

Culture, Identity and Foreign Language Teaching And Learning

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Abstract

Language, culture and identity are essentially connected. But, it often happens that in foreign language classrooms teachers give little attention to the identity of the student. A student enters the classroom with his own identity and culture. When learning a foreign language, it is necessary for the student to learn and understand the culture of the foreign language, too. This is where the problem arises of culture and identity influencing teaching and learning foreign languages. In general, students are representatives of the identity and culture of their first language and where they come from. In order for the student to learn the foreign language he must feel that he can express himself freely in the classroom. However, the students are likely to become confused when they are faced with the new culture of the foreign language. They now have to understand and adjust this to their sense of identity and their culture, and this can often lead to uncertainty. It can result in the student feeling unsure as to where they belong in the community.

The teacher needs to be aware of this issue and should include it to the method of teaching and resources used. The paper deals with the question of how the process of teaching and learning a foreign language affects the students' identity and sense of belonging to a community.

Keywords: foreign language, culture, identity

Culture refers to our way of life, including everything that is learned, shared, and passed from one generation to the next. Although culture endures over time, it is not static. Language, values, rules, beliefs are all part of one's culture. Culture is passed on from one generation to the next through the process of socialization. Although there are many aspects of everyday life that are shared by most members of society, there are different conceptions and definitions of culture within this general

approach. The dominant culture of a society refers to the main culture in a society, which is shared, or at least accepted without opposition, by the majority of people.

Identity is a process of identifying or non-identifying with a particular position in life and continually modifying this position and attitudes toward it (Crawshaw, 2001, p.101). It is about how individuals or groups see and define themselves, and how other individuals or groups see and define them. Identity is formed through the socialization process and the influence of social institutions like the family, the education system and the mass media. The concept of identity is an important one, as it is only through establishing our own identities and learning about the identities of other individuals and groups that we come to know what makes us similar to some people and different from others, and therefore form social connections with them. The identity of individuals and groups involves both elements of personal choice and the responses and attitudes of others. Individuals are not free to adopt any identity they like, and factors like their social class, their ethnic group and their sex are likely to influence how others see them. The identity that an individual wants to assert and which they may wish others to see them having may not be the one that others accept or recognise.

Often, in foreign language classrooms, the teacher or curriculum pays little or no attention to identity of the student. A student enters the classroom with his own identity and culture. When learning a foreign language, it is necessary for the student to learn the culture of the foreign language, too (Spackman, 2009, p.2). This is where the question of culture and identity influencing foreign language acquisition happens. In many ways students are representatives of the identity and culture of their first language and where they come from.

In order for the students to learn the foreign language, they must feel that they are comfortable in the classroom and can express themselves freely. However, they tend to become confused when they are faced with the new culture of the foreign language. What they often try to do is to adapt that new culture, in their sense of their identity and their culture and this often leads to uncertainty. Additionally, it results in the students feeling unsure as to where they belong in the community.

Culture and Foreign Language Learning

Language is something that people do in their daily lives and something they use to express, create and interpret meanings and to establish and maintain social and interpersonal relationships. This understanding of language sees language not simply as a body of knowledge to be learnt, but as a social practice in which to participate (Kramsch, 1993). It is not enough for language learners just to know grammar and

vocabulary. They also need to know how that language is used to create and represent meanings and how to communicate with others and to engage with the communication of others. This requires the development of awareness of the nature of language and its impact on the world (Svalberg, 2007). The role of language in learning cannot be over-emphasised. Language is the prime resource teachers have and use for mediating learning. When learning languages, then, teachers and students are working with language simultaneously as an object of study and as a medium for learning. In teaching languages, the target language is not simply a new code – new labels for the same concepts; rather, when it is effectively taught, the new language and culture being learned offer the opportunity for learning new concepts and new ways of understanding the world.

Gunderson suitably describes language and culture: “Language and culture are inextricably linked. Unlike the Gordian knot, nothing comes from separating them because they have little or no meaning apart from each other. And English has become a world language, one that dominates business and science. In many respects it is hegemonic. To participate in the world economy and to benefit from the advances of science, it is believed, one must know English” (Gunderson, 2000, p.694). It is suggested that social class can also affect identity in language learners. This is due to a particular aspect such as financial matters. For instance, if a language learner does not have similar financial access, he will be somewhat left out or feel like an outsider to an extent. He will feel that he is not socially equal to his co-learners. Another aspect affecting identity may be the personal abilities of the student. A personal ability is the competence to do something well. Those two factors can harm the students' sense of belonging to a community (identity) and perhaps obstruct their learning. "Although identity is conditioned by social interaction and social structures, it conditions social interaction and social structures at the same time. It is, in short, constitutive of and constituted by the social environment" (Block, 2007, p. 866).

On the other hand, being successful in school means that students must "surrender great parts of their language and culture" and that "culture is part of identity, and identity relates to how well a student does in school and in society" (Gunderson, 2000, p. 693). There are several factors to think about within culture, identity and language that indicate how they are mutually connected. This is due to the country and its people uniting through language. It is implied that language is a way of expressing one's culture and identity, among other things.

An approach to language teaching that has intercultural language learning at its heart involves developing with students an understanding of their own culture, and the recognition of the same in others. It also involves understanding the way in which this recognition influences the process of communication within their own language

and culture, and across languages and cultures. Through intercultural language learning, students engage with and learn to understand and interpret human communication and interaction in increasingly sophisticated ways. They do so both as participants in communication and as observers who notice, describe, analyse and interpret ideas, experiences and feelings shared when communicating with others. In doing so, they engage with interpreting their own and the meanings of others, with each one's experience of participation and reflection leading to a greater awareness of self in relation to others. The ongoing interactive exchange of meanings, and the reflection on both, the meanings exchanged and the process of interaction is an integral part of life in our world. As such, intercultural language learning is best understood not as something to be added to teaching and learning but rather something that is integral to the interactions that already takes place in the classroom and beyond.

Identity and Second Language Acquisition

More often than not, the identity and culture of the first language are quite different from the culture of the foreign language. This may lead to the students' identity changing or leaving them feeling lonely and isolated. Some teachers are not aware of this effect and thus make the problem even bigger. The curriculum contains cultural components and the teacher transmits this either wittingly or not. Learning a foreign language will theoretically demand the learner to adapt his/her values and behaviour (Jund, 2010). This implies that there is a strong connection between the language and culture and that it is represented in the culture of the speakers. It includes aspects such as beliefs, values and needs.

The sociolinguistic aspect of communication refers to the attributes of speech, which rely on social, pragmatic, and cultural elements. This is notable, as language and interaction might depend on the social status of the speaker or hearer, as well as on social factors. It is essential to develop an awareness of socio-cultural and sociolinguistic differences between the first language of the student and foreign language. Such awareness may help both the teacher and the student understand issues of accidental failure and difficulties of communication (Cakir, 2006, p.158). Additionally, it may result in the discovery of a suitable solution. When individuals face new social cultures, they find that their sense of identity is weakened and that they suffer and are somewhat confused until a balance is reached. A transformational phase happens in the identity of the learner. It is a notion regarding identity and the essential idea that it revolves around is uncertainty. The feeling of uncertainty comes from being a part of something and feeling apart from it. It is at the same time confirmation and withdrawal of these feelings. This issue is important as it can create

an uncomfortable, unconfident learner, or if developed in the classroom, may result in a 'positive', well-balanced identity in a foreign language learner.

The classroom environment can play a crucial part in the development of a learner's foreign language identity. This idea focuses on the learner as an active participant in the language learning process, and by extension, identity construction (Van Lier, 2008). Identity construction happens whenever learners are cognitively, emotionally and physically engaged. Learners begin to understand the complexities of their own language through classroom study of the target language. They also begin to select and use functional language that supports their new communicative needs. The process of integrating a new language into one's cognitive and psychological base requires time.

Although the foreign language classroom defines a boundary between itself and the target language community, learner interactions within this context still influence the development of their foreign language identity. The classroom itself is a rich environment where learners display evidence of academic and social orientations. Whether interested in earning a particular grade or preparing for interactions in the target culture, identity work is part of the foreign language classroom. So, the acquisition process is dialectical. The learner discovers, deconstructs and analyzes both the first and the foreign language at the same time.

It can be said that most students learn a foreign language thinking about it as an advantage that will allow them to fit in and access certain parts of the community to which they wish to belong. This reflects on the practices of language teaching. In the process of learning a language, language is a method by which one can express himself and his identity. It is also a means to challenge this socially constructed identity, and express the learner's prejudices. Regarding language learning, it is important to take into consideration and understand how language is "constructive of social formations, communities, and individual identities" (Luke, 1996, p.9). This emphasises the importance of language learning when a student is trying to construct an identity while at the same time being influenced by external factors such as society and culture.

McCarthy, Fischer & Penny conclude that it is crucial for teachers to realise and begin to discuss the issue of "cultural identity, cultural difference, and cultural community" (McCarthy, 2003, p.445). In the meantime, it is crucial for curriculum to develop and become more effective, as well as to construct forms of instructional practice that accommodate and reflect images of self among foreign language learners. This should begin with the realisation and acceptance that the students' multilingual and multicultural backgrounds are important and admired as a necessary instrument of learning. Moreover, it may even include new abilities to understand

what the curriculum should provide. As a suggestion, the role of the school in this context is to help, adapt and adjust the student population differences during the learning process. It should concentrate on using the learners' needs, motivation and affinities, among other things.

Conclusion

For meaningful and successful communication, students need to be aware of both the subtle and obvious differences that exist between their first and foreign cultures. The importance of interpreting speech styles and speech acts appropriately to communicate effectively is a critical component of foreign language teaching and learning. Confusion related to the appropriate and correct interpretation of speech styles and speech acts in the foreign language can arise from differences between their native language and the language they are learning.

Language-learner identity is socially and individually constructed. Learners place themselves in relation to the situation at hand and take an active role in seeing themselves and others around them. Identity work happens during the process of language acquisition, no matter what the context. Language develops along with cognitive and emotional development (Granger, 2004), and learning a foreign language gives learners a new sense of who they are and their place in the world. Various contexts provide models for learners to imitate, and, if they choose, appropriate. The informal meetings language learners have with other learners, whether they be experts or novices, help them to control their own linguistic development, evaluate their communicative competence and (re)define their identity within the context.

Our understanding of sociolinguistics has influenced our thinking about the way we teach a foreign language by emphasising the importance of knowing the relationship and the purpose of the exchange between speakers (Canale, 1983; Bachman, 1989) As teachers, we need to value not only our students' native culture and language, but also how and why their educational background might influence their foreign language interpretation, acquisition, and production. Teachers need to consider the social and affective aspects of learning and using a foreign language. When this happens, new and better ways for students to relate to foreign language learning may be provided.

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