
Socio Cultural and Linguistic Incompatibility and Significance of Culture in Second Language Teaching

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Abstract

The relationship between culture and language has been known to the researchers. But, this relationship became more prominent and used extensively during language research in the 1990s with the turn and advent of modern linguistics. Since then specific attention was paid to this relationship even though studies on culture date back to antiquity. (Brooks, 1975). If this relationship between language and culture is not properly handled in the class room, there will be lot of cultural incompatibility during communication. Demen's work (1987) approached the influence of culture on interaction and communication. She urges the language teachers to become the ethnographers of their own student's culture to provide insights into learner knowledge and expectations. Allen (1985) says that the goal of having culture syllabus is not to force the students to change their cultural identity but it is to enable them understand the complexity of culture and that is demonstrated in every way of life. From the above works and from the experience of the second language teachers it is clear that in order to have effective communication and to avoid communicative incompatibility, it is inevitable to include culture teaching in the language classes. This paper deals with some of the problems faced by the mother tongue speakers of Tamil while learning Malayalam as the second language in India. Also, this paper tries to give some suggestions to the teachers to teach culture in a class room.

Introduction

The aim of language teaching is to communicate effectively in the target language. It is a known and accepted phenomenon that language and culture

are inseparable. This relationship became more prominent and used extensively during language research in the 1990s with the turn and advent of modern linguistics. Since then specific attention was paid to this relationship even though studies on culture date back to antiquity (Brooks, 1975). According to Brooks (1964) the cultural patterns are learned by the mother tongue speakers very early in their lives and they are well beneath the threshold of awareness in the thoughts of native speakers. But, the second language learners have to learn these cultural uses as they learn the grammar of the language concerned. If this is not properly handled in the class room, there will be lot of cultural incompatibility during communication. Allen (1985) says that the goal of having culture syllabus is not to force the students to change their cultural identity but it is to enable them to understand the complexity of culture and that is demonstrated in every way of life. From the above works it is clear that in order to have effective communication and to avoid communicative incompatibility, it is inevitable to include culture in language class. This paper deals with the problems related to cultural incompatibility while learning Malayalam by a Tamil speaker in an Indian context. Both Tamil and Malayalam are spoken in Southern India and are classified under Dravidian Languages.

Methodology and design of this research

In this short research, purposive sampling techniques were used to select research participants for the study. Purposive sampling involves the researcher targeting participants most closely related to the topic of research in this case, the selection of participants required representative duties for their community of teachers. This is frequently used as a qualitative approach to gather participants (Huberner, 1959; Richards & Lockhart, 1996.) since these techniques allow the selection of the best, most optimal examples of the phenomenon.

The sample population (participants) in this research work comprised of school students who were doing their 10th standard with Tamil as their mother tongue and have taken Malayalam as the second language. The linguistic expositions of the students while they were interacting with the Malayalam speakers which include their lecturers, peers etc. were observed, surveyed in order to find out their performance. Also, the text books too were critically examined for the cultural elements in the text books. Several researchers have studied the importance of culture in foreign language learning, teaching situations. Seelye (1994) notes that leaving a foreign language in isolation of its cultural roots prevents from becoming socialized

into its contextual use. Seelye (1974) elsewhere emphasizes the concept above by noting that words in isolation from their relevant cultural context have no meaning. The meaning of the word or string of words can be really found in its everyday use, and learning a language is meant to equip the learner with a powerful tool to construct a new culture. Thus what a language learner is expected to do is to know how to decode the linguistic components which can best suit a situation which requires a cultural awareness. Crawford Lange and Lange (1984) stress that studying and learning another language along with studying the culture of native speakers is a lifeless endeavor; moreover, proficiency in a language relies on awareness of its sociolinguistic and cultural context (Spinelli, 1997) because the target followed in proficiency is to enable students to function properly and appropriately in the target language as well as to be able to discuss their personal experience in the native culture. Socio-linguistically speaking language is a medium to transmit ideas and through ideas the culture (Morain, 1983). Seelye (1994) strongly acknowledges that many awkward mistakes that language learners make could be avoided by the inclusion of cultural connotations of the linguistic units.

Text Books and Class Room Teaching

Although text books are the main source of cultural information, they remain insufficient, and need to be enriched by supplementary material. No doubt teaching culture seems to be more subtle of curricular goals for: 1. culture is hard to define 2. it is difficult to define cultural knowledge, and 3. learning a language does not guarantee learning culture which is vast, subjective, subtle and unpredictable. Researchers have discussed numerous difficulties teachers encounter in teaching culture (Heusinkveld, 1997, Seelye, 1994). Heusinkveld further explains that teacher cannot teach culture from textbooks alone. It is imperative, that teachers bring their own real-life cultural experiences to the classroom. Students need to see that language and culture are intertwined. When we look into the text books of Malayalam, most of the text books are well equipped with properly designed lessons and exercises but what is lacking is the culture bound usages of terms in the target language. There are several cultural asymmetries exist in the school system which have several reasons. One significant point to mention here will be that in Indian school situation the second language teachers often teach the structure and sometimes artificial discourse patterns printed in the text books. There is no culturally oriented discourse throughout the teaching process. While discussing about the cultural discourses in class

rooms, Johnson (2000) mentions that “most discourses of education proceed as though they are either compatible with or hostile to life outside of school but not as though they must strive to be well integrated into daily life as lived” The reason for this can be attributed to the existing syllabus and text book too. Apart from this one can question the teaching methodologies also. While looking into the text books there are no culturally loaded words in the text books and their contextual use. Unless and until culturally significant words and their traditional usage for effective communication are not explicitly exhibited in the second language class rooms, there will be always gap in adopting appropriate communicative strategies by the second language learners. Bernstein (1990) while discussing about the traditions in language use mentions that the teaching and practicing the culturally loaded words in the class room can be termed as invisible pedagogies. This concept has been used and practiced by some of the scholars who are concentrating their research in discourse and schooling (Cazden, 1994). But, in most of the cases it is not followed.

The following example may be considered to see the structural acceptance and sociolinguistic intolerance in the use of second person honorific pronoun by a mother tongue speaker of Tamil while learning Malayalam as the second language. The second person honorific pronoun in Malayalam is **ningngaL**. The second person honorific pronoun in Tamil is also **ningngaL**. In these two forms there are no structural differences. But, there is difference while using these pronouns in a natural environment. For instance, in Tamil this pronoun is used in any situation when the speaker prefers to give respect to the hearer. Whereas, in Malayalam this pronoun cannot be used directly to a person who is superior in age, education and belong to higher socio economic status than the person who uses the term. This is culturally not acceptable though this pronoun has an inherent respect in it. In such environment the use of this pronoun **ningngaL** is not accepted and in most of the cases it is considered as ill mannered. The term used in such environments will be **thaanggaL** or the speaker will not use any address term which means the sentence goes without a pronoun. Comprehension will be through linguistic environment. If this socio cultural interactive rule is not adhered to, the hearer will be offended. It is surprising to note that none of the text books talk about this type of language use which has cultural implications. In the absence of such clear instructions the second language learners have lot of problems during interactions.

Another example is the use of the word **puLLI**. This word both in Tamil and in Malayalam gives same meaning. That is, it refers to a **dot** (the punctuation mark **dot** we put to mark the finiteness of the sentence). Though

there is a semantic similarity between these two words in two different languages, it has differential sociolinguistic functions. The functional difference is that in Malayalam the word **puLLi** in a social context while two persons are interacting with one another, it is used to address a person who is equal to the speaker in status or sometimes it refers to a superior also.

- (e.g.) (1) avıDa nikkunna aa **puLLi** enRe accanaaNu
‘the person who is standing over there is my father’
(2) aa **puLLi** enRe kuuTTukaaranaaNu
‘that person is my friend’
(3) iı **puLLi** avanRe aniyan
‘this person is his younger brother’

Though the basic meaning of the word **puLLi** is **dot** in Malayalam, the above three sentences are culturally accepted in the Malayalam language speaking environment. This is because in this environment the meaning of **puLLi** will be a **person**. But, in Tamil this word has only one meaning that is a **dot**. Subsequently, in this case the incompatibility will be that when the Malayalam speaker addresses a Tamil speaker as **PuLLi** the latter gets offended by this address term.

Some of these examples show that the linguistic competence proposed by Chomsky (1965) in many interactive situations is insufficient for meaningful language learning. Del Hymes (1972) proposed the concept of communicative competence in which he emphasized that our linguistic knowledge does not guarantee the ability to communicate effectively in a target language. Hyme’s notion is that grammatical competence is one component of the overall knowledge of the native speakers. He points out that besides grammatical competence, communicative competence encompasses sociolinguistic and contextual competence which has cultural attestation. This is very significant and vital for a second language learner. While preparing the second language text books and exercises one should have this as one of its objectives. Teaching methodologies should always take into consideration at every level the sociolinguistic competence in addition to linguistic competence. In order to inculcate the above competencies the teacher should also need to have proper understanding about the target culture. In late 1990s the focus of foreign language teaching tried to find out its own way to develop intercultural competence among second language learners. Nonetheless the model of six competencies for a second language teacher and development of these competencies (Byram,

1988 10) got highlighted and started to get emphasized (Byram, M, 1997), the competencies are as follows.

- Linguistic competence
- Sociolinguistic competence
- Discourse competence
- Strategic competence
- Socio-cultural competence
- Social competence

It is important to take the above mentioned parameters while preparing the text books with an objective of teaching a second language. In addition to that while teaching the language the teachers too should adopt his/her own methodologies to achieve the goal.

Second Language Teaching and the role of the Teacher

- Teachers need to be familiar with modes of talking about culture. Indicative and initiative steps may successfully begin with geography or history and continue with micro-social life.
- Teachers can evaluate their own personal potentials, experiences, and learning in using the cultural aspects efficiently in the classroom. Storytelling and anecdotes present a high profile of culture and can make students follow the lack and solve the problems raised by the story teller.
- Teachers can stabilize contrasts and comparisons. Cultural elements may apparently be the same but with a very different meaning; especially gestures are at times very confusing.
- Teachers should focus on the process of culture learning by introducing activities that seek to explore the cultural identity and to develop cultural awareness.
- Teachers as they might be doing so in linguistic area need to take the time to prepare cultural awareness.
- Teachers should first evaluate the profile of the class room. Sometimes it might not even let the teacher think of giving a lecture, or playing a movie.
- Teachers had better give students the elements rich in content to be discussed.
- Teachers should get students involved in the cultural activities by establishing panels and student gatherings.

- Teachers can take culture into their classes through. cultural assimilators, culture capsules, culture clusters, audio motor units, cultural mini dramas, learning activity packages, field work, geographical and historical prompts, ethnographic approaches, media and bringing up as many good topics as possible in the classroom.
- Teachers can also compare and contrast home culture with the foreign culture.

Conclusion

Having observed the significance of culture in second language teaching it can be asserted that most methodologies with which language educators are familiar focus on the development of language skills and do not address the teaching of culture per se. Historically, when culture issues were addressed, they frequently concentrated on great literature, history, or geography and were designed to broaden students' liberal arts background. Sociolinguistic issues became more important with the introduction of communicative approaches to language teaching. Today teachers, parents, and syllabi alike assert that an important goal of studying other languages and cultures is to emphasize learning about other peoples' way of life. Still some laymen assume that language study itself will automatically lead to cross-cultural understanding and, by extension, to world peace (Robinson-Stuart & Nocon, 1996). Research does not bear out this supposition. Although favorable attitudes toward the target culture are positively associated with language acquisition (Schumann, 1978), research does not find the reverse to be true: language study alone does not appear to promote positive attitude towards the target culture and its people (Robinson-Stuart & Nocon, 1996). In fact, studies have found that other language study has no positive effect on the attitude of the speakers of L2 (Nocon, 1991) and in some cases, the attitudes are more negative after a semester of language study (Mantle-Bromley & Miller, 1991). Apparently this is because without specific instruction in seeking similarities between the native and target cultures, students fail to develop empathy for the native speakers of the language they are learning. This can be avoided if the students are made to feel through the language teaching and the text book based culture teaching that they are also a part of the other language culture.

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