

CHAPTER 4

INCORPORATING CULTURE IN THE TEACHING AND LEARNING OF ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE



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Abstract

Over the years, language scholars have fore-grounded the need to incorporate cultural knowledge into second language teaching and learning owing to consensus that culture is not only inseparably related to language, but also plays an important role throughout the process of language teaching and learning. This concern bifurcates into the question of whether culture should be taught alongside the English language as a second language, and how to incorporate culture in the teaching of English. This work, therefore, seeks to establish the relationship between language and culture, especially as it relates to the four language skills; how to teach culture alongside English language in a second language context; problems inherent in this cross-cultural communication and their possible solutions. It was recommended that the inclusion of culture in language teaching will help reduce ethnocentric stereotypes amongst learners and achieve a greater cross-cultural understanding amongst cultures.

Key words: language, culture, English as a second language (ESL).

Introduction

Internationally, the English language has attained a vantage position as the most widely spoken language in both native and non-native environments across the globe. In addition, it has developed certain characteristic features peculiar to its regional varieties whilst maintaining its mutual intelligibility. According to Randolph Quirk (1984), English is in daily use amongst three or four hundred million people who are not native speakers. Most of these speakers require English for 'external' purposes'. Moreover, studies have shown an estimated number of over six hundred million users of English language throughout the world (Kachru, 1986).

Since people all around the world learn and use English to achieve their different aims, ranging from education, commerce, tourism to administration, science and technology and others; the question arises, if there is a need to teach the culture of the native speakers of English along with the language, especially in a second language situation? This issue has been the preoccupation of most applied linguists, socio-linguists and other language scholars for nearly two decades. Consequently, four divergent views have emerged over time, from this controversy.

The first view is that the culture of the native speakers of English be taught alongside the English language to acculturate language learners into the cultures of English speaking countries (Byram, 1990; Byram & Flemming, 1998). The second view refutes the teaching of the target language culture with English in countries where English is an institutionalised variety (Kachru & Welson, 1996). The third position rejects the idea of teaching the target language culture but advocates instead, the teaching of the local culture of the learners (Mckay, 2003). The last view maintains that since English has become a lingua franca in most regions, it should not be taught in relation to any culture (Alptekin, 2005; Jenkins, 1996).

However, majority of these scholars recognise that for a learner to learn a second language effectively, he/she must not only attain linguistic competence but must be sensitive to the values of the target language.

Language is the carrier of culture and this implies that language and culture are intricately interwoven, such that one cannot be extricated from the other. Tucker and Lambert (1973:246) stated that "the ability to communicate fully in a second language depends on the degree of non-ethnocentrism of the learner. The successful learner must develop an awareness and sensitivity towards the values and traditions of the people whose language is being studied". It is, therefore, imperative for second language learners to understand the culture of the target language such as English.

Lado (1957) opined that to know English, the learner must be able to communicate in the language in a manner that the native speakers will accept as their own. In this case, the second language learner is forced to suppress his cultural identity for the native speaker's cultural background. However, Hall (1978:55) added that "in order to understand the target culture in a second language such as English, one must transcend one's culture (which) can be done only by making explicit the rules by which it operates." From the foregoing, it is imperative that students must understand the target culture of their second language as well as draw basis for comparison from their local culture in order to achieve cross-cultural communication.

Culture

The term culture was first used by the pioneer English Anthropologist, Edward B. Taylor in his book *Primitive Culture* published in 1871. Taylor defined culture as 'that complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, art, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.'

The Cambridge English Dictionary states that Culture is the way of life, especially the general customs and beliefs of a particular group at a particular time. However, in whatever dimension culture is looked at, it has certain characteristics which are universal to every culture. These characteristics include culture as a learned behaviour; its abstract nature which makes it exist in the minds or habits of the members of a given society; culture as an embodiment of attitudes, values and knowledge as well as material objects; the transmissibility of culture which makes it possible to be handed down from one generation to another and the dynamic nature of culture which is ever changing with time. All these features apply to every culture which establishes that culture, though it has a universal phenomenon that is associated with members of a given society.

Applying culture to the learning of a second language, Spackman Christopher in his book, *Culture and Second Language Acquisition* (2008:3-4) states that:

Culture is to human, what water is to fish—that which surrounds us and that we are only aware of when it is gone. Culture as a process undermines the idea that culture can be learned through superficial aspects like food, costume, holidays. It is experienced through language because language is inseparable from culture. Learning a new language while living in the culture involves coming to terms with the new ocean you are swimming in. This is acculturation which can have two meanings. The general meaning is just the process or act of adjusting to a new culture.

Going by the above assertion, if we accept the acquisition of a second language as the acquisition of a second culture, it then follows that attention should be given to the culture of the second language and its acquisition, along with the beliefs and customs of the first language in a second language learning situation.

Relationship Between Language and Culture

Language in a general sense is a set of code of arbitrary vocal symbols and signs used for

communication in a speech community. Some human scientists see language as a culturally transmitted behavioural patterns, shared by a group of individuals. According to Robert Hall, in J.C Ogbodo et al (2010:4) 'Language is the institution whereby humans communicate and interact with each other by means of habitually used oral auditory arbitrary symbols' while Babara, M. and Strang, H. opine that language is a set of human habits, the purpose of which is give expressions to thought, and feelings, and especially to impart them to others'. (Ogbodo et al, 2010:4).

Language is part of culture and Culture is part of language. According to Jiang (2000:328), 'Language and Culture are intricately interwoven such that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture.'

Language mirrors the cultural inclination of a particular group, their religion, social habits, cuisine, music, arts and rituals. According to Wei (2005:56), 'Language has a dual character both as a means of communication and a carrier of culture. Therefore, language without culture and vice versa is unthinkable.

The dynamic relationship between language and culture is always at play in the classroom. The learning of a new language and culture in addition to the mother tongue should be based on the application of socio-cultural theories rather than cognitive theories. The classroom should be seen as providing a framework for students to socialize and communicate, using the target language without undue focus on grammatical skills and word translation.

English as a Second Language in Nigeria

In Nigeria, the present status of English is that of a second language. It is learnt and used by Nigerians after their mother tongue. The English language in Nigeria is learnt mostly through the school system. Its usage is more extensive than any other foreign language like French, Arabic and German etc. Although English came to be adopted as the official language of the country, its status as a second language remains unchanged. However, the multi-lingual nature of the Nigerian society, due to her ethnic diversity has its educational implications for the acquisition of English as a second language. For example, a greater population of Nigerians are not learned, and the society does not encourage the use of the target language except amongst the educated class. These inhibiting factors impact on the acquisition of English as a second language.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are as follows:

- i. To bring about behavioural change in the individual learner of English as a second language and reduce ethnocentric remarks and stereotypes due to cultural bias.
- ii. To increase the awareness of learners on their own socio-cultural behaviour and assist them to apply them positively to enhance effective inter-cultural communication.
- iii. To achieve greater cross-cultural understanding amongst users of English.
- iv. To establish the need to incorporate culture in learning English as a second language especially amongst teachers, curriculum planners and other stakeholders.

Importance of Culture in English as a Second Language

In the area of teaching and learning, Gao posits that 'the interdependence of language learning and cultural learning is so evident that one can conclude that language learning is culture learning and consequently, language teaching is cultural teaching (2006:59).

The essence of incorporating culture in the teaching of English as a Second language cannot be over emphasized. This helps in the following ways:

- i. It prepares the learners to adopt the mindset and technique with which to learn English, understand and appreciate the values, ways of doing things and the unique qualities of the target language culture.
- ii. Learners are encouraged to overcome cultural barriers and adjust to the new culture.
- iii. The teacher understands and appreciates problem areas in the students' acquisition of a second

language due to cultural differences and is in a better position to devise remedial strategies to address the problems. Language scholars further argue that the teaching of culture in English should include the following:

- Cultural knowledge
 - Cultural values (the psyche of the target culture, that is, what they regard as important)
 - Cultural behaviour (daily routines and behaviour)
 - Cultural skills (involving inter-cultural sensitivity and awareness with English as a medium of interactional communication)
- iv. Ultimately, incorporating cultural studies in the teaching of English as a second language reduces cross-cultural misunderstanding. By understanding one's own cultural presuppositions, one can become more tolerant of other language users from different cultural background.

Cultural Influences on the Four Language Skills and Implications for Teaching in an ESL (English as a Second Language) Context

Learning a language is not limited to the knowledge of its grammatical rules and syntax but with the way of life and the cultural behaviour, values and customs contained in the culture of the language. Since culture and language are interwoven, the transmission of the basic language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing have their cultural influences.

According to Smith (1987) in the *Introduction to Discourse Across Cultures*, recognizing such things as a place of silence, appropriate topics of conversation, forms of address, expression of speech acts; (for example- apologizing, requests, agreements, disagreements, etc) are perhaps more important to effective cross-cultural communication than grammar, lexis and phonology since the former are not the same across cultures.

Cultural Influence on Listening

In a second language learning environment, learners train their listening ability to understand better. Some learners have poor listening skills due to poor vocabulary, weak grammar, vague pronunciation, but the major reason is related to the lack of knowledge of the cultural background of the target language. Listening is closely related to the culture, economy and politics of the target language. It is a known fact that when we are listening to some familiar events, it is relatively easier for us to understand. On the contrary, listening to materials which are strange to our cultural background may prove difficult to understand. For example, a Nigerian listener will have a better understanding, listening to a commentary on the Niger Delta insurgence than to a news documentary on the cultural rites of the Eskimos. He will need to decipher and decode the message intended by first understanding who the Eskimos are and what part of the world they belong, before appreciating what the content is all about. Therefore, culture plays an important role in our listening ability. It can hinder our listening ability or aid it, depending on cultural background knowledge.

Implication for Teaching

Teaching strategies should be geared towards reconstructing the learner's thinking pattern and helping him adjust to the new and unfamiliar patterns of the new language.

Cultural Influence on Speaking

Effective communication through speech is essentially the practical use of language and the use of materials mutually intelligible to the interlocutors involved. A speaker who lacks the cultural background knowledge of a language, but is well versed in the linguistic aspect is bound to fail in his communication because in oral communication, speakers pay much attention to the context, that is, what one is saying, to whom, when and where it is being said. For example, if a young man addresses his father by his first name in the African context, it is regarded as unruly and inappropriate but in the Western context, it is considered acceptable, hence, speaking is influenced by cultural knowledge and propels interlocutors to use proper sentences in proper context.

Implication for teaching

Teachers should sensitise students on the implications of constructing English words, phrases and sentences based on their understanding of how their first language is formed and also assist the learners 'get into' the target language by use of proper sentences in proper contexts.

Cultural Influence on Reading

Reading is one of the language skill, which facilitates comprehension, good pronunciation and critical thinking skills. Linguistic knowledge can positively affect one's reading, but cultural factors play a more important role in the reading process. Most reading barriers are caused by cultural differences between the first and second languages, such as background information, sentences and text structures. Learners may know the meaning of individual words, but lack of cultural background will make it difficult for them to infer the meaning of words when combined in sentences or paragraphs. For example, the use of proverbial statements in Achebe's works will sound strange to a Hausa man. These proverbs are contextualised in the Igbo traditions and customs as against that of the Hausas or other geographical regions. In this case, there is a mutual or shared understanding between Achebe and the Igbo reader, as against an Hausa reader who will need further explanations on these proverbial statements to appreciate the author's intended message.

Implications for teaching

Teachers should recognize the importance of cultural knowledge and historical background in reading and apply appropriate teaching strategies to familiarize students with the contextual background of what is read for better assimilation and comprehension.

Cultural Influence on Writing

A writer's style is a reflection of his personality, experience and beliefs. If a writer uses an expression which is outside the contextual knowledge of his targeted audience, there is bound to be a breakdown in communication. For example, if an author uses the expression – The Senatorial candidate is Adolph Hitler and his predecessor is Nelson Mandela; to a not so literate Nigerian reader, the literal meaning may not be enough to understand the intended message. The reader needs to know the origin and the historical facts about Hitler and Nelson Mandela respectively. Connotatively, the writer means to use the character of Hitler who was known for his high-handedness and dictatorship. Nelson Mandela on the other hand was an African statesman, epitomised for self-sacrifice and national interest. Therefore, the above expression means that Hitler depicts one who enjoys power at the expense of the common good while Mandela is a selfless personality known for his goodwill and democratic interest. The success of decoding this expression does not depend on its grammatical structure but on the cultural implications of the terms which can only be fully appreciated by knowing the historical and cultural background of the two individuals in question.

Implications for Teaching

The goal of the teacher is to enhance students' mastery of writing skills in the target language and to familiarise them with the techniques and mechanisms of good writing which include spelling, punctuation and capitalization and other rudiments of effective writing.

Problems of Teaching Culture with English as a Second Language

Teaching culture along with English as a second language is worthwhile, though a daunting task. The following problems are inherent in the process:

- i. Cultural Interferences: Usually there are evidences of cultural interferences between the local culture of the learners and the English culture. Most learners apply their understanding of their local culture to English which brings about confusion and misunderstanding.
- ii. Learners experience 'cultural shock' as they feel disorientated when they come in contact with an unfamiliar way of life and move between two social environments.

- iii. Some teachers have little or no cultural knowledge or exposure of the target culture which makes it difficult for them to facilitate the learning process.
- iv. The various stakeholders in the teaching and learning of a second language are yet to be sensitised on the importance of incorporating and implementing cultural studies in the curriculum.

Methods of Teaching Culture in English Language

Second language learners need to understand what the native speakers of English mean without replicating their cultural behaviour. The teacher therefore is responsible in helping the students cultivate a degree of intellectual objectivity that is essential in cross-communication. In addition, the teacher needs to consider the learners' socio-cultural background while choosing materials and pedagogical approaches for different linguistic contexts.

The following methods are identified:

Grammar-Translation Method: Students first learn the rules of grammar of the mother tongue as well as the target language and make bilingual lists of vocabularies with their exceptions, irregularities in the two languages. Exercises for translation are given by the teacher to the learners to read. Comprehension of the rules and readings are tested through translation. Students are considered to have learnt if they are able to translate the passages well. In this method, the native and the target languages are constantly compared. This comparison approach 'provides a double perspective but not to evaluate to see which is better' (Planet, Byram 1999:189).

Direct Method: This is mostly used in a private and non-formal setting. This is based on the way children learn their mother tongue. Language is learned through the association of words and phrases with objects and action.

Discussions: The teacher tries to use introductory remarks which bother on his experiences about the target language to prepare the students to assimilate the new culture. Sources of materials for discussion could include interaction with members of the target culture, visits to the country, the country's media; historical and political data, contrastive views on fashion and styles of the target country with the local culture. These sources express the attitudes of the target language.

Drama and Role play: This involves selecting some learners to act out a series of short scenes and taking the roles of other persons as a way of learning from the known to the unknown. This method helps learners to be sensitive to alternative cultural perspectives and helps the teacher to improve on the entry behaviour of the students before instruction.

Conclusion

There is no gainsaying the fact that language and culture are interrelated such that one cannot be separated from the other. Most learners of English achieve linguistic competence but fail to communicate effectively with other English speakers outside the Nigerian context, talk more of the native speakers of English. Achebe (1965: 222) reflects on the English usage in Africa thus "Can an African ever learn English well enough to be able to use it effectively in creative writing? Certainly yes, but then if on the other hand you ask, can he (an African) ever learn to use it like a native speaker? I should say, I hope not. It is neither necessary nor desirable for him to be able to do so."

The issue is, therefore not in acquiring the cultural systems of the native speakers but to be able to favourably interact in the real world using the English language which has grown to have more acceptance than any other language across the globe.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- i. Teachers curriculum planners and translators must realise that cultural background is as important as the linguistic aspects of second language teaching and learning and adopt this attitude in their respective roles.
- ii. Teachers should be abreast of the cultural needs of the students in the learning of a second language such as English; and provide them with the knowledge they need to 'get into' the new culture, going from the known (L1) to the unknown (L2).
- iii. Students should be expressive of their cultural attitudes towards the target language and practise more often to gain perfection.
- iv. Students should not be disoriented or experience 'cultural shock' when they come in contact with unfamiliar ways of life due to cultural differences in the target language but rather conceptualise the English language as a common tool shared by people in a global village and be confident that their communication patterns are valid and acceptable like any other style of English around the world.

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