Culture in Second Language Teaching

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The National Center for Cultural Competence defines culture as an "integrated pattern of human behavior that includes thoughts, communications, languages, practices, beliefs, values, customs, courtesies, rituals, manners of interacting and roles, relationships and expected behaviors of a racial, ethnic, religious or social group; and the ability to transmit the above to succeeding generations" (Goode, Sockalingam, Brown, & Jones, 2000). This means that language is not only part of how we define culture, it also reflects culture. Thus, the culture associated with a language cannot be learned in a few lessons about celebrations, folk songs, or costumes of the area in which the language is spoken. Culture is a much broader concept that is inherently tied to many of the linguistic concepts taught in second language classes.

Through initiatives such as the national standards for foreign language learning, language educators in the United States have made it a priority to incorporate the study of culture into their classroom curricula. Cultural knowledge is one of the five goal areas of the national standards:

Through the study of other languages, students gain a knowledge and understanding of the *cultures* that use that language; in fact, students cannot truly master the language until they have also mastered the cultural contexts in which the language occurs. (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 1996, p. 27)

This Digest disc usses the importance of incorporating culture into second language teaching and recommends strategies for infusing cultural issues in classroom instruction.

The Importance of Culture in Language Teaching

Linguists and anthropologists have long recognized that the forms and uses of a given language reflect the cultural values of the society in which the language is spoken. Linguistic competence alone is not enough for learners of a language to be competent in that language (Krasner, 1999). Language learners need to be aware, for example, of the culturally appropriate ways to address people, express gratitude, make requests, and agree or disagree with someone. They should know that behaviors and intonation patterns that are appropriate in their own speech community may be perceived differently by members of the target language speech community. They have to understand that, in order for communication to be successful, language use must be associated with other culturally appropriate behavior.

In many regards, culture is taught implicitly, imbedded in the linguistic forms that students are learning. To make students aware of the cultural features reflected in the language, teachers can make those cultural features an explicit topic of discussion in relation to the linguistic forms being studied. For example, when teaching subject pronouns and verbal inflections in French, a teacher could help students understand when in French it is appropriate to use an informal form of address (*tu*) rather than a formal form of address (*vous*)—a distinction that English does not have. An English as a second language teacher could help students understand socially appropriate communication, such as making requests that show respect; for example, "Hey you, come here" may be a linguistically correct request, but it is not a culturally appropriate way for a student to address a teacher. Students will master a language only when they learn both its linguistic and cultural norms.

Teaching Culture Without Preconceptions

Cultural information should be presented in a nonjudgmental fashion, in a way that does not place value or judgment on distinctions between the students' native culture and the culture explored in the classroom. Kramsch (1993) describes the "third culture" of the language classroom—a neutral space that learners can create and use to explore and reflect on their own and the target culture and language.

Some teachers and researchers have found it effective to present students with objects or ideas that are specific to the culture of study but are unfamiliar to the students. The students are given clues or background information about the objects and ideas so that they can incorporate the new information into their own worldview. An example might be a cooking utensil. Students would be told that the object is somehow used for cooking, then they would either research or be informed about how the utensil is used. This could lead into related discussion about foods eaten in the target culture, the geography, growing seasons, and so forth. The students act as anthropologists, exploring and understanding the target culture in relation to their own. In this manner, students achieve a level of empathy, appreciating that the way people do things in their culture has its own coherence.

It is also important to help students understand that cultures are not monolithic. A variety of successful behaviors are possible for any type of interaction in any particular culture. Teachers must allow students to observe and explore cultural interactions from their own perspectives to enable them to find their own voices in the second language speech community.

Instructional Strategies for Teaching Language and Culture

Cultural activities and objectives should be carefully organized and incorporated into lesson plans to enrich and inform the teaching content. Some useful ideas for presenting culture in the classroom are described in this section.

Authentic Materials

Using authentic sources from the native speech community helps to engage students in authentic cultural experiences. Sources can include films, news broadcasts, and television shows; Web sites; and photographs, magazines, newspapers, restaurant menus, travel brochures, and other printed materials. Teachers can adapt their use of authentic materials to suit the age and language proficiency level of the students. For example, even beginning language students can watch and listen to video clips taken from a television show in the target language and focus on such cultural conventions as greetings. The teacher might supply students with a detailed translation or give them a chart, diagram, or outline to complete while they listen to a dialogue or watch a video. After the class has viewed the relevant segments, the teacher can engage the students in discussion of the cultural norms represented in the segments and what these norms might say about the values of the culture. Discussion topics might include nonverbal behaviors (e.g., the physical distance between speakers, gestures, eye contact, societal roles, and how people in different social roles relate to each other). Students might describe the behaviors they observe and discuss which of them are similar to their native culture and which are not and determine strategies for effective communication in the target language.

Proverbs

Discussion of common proverbs in the target language could focus on how the proverbs are different from or similar to proverbs in the students' native language and how differences might underscore historical and cultural background (Ciccarelli, 1996). Using proverbs as a way to explore culture also provides a way to analyze the stereotypes about and misperceptions of the culture, as well as a way for students to explore the values that are often represented in the proverbs of their native culture.

Role Play

In role plays, students can act out a miscommunication that is based on cultural differences. For example, after learning about ways of addressing different groups of people in the target culture, such as people of the same age and older people, students could role play a situation in which an inappropriate greeting is used. Other students observe the role play and try to identify the reason for the miscommunication. They then role play the same situation using a culturally appropriate form of address.

Culture Capsules

Students can be presented with objects (e.g., figurines, tools, jewelry, art) or images that originate from the target culture. The students are then responsible for finding information about the item in question, either by conducting research or by being given clues to investigate. They can either write a brief summary or make an oral presentation to the class about the cultural relevance of the item. Such activities can also serve as a foundation from which teachers can go on to discuss larger cultural, historical, and linguistic factors that tie in with the objects. Such contextualization is, in fact, important to the success of using culture capsules.

Students as Cultural Resources

U.S. schools are more culturally and ethnically diverse than they have ever been. Exchange students, immigrant students, or students who speak the target language at home can be invited to the classroom as expert sources. These students can share authentic insights into the home and cultural life of native speakers of the language.

Ethnographic Studies

An effective way for students to learn about the target language and culture is to send them into their own community to find information. Students can carry out ethnographic interviews with native speakers in the community, which they can record in notebooks or on audiotapes or videotapes. Discussion activities could include oral family histories, interviews with community professionals, and studies of social groups (Pino, 1997). It is important to note that activities involving the target-language community require a great deal of time on the part of the teacher to help set them up and to offer ongoing supervision.

Literature

Literary texts are often replete with cultural information and evoke memorable reactions for readers. Texts that are carefully selected for a given group of students and with specific goals in mind can be very helpful in allowing students to acquire insight into a culture. One study compared the level and quality of recollection when two different groups of students learned about Côte D'Ivoire (Scott & Huntington, 2000). One group studied a fact sheet and a second studied a poem about colonialism in Côte D'Ivoire. The researchers found that group that studied the fact sheet retained very little information about the Côte D'Ivoire culture, whereas the group that read the poem showed a capacity to empathize with the personal history of the Côte D'Ivoire people.

Film

Film and television segments offer students an opportunity to witness behaviors that are not obvious in texts. Film is often one of the more current and comprehensive ways to encapsulate the look, feel, and rhythm of a culture. Film also connects students with language and cultural issues simultaneously (Stephens, 2001), such as depicting conversational timing or turn-taking in conversation. At least one study showed that students achieved significant gains in overall cultural knowledge after watching videos from the target culture in the classroom (Herron, Cole, Corrie, & Dubreil, 1999).

Conclusion

The idea of teaching culture is nothing new to second language teachers. In many cases, teaching culture has meant focusing a few lessons on holidays, customary clothing, folk songs, and food. While these topics may be useful, without a broader context or frame they offer little in the way of enriching linguistic or social insight—especially if a goal of language instruction is to enable students to function effectively in another language and society. Understanding the cultural context of day-to-day conversational conventions such as greetings, farewells, forms of address, thanking, making requests, and giving or receiving compliments means more than just being able to produce grammatical sentences. It means knowing what is appropriate to say to whom, and in what situations, and it means understanding the beliefs and values represented by the various forms and usages of the language.

Culture must be fully incorporated as a vital component of language learning. Second language teachers should identify key cultural items in every aspect of the language that they teach. Student can be successful in speaking a second language only if cultural issues are an inherent part of the curriculum.

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