attaining linguistic proficiency is undoubtedly very

important, but in many cases it is not sufficient for successful cross-cultural communication. At the present time, the ultimate goal of all cultural and cross-cultural education is to enable learners to become effective in a global economy, an international community, and across national boundaries.

Teaching L2/FL practical cultural skills

The very purpose of teaching L2/FL cultural and pragmatic interactional norms is to enable learners to communicate effectively. In consequence, the teaching of practical language competencies has to develop learners' cross-cultural awareness, at the very least. In addition, however, instruction in functional pragmatic skills needs to extend beyond cultural appreciation of, for example, literature and the arts to building realistic and usable intercultural abilities (Scarino, 2010). It is hard to imagine that the effective teaching of incremental language skills, such as speaking or listening, intended for functional communication can take place in isolation from instruction in L2/FL culture. A good analogy in this case may be learning basic math skills: knowing math rules would not be helpful at all if a learner cannot compute such small daily necessities as car fuel efficiency per liter, currency conversions in shops in another country, or the taxi fare required to reach a particular destination. The knowledge about specific cultural attributes of a community does not necessarily enable to learners' to communicate effectively in social, educational, and professional interactions where both linguistic and pragmatic skills have to be deployed (Hinkel, 2001).

In the teaching of language and culture, a significant challenge for FL teachers lies in specifically what elements of pragmatics

and culture to teach and how to teach them. Much research carried out in pragmatics and sociolinguistics over the past several decades has focused on the socio-cultural norms of politeness and appropriateness in performing various types of speech acts and in writing. In the case of speech acts, such as requests, clarifications, apologies, and small talk, for example, the linguistic and pragmatic features of such specific speech acts can be taught in the classroom to focus on repeated and frequently routinized uses of language, together with the important differences according to the social status of the speaker and the hearer, and other situational factors. Speech acts can be direct or indirect, and thus vary in the degree of their politeness or even comprehensibility. For example, *You attended the class yesterday, right?* is an indirect speech act in English, and it can mean that the speaker would like to borrow class notes and is not merely inquiring about the hearer's class attendance. However, if the hearer does not fully grasp the pragmatic function of this speech act, then the speaker's communicative goal may not be achieved. In this case, the pragmatic context is crucial for the speaker's meaning to be understood.

The overarching objective of teaching culture and pragmatics as communicative skills is to provide learners with the tools to enable them to implement the sociolinguistic norms reflected in the ways of speaking and writing in the community (Hinkel, 2006).

Many L2/FL researchers have found that violations of cultural norms of appropriateness in spoken or written interactions between native and nonnative speakers or between speakers of different languages often lead to sociopragmatic failure, uncomfortable breakdowns in communication, and stereotyping (see the

work of Michael Byram or Ron Scollon & Suzanne Scollon on cultural misinterpretations, miscommunications, and communication failures). In many situations, when FL learners display inappropriate pragmatic and language behaviors, they are often not even aware that they do. The teaching of ways of speaking and writing in L2/FL has to strive to develop learners' skills in the socio-cultural features of language so as to provide them appropriate choices. Without such instruction, language learners and users may simply have very few options.

The need to teach second or foreign culture

The central and complex meaning of culture refers to socio-cultural norms, worldviews, beliefs, assumptions, and value systems that find their way into practically all facets of language use, including the classroom, and language teaching and learning. Most people are not even aware of socio-cultural beliefs and assumption, and thus cannot examine them intellectually. Scollon and Scollon (2001) state that the cultural concepts of what is acceptable, appropriate, and expected in one's behavior is acquired in the process of socialization and, hence, becomes inseparable from an individual's identity. For example, in the classroom, the roles of the student and the teacher are defined by the socio-cultural values of the larger community and the society. If teachers believe that they are required to lead and dominate conversations, introduce topics, and provide linguistic models, FL students' culturally-determined views on how participatory learning is to be accomplished in the classroom may do little to bridge the cultural gap. Most teachers, even those with minimal classroom experience or exposure, know how difficult it can be to convince some students to adopt

a different model of learning. On the other hand, an explicit discussion of the roles and tasks of teachers and students in the learning process can lead to a more productive classroom atmosphere.

The complexity of teaching culture lies in the fact that, unlike incremental language skills, such as listening, reading, speaking, or writing, culture does not represent a separate area of L2/FL instruction. In language learning and teaching, the crucial socio-cultural principles that determine the norms of appropriate and polite behavior and language use within the frameworks of the society represent the manifestations of culture (Hinkel, 2001, 2006). To members of a particular community and culture, these assumptions appear to be self-evident and axiomatic. On the other hand, they are not always shared by members of other cultures whose values are similarly based on unquestioned and unquestionable fundamental assumptions and concepts. It is also important to note that ways of using language (e.g. speaking, listening, reading, and writing) and socio-cultural frameworks in different communities may conflict to varying extents, as in the above example (Hinkel, 1999).

One of the main (if not the main) reasons that L2/FL culture needs to be taught is that, even in the case of linguistically advanced and proficient learners, the socio-cultural frameworks they acquire as a part of their socialization into beliefs, assumptions, and behaviors remain predominantly first culture-bound (Hinkel, 1999). Byram and Morgan (1994, p. 43) point out that "[l]earners cannot simply shake off their own culture and step into another ... their culture is a part of themselves and created them as social beings"

Teaching culture in language classrooms: The pragmatic function and a linguistic form

In the teaching of L2/FL pragmatics in the context of listening, speaking, reading, or writing, two overarching instructional goals lie at the focus of instruction. The **pragmatic function** (i.e., the socio-cultural purpose/goal) of speech acts, such as requests or apologies, or in writing, say, email messages or academic papers, can be found in practically every curriculum for teaching speaking or writing. The **linguistic form** of, for example, speech acts or conversational routines is one of the most easily accessible and familiar areas of teaching L2/FL listening or speaking, e.g. *I can't come to your party* (direct refusal) vs. *I am very sorry, but I'll be out of town that entire week* (an apology followed by an indirect refusal). The pragmatic function of these expressions is the same --a refusal, but the speaker's choice of form may cause different reactions from the hearer.

For example, to increase learners' linguistic repertoire, the majority of FL textbooks for teaching speaking devote a great deal of attention to the form of polite and casual expressions, idioms, and short dialogues, and even their appropriate pronunciation and intonation because, for instance, transfer of intonation from L1 to L2 can have very subtle negative consequences for interaction. For instance, in textbooks for learners of English, formal and informal expressions, e.g. greetings, partings, or invitations, are frequently distinguished for the benefit of the learner. However, few texts indicate the appropriate contexts or status, age, and familiarity distinctions that crucially affect when such expressions can be used or when they cannot. Nor is the highly formal style typically found in books, or in presentations by news anchors, or in speeches in front of

groups, as opposed to those that are needed in daily conversations among real people, such as bosses or teachers. Highly formal and bookish expressions, for example, can convey an erroneous impression that the speaker is being "uppity" and is not particularly interested in getting along with the hearer. (As a side note, I've heard many learners of English express confusion in regard to when, where, and with whom to use informal, formal, and highly formal styles.) The distinctions between pragmatic forms of many politeness and conversational expressions in listening and speaking, or easily identifiable discourse markers in reading and writing are relatively easy to teach in classroom instruction in practically any of the fundamental language skills.

Teaching culture in listening and speaking

What makes a particular expression or speech act situationally appropriate is not so much the linguistic form or the range of the linguistic repertoire, but the **socio-cultural variables**, which are rarely addressed in classroom instruction (see Seeley's goals above). Partly for this reason, it is not uncommon to hear learners use informal greetings with peers or professors alike simply because these are very common in daily interactions.

Such socio-culturally inappropriate greetings and conversational closures, as well as other speech acts, are likely to cause a bit of a surprise. However, as has been mentioned, for obvious reasons, their impropriety has little chance of being openly discussed in real-life interactions. The socio-cultural variables that can make a perfectly acceptable expression unacceptable in different interactions or settings reflect the numerous aspects of L1 or L2 culture that do not easily lend themselves to

textbook exercises or lists of expressions. Nonetheless, it is the socio-cultural features, such as gender, age, the degree of familiarity, and the social status of the participants in the interaction that can lead to uncomfortable breakdowns and miscommunications.

Few of these conversational devices, however, distinguish between those that are appropriate in peer-level and casual interactions and those that should be used in conversational exchanges with hearers who are strangers, or those who have a different socio-cultural status or are of different age and gender. Furthermore, in such examples, the situational variables are rarely taken into account in classroom listening selections. While it can be very appropriate to strike up a conversation with a stranger, say, at a bus stop or in a waiting room, in many European or North American countries, such behavior would not be considered appropriate in many other countries. Yet, few, if any, textbooks even mention that in various languages polite greetings can be used only when people know each other or are introduced by a mutual acquaintance.

Teaching culture in reading and writing

In the teaching of FL writing, teachers may draw on many examples from speaking and establish parallels to help learners develop cultural awareness in language use. One of the well-known problems in the teaching of FL or L2 writing in non-English-speaking contexts is that FL learners often do not provide a sufficient amount of politeness and recipient-oriented discourse in their communications. Writing professional or business correspondence can be an excellent vehicle for teaching written discourse. Similar to the high degree of politeness and formality that is expected in Farsi, for example, spoken interactions with one's

social superiors, such as bosses, teachers, or those who are older, written communications also need to display a great deal of recipient-focused strategies. Written discourse also needs to show interest and sympathy toward the reader, and include, for example, formal uses of titles and forms of address, hedged and softened inquiries and requests. To help learners take a different view of the necessary politeness in writing, teachers may need to provide explicit instruction on reader expectations in another culture, the value of overt reader-oriented politeness and interest, and how to achieve these in writing. It is important for learners to know that the uses of formalities and politeness strategies are requisite in written communications with speakers of English, regardless of whether the actual prose is written in English or in another language. In the case of Anglo-American professional or business correspondence, it is perfectly acceptable for a communication to be author-focused, as in *I'd like to ...*, *I'd prefer that ...*, or *I am interested in ...*. Unless they are instructed otherwise, this can also be the approach that many English speakers would take in writing in interactions with speakers of other languages.

Materials and activities for culture learning in the classroom

The learners' actual goals in attaining FL linguistic proficiency may serve as guides for determining their needs in learning culture. For example, if learners intend to obtain employment in local or multinational companies, their need of L2 cultural competencies may be different from those who are concerned with passing language tests or who are enrolled in weekend conversation classes. In many settings, however, instruction highlighting the influence of culture on second or foreign language use can be made effective and

productive when working on particular L2 activities.

In light of the fact that manifestations of the influence of culture on language use are very common, materials for teaching cultural concepts and their outcomes are usually easy to create. The tasks associated with training learners to become careful and sharp people-watchers and observers of culturally-appropriate and common interactional routines and expressions can serve as a basis for very productive and effective projects that are interesting and enjoyable for learners. For intermediate learners, for example, a teacher may choose to make a basic checklist of linguistic and social features of speech events and interactions to encourage students to carry out their "field research" when watching TV shows and movies, or surfing the web, as well as in restaurants, stores, and offices.

The primary goal of this activity and people-watching is to make learners aware of the linguistic and social factors that play a crucial role in interactions in any language or culture. The next step would be to compare the politeness and conversational routines in the learners' L1 to those found in a range of language materials (e.g. movie clips, recorded audio and video interviews plentiful on the Internet and countless websites, taped dialogues that accompany many student texts and software, or perhaps even materials for test preparation). In addition, advanced students can participate in role-plays, short skits, or mini-plays, for which they write scripts to center on linguistic features of particular speech acts or types of FL conversational exchanges.

A couple of additional activities for teaching culture in listening, speaking, and writing in FL classrooms are suggested below. They

are designed with the curricular objective of teaching a range of L2 or FL socio-cultural concepts and their outcomes in real-life language use. All these have been popular for years with many different groups of learners at various levels of proficiency. Extensive culture-teaching projects and activities, as they are presented below, are intended to continue for two or three weeks and certainly do not need to be implemented exactly as they are described. Teachers can choose to use only portions of them, as desired.

- Beginning learners are usually curious about a foreign culture, and they often need to experience small bits of it. With beginners, an emphasis should probably be placed on a tangible cultural experience that can be discussed, explained, and exemplified -- and less so on culture learning (Byram & Morgan, 1994). Traditional foods, souvenirs, pictures of landscapes and cityscapes, maps, books, and other real-life artifacts from English-speaking countries can become ready examples of objects from the local culture.
- Inviting guest speakers, who are experienced FL learners and who can give a talk about what they saw and did at the beginning of their sojourn, is probably one of the most effective activities for investigating another culture. These talks represent real-life testimonials and evidence that comes from real people (instead of teachers or textbooks). The greatest advantage of inviting guest speakers is that they can allow beginning learners an access to second-hand experiences, and several productive assignments can be derived from them. Following the talk, the information can be used for a short presentation to small groups of students or to an entire class.
- Learners can construct short questionnaires that focus on noticing and analyzing the manifestations of culture in language use and raising awareness of politeness norms and expressions, socio-cultural variables, such as age, gender, and social status, pragmatic functions of various routinized expressions, and linguistic forms of speech acts (e.g. the types of common and prevalent "softening" devices and the specific contexts of their use). The questionnaires can be administered in the learners' L1 to gather information that can be later used in L2/FL presentations or short written descriptions. The tasks can be simplified for intermediate level learners or be made more complex for advanced L2 speakers, depending on their language proficiency. Although native speakers of any language may not be aware of reasons for their own behaviors, they are usually aware of linguistic and behavioral "prescriptions" in abstract terms. That is, most native speakers would be able to tell the difference between what is considered to be polite or even acceptable in a particular situation and, if asked, some may even be able say why some expression, phrase, or behavior would be perceived as more polite than another.
- Home videos, movie clips, and videotaped excerpts from newscasts and TV programs of all sorts (e.g.

TV commercials, TV shows or movies for younger learners, or biographies of the important political figures, pop stars, movie stars, sports figures, musicians) can provide a practically inexhaustible resource for examining the influence of culture on language (e.g. routinized expressions, questions, requests, clarifications, etc.), interactional practices, body language, turn taking, and the length of pauses to signal the end of a turn. The information on socio-cultural and politeness norms of the community obtained from such materials can be used in subsequent mini role-plays, skits, plays that learners can script and present, as well as short formal presentations and written assignments, such letters or emails.

- the aspects of FL speech acts and behaviors that learners found strange or surprising
- the descriptions of polite and routinized expressions that they noted
- culturally-determined conventions in speech and behavior

These projects can be worked on from one to two weeks, depending on the amount of the material used in the video-lesson.

Conclusion

In EFL settings, learners' first language and natal culture invariably provide the sole available point of reference for understanding how the world and the society work, and how meanings are conveyed by means of language. When students begin learning another language, they often

discover that speakers of a different language do not see social constructs and organizations in similar ways. In more cases than not, an individual's immediate reaction is to dismiss these new and foreign worldviews and ways of doing things as irrelevant, slightly ridiculous, impractical, and not very intelligent. As Stewart (1972, p. 16) stated so insightfully, "[t]he typical person has a strong sense of what the world is really like, so that it is with surprise that he discovers that 'reality' is built up out of certain assumptions commonly shared among members of the same culture. Cultural assumptions may be defined as abstract, organized, and general concepts which pervade a person's outlook and behavior."

Advanced students who are well-versed in the ways of communicating and doing things in another culture have a world of opportunity open to them. These learners can move between their L1 world and the world of the other language. They are keenly aware that, in the process of communication, they understand and interpret people, their language uses, and the world through the framework of reference in their own language and culture. These individuals know from experience that different cultural ways of doing and speaking are simply undergird by different socio-cultural norms, assumptions, and value systems, all of which have distinct pragmatic manifestations in language and behavior. In language teaching and learning, teaching and learning another culture is intertwined with learning how to communicate effectively in another language and learning how to correctly and appropriately understand and interpret social and linguistic behavior inextricably bound up in all human communication. Without linguistic and cross-cultural competencies

combined, effective communication may be virtually impossible. Although many L2/FL teachers typically believe that teaching and learning about another culture in the classroom is very difficult, without such teaching and learning it has no chance of taking place. "A journey of a thousand miles begins with a footstep" (Lao Tzu, section 64, translated by R.L. Wing, 1986).

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