

Language Teaching: an Intercultural Model

Shashikant R. Mhalunkar

Dept. of English, B.N.N. College, Bhiwandi Dist. Thane, Maharashtra, India

Abstract

Language learning and culture are closely linked. Since language is a code that involves social and cultural practices of interpretation and making meaning, the way a language is taught also reflects the way the users of the language understand it. Further, a language classroom is a cultural context where the cultural of the teacher, the students and the target language blend and clash. Hence, it is imperative to understand the culture of a language before designing a teaching curriculum in it.

This paper is an attempt to explore how language learning is conditioned by the culture embedded in communication system. It also investigates how language learning depends upon factors such as variability, diversity, intercultural practices and dynamic process of active engagement with cultural codes.

The paper also highlights the shift from linguistic to intercultural mode of language training. Teachers as social and cultural beings have constructive roles in language classroom, and the use of materials such as fiction and films in language instruction also involves intercultural strategies. The paper also examines the socio-cultural aspect of mental activity in the context of language learning. Language acquisition through cultural participation is also in the focus of this paper.

KEYWORDS: intercultural, IcLL, language teaching

Language and culture are intricately connected. It is impossible to understand a culture without having some idea of its language. Conversely, it is not possible to understand a language without having a fair idea of the culture in which it is embedded. Not only are the linguistic situations cultural but also multicultural and intercultural. Further, language competence is not merely about the knowledge of grammatical principles and syntax but rather involves cognitive processes that are rooted in social and cultural contexts. Language teaching has to have in focus the idea of culture-specific meanings that linguistic categories produce. For instance, lexical units of English can produce culture-specific associations when used in India. A word like 'owl' has a specific Indian cultural connection which is not encoded in the British use of the word. Similar semantic spillover can be seen in words such as 'cow', 'ox', 'dog' and 'snake'. A teacher taking such linguistic categories into a classroom has to be aware of the intercultural context. It is therefore imperative for the language teachers to keep in mind that the acquisition of language competency in English in India depends on the cultural aspect of meaning.

Differences in cultural background both impede and enhance the semantic aspect of second language acquisition. Different language cultures often create varied meanings of certain phrases. For instance, the expression 'a good day' implies 'a sunny day' in English culture while in many African cultures it implies 'a rainy day'.

The fact that social practices are involved in the interpretation and making of meanings also impacts language teaching since teaching of a language is also a reflection

of the way one understands language. Language is both a code and a social practice and this perspective is different from the traditional view that language is merely a code. Modern understanding of language as an open, dynamic, energetic and constantly evolving phenomenon accommodates further complexities of cultural and communicative situations. This premise also implies that it is not enough for the language learner to know merely grammar and vocabulary. Both the trainers and learners need the awareness of the nature of language and its impact on the world. Language evaluators who have an impact on curriculum and classroom pedagogies are often located in the multicultural and intercultural spaces. Hence, their interventions in both classroom and curriculum designing have to give space for discoveries through cross-cultural interface. Most language learners try to find the relationship between their own languages and the language they learn. In such a situation the cultural contexts of both the languages are very significant.

In Indian situation, language learning classroom is rarely a monocultural situation as the learner's own culture and the culture of the target language are simultaneously present and can be simultaneously engaged. In most situations, English becomes an additional language to communicate and the learners and the teachers need to understand that being intercultural is something more than knowing a culture.

Culture involves all those practices such as events, symbols, ways of living and customs. It is not a body of knowledge but rather a framework in which a group of people leads their lives and communicates in a shared code. A dynamic approach to culture and language implies that an active engagement with culture provides the learner of language with identity, practices, values, attitudes, beliefs and worldview. An intercultural perspective also implies a transformational engagement of learner in the process of learning. For instance, learning English imparts an intercultural identity for the learner with his/her self, rooted in one culture, gaining more spaces.

A dynamic relationship between language and culture is always at play. And an attempt to develop intercultural capabilities result in one's experience of linguistic and cultural diversities, making both the trainer and the learner engage constructively with diversities.

Interculturalism in language teaching becomes all the more evident when texts such as fiction, poetry, films and biographies are used as teaching materials. For instance, understanding the use of dialect in African American poem used as a text in language classroom has to have an intercultural understanding of how and why the dialect is used by the poet. Such an approach has an assumption that language learning is something more than a response to stimulus and that it is context dependent.

An intercultural approach to language instruction places a premium on learner's experiences, social participation, use of mediating devices such as tools and technologies and, the learner's initial culture. It also underlines the idea that learners from different life-worlds create a receptive context to second language acquisition. It also assumes that the learners have different needs, interests, motivations and desires. Intercultural language teaching, hence, focuses on the relationship between language, culture and learning. Language learning in this context is both intrapersonal and interpersonal process of meaning making. It is also interactional, developmental and interpretive.

Intercultural orientation to language learning accepts the reality that at least two languages are constantly at play in the learning of an additional language. It also upholds

five principles: active construction, making connections, interaction, reflection and responsibility. Further, it makes it necessary to give the learners the awareness of their own situatedness in their own language and culture, and the recognition that they have understood the culture of the target language. It can be considered as a dialogue that enables both the trainer and the learner to which a common ground for negotiation where cultures are recognized, mediated and accepted.

There has also been an increased attention on intercultural communicative competence (ICC) which is considered as one of the key competencies for the twenty-first century citizens. This has generated a shift of the ultimate goal of English language education from training ESL learners to become native-like English speakers by making them intercultural speakers and with emphasis on intercultural situations. Many English trainers are oblivious of the intercultural language education since they are not equipped with a framework for intercultural communicative language teaching (IcLT). The intercultural model takes into account various factors such as communicative competence, discourse competence and linguistic competence. It is a more complete language instruction model as it incorporates the elements of cognitive psychology, socio-linguistics and ethno-linguistics.

Intercultural language learning (IcLL) covers many aspects as Anthony Liddicoat and Angela Scarino observe. Developing the theories of applied linguistics and cultures in communication, at the University of South Australia, Liddicoat and Scarino highlight certain patterns and features of the intercultural model:

- a) It covers theoretical issues defining language, culture and communication as well as practice-driven issues such as classroom interactions, technologies and assessment.
- b) It examines systematically certain components of language teaching such as learning, meaning, culture and assessment in social and cultural context.
- c) It features many examples drawn from various languages, intercultural contexts and frameworks.
- d) It documents the collaborative work between linguists and practising teachers.
- e) It provides addition to the literature on the intercultural aspects of language education. (Liddicoat&Scarino 7)

One of the assumptions in the intercultural model is that culture interacts with language at many levels and that some of which can be analysed and practised. Culture also gets manifested in many aspects of a language including its context, in its general text structure, within utterances, in the organisation and selection of the units of language and in linguistic and paralinguistic structures. For instance, culture of the context determines the world knowledge of a language community while the organisation and selection of the units of language determines the norms of interaction. Most of the above mentioned features vary from language to language. For instance, the French utterance, 'donne-moi le livre' and the English expression, 'give me the book' mean the same but they cannot be used in the same context as the French expression would be considered sufficiently polite in various contexts than the English version. This example also shows that there is no level of language which is independent of the influence of culture.

The notion of communicative competence has embedded in interculturality. This idea is celebrated in both socio-linguistics and anthropological linguistics. Second

language learners have to face this situation more specifically as they have to emerge as intercultural speakers while proving their communication competence in a target language. Many aspects like the paralinguistic competence (tone, body language, etc.) are distinctly cultural. Pragmatic competence in a language including the sensitivity to a dialect, sensitivity to register and the understanding of references and figures of speech are also culturally rooted. These aspects are as important as the elements of textual competence such as cohesion and organisation.

Byram and Zarate have developed a model of higher level competencies in the context of foreign language teaching. Their model of intercultural communicative competence involves four elements:

- 1) Linguistic Competence: Knowledge of the linguistic code: lexicon, syntax, morphology, semantics and phonology;
- 2) Socio-linguistic Competence: Appropriate selection of language forms for audience and context;
- 3) Discourse Competence: Appropriate structuring of the language in the production or the reception of texts;
- 4) Intellectual Competence: Knowledge of self and other, knowing how to understand, knowing how to learn and knowing how to be. (Byram&Zarate1994)

Intercultural language learning model involves the fusing of language, culture and learning into a single pedagogical approach. It starts with the idea that language, culture and learning are essentially interrelated and the practice places this overlap at the centre of the learning process. It enriches the ways of linking languages to other areas. This method also involves developing within the learners understanding of their own language and culture in relation to an additional language culture. It is also a dialogue that enables one to reach a common ground on many variable points of culture. In this context, the learners will be able to reflect how the similarities and differences of food traditions of two cultures have shaped their responses to the situation.

One can conclude by stating that the intercultural model of language learning encourages the learners to learn and use language purposefully in a range of tasks through interaction with people, texts and technologies. It also motivates the learners to explore the culturally conditioned nature of human behavior. On the part of teachers, it helps them in supporting the students while making connections in their learning. Most significantly, it gives the curriculum enough time and scope for noticing, formulating questions, discovering, discussing and experimenting.

Works Cited

- Liddicoat, Anthony & Angela Scarino. *Intercultural Language Teaching and Learning*. London: Blackwell, 2013.
- Byram, M. & Zarate. *Definitions: A Report for the Council of Europe*. Strasbourg: 1994.