

# **Culture Awareness in foreign language classrooms**

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## **ABSTRACT**

**This paper focuses on the importance of cultural awareness in foreign language teaching. We the foreign language educators, are required to instill in our students, a keen interest in the Sociolinguistic rules and a strong understanding of the contemporary culture of that foreign society to help them achieve complete and relevant communication through their language. It is never enough to emphasize to our Indian students, who being neither equipped with the Sociolinguistic competence of the target foreign language, nor having exposure to its communicative rules, the extreme importance of imbibing the significance of the culture to shape their learnt language. Their awareness of that culture will eventually give them an innate, if not an almost, spontaneous ability to choose the right words, proverbs and terminologies to express themselves through their language.**

**We cannot disagree with the fact that the proper aim of language teaching is communication. Communicative competence is concerned with the concrete acts of language use and the social rules of language use (Allwright, 1976). It is that competence, which we have to provide to our students, teaching them, ‘when to speak, ‘when not’ and ‘what to talk about with whom, when and where and in what manner’.**

**Keywords Cultural awareness, communicative competence, target foreign culture, foreign language educators**

## **INTRODUCTION**

We often wonder what is Culture? Researchers such as Brown(1994) has explained that language and culture are inseparable part of each other. Many other scholars also agreed to it as River(1981) said that language cannot be taken far away from the culture. Language becomes the most important feature or designator of a culture. Thus different languages have formed various categories of cultural aspects, such as traditions and ways of life and world view of people.

Culture and language being two important parts of communication, with vocabularies and expressions, customs and traditions. Hence as Language promotes usage of synonyms and local expressions, it becomes the mirror that shows glimpses of a culture and its people. With the importance of interaction in foreign language, teaching communication without teaching culture, is not enough for a classroom anymore. It always lacks the complete communication between the foreigner and natives of a certain language. It is something like to driving a car through a busy intersection, without understanding the meaning of the traffic lights. In order to learn the right usage of language to communicate, it is important to have cultural awareness of the target country.

## **LANGUAGE & CULTURE**

As this paper focuses on the aspect of culture in foreign language teaching, my question stands as Do we, the foreign language educators, first introduce the foreign culture to our students, or we start with the basic expressions such as “hello”, “how are you?”, “good bye”, etc.

It is mostly seen that in our classrooms, we intend to concentrate on the linguistic skills – that is, those activities which depend on verbal manifestation by means of some amount of knowledge of correct grammatical usage. Our focus stays on familiarity of syntax, phonology etc. with an idea of keeping culture teaching limited to merely a separate class on ‘Society and culture’.

The focus of my concern has been on the element that language, in any of the four forms – speaking, listening, reading and writing, cannot be taught and learnt without teaching culture in a foreign language class. As each culture is considered to be the combination of many interrelated beliefs, traditions, values, social norms, social systems and material culture elements, language cannot be taken as separate from the culture it is learnt and spoken in. Foreign language teachers should consciously try to convey the implications of that foreign culture in the language, within that context of conversation, wherever possible. Mere fluency in writing or speaking in a foreign language without any cultural awareness is of little use in a practical level, especially in terms of communications.

While we strive to introduce vowels and consonants of the target language to the beginners during their initial classes thus laying the foundation of their language training. Students with their initial curiosity, to acquaint themselves to that new country, often try to learn more of that fashion, food and contemporary music. Sometimes, they also imitate that fashion. However, in the classroom, “culture” which acts as an invisible bridge between the theory and the spoken word, is yet to be established. It is here, where the role of a foreign language teacher comes in. The teacher needs to start introducing the foreign culture with the use of any of the appropriate culture teaching tools, such as short videos of the people and country, reading out interesting cultural facts, talking about the cultural differences and similarities between their mother culture and the target foreign culture etc.

Hendon(1980) focused on the relevance and importance of culture with its relation to the inspiring factors which affect the foreign language learners.

“Cultural activity stimulates the interest in foreign language study. Culture materials provide many topics of personal interest to a student, thereby increasing motivation. The inclusion of culture in the foreign language classroom could well provide an important bridge for the language student in his search for relevance.”

In regard to Bryam(1989)’s research about the cultural awareness in teaching of communicative skills of foreign language learners. Learning a language without learning the native culture, might be enough for survival and daily transactions, but communication can not be called as complete without the cultural awareness. Communication becomes more relevant and effective with a clear understanding of culture. It also gives the student an opportunity to the students to understand the natives of that country better through interactions and communication.

Asian languages are said to be deeply rooted in their cultural protocols. It has been observed that many of the foreign languages, when taught in the closed boundaries of a classroom, begin with basic greetings such as “Hello”, “Namaste”, “Hola” “Annyeonghaseyo”, “Konnichiwa”. Students feel a high level of motivation in having being able to speak the first few expressions of a new language, however, if the proper body gestures of these greetings, are not demonstrated to the students in the classroom, they would wrongly gesticulate which may be culturally inappropriate in that context. As similar to the case of teaching a foreign students, how to say “Namaste”, in Hindi, without the right gestures of joined palms, may look incomplete. Such cultural norms are complemented by the correct usage of words, gestures and body language.

Verbal behavior and intended behaviors are all part of language behaviors. We need to teach to pay more special attention to the cultural and everyday life settings of the native speakers of a particular foreign language. We also need to keep this in mind that communicative misunderstandings may result from the difference in the modes of thoughts and reflective culture patterns, rather than from an inability to speak the language fluently. Hence, we can say that the role of gesture and other paralinguistic cues are vital in communication activities. It has been observed that the meanings of verbal signs are largely affected by the speaker-listener’s readiness to interpret such non-verbal cues. Non-verbal symbols are connected with various human social behavioral factors such as kinesics, encompassing facial expressions, eye behaviors, the use of space and time, and touching, which vary from culture to culture.

The ways of life of a society are largely reflected in its culture patterns and customs. Chastain(1975) defined culture as ‘the way people live’, and according to Brown(1994) culture is a ‘way of life’. As we show demos of clearer and better understanding of these integral elements of people, language and their culture inseparably, we are able to develop more natural communication abilities.

River(1964) stated that ‘when students don’t have a certain grasp of the language and a basic understanding of the cultural and social norms of the people, they are unable to understand the relationship between the formal culture and aspects of contemporary society, and the relationship and interaction between this ‘formal culture’ and the ‘deep culture’<sup>1</sup> of everyday living. We often get to notice that sometimes the culturally conditioned images may also be associated with the most common difference of mother tongue and the target language. The students of higher level of foreign language proficiency have shown this characteristics more than others.

Culture teaching in foreign language also need to consider the intercultural similarities and differences. We need to understand both the cultures in order to teach the cultural traits. Intercultural teaching and understanding should be the goal of a language class. Hence, the more awareness of students of their own culture gives them more comprehensible and relevant understanding of the difference and similarities of socio-linguistic aspects.

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<sup>1</sup>The ‘way of life’ culture was described as Brook’s term of ‘deep culture’.

## CONCLUSION

I believe that foreign language teaching involves much more than teaching grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation. In today's world, foreign language learners are focusing on the competence to adjust the language to its cultural situations and surroundings, it is spoken in. As the students learn the greetings, daily life conversations, discussions on social norms etc., they also get aware of the background behind cross-cultural behaviours, which may be regarded as bizarre or culturally taboo.

As the students learn about the social variable such as age, environment, society, religion, they also should be taught about the acceptable language behaviors. Teachers play a very important role in teaching the students that every common word and phrase of a foreign language, has important cultural implications. The teacher helps the student how to organise and analyse the expressions to suit a certain sociolinguistic setup of that foreign culture. At the same time, the students should be made to see their native culture more accurately and objectively from a new perspective. It will give the students a more international outlook beyond an ethnocentric perspective. Students will gain cross-cultural perspectives by understanding foreign culture. These will help the students to have a more positive attitude towards the learning of a foreign language.

History shows that all great cultures and languages have imbibed the other culture beyond their limitations. We can say that today's contemporary educators are becoming part of that contributory process. For learning of a foreign language and its culture, is but that first step in the process of a greater understanding of mankind.

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