

THE IMPORTANCE OF CULTURAL COMPONENT IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING PROCESS

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Abstract

The 21st century is the era demanding people to know two and more languages, which provide them with more opportunities in any sphere such as business, banking, diplomacy, medicine, etc. Thus, mastering a language, in any case, means being able to communicate effectively and interact with individuals representing other cultures and speaking other languages. Actually, this implies that the learner not only acquires language skills, but also becomes the carrier of the target-language culture. Consequently, foreign language teaching needs to introduce a more sophisticated approach towards the element of culture in the educational process. It is high time to recognize the importance of intercultural learning or interculturality in foreign language teaching as culture is an integral part of any language course and should be taught in parallel with the language from the very first steps.

The cultural component has always been one of the most essential dimensions of intercultural language teaching and is based on the following principles: awareness of one's own culture; study of the target-language culture; comparison of the cultures under consideration.

Keywords: cultural component; foreign language teaching; interculturality; target-language culture; communication, language skills.

1 INTRODUCTION

Learning a foreign language becomes a kind of enculturation, where one acquires new cultural frames of reference and a new world view, reflecting those of the target language culture and its speakers [1]. The process of language teaching and learning has always been in the scope of attention of educators as the acquired language knowledge is a successful tool for building communication, enlarging horizons, gaining more sophisticated new knowledge and sharing it. Throughout centuries the methods of teaching foreign languages (TFL) have developed and improved incorporating various approaches thus enriching the arsenal of teachers and making their efforts more target-oriented.

2 METHODOLOGY

It is obvious that previously teachers mainly focused their attention on simply one goal while teaching a foreign language, that is, the language itself with its most important components: pronunciation, intonation, vocabulary digestion, correctly formulated grammatical forms, etc. and another essential task for the teacher was to perform an adequate assessment of the principal skills students should possess: listening, reading, writing, comprehending and speaking.

Yet, mastering these skills has proved not always to be that sufficient to build up efficient communication with foreign interlocutors. As the language teaching process was primarily restricted to and based on presenting the target language in classical texts, the so-called "communicative component" was actually disregarded. In reality, it became clear that the classical approach to TFL hampered the communication process, thus creating difficulties in mutual understanding and cultural tolerance. In the last quarter of the XX century it became relevant to adopt some new approach towards TFL and to adapt it to new needs and realities. So, the 1970s were marked with the emergence of such notions as "Communicative Approach" and "Communicative Language Teaching" which announced a "cultural turn" [2]. The new social context, forming under the influence of new challenges of globalization, developing technologies and economic demands, pushed forward the idea of the 'cultural turn' and the necessity for its introduction into the TFL process. It became urgent for people of different nationalities to get more and more information about each other's cultures, mentality, behavior and perceptions in order to be able to communicate or interact effectually.

Indeed, we have to accept that culture and language are so interconnected that it is not surprising they are sometimes perceived as synonyms [3]. If we go deeper into the matter we see that language expresses an individual's thoughts and beliefs which are culturally biased and, yet, any culture cannot express itself without language operation, i.e. communication. As Brown [4] puts it: "A language is a part of a culture and a culture is a part of a language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture."

As the concept of culture itself is a rather broad and continuously manipulated notion, present in practically any sphere of human activities, it is viewed and studied from various angles in different disciplines. Among the myriad of definitions and interpretations of culture it is not easy to elicit the one that would give its all-embracing depth. That's why we have found it appropriate to introduce only a few selected approaches to the concept of culture and its components, which we believe complement to the culture-language link.

Lustig and Koester see culture as a "learned set of shared interpretations about beliefs, values and norms, which affect the behaviors of a relatively large group of people" [5]. In their understanding it is not a matter of geographic belonging to a place or race but rather a matter of sharing similar beliefs and behaviors.

McCarthy and Carter value culture as "social knowledge and interactive skills which are required in addition to knowledge of the language system" [6], thus, rating culture into the range of social discourse.

Another view represented by Crozet and Liddicoat states that "culture is a concept referring to ways of acting, believing, valuing, and thinking which are shared by members of a community (social group) and which are transmitted to the next generation. A culture is dynamic and open to change as a result of a change in living conditions or through contact with other cultures" [7].

Hence, as mentioned above, the cultural component (CC) has unfairly been neglected from the foreign language curricula and has been viewed as an accompanying component in TFL. But the challenges of the 21st century require that the CC should become an inseparable part of teaching and studying any foreign language. As the aim of TFL is not only to teach language for just the sake of knowing the language, i.e. its grammar, vocabulary, structures, etc., but also to implement it as a tool of communication with the speakers of the target language, be it natives or just language carriers.

The communication won't be successful unless the language knowledge is based on the knowledge of culture. No one can master a language without background knowledge of its culture, otherwise misunderstanding and miscomprehension might occur during communication. When put in a new socio-cultural context, FL learners should be aware of the cultural differences because even a lexically and grammatically correct statement may have some connotation in the interlocutor's culture, thus can produce certain problems. In fact, proficiency for FL learners in the target language is achieved when the link between language and culture is ensured. This is not an easy task. Teaching culture can be characterized as a complex technique which comprises not only presenting facts, history and cultural issues of the target language countries but exploring, describing and analyzing the material under consideration as well. The role of the language teacher is therefore to develop skills, attitudes and awareness of values just as much as to develop knowledge of a particular culture or country [10].

Willingly or unwillingly, the cultural component should become a part and parcel of teaching a foreign language. The fact that both language and culture carry meaning and are used to describe and supplement each other makes it an imperative that certain principles be highlighted while teaching culture. Crozet and Liddicoat [7] have introduced five principles to facilitate this process:

- 1 Culture is integrated into language macroskills not a separate macroskill and the culture needs to be taught simultaneously with and integrated into language teaching.
- 2 Culture is taught from the very beginning of language learning and is not delayed until the learners have acquired some of the language.
- 3 The bilingual speaker is the norm and learners are expected to become competent users of a complex linguistic repertoire involving multiple languages.
- 4 Language acquisition involves intercultural acquisition.
- 5 Culture learning involves learning how to discover new information about the culture.

Actually, this approach implies that the learner not only acquires language skills, but also becomes the carrier of the target-language culture. To that end, a knowledgeable teacher is to guide learners in the

right direction supporting them in their efforts to gain linguistic skills as well as cultural competence, thus encouraging them to communicate freely and relevantly, sharing information on both their own and target-language cultures. This is the first and most important step into the domain of interculturality – a challenging phenomenon typical of the 21st century.

Supporting cross-cultural dialogue, the concept of interculturality is defined as “a set of multi-faceted processes of interaction through which relations between different cultures are constructed, aiming to enable groups and individuals to forge links between cultures based on equity and mutual respect” [8].

As Sinden, states [9], “intercultural communication involves the sharing of information across different cultures and social groups, including individuals with different religious, social, ethnic, and educational backgrounds. It seeks to understand the differences in how people from a variety of cultures act, communicate, and perceive the world around them.”

In reality the main concern of the FL teachers has always been to implement more effective approaches and models of language teaching. Forming a competence of professional communication in a foreign language the goal is to provide students with the tools and teach them the skills of communication on their own specialty and, at the same time, attract foreign colleagues showing respect and knowledge of their culture [11].

Intercultural approach provides them with this toolbox as it ensures obtaining the culture-specific and culture-general knowledge, attitudes and skills which enable them to communicate and interact with people from other cultures. Moreover, it is an opportunity to make the educational process more dynamic, interesting, and open to new experiences. This approach develops observation skills, analytical and critical thinking, and relevant communication abilities which help the learners get rid of peculiar individual and national complexes.

Intercultural communicative competence is the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with people from other language and cultural backgrounds [1]. Effective intercultural communication requires: 1) *empathy* - an understanding of other people's behaviors and ways of thinking; 2) *respect* - genuine admiration and appreciation of different ways of thinking and communication; 3) *tolerance* - the ability and willingness to accept and acknowledge different behaviors and ways of thinking, the existence of opinions or behavior that one does not necessarily agree with; 4) *sensitivity* - the awareness and responsiveness to other people's behaviors and ways of thinking; 5) *flexibility* - willingness to adapt and open to change and different ways of thinking.

The intercultural approach towards language teaching comprises the following principles:

- awareness of one's own culture;
- study of the target-language culture;
- comparison of the cultures under consideration.

The first principle urges the learners to investigate their culture with a fresh look and identify their own place in it. Moreover, this helps them to evaluate their cultural heritage and characteristics, which so far have been taken for granted and didn't seem something fascinating or enchanting, from a new perspective. It can be considered a self-cognitive process which leads to building self-confidence and self-sustainability. This attitude broadens the learners' knowledge of native language and its opportunities.

The second principle – study of the target-language culture – is a multilevel process accompanying the learners from the very first steps of their language education. It can be compared with “discovering new lands” which are full of novelties, surprises and prospects. During the process of learning, in line with mastering the language learners indulge themselves into the new realities, adapt them, and little by little become target language speakers and target-language carriers.

The third principle – comparison of the cultures under consideration – involves assessment and evaluation of the knowledge gained simultaneously while implementing the first two principles of the intercultural approach and leads to intercultural communication. The learners gain the ability to function in the intercultural context, to distinguish, recognize and evaluate cultural differences, to overcome those differences in communication while maintaining their own cultural identity. This principle supposes vast knowledge of the native and target languages, and the cultural component of the teaching process takes a leading role.

Furthermore, all these three principles constitute not just a key part of Foreign Language Teaching. They play an essential role in teaching Foreign Language for Special Purposes (FLSP). This aspect of

TFL is certainly marked with cultural component and it encompasses a strong emphasis on intercultural communication as it presupposes interaction with “culture within a target culture”.

3 RESULTS

Research findings support the view that intercultural competence is a combination of one’s personal abilities (such as flexibility, empathy, open-mindedness, self-awareness, adaptability, language skills, cultural knowledge, etc.) as well as relevant contextual variables (such as shared goals, incentives, perceptions of equality, perceptions of agency, etc.).

When dealing with FLSP educators have to face not only the challenges connected with linguistic and cultural differences as a whole, but also have to take into consideration the specific features of a definite sphere, such as business, banking, diplomacy, medicine, etc.

Undoubtedly, this aspect of intercultural learning is of crucial importance, especially nowadays when so many people know two and more languages and operate in multi-lingual environments.

4 CONCLUSIONS

Given the fact that culture awareness is an integral part of Teaching Foreign Languages, it is necessary to develop a framework or curriculum that would meet the demands of the new times and satisfy the needs of learners. The cultural component becomes a key factor in the foreign language teaching process. Consequently, language teaching context should be developed alongside with linguistic competences at all levels of education.

Intercultural language teaching, being a rather sophisticated approach of second/third language teaching, comes to fill the gap as it functions efficaciously and encourages the learners to build up eloquent knowledge with a great feedback. When cultural dimension is emphasized the learners are motivated to conduct their gained communicative skills in intercultural dialogue.

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