

“Linguo-cultural teaching”: Reflections on intercultural literacy in foreign language classroom.

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Abstract

In the quest for accelerating globalization, societies are becoming more multilingual and multicultural. Many countries have therefore invested resources in foreign language education to meet the needs for intercultural understanding. The recurring problem, however, is that the traditional approach to foreign language teaching views culture as a secondary priority, honing students' linguistic competence at the expense of their intercultural competence development. This paper intends to demonstrate that language and culture are inextricably intertwined. It will also discuss how cultural literacy fits into a language-learning curriculum. Finally it will discuss the importance of “Linguo-cultural teaching” and the strategies that ideally bridge between linguistic content and cultural information in a lively and engaging context to promote effective teaching of language and culture seamlessly.

Introduction:

One of the misconceptions that have permeated foreign language teaching is the conviction that language is merely a code and, once mastered – mainly by dint of steeping oneself into grammatical rules and some aspects of the social context in which it is embedded – ‘one language is essentially (albeit not easily) translatable into another (Kramsch, 1993). To some extent, this belief has been instrumental in promoting various approaches to foreign language teaching – pragmatic, sociolinguistic, and communicative – which have certainly endowed the study of language with a social “hue”. Nevertheless, paying lip service to the social dynamics that undergird language without trying to identify and gain insight into the very fabric of society and culture that have come to charge language in many and varied ways, can only cause misunderstanding and lead to cross cultural miscommunication (Thanasoulas, 2001).

Even though “culture” as a word and concept might be hard to define succinctly, there is little argument that it is the linchpin of much of what we do in our language classes. For example, if you ask your students why they are studying a language, the odds are that the reason they give will be culturally based: travel, food, music, literature, and relationships. All the responses require a particular knowledge not just of the language, but also of the cultural particulars of a people and place. This notwithstanding, *how* we teach culture remains a thorny issue for all of us.

The coinage of “linguo-cultural” teaching is attributed to Russian linguists, Kostomarov and Vereshchagin (1983) who claim, “in the process of learning, the union of language and information relating to the national culture is called linguo-cultural teaching. In other words, when learning other subjects, we always bring other things into the subject matter for clarification of the concepts. For example, in geometry (math), concepts and analogies like how ‘splitting is like’, or ‘quarter hour on the clock is like’ are introduced in the discussion for clearer explanation.

So why can teachers not embed language into the culture of the language? Instead, we continue to teach language at the level of grammar and lexicon, losing sight of the fact that without the cultural component, language performance is certainly impeded! This will be explained later within the pyramid of foreign language learning.

In general, this paper is aimed at shedding some light of the role of teaching foreign language with the intent of fostering cross-cultural understanding, which transcends the boundaries of linguistic forms – while enriching and giving far deeper meaning to what is dubbed “communicative competence”- and runs counter to a solipsistic world view. I would also attempt to bring to the fold ways of incorporating culture not only into the foreign language curriculum but also into learners’ repertoire and outlook on life.

The above objectives clearly echo Kramsch’s (1993) insightful remark that ‘we cannot go about teaching foreign language without at least offering some insights into its speakers’ culture. By the same token, we cannot go about fostering “communicative competence” without taking into account the different views and perspectives of people in different cultures, which may enhance or even inhibit communication. After all, communication requires understanding, and understanding requires stepping into the shoes of the foreigner and sifting her cultural baggage, while always ‘putting [the target] culture in relation to one’s own’ (Kramsch, 1993). It is noteworthy to remark that, if we teach language without teaching at the same time the culture in which the language operates, we are teaching meaningless symbols or symbols to which the student attaches the wrong meaning (Politzer, 1959)

Language learning and cultural integration:

In examining the relationship between language and culture and why the teaching of culture should constitute and integral part of the foreign language curriculum, it comes to light that language is a social institution, both shaping and shaped by society at large, or in particular the ‘cultural niches’ in which it plays an important role (Armour-Thomas & Gopaul-McNicol, 1998). Furthermore, language is not ‘autonomous construct’ but social practice both creating and created by the structures and forces of the social institutions within which we live and function (Fairclough, 1989). Certainly, language cannot exist in a vacuum and learners cannot truly master the language until they have also mastered the cultural context in which the language occurs.

In Garza’s (2013) illustration, "Speakers in dialogues can be seen and heard; other participants in the situation can be seen. The language learner can readily see the ages of the participants; their sex; perhaps the relationships of one to another; their dress, social status, and what they are doing; and perhaps their mood or feelings. Further, paralinguistic information, such as facial expressions or hand gestures, is available to accompany aural clues of intonation." Indeed, all of these advantages can be tied to the subject of our conversation on culture.

If we agree that language and culture are inextricably linked, then it is pointless to ask the question “how much of the culture of a country should be taught along with the language?”

For example, when a person decides to learn French, he/she is not merely absorbing the linguistics of the language but everything to do with French and France including the stereotypical preconceptions about the French language – beautiful, romantic, where it is spoken, etc. Thus, a speaker of a language automatically aligns oneself with the culture of the language because, for anyone to speak any particular language well, the one has to think in the culture of that language. Since a person’s mind is the center of his identity, thought is exceptionally powerful activity. Therefore, if a person thinks in French in order to speak French, we can conclude that, in effect, he has almost taken a French identity (Brown, 2004; Littlewood, 2012). That is the power and essence of a language. Language is culture. Language is the soul of the country and people who speak it. That is why a learner of a foreign language with integrative motivation seeks to look for programs of the language to listen or watch. It becomes an unconscious choice because the language one speaks or seeks to speak affects who the one is. This results from the fact that language is not dead; it is alive and therefore, can never be divorced from the culture that produced it.

Brief history:

Noam Chomsky, father of modern linguistics situates his work in Anglo centric and Eurocentric context. Chomskyan linguistics, beginning with his *Syntactic Structures*, a distillation of his *Logical Structure of Linguistic Theory* (1955) challenges structural linguistics and introduces transformational grammar, which takes utterances (sequences of words) to have a syntax characterized by a formal grammar; in particular, a context-free grammar extended with transformational rules. Chomsky believed that there is a box in our brain in which we put all the grammar, structure, and vocabulary and reproduce it – that is language!

In the 1970's, Ned Seeley, (1977) writes: "Learning a language in isolation of its cultural roots prevents one from becoming socialized into its contextual use. Knowledge of linguistic structure alone does not carry with it any special insight into the political, social, religious and economic systems". Thus, Seeley's assertion suggests that, without context – the speaker, intonation, symbols and meaning - all one learns in a language classroom is grammar and words; not language.

Still, in an attempt to improve on Chomsky's cognitive theory of language, Rivers (2001) in her work 'Teaching foreign language skills' takes a social constructive stand and opines that "we must focus on both appropriate content and activities that enable students to assimilate that content." She believes that activities should encourage students to go beyond facts so that they begin to perceive and experience vicariously the deeper levels of the culture of the speakers of the language. Rivers (1981) believes that fluency is not enough without getting students to a direction to become as close to native speakers as possible.

In the 1990's, Kramersch (1993) weighed into the argument supporting the linguists from 1970 and stated that "at the intersection of multiple native and target cultures, the major task of language learners is to define for themselves, what this "third place" that they have engaged in seeking will look like, whether they are conscious of it or not"

Kramersch's (1993) 'Context and culture in language teaching' describes "the third place" as a place where culture fits into language learning. In other words, this is how the learner understands how the native speaker understands the language. The learner then reaches a level of learning the cultural phenomenon and knows how he/she is going to internalize it.

Language learning and the curriculum:

The problem encountered by both teachers and foreign language learners regarding cultural integration stems from the fact that, some students are far removed from the culture of the language they are learning. Or the students may be physically immersed in the culture but experientially and psychologically distant from it (Pica, 1994). Thus, the barrier to language is lack of motivation and that one is able to learn a language when the one has the passion, motivation and interest in the literature and culture and the people of the language. Within the foreign language-learning classroom, students are motivated differently in their acquisition of the language. Students may have **instrumental motivation** or **integrative motivation** to learn a language.

According to Brown (1994) instrumental motivation is the functional need for learners to acquire the language in order to serve some utilitarian purpose, such as securing a job, as an interpreter, or a place at the university. In his explanation, Kramersch (1993) refers to instrumental motivation as a perspective that pertains to the transmission of factual, cultural information with statistical and institutional structures and other aspects of the target civilization and serious scholarly information. In other words, learners are introduced to an immersion program in literature and the arts with only popular, mass-market information only focusing on the customs, habits, and folklore of everyday life. This preoccupation with facts rather than meanings leaves much to be desired as far as understanding of foreign attitudes and values is concerned. Thus, it would virtually blindfold learners to the minute [albeit significant] aspects of their own, as well as the target group's identity that are not easily divined and appropriated. Consequently, all that it offers is mere book knowledge learned by rote (Huebener, 1959).

Another major problem that arises is that, instrumentally motivated learners are neither concerned with the culture from which their target language emerged, nor interested in developing any feelings of affinity with the native speakers of that language.

Conversely, integrative motivation implies the desire to acquire a language while immersing into the whole culture of the language in order to identify with and become part of that society (Brown, 2004). The integrative perspective draws upon cross-cultural psychology or anthropology and embeds culture within an interpretive framework to establish connections, namely, points of reference or departure between one's own and the target country. The limitations of this approach, however, cannot be overlooked. It has been argued that it can only furnish learners with cultural knowledge, while leaving them to their own devices to integrate that knowledge with the assumptions, beliefs, and mindsets already obtaining in their society.

The two perspectives or types of motivation explained above appear to presuppose that culture can be separated from language [especially, with instrumental perspective]. The assumption is that, culture is a concept that needs to be introduced into the language classroom and to the learner, and that the learner and the teacher have a choice as to whether or not cultural integration should be included in the syllabus.

However, within the notion of integrative motivation to language learning, it should be understood that language and culture are inextricably linked. Since people think in the culture of the language they speak, it is undisputable that educators need to move away from the question of inclusion or exclusion of culture in a foreign language curriculum. Instead, they should deliberate on the issues of immersion versus non-deliberate exposure to it.

More often than not, foreign language teaching brings in its fold a relationship between knowledge of a foreign language and knowledge of the culture from which that language originated. But in the equation, the question of “culture” is often relegated to the background of the foreign language curriculum or instructional plan. At best, it is either introduced as a bonus if the teacher manages to find time to introduce a bit of culture of foreign language into the classroom or if students/learners are lucky to spend some short time in a foreign country to immerse themselves in the culture of the country. The irony is that, this is just one class or one month! Sometimes, this problem occurs due to teachers’ insufficient knowledge of other cultures and different perceptions of or attitudes towards the foreign culture(s). Consequently, culture becomes a null or an evaded curriculum within the foreign language classroom.

“Linguo-cultural teaching”

Prior to considering teaching a foreign language, a relevant question that needs answer is, how can we incorporate culture into the foreign language curriculum? For teachers who are ready to teach foreign language, they are required, as a matter of professional urgency, to shed their own biases, reduce their prejudices and stereotypical mindset and assume the position of openness. Foreign language teachers should only try to show the way and to teach about culture rather than to posit a specific way of seeing things. That would be a corollary and ancillary to cultural and linguistic imperialism (Kramsch, 1993). Teachers must encourage students to be aware that there are no such things as superior and inferior cultures and that there are only differences among people within the target culture as well. Also, be mindful of the fact that a foreign language teacher is in the classroom to neither confirm the prejudices of their students nor attack their deeply held convictions. The teacher’s task is to stimulate students’ interest in the target culture, and to help establish the foreign language classroom ‘not so much as a place where language is taught, but as one where opportunities for learning various kinds are provided through the interactions that take place between participants. Furthermore, teachers should raise students’ awareness of their own culture, to provide them with some kind of metalanguage in order to talk about culture and to cultivate a degree of intellectual objectivity essential in cross-cultural analyses (Straub, 2009).

Undoubtedly, foreign language learning consists of several components including grammatical competence (some languages have adjectives before the noun while others have their adjectives after the noun – e.g. black chair [in English] versus “akonnwa tuntum” [in Akan language]); communicative competence (knowledge of the conventions, customs, beliefs, and systems of meaning of another country); language proficiency, as well as a change in attitudes towards one’s own or another culture. (Note: Language proficiency is the ability of an individual to speak or perform in an acquired language. Proficiency involves fluency, accuracy, competence and performance)

In keeping with the conversation, many believe that language without cultural relevance is useless. Yet, successfully teaching the cultural element in our foreign language classes remains elusive. It is a common knowledge that, in foreign language classes, teachers emphasize *listening, speaking, reading and writing* and only sometimes refer to culture as a fifth skill. The problem is that, while it may be generally accepted in the language teaching community that culture is an integral part of language instruction, there is little consensus on *what* and *how* we should teach it since culture is fluid and amorphous unlike vocabulary and grammar, which are concrete in their content. However, culture, as a skill in language learning, emphasizes the learner’s ability to perceive, to understand and ultimately, to accept cultural relativity.

We may consider the following objectives and concrete techniques and examples to explain the notion of cultural relativity in a foreign language instruction classroom:

First, we need to create a cultural island in a foreign language classroom where students would want to feel, touch, smell and see the foreign people and not just hear their language (Peck, 2008). As a cultural island, the emphasis will be on ‘cultural experience’ rather than ‘cultural awareness’ (Kramsch, 1993; Singhal, 1998; Peck, 2008). Consequently, teachers may bring into the classroom, posters, pictures, maps, and other artifacts in order to help students develop ‘mental image’ of the target culture

Second, a stimulating activity would be to send students on “cultural errands” – to the supermarkets and departmental stores- and have them write down the names of imported goods to familiarize themselves with things from other places and cultures. Teachers can also invite guest speakers to talk about their experiences of the foreign country.

Third, the teacher may divide the class into groups and have them draw up a list of those characteristics and traits that distinguish the home from the target culture. Such a list could include: music, race and national origin, geography, architecture, customs, arts and crafts, clothing, physical features, food, vocabulary, etc.

Based on the list above, once the major differences have been established, students can be introduced to some key words such as “marriage”, “civil union”, “death”, “gay”, “homosexuality”, etc. Students would then be assisted in taking an insider’s view of the connotations of these words and concepts. Thus, they can question their own assumptions and try to see the underlying significance of a particular term or word in the in the target language and culture. For example, in English culture, both animals and humans have feelings, get sick, and are buried in cemeteries and as well, they both take human pronouns. In Hispanic and African cultures, however, the distinction between humans and animals is so great and bullfighting and cockfighting is highly unlikely to be seen as a waste of time, as many western spectators are apt to say. Thus, notions such as “cruel”, “slaughter”, or “being defenseless” carry vastly different undertones in different cultures.

Students would also learn that language may vary according to social variables, such as sex, age, social class, location and the concomitant register should not go unnoticed. For example, students can be taught that there are certain words used more by women than men, and vice versa, and that there are also different dialects which may not enjoy equal adulation and prestige for example, Cockney as opposed to Received Pronunciation in England (Peck, 2008).

Cultural literacy or the lack thereof can affect how learners comprehend a foreign text. Hence, an amount of cultural background is required to “get what is going on in our everyday interaction. We may consider how language learners acquire knowledge that comes naturally to native speakers within the context of entertainment, at the restaurant, bus station, proposal to a fiancée, the significance and manner of giving flowers, love expression, informal expression, etc. For instance, consider the social act of giving flowers to a girlfriend. In different cultures, who should give flowers to whom? In what situation would one give flowers? What kinds of flowers are appropriate? Does the number of flowers have any significance? Should a statement accompany the giving of flowers?

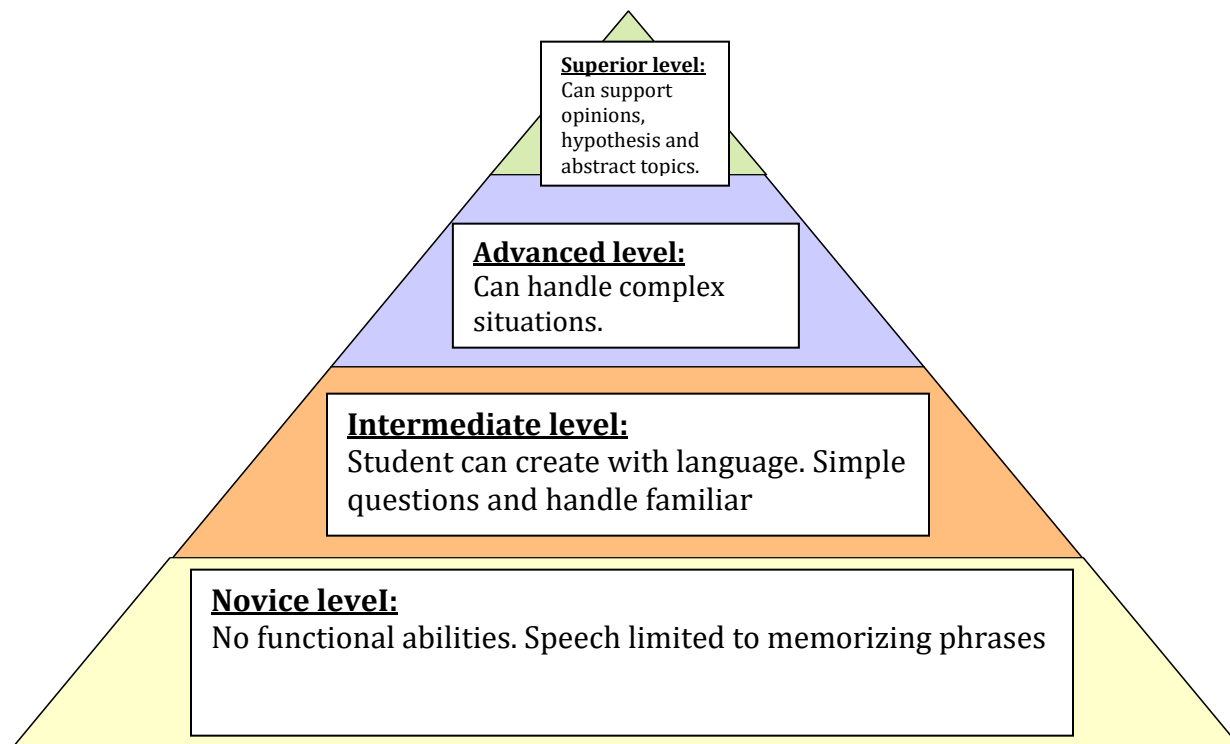
Again, alongside linguistic knowledge, students should familiarize themselves with different forms of non-verbal communication, such as gestures and facial expressions, typical in the target culture. This non-verbal communication cannot be taught within the structure of grammar and lexicon; they are cultural phenomena, and may lead to miscommunication and erroneous assumptions (Wierzbicka, 1999). An appropriate activity in this area would be handing out pictures showing gestures and then inviting students to discuss and answer questions related to the expressions. For example, which gestures are different from those in the home culture? Which of the gestures shown would be used in different situations or even avoided in the home culture?

With several words indicating emotions (happiness, fear, anger, joy, pain, guilt, and sadness) ask students to use facial expressions and gestures to express these emotions. Compare these with how different cultures express similar emotions. Another important concept is the introduction of “literacy culture”. This refers to phrases that have cultural context sometimes referred to as low culture duality. For example, the fastness with which the following questions are asked within the cultural context of America may confuse a foreign speaker: “for here or to go; cash or credit; credit or debit, paper or plastic”.

Students may speculate on the significance of various styles of clothing, the symbolic meaning of colors, gestures, facial expressions and the physical distance people unconsciously put between each other, and to show in what ways these non-verbal cues are similar to, or at variance with those of their culture (Straub, 2009).

Thus, culture as a fifth skill in language learning refers to the ability to perceive and recognize cultural differences. With reference to the question about giving flowers to a friend, we students may learn new perspectives and concepts like “oh! So that is how you are supposed to give flowers in Russia!” The ability to accept cultural differences such as “From now on, I must remember to give an odd number of flowers.” The ability to appreciate and value cultural differences as “Isn’t it interesting that the number of flowers holds significance!”

The Pyramid of foreign language learning



In order to prepare student of foreign language learning to appreciable and target level, educators and foreign language curriculum developers need to prepare students to move from the level of novice to advanced/superior level, which will be the equivalence of fully educated native speaker. This idea is graphically represented above as the pyramid of foreign language learning

Observed critically, we notice that the four level pyramid of language is filled up with grammar/vocabulary, amount of sociolinguistic information and tons of cultural information. That means we can move from novice to superior.

At the novice level, speech is limited to memorizing phrases. For example, “Hello! How are you? I am fine. Pleased to meet you. Yes. No. Thank you” (expressing the usual interaction)

At the intermediate level, learners can create language and ask simple questions and handle familiar situations or transactions. For example, “I like to order stake, I want it well done, I don’t like this one.”

At the advanced level, the learner can handle complex situations and finally, at the superior level, the learner can support opinion and hypothesis. He can also discuss abstract topics and handle linguistically unfamiliar situation.

We can deduce from our discussion that there are several practical ways to effectively teach culture alongside a language. The following may serve as sample methods to be considered by foreign language teachers:

First, **develop language learners into active learners** within the limited time frame of a standard university course. **Use the students as cultural resource.** Whenever the classroom is culturally and ethnically diverse, especially when there are exchange students from foreign cultures or returnees from an exchange program in the target culture, they can be invited to the classroom as expert sources and share authentic insights into the home and cultural life of native speakers of the language.

Secondly, **provide students with authentic materials and technology.** Make authentic video and other social media materials essential components of the interactive foreign language classroom. Use Internet resources to facilitate authentic contact with the foreign language (L2). Encourage direct interaction within virtual community of learners and native speakers by the use of pen pals, and emails to practice language. Watching films, news broadcasts or TV shows can provide students with ample information about non-verbal behavior such as the use of space, eye contact or gestures

Third, **use role-plays**. Simulating “real life” environment to facilitate acquisition of linguistic and non-linguistic elements (i.e. cultural elements of communication) especially supports students in making the shift in perspective from their own culture, which can become a strange one when looked at from the outside, while the target culture becomes more familiar. In the process, students practice speaking and using language in unpredictable situations.

Fourth, research **and use cultural artifacts/items**. Encourage learners to identify the cultural markers of these items that make them unique purveyors of cultural information. This kind of culture-specific information can easily be integrated into a more general lesson on the language.

For example, what are the cultural implications of a doll (in the Asante language), Buddha figurine (in the Chinese/Taiwanese language), the cross, colors, a driver’s license (in the United States), and national identity card (in Europe)? If foreign language learners know the meanings of the artifacts in the various cultures, they can use them appropriately.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, the premise of this paper has been supported by the examination of concepts and practical examples in language learning. It goes without saying that the teaching of culture should not just become an integral part of foreign instruction; instead, culture should be our message to students and language our medium (Peck, 2008). That is to say that, a basic competence in any specific language, with a minimum of cultural references will not only be of little value but can also lead to misunderstanding, culture shock, and even animosity among nations. It has also been established that knowing a second or foreign language should open windows on the target culture as well as on the world at large. As an example, speaking English or Taiwanese should give the learner the opportunity to see the world through “English or Taiwanese eyes”, without making him relinquish his own grip of reality and personal identity, but he can step back and evaluate both home and target cultures. It is now obvious that foreign language teachers should also be foreign culture teachers, with the ability to experience and analyze both home and target cultures. Thus, the teachers should convey cultural meaning and introduce students to a kind of learning which ‘challenges and modifies their perspective on the world and their cultural identity as members of a given social and national group’.

By and large, rather than being a fifth adjunct to the four skills (*listening, speaking, writing, and reading,*) of foreign language classroom, culture can best find expression and fluidity through the medium of literature, grammar and lexicon and become a viable component of any second language program. As our food for thought, the barrier to foreign language learning is motivation and that students are able to learn any foreign language if they are encouraged to have the passion, desire, motivation and the enthusiasm to like the literature and culture and people of the language.

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