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Role of Culture in Foreign Language Teaching

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Abstract

This paper deals with the role of culture in foreign language teaching. Teaching and learning foreign language does not mean only acquiring linguistic competence but also acquiring cultural competence. The aim of this paper is to explore the role of culture for effective foreign language teaching. Since this paper is based on the analysis of secondary data, it is claimed to be a reference material for those who want to know the significance of culture in foreign language teaching. It has been prepared by doing meta-analysis of secondary data obtained from library research through the Internet. It reveals that cultural knowledge is a key prerequisite for meaningful foreign language teaching. Culture plays a crucial role to make learners understand and communicate a foreign language more accurately and appropriately in real life situation. Learning a new language without familiarity with its cultural aspects remains incomplete. To achieve successful foreign language teaching, greater emphasis should be placed on the cultural aspects of language by curriculum designers, textbook writers, and teachers. It is significant to think about the crucial role of culture in foreign language teaching to make students communicate and collaborate cross-culturally in the present context.

Keywords: Culture, foreign language teaching/learning, intercultural awareness, intercultural competence

Introduction

Language is well thought-out as a way of expression through which people convey their inner experiences, emotions, judgments, wants, and wishes in the forms of lexis, signs and signals. Though there are several languages in the world, each language has its own unique structure. Language is shaped and influenced by culture and vice versa. It cannot be truly mastered without immersing oneself in its culture. Connecting language and culture, Brown (1994) posits, "A language is a part of a culture and a culture is a part of a language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture" (p.165). It simply indicates that language and

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culture are inherently linked to each other and one needs to have cultural knowledge to learn the language effectively.

Knowledge of culture is concerned with the understanding of cultural norms, values, viewpoints, behaviors, practices, background, and language unique to a society. It is important in language teaching and learning in that it inculcates learners with cultural awareness that helps them communicate more accurately and appropriately in the real life situation. Moreover, it develops the sense of intercultural understanding in learners that leads them to respect and tolerate people from diverse communities. Cultural knowledge enables the learners to apply target language more appropriately by providing with unique language structure of target language which can save time as well in foreign language class (Aidinlou & Kejal, 2012). To communicate effectively in a foreign language, one must also be familiar with its cultural context. Learners can communicate effectively if they understand the culture of the target language.

The popularity of teaching and learning foreign languages has been mounting rapidly in the current years. Many people in the world are learning foreign languages for various purposes such as tourism, business, and international communication. More specifically, most of the people learn English language as it is an international language. They want to be more employable in every country in the world, get better job or a promotion where they are working, get access in science and technology, access in Internet and social media, for international business and so on through English language. Along with the high craze of learning English, the voices of learning culture has also been raising rapidly throughout the world. It is said that English language should be presented along with its cultural aspects to make the students speak English accurately and appropriately. The English textbooks with culture are supposed to be good and effective for the learners of English language. The textbooks with culture helps the learners to understand values, beliefs and codes of behavior resided in the target culture which accelerate them to learn the target language (Thanasoulas, 2001). Thus, the role of culture in foreign language is significantly being increased in the present situation.

Though many schools and institutions are striving to supply the most effective teaching strategies for teaching, English learners do not seem to communicate effectively in real context. It is observed that that a large portion of high-achieving students in foreign language, sometimes, experience difficulties to engage in conversations with native speakers in real-life scenarios (Choudhury, 2014). It seems to be the main problem in foreign language teaching and learning. Although various factors have been proposed for this issue such as shortage of qualified teachers, insufficient contemporary teaching resources, deficiency of learners' dedication etc., one of the factors might be the learning foreign language without proper awareness of its cultural aspects that is the main gap in the present study.

Learning culture in classrooms is not about forcing students to abandon their own culture but about helping them understand the underlying social and cultural factors that affect successful communication. Though the cultural aspect of foreign language teaching has been discussed by various studies, there has not been sufficient discussion on why cultural difference is crucial in learning foreign language so far. So, I have attempted to explore why and how cultural understanding is essential for effective foreign language teaching and learning.

These trigger researcher's motivations on the study of the role of culture in foreign language teaching and learning.

Methods and Procedures

This study is informed by the document-based research design. It enabled the researcher to gain an understanding of what the scholars' view about the role of culture in foreign language teaching. The researcher has used different documents related to the role of culture in foreign language teaching and collects information from both print and electronic media for this study. He has identified the relation between culture and foreign language teaching and clarified its significance after going through the previous research studies. All the materials available both in print and electronic media were related to the role of culture in foreign language teaching. Discussions with colleagues and teachers were also the informal ways of collecting information.

Results and Discussion

Although cultural factors were previously underrepresented in second or foreign language education, they have recently become a focal point for linguists, textbook writers, methodologists, and teachers. Applied linguists and sociolinguists have been discussing the significance of teaching culture in foreign language instruction for almost two decades. Considering this fact, the researcher has come across a number of studies through the review of related literature which has provided a platform to the researcher to develop the conceptual framework.

In this study, the researcher has critically evaluated the published materials related to the role of culture in foreign language teaching. He has observed various issues about the culture and its role in foreign language teaching. On the basis of meta-analysis of the related literature and researcher's own experience as an English language teacher, he has summarized the role of culture in teaching foreign language in the following subheadings.

Culture

Culture is a term with a wide range of interpretations. Sapir posits that it is "an assemblage of socially inherited practices and beliefs that determines the texture of our lives" (1921, p. 207). Culture consists of values or perspectives resided in the group of people which make them different from another in the social milieu (Sinagatullin, 2003). Simply to say, culture is associated with knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, actions, attitudes and tradition shared by a particular group of people. It is a way of life accepted by particular people without thinking it. Culture is an integral part of language, and without understanding cultural nuances, communication in a target language may be incomplete. According to Kramsch (1998), language carries cultural information. She believes that culture is an indispensable part of language, and it should be the primary focus of language teaching.

Relationship between Language and Culture

The interdependence of language and culture has been a heated discussion in the field of applied linguistics particularly for effective target language learning. Language is supposed to be the means of communication as well as a carrier of culture (Farooq et al., 2017). However, it is more considered as a mirror of a particular culture. In other words, language and culture are intertwined, and one will affect the other. Both language and culture have a kind of deep and symbolic relationship. Sapir Whorf hypothesis is also in the line of the influence of language and culture. "When a language becomes extinct, a part of the

cultural patrimony of humanity is lost" (Barfield & Uzarski, 2009, p.2). The interdependence of language and culture can also be corroborated through the statement that is learning a language goes hand-in-hand with learning its culture, and teaching a language involves imparting cultural knowledge (Goa, 2006 as cited in Choudhury, 2014). The culture affects the way of thinking, interacting, communicating of people. People's beliefs, values, rituals, traditions are transmitted from generation to generation through language. So, language is not merely a means of communication. It is a cultural act. In this sense, the role of culture seems to be significant in language teaching and learning.

Language Affects Culture

Language is used to share our ideas. However, it can affect the cultural elements existed in the particular community. It is actually claimed that language influences the ideas and social situation of a particular speech community. Whenever language expands, the culture changes. It means that the meaning of a word can be changed, and then a new imagery is created in the society. For example, in Nepali, the term 'uncle' is classified into several kinds as a result, the word uncle represents several different meanings and accordingly Nepali people see the variations in uncles but it does not take place in the context of English culture. In the same way, the English word 'nice' now generally means pleasing, agreeable, polite, and kind. But in the 15th century 'nice' meant foolish, wanton, lascivious, and even wicked. These examples reveal that the variations of language can affect the social conditions of particular society. Thus, the language may determine or influence the culture. This simply implies that there is integral relationship between language and culture.

Culture Affects Language

Culture is supposed to be sum total of a group's shared values, norms, and beliefs, which shape their behaviors and worldview. It consists of ethnic conditions, nationality, disability, gender, race, sexual orientation, and religious conviction in general. Culture does not only mold people's beliefs and customs but also influence on linguistic patterns and social interactions. So, cultural knowledge is indeed a crucial means for achieving linguistic proficiency. The manipulation of language can be a tool for cultural influence, but its effectiveness depends on various factors. For instance, cultural practice in Nepalese society demands respects from those who are younger and junior in relation. As a result, various forms of honorific and non-honorific are used while speaking to senior and junior persons in Nepalese society. Nepalese husband mostly use non-honorific pronouns to their wives (*timi/tan* i.e. you) and receive various honorific forms (*tapain /hajur /yahan* i.e. you). It is mainly because of the Nepali culture in which women is considered to be lower than that of the men. It simply indicates that cultural values of society can have an effect on the use of language. In brief, language is a cultural construct, shaped by the values, beliefs, and experiences of a society. It should be taken as an inseparable part of a society and culture. This also indicates close connection between language and culture.

Culture in Foreign Language Teaching

Thanasoulas (2001) emphasizes the culture in foreign language teaching by stating the foreign language learning as culture learning. He is of the opinion that teaching culture does not simply mean learning about historical, geographical, and political aspects of culture rather it is the understanding values, beliefs and convention of behavior resided in the target culture. He opines that one needs to have the cultural knowledge of target language rather

than broad knowledge about target language society to communicate appropriately in target language. Teaching culture plays an important role to promote students' understanding regarding the nature of the foreign language. The degree of success in second language depends on the learners' awareness regarding the cultural norms and values of the people whose language is being studied. In this sense, cultural knowledge is crucial for effective foreign language teaching. Thus, the culture is supposed to be an indispensable part of all the four skills without which successful communication would hardly be possible.

Kramersch (2013) discusses two different viewpoints concerning culture in language teaching: modernist and postmodernist. He has stated that teaching of culture will always experience a tension between whether it should be taught as per the criteria of modern objectives or post-modern objectives. These two perspectives on culture have both a theoretical and practical influence on language teaching today. Both needs are reflected in language, which make the task of the language teachers more complex and more relevant simultaneously in the foreign language teaching. Kramersch has introduced the concept of 'big C' culture and 'little c' culture while teaching culture from modernist perspective. Kramersch (2013) states that 'big C' culture represents traditional concept of culture which focuses on the visible cultural products that include explaining the geographical, historical, political, religious events etc. On the other hand, the 'little c' culture refers to the ways of behaving, eating, talking, dwelling, believing of people of particular community. It is more associated with the invisible parts of culture. Both types of cultural knowledge make the foreign language learning more effective.

Intercultural Competence

The concept of intercultural competence emerged first in Europe along with the notions of communicative competence in the field of foreign language teaching. Intercultural competence simply indicates an ability to understand, communicate and effectively interact with people from various communities. It makes learners aware of the concept of what is polite in one culture may be impolite in another. It can play a vital role to develop the sense of positive attitudes towards cultural differences in various languages due to the knowledge of different cultural practices and world views. "Intercultural communicative competence includes the ability to understand the language and behavior of the target community, and explains it to members of the home community and vice-versa" (Corbett, 2003. p.2). Intercultural competence makes the learners to communicate effectively and appropriately with people from other language and cultural backgrounds. It makes learners more aware of the conceptual variations of language. In this sense intercultural competence is a must for the development of intercultural communicative competence. So, intercultural competence is very important in foreign language teaching.

Byram (1997) states that one should have the good attitude, knowledge, skill of interpretation, skills of discovering and interaction, critical cultural awareness to be an intercultural competent speaker. It indicates that intercultural competence is the ability to interact with people from another culture in their language without being sufficient knowledge of the target culture. It equips individuals to adapt seamlessly to intercultural interactions and articulate their cultural perspectives with clarity and purpose. Although different models are existed from different scholars in developing intercultural competence, all models are concerned with the effective interaction with people across cultures. Byram (1997) puts

forward that intercultural competent people have a strong sense of their own cultural identity and its connections with language. It also shows that the role of intercultural competence is supposed to be important in foreign language teaching.

Relevance of Culture in Foreign Language Teaching

It is known that language and culture are the two sides of a coin that go side by side. Since these two are inseparable, the role of culture is obviously important in language teaching and learning more specifically in foreign language teaching. Farooq et al. (2017) state that culture and language are inseparable by stating the language as a vessel that carries and preserves cultural knowledge and traditions. Language without culture and human culture without language is unimaginable (Wei, 2005 as cited in Farooq et al., 2017). It also reinforces the needs of culture in language teaching. Regarding the relevance of culture, Farooq et al. (2017) opine that culture is a fifth language skill without which communication is insufficient. All teachers need to be accustomed with the cultural aspects of the target language and the culture of learners for effective foreign language teaching in the classroom. They have to be aware of integrating culture and language in their teaching. The exposure of cultural aspects of target language may assist students to contrast it with their own culture which may guide them to understand the unique structure of foreign language well. Integrating the cultural aspects in language teaching enhances cultural knowledge so that learners can develop their critical thinking towards the foreign culture which ultimately accelerates their way of learning foreign language. Thus, the role of culture is important in the foreign language education.

Thanasoulas (2001) states that teaching a foreign language is not as equal as learning new vocabulary and expressions in the sense that teaching foreign language is entangled with the cultural elements of target language which make the students aware about the unique features of target language. The cultural awareness can develop the sense of empathy and respect in students toward different cultures. So, the cultural awareness is considered to be crucial factor in the course of teaching and learning foreign language. Students can perform better in foreign language if they are aware of their own culture and the culture of foreign language. Cultural assimilators are valuable resources for promoting intercultural sensitivity and empathy in the foreign language classroom. Students can do better performance if they are taught foreign language in accordance to cultural reference. The greater the cultural distance between the learner and the target culture, the more likely communication misunderstandings will occur. It is, therefore, crucial to establish connections between students' cultural backgrounds and the target language culture through curriculum and classroom activities for effective foreign language teaching.

Holliday (2009) has discussed 'old thinking' and 'new thinking' regarding the role of culture in English language education. He is of the opinion that in 'old thinking', language reflects the real culture of the native speaker whereas in new thinking, language reveals the culture of globalization where language works as an agent of change with understandable communication all through the world. Though there is a struggle between the elements of both within our thinking and practice, one should have awareness of both thinking for effective foreign language learning. So, we cannot ignore any one of them in teaching and learning foreign language. Both 'old thinking' and 'new thinking' helps to understand and interpret cross-cultural and socio-cultural phenomena very closely. They play crucial role to develop intercultural competence in language learners.

Choudhury (2014) states that culture and language are inextricably linked and it is impossible to separate them without diminishing their importance in learning language. If any one of them is alienated the other remains imperfect. Norms and values of culture are mirrored in language. So, learning a new language without understanding its culture can limit its practical application in real-world scenarios. The closer the learners are with target culture, the better they can communicate in target language. It is, therefore, indispensable to learn about the cultural factors of the target language to learn it properly.

Having knowledge on socio-cultural aspects, language is well thought-out to be one of the preconditions for effective teaching and learning foreign language. According to Aidinlou and Kejal (2012), understanding social and cultural norms and values of target language facilitate the learners to make out the new language better way. It helps them how, when and where to apply target language structures appropriately as such both teacher and students can save their learning time in the classroom. Aidinlou and Kejal (2012) are of the opinion that socio-cultural factors in the language classes assist educators to strengthen the quality of their teaching. It also shows that socio-cultural knowledge is important in using foreign language appropriately. Teaching language taking into account the socio-cultural aspects help to increase students' motivation than that of the learning language without considering the cultural aspects of language.

Stockwell (2018) discusses some main factors needed to be taken into account in teaching culture in foreign language classes in order to create an effective foreign language teaching environment. He points out that foreign language education must address the issues of how culture can be effectively integrated into language teaching and what its role should be. Although cross-cultural understanding is a valuable byproduct of foreign language learning, it is crucial to integrate cultural instruction into language teaching. Instead of simply imparting cultural knowledge, the teacher should guide students to explore and reflect on cultural matters. According to Stockwell (2018), successful culture teaching in foreign language education necessitates a balanced focus on the teacher's cultural perspective, pedagogical practices, appropriate technology, and the creation of a self-directed learning environment for students. He is of the opinion that it is timely to consider about successful teaching approaches with culture and language so that learners can communicate effectively with the people of the 21st century. From this discussion, it can be concluded that effective foreign language teaching and learning activities cannot be imagined at the expense of culture in the present situation.

Lessard-Clouston (1997) emphasizes the significance of cultivating both cultural knowledge and communication skills in the target language to become a socially competent speaker. He asserts that cultural awareness is crucial for learners to grasp the evolving nature of both the target culture and their own cultural identity. The cultural learning experiences of learners are crucial that should be exposed and responded for effective teaching and learning of foreign language. Cultural knowledge of the target and learner's own culture remove the cultural misinterpretation found in the course of language learning. Kramsch (1993) argues that a foreign culture and one's own culture should be placed together in order while teaching foreign language. At this situation learner can have a strong understanding of both one's own culture and the target culture that can significantly reduce misunderstandings in language learning due to cultural differences. So, the cultural knowledge is essential to understand the dynamic nature of target language.

Educational Implications of Role of Culture in Teaching Foreign Language

On the basis of different studies related to the role of culture in foreign language teaching and learning and the researchers' experience as an English language teacher, it can be concluded that culture provides fundamental doctrines for teaching and learning foreign language effectively. Cultural knowledge encourages learners to gain correct knowledge and eliminate inappropriate use of target language. Culture provides platforms to researchers, linguists, curriculum designers, textbook writers, methodologists, teacher trainers, students, and ESL/EFL teachers in order to explore, analyze, and interpret the way of knowing foreign language. It works as an additional backbone for goal setting, designing materials, conducting classroom activities, evaluating students and providing remedial feedback in teaching foreign language. It supports all the concerned authorities of foreign language teaching and learning for better achievements. Cultural knowledge brings positive attitudes towards the target language in learners so that teachers can introduce more cultural materials into the learning process to enhance the world views of learners. Cultural materials encourage teachers to share their own cultural experience with learners which help them enter another culture as such learners can develop cultural awareness in language learning. Cultural materials help the students to acquire the foreign language in natural way so that they can communicate in real life situation. These are supposed to be some of the educational implications of role of culture in language teaching.

The central goal of teaching foreign language is to make the students able to communicate with the people from another community. One should have the intercultural competence for successful communication in foreign language. To develop the intercultural communicative competence, cultural texts, and cultural films including both verbal and nonverbal behaviors and social practices of different social, cultural, regional and ethnic groups should be incorporated in school curriculum. There should be balance among the teacher's cultural attitude, pedagogical practices, technological integration, and the establishment of a self-directed learning environment for effective foreign language teaching. In Nepal, English is taught as a foreign language in multilingual and multicultural contexts. In such a scenario, if teachers possess a strong understanding of both the target language culture and their learners' own cultures, they can significantly enhance their English language classes. Moreover, they can teach foreign language by creating friendly teaching and learning atmosphere in the classroom. Thus, the role of culture is beneficial in teaching foreign language.

Conclusion

Building on the above discussions, it can be argued that culture plays a significant role in teaching and learning foreign language. Knowing cultural aspects of language is well thought-out to be one of the preconditions for effective foreign language teaching and learning. Learning foreign language does not only mean achieving academic performance but also arriving to native like competence or communicating in real life situation. One should have possessed cultural knowledge to be a socio competent speaker in the foreign language. Learning foreign language without proper awareness of its cultural aspects becomes slow and difficult. Many research works and articles produced by the different scholars have directly or indirectly focused on the value and importance of culture in learning foreign language for successful communication in foreign language. Foreign language teaching should integrate cultural

instruction to equip students with the ability to use the target language effectively in real-world contexts.

Learning culture in classes does not mean asking learners to discard their culture and take up another identity rather it is for dispelling misunderstanding among speakers due to cultural gap. Sometimes applications of learner's own norms and values in the foreign language communication may create misunderstanding which may portray speaker as impolite in the communication. Therefore, it is vital to build up intercultural awareness to be a socio-culturally competent speaker in the foreign language. Intercultural competence enables the learners to communicate effectively and appropriately with people from other linguistic backgrounds. Cultural knowledge should be stressed more for successful foreign language teaching and learning. It is also important to consider timely about the preference of teaching materials that flawlessly integrate culture and language in order to make learners communicate and collaborate appropriately in foreign language in the present context.

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