

The Cultural Element In Second Language Teaching

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Abstract

Second language teaching usually neglects covering the teaching and testing of linguistic cultural aspects. Here it is argued that second language teachers should teach paralinguistic behavior as well. Among very important issues related to language are: greetings (including handshaking) paralinguistic behavior such as hand signals and beckoning, and manners (bowing, interacting with others, etc.) The foreign language student needs to learn not only the grammar, vocabulary, history, geography and culture of the target language, but also the paralinguistic behavior illustrated often by the body language characteristic to specific cultures.

Keywords: paralinguistic, culture, gestures, manners, etiquette

As for the teaching of kinetic behavior, it is evident that videos would be the best way to bring this important facet into the classroom. Neither photographs nor drawings portray the whole kinetic range of an action for which they must always be supplemented by detailed explanations. If drawings are used they should always include facial expressions as well. With respect to the testing of kinesics, every student should ideally be able not only to identify cultural contrasts, but also to act them out. Finally, the evaluation of culture must be part of formal testing in the same way as the other aspects of language. Objective multiple choice tests of the type outlined by Seeley are a good means of evaluating cultural competence. And for a deep understanding of a specifically important cultural concept, a composition or a short essay on the subject could be required. Nevertheless, an essay should probably be restricted only to very advanced students of the language, as in the case of candidates for a Master's in second language teaching, for instance.

It is hoped that the present tendency for communication will allow us to incorporate those useful concepts that anthropology, psychology, and sociology have to offer to the language teaching profession. For if communication is wanted and not simply passive knowledge, language has to be presented with its pertinent cultural denotations.

cultural concepts. As an example, Kramersch mentions the American “ open door ” vs. the German “ close door ” office policies. The instructor lists a series of cultural information where, for instance, one finds that having doors open in public places shows friendliness whereas the tendency of keeping doors closed in Germany denotes order. Through general discussion or brainstorming, the students are guided to see the positive sides of both constructs by examining the differences not only from their native perspective, but also from the other side of the fence. Thus the German speaker will have to try judging the American open door custom not in the light of the German close door behavior, but as an independent event that fits in the society where it is practiced. As Kramersch puts it, “ Real cultural understanding is precisely this ability to step in someone else's shoes or, as Kelly calls it, ‘rotate the axes of one's thinking’ without losing one's own cultural identity. ” (1983:445)

Construction of experience. Exercise in dichotomous thinking (Kramersch 1983:444).

	United States	Germany
Cultural event	OPEN DOORS	CLOSED DOORS
Meaning (value)	friendliness	order
Constructs:	friendly vs. don't like you	order vs. disorganized
What does this value mean to you?	trust you vs. exclude you	in control vs. chaotic structured vs. amateur professional vs. not serious
Range of convenience (what other examples of this American value? of this German value?)	no hedges glass doors smile informal parties “call me Bill” “dear friend”	hedges and fences full doors handshake role of hostess at parties “Sie, ”“Frau Doktor, ” “Herr X, ”“Sehr geehrter Herr”
Superordinate construct (what do all these examples have in common?)	open to all/public vs. private	official/professional vs. private
Common aspect (where is the emphasis in both cases?)	person in community	individual in society

for instance, may involve misunderstanding and negative reactions. A good-bye sign in Spain—palm up with fingers moving back and forth—might be mistaken by foreigners as a beckoning sign. For, it should be pointed, the polite way to call somebody in Spain is done by moving one's fingers with the palm of the hand facing down. A palm up forefinger beckoning, as used in North America is regarded as an extremely rude gesture in Spain.

Manners

Etiquette or manners are neither universal nor language specific either. Across the strata of a given society, we find different restrictions and prescriptive formulas of behavior. The language student must learn the etiquette of his target language along with its cultural variations. Care should be taken to instruct the students on the behavioral expectations of their target language. Stretching in public, slipping off one's shoes in a university library or putting one's feet on a bench or on a desk may be informally accepted in the United States or Canada, but it is frowned upon, to say the least, in Latin America, among other places. In most societies any public display of behavior that contravenes the expected native standards is generally condemned and usually repressed regardless of the national origin or the innocence of the perpetrator.

Methodology and Testing

Lado suggested a useful and simple way to attest the validity of judgments. A good way to gather information is done by asking native speakers whether a specific way of behavior would be considered by them normal or anomalous. In doing this, one will have to allow for urban, rural, religious and other variations within the same culture. Kramsch has proposed the use of the theory of “ personal constructs ” from the psychologist George A. Kelly for the teaching of cultural concepts in language. Kelly's main contention is that people are psychologically conditioned in their behavior by the way they anticipate events. Therefore, when we are confronted with a foreign culture we will tend to expect a development of facts according to our “ canalized ” thoughts. Kelly's personal construct grids are taken by Kramsch and are applied to the discussion of

equal return of the positive-neutral pressure normally offered even to doubtful strangers.

Aside the aforementioned standard, the language student must also learn those sociological variations with which he might come into contact. Thus in the United States one finds the “ soul ” or “ hip ” greeting. The main version of it consists of grasping each other's hands and interlocking the thumbs. Many antagonistic socio-cultural barriers are demolished when an individual yields to that form of greeting in the same way as if he would adapt to the dialect or register of the group with which he is interacting.

Paralinguistic Behavior

“ A nod is as good as a wink. ” – English proverb

In teaching second language students we customarily take care to point out those taboo words or dialectal variations that can be offensive. Thus we inform ESL students about the dichotomy between cock vs. rooster and ass vs. donkey, the first synonyms are widely used in the United Kingdom while they are shunned in North America for carrying an obscene meaning. Few language programs or teachers, however, cover those paralinguistic variables that are so heavily laden with meaning. Why not provide our students as well with equally detailed semiotic information? It is not advisable as Allen proposes “ to experience the situations ” and learn from them (1969:326). This cultural “ direct method ” may work out in some cases, but it may also foster misconceptions and unnecessary cultural shocks that could be avoided with appropriate pedagogic materials and a competent instructor. Some major contributions to this field are: Saitz and Cervenka (1972), Green (1968), Efron (1972), Barakat (1973) and Axtell (1997). For a good review of the first three books see Poyatos (1975). Birdwhistell, a pioneer in the study of paralinguistic phenomena stated that there are no universal bodies or facial expressions when it comes to the definition of social meaning. The palm-back V sign for victory popularized in Great Britain by Winston Churchill won acceptance in many parts of the world but in some countries it is interpreted as the sign for number two, while in Great Britain itself, as in Australia, it turns into an obscene insult if the back of the hand is rotated to face outwards. A circle made with the thumb and forefinger of one hand is an obscene sign in Brazil, but it expresses approval among Anglo-Americans. Beckoning,

cultural range in which those greetings occur and the expected replies. Obviously, such demand might lead us to wonder what degree of cultural behavior is expected from second language speakers or, for that matter, from any person functioning in an alien culture. What will happen if a westerner, raised in an egalitarian society where the relationship student-teacher is conducted on informal bases, finds awkward the act of bowing to the teacher before and after classes in his exchange college in Japan? Or should an American during his business trip to Jordan refuse to greet his clients by placing the palm of his right hand on his chest after shaking hands, when, if at home, he would only do that as a patriotic gesture, as when pledging allegiance to the flag? This dilemma has to be answered by the foreigner himself. In doing that, he must ponder that behavior that can be considered as offensive or demeaning in one culture can, on the other hand, be not only acceptable, but even desirable in another. A second language speaker who does not master the sociolinguistic nature of the language can be regarded as a native child who knows how to speak but who has not yet learned his manners. To illustrate the point and perhaps to facilitate the answer, we will consider the opposite situation, that of Japanese and Arab students living in western countries. Not only will they have to quit the bowing or the hand on the chest salutations, respectively, lest they might be regarded as servile or exaggerated in their behavior, but they will also have to adjust to the distinct ways of greeting and handshaking, which vary in many details in different western cultures. The handshake, for example, differs considerably in its kinetic range in some western countries. The French clasp and pumping is more vigorous than the English one and stops abruptly after one shake (Brault, 1963:381). The Anglo-American standard handshake has been explained in detail by Brosnahan (1979:79):

The positive-neutral pressure zone communicates, to a native English-speaking adult male, sincerity, self-confidence, openness, approval of the alter, pleasure in the meeting, and respect for both ego and alter. The too-much pressure zone, identified informally as a bone-crusher, knuckle-buster, hand wrestling et al., is perceived as excessive, disrespectful, domineering, egotistical, and physically challenging, and it occasionally leads to fights... The too-little pressure zone—probably the commonest failure of handshake heparics among both native and non-native English speakers—communicates dislike, weakness, timidity, unwillingness, and lack of confidence in self and of respect for the alter. At worst, it communicates insult since, like the too-little position, it constitutes less than

observing and adjusting to new situations as they arise. These two tenets, however, are impractical as we shall see. To begin with, few language teachers at the high school level and even those who hold positions in universities are familiar with the slippery concept of behavioral culture and cannot formally teach it, limiting themselves to the occasional digressions in which anecdotal accounts of personal experiences are told to add some spice to the routine of language teaching. We should also point out that even native speaking teachers tend to be unaware of cultural contrasts unless they have been trained for that purpose, in the same way as a native speaker who has not received any linguistic instruction cannot explain the phonological or syntactic rules of his language. As for the second assumption that relies on the capacity of observation of the unsophisticated second language speaker for the acquisition of behavioral competence, it is not difficult to realize how dangerous is to “do as the Romans do,” especially when the “Romans” may have strict restrictions of behavior that are not apparent superficially or that do not apply to everybody indiscriminately. It is for these reasons, therefore, that an appeal for the inclusion of behavioral culture in the second language curriculum is made here.

Greetings

It is primordial that the second language be taught within its contextual cultural implications since the early stages in which the first words and customary greetings are introduced. Such commonplace items like “how are you?” require more information than the simple translation from the target language into the native one. The fact that “how are you?” as a salutation does not intend the elicitation of a full explanatory answer concerning one's health or emotional feelings at the moment should be made clear to ESL language students. Another illustrative example of cultural contrast in greetings come to us from Mandarin Chinese. In this language it is customary to greet one another by asking “chù nǎ: lǐ?” which translates into English as “where are you going?” The answer is normally a vague remark like “up there,” “home,” “to work,” etc., for this greeting is usually said on the move and one only has time to utter a few words at best. Likewise, in Taiwanese one may ask “tjia ba bue?” literally meaning “have you eaten yet?” Nevertheless, the context should be taken as a greeting, not as a question regarding whether one has actually eaten. Thus, when introducing these salutations in class, the language teacher should also discuss, inasmuch as possible, the

Introduction

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This paper deals with the teaching of culture within the framework of second language instruction. It is suggested that cultural aspects carrying essential meaning should be explained within their linguistic context at the outset of any language program. Special emphasis will be given to potentially offensive situations in intercultural linguistic and paralinguistic misunderstandings, and the methodology will be reviewed.

As more and more language educators recognize the important role that effective communication plays on the development of second language learning, an awareness of the evident gap that exists between language and the conveyance of meaning across cultures has developed among the professionals in the last decades. The most recent trends have pointed towards an emphasis on communication with the inclusion of situational programs in which language is treated as divisible parts that can be arranged and patterned into independent modules planned for communicational goals; therefore, sociolinguistic concepts such as slang, argot, and register have entered the language teaching scene as new remedies for the decentralization of the traditional method and for the practical application of courses that meet individual needs or fancies. Consequently, next to the traditional courses in languages, we find today “ situational packages ” of the same languages for waiters, commercial flight attendants, police, medical doctors and nurses, or firefighters. These situational courses, however, although helpful because of their socio-cultural scope and aims, fail roundly to provide beginners with the necessary tools for an overall communication.

Some efforts have been made in recent years to incorporate cultural behavior concepts in the formal teaching of modern languages in the classroom. Some cultural accounts found in textbooks refer to customs and celebrations and the readings are followed by questions based on the lessons. However, many of these readings contain the usual deficiencies traditionally found in most textbooks: neglect of behavioral information with almost an exclusive concentration on historical and geographical aspects. Some authors suggest that through traveling and corresponding with native speakers we can overcome generalizations. This is, nevertheless, not a viable solution, since the majority of language learners without formal guidance will develop, at most, a tourist like feeling of cultural contrast. Generally, it is implicitly assumed that the language teacher will supplement his lessons with the pertinent cultural comments in an ad hoc basis and that the students will learn how to function in the society of their second language by

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