ON INTERCULTURAL ASPECTS OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING IN SRI LANKA

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on interactional data from the adult English as a Second Language classroom, it is argued that constructing an answer to a critical question appears to be a highly collaborative affair that requires intercultural awareness. The teaching skills suggests that responding to culture questions is a collective cognitive function, then it is argued in this paper that in attempting to construct evaluative answers language learners are involved not only in a learning, but also in a complex social task in which intercultural perspectives need to be negotiated, stances taken and identities navigated. It is suggested that language cannot be separated from the social and cultural knowledge through which it is brought into being. It is argued that any implementation of teaching methodology in an English language teaching context ought to consider interpersonal and social aspects, particularly intercultural settings.

Keywords: Intercultural Awareness, Teaching English as Foreign Language, Sri Lanka

INTRODUCTION

Teaching skills and the concept of criticality have become prominent in a range of educational contexts worldwide. Policy makers and employers require flexible and generic transferable skills from learners who have completed educational programs (U.S. Department of Education, 1991; Biggs, 1987; Roberts, 2002). This general trend for an increase in the implementation of intercultural communication competence is also evident in English Language Teaching (ELT) contexts. Waters suggests that the "importance of thinking for language learning" and making connections between new and old information is "widely accepted" (2006,p.319). Despite this apparent common fact, he argues that some English language learning contexts do not include the types of activities which might promote particular ways of thinking. So the lack of thinking activities in classrooms in Sri Lanka may be the result of a lack of awareness about how to conceptualize levels of intercultural awareness.

Although the importance of such concepts may be agreed on a rhetorical level, the implementation of such concepts into classroom practices may have rather less widely accepted effects and far reaching consequences. It is said that critical thinking is a social practice, which is difficult to define because of its implicitness in particular contexts(Atkinson,1997). As a culturally based concept, it can hold different positions in different cultures. Puolimatka (2004) suggests that the development of a critical individual is dependent upon pre-existing social conditions rather than an increase in language proficiency. It seems that culturally embedded concepts or the implementation of approaches to improve thinking, have the potential to cause concern for educators if the impact and consequences in inter or cross-cultural contexts are not thoroughly explored. Rather than suggesting guidelines and exemplars of how English language teaching professionals can conceptualize cultural

awareness in English-teaching materials, the cultural and social aspects of such moves and their application in intercultural contexts could be more deeply pursued using appropriate frameworks (Dogancay-Aktuna, 2005). This paper aims to highlight how to promote teaching under intercultural background, and involves drawing on the personal, social and cultural knowledge of speakers in interaction. The implications for language teaching are a raised awareness that such activities are not necessarily about improving individual cognitive functioning. They are concerned with fundamental aspects of interpersonal communication and social functioning, which involve the teaching and should be linked with the circumstance. Moreover, any approach to the implementation of language skills, particularly in an intercultural context ought to position itself in a critical pedagogic framework, which reflects the understanding that language education is not a neutral, ideologically empty activity (Simpson, 2009). For teachers and educators this suggests engagement with a critical approach to intercultural communication and second/foreign language teaching (Corbett, 2003). The paper establishes a profile including: (1) the current context of English learning in Sri lanka schools, which analysizes the current situation of cultural awareness in English classroom. (2) Language and Culture Competence. The relationship between culture and language is proposed, the emphasis is also placed upon how to enhance cultural competence which serves for language proficiency when L2 students encounter the problem of inter-culture.(3) Patrens of Culture Competence in English classroom (4) Evaluation in Intercultural Contexts by Learners. The situation for teaching and learning English as a foreign language in schools is particularly complex and the specific issues essential for improving teaching practice and increasing learner participation are explored.

THE CURRENT CONTEXT OF ENGLISH LEARNING IN SRI LANKA SCHOOLS

The English language classroom in Sri Lanka and other English-speaking cultures has a number of salient features that need to be taken into consideration:

A. The nature of the learner group, characterized by diversity in linguistic and cultural background, and increasing participation by English users.

B. The English language environment : English is seen to be the dominant medium of instruction.

C. The issue of learner diversity

> There is a low intensity and low frequency of learning where on average students are exposed to 3 or 4 lessons of approximately 40 minutes duration per week, resulting in a maximum time on task of approximately 80-100 hours a year in secondary school, and between 30-60 hours a year in most primary school programs. An environment is characterized by limited practice and lacks a sense of communication in the class of Sri Lanka. The obvious cultural diversity illustrates the fact that it is useful to have an appreciation of the value of a variety of cultural identities, and to try developing our own culture subjectivity for better communication. In the process of productive orientation learning, ESL students are able to give a full play to their potential on the basis of a deep understanding of their native culture as well as foreign cultures (Zhang Wei, 2009).

While at the same time there has been significant growth in the English speaking community in Sri Lanka. The high participation rate of students who speak English in school-based second language programs has become a significant issue. Teachers attempt to offer appropriate programs to meet diverse learner needs, employing a number of strategies to respond to the particular mix of learners in their classroom. As to Sri Lankan students,

however, what they are concerned with is how to gain a good command of English in order for it to serve as a powerful tool in a global context. Avoiding the negative-transferring from their mother tongue, most of L2 students tend to show little interest in culture learning. Hence great attention is paid to language competence and communication skills. It is necessary in successful intercultural communication to have the following attitude and awareness: respect for cultural diversity on the basis of an understanding of the belief system that forms the ground for the emerging global culture. Intercommunication is a two-way for the original culture and the target culture. It should be taught as an interpersonal process rather than simply presenting cultural facts. Therefore, Initiatives are needed to develop and cultivate intercultural awareness in the classroom, and to achieve their teaching goals effectively in this type of context, initiatives which respond to the knowledge and skills that different groups of learners bring to the task-initiatives based on contemporary curriculum design and the contexts in which learning takes place.

LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL COMPETENCE

In this section, we will briefly examine the relationship between language and culture, specifically language proficiency and cultural identity. And see why the comparison of cultures should constitute an integral part of the English language curriculum. Language is a tool of symbolic communication, by which individual subjectivities are constituted to a great extent. Language serves as a form to convey the content of culture. Acquiring the ability to communicate through culture in a foreign language is meaningful and challenging to the college students in the context of cultural diversity because proficiency in language and in cultural competence are stressed equally. So the ultimate goal of language study is not just to learn a language for its own sake. Rather, the goal it is to learn how to understand and effectively communicate with people of other nations and cultures.

It goes without saying that effective intercultural communication can be achieved by means of a solid knowledge of the language. The goal for students should be to become proficient enough to function satisfactorily in a global environment. Language proficiency provides a link across the disciplines of knowledge and it might not be specific to any particular discipline. Language proficiency is in fact a set of abilities that constitute the key abilities in learning how to learn. There are many factors influencing it, and students must be provided with information and experiences to understand the social and cultural differences they can expect to find.

The cultural factors influencing the Second Language Acquisition （SLA） come from the influences of both the first language and the native culture. The reasons that we explore these cultural factors are as follows: first, second language acquisition needs to undergo an amalgamation process of the first language and target language; from which comes the "inter-language". Second, the development of inter-language is affected by enculturation and acculturation, and so appears the "inter-culture"; In fact, these two competencies are also a manifestation of inter-culture. Since the process of SLA is a continual developmental process of the acquired language, the acquirer's inter-language, inter-culture, linguistic competence and communicative competence will all undergo the progressive changes, even though the learner may sometimes encounter some setbacks on a certain level related to the target language. The reason why a language possesses certain meanings is that it is acquired in the setting of society and culture. Moreover the meaning derived from certain culture is shaped and solidified by the language.

In the SLA process, the learner's native language may influence his mastery or command of the target language, and so emerges the phenomenon of "inter-language". Many SL learners,

however, under the impact of their native culture transfer, would communicate in the relevant community by utilizing a lot of inter-language in which their forms are correct but their cultural connotations are wrong in the target language. In Sri Lanka, it is universal for the EFL students to use Sin-English, the negative-transfer from their native tongue Sinhala. When the learners communicate in these inter-languages, they would make errors in their language applications, because they are going against social practice in the target language. In other words, the language practices resulting from such kind of mixing between the native and target languages may be defined as the connotation of "inter-culture". Libben and Lindner（1993）think that, "Unlike SLA, therefore, SCA involves the expansion of an existing system rather than the development of a new one." In other words, in the SLA process, the native cultural system would naturally expand into an inter-cultural system. So we can conclude that "inter-culture" refers to the interspaces between the native culture and target culture, where both cultures have been partially or wholly attended.

Inter-culture is the notion of communicative competence, a concept developed by Dell Hymes, and refers to the ability to use speech appropriately in varying social contexts. Competent speakers of a language should know what to say, to whom, and how to say it, because internalization of linguistic rules alone is not sufficient to guarantee the learner's application of language. In this regard there are two challenges we should deal with (1) identifying for students, what the most important social and cultural differences are, and (2) creating opportunities for students to apprehend those differences experientially and not just to comprehend them theoretically. The inter-language and inter-culture make an SL learner's language and communicative competences really influence the process of SLA. Therefore, it is reasonable for us to think of such linguistic and cultural forms as the developmental factors in the process of second language acquisition. Social experience is identified through means of expression that go beyond ordinary speaking and writing. They are unique record of diverse cultures and how these cultures have developed over time. Lack of cultural competence will lead to a failure in communication even though their linguistic competence may be appropriate.

Consequently, attention will be given to the concepts of cultural competence and cultural identity, to explore the patterns suggestive and instructive for intercommunication.

METHOD

A set of principles for language learning based on contemporary views of language, culture and learning were presented in the Report on Intercultural Language Learning (2004). This intercultural orientation to language learning has had a profound impact on language education in schools, which are now reflected in the Guide to Teaching and Learning Languages. From an intercultural perspective language learning is viewed as an interactive process, It is a process of interacting and making meaning about languages and cultures. It is a process of making meaning about the process itself and the experience of learning to use another language. It requires a consistent orientation to classroom interaction that focuses on developing language and cultural awareness by comparing, contrasting and reflecting on English, and other relevant languages, reflecting on English, local and other cultures, and on the life experiences of learners and others from the target language community. This approach to language teaching and learning has implications in a curriculum for English as a foreign language for our understanding of what is necessary in the classroom, in terms of how we understand the task of bridging the gap between learners' prior knowledge of language and culture learning and the task of learning to communicate in English.

The following conceptual patterns make us believe that whoever is learning the foreign

language is also learning the cultural knowledge and skill, required to be a competent L2 speaker. Teaching cultures has the following goals are in themselves and accomplished by it.

I.   Clarification: To help students to recognize culture competence is not an expendable fifth skill, tacked on the teaching of speaking, listening, reading and writing.

II. The dynamics of culture: To help students to develop an understanding of critical awareness of culture. That is, culture never remains static but is constantly changing, for the purpose of interpreting L1 culture, L2 observers must first become aware of what it means to participate in their own culture and what the contents of cultures are.

III. Cultural identity: To help students to establish cultural identity, to attain "a shift of perspective or the recognition of cognitive dissonance" (Byram Morgan et al, 1994).

IV. Cultural competence: To help students to develop the ability to evaluate the native culture and target culture.

The Pattern of Classroom communication is a product of the interaction and renegotiation between teachers and students under a particular cultural context, and an integration of different individual identities. In the classroom, what the teacher does is not to replace the original culture identity with that of a target country, or a target culture, but to support the student in establishing the concept of a multicultural community. In this case, students will consciously lay stress on learning language by comparison, contrast and empathy instead of going so far as to forget or abandon their original culture system.

i.   Open attitude: develop receptiveness to cross-cultural learning.

ii. Self and Other culture awareness: to recognize key differences and similarities between self and other; and other self-awareness

iii. Cultural knowledge: we should be grounded in a solid base of cultural knowledge

iv. Cross-Cultural Skills: develop behaviors that maximize cross-cultural effectiveness. It includes:

a. What skills will help me minimize cross-cultural conflict and maximize productivity and effectiveness?

b. How can I continue to refine my skills and develop my level of cultural competence and adaptability?

c. How can I use my cross-cultural skills to further enhance my openness to cross cultural learning?

For this part, the following measures are taken in the classroom:

Comparison and Contrast: With a view to identifying common ground between different cultures. Learners must first become conversant with what it means to be part of a culture, their own culture. By exploring their own culture, for example by discussing the values, traditions, customs and rituals they unconsciously take part in, they become ready to reflect upon the values, expectations and traditions of others.

1. **Activities:** As a guide, teacher instructs students to get involved in activities. i.e. having them draw up a list of characteristics and traits that distinguish the home and target culture from the items: music, race, arts and crafts, clothing, food and so forth. Thus they are assisted in taking an insider's view of the connotations of those words and concepts.

2. **Non-verbal Communication:** Students should familiarize themselves with various forms of non-verbal communication, such as gestures and facial expressions, especially

in the target culture. Learners should be cognizant of the fact that "the seemingly universal signals such as gestures and facial expressions are actually cultural phenomena" (Wierzbicka, 1999). Teacher can invite the students to answer questions: which gestures are different from those in the home culture? Which of the gestures shown need to be avoided in different situations in the home culture?

FINDINGS

In its broadest sense, intercultural classroom contexts are those in which more than one culture may be represented through material or task or the socialized experiences of participants. Acts of evaluation in intercultural language learning contexts may need consideration for a number of reasons. Firstly, (Waters, 2006) evaluative activities in adult English language learning classrooms can be an opportunity for self-expression which "fosters a healthier, more 'adult' psychological frame of mind". Exactly how a healthier frame of mind is to be understood here is unclear. However, notions of the individual and the social system present in an intercultural context may differ greatly. There may also be a diverse range of expectations held by teachers and learners regarding the functions of self-expression (Atkinson, 1997). Secondly, although there is no support from evidence of learner discourse from evaluative activities, and evaluative actions in interpersonal communication involve the public expression of attitude or values, the positioning of an individual in relation to an object or topic, and the alignment to others in interaction (Du Bois, 2007). It might be suggested that while the linguistic means through which these processes are evidenced may be no less complex than at other levels of thinking, the social functioning involved is complex. In this regard, the benefits for language learners in intercultural contexts may be in the opportunity for stance-taking and perspective sharing. In fact, the importance of perspective sharing in language learning has been argued as a means to greater social functioning (Hall, 2006). Studies of communication suggest that common ground, that is, the information that speakers believe that they share, is fundamental to understanding and responding to utterances in a communicative context (Clark, 1996).

CONCLUSION

Language and culture are so intricately intertwined; we should concern ourselves with culture because learning the cultural knowledge and skills is required for being a competent L2 language learner. Intercultural awareness, knowledge and skills are the key components for an effective cross-cultural communication. Intercultural communication is not only about developing cross-cultural understanding, but also has a great impact on the way we think, feel and above all, on the way we act.

This review of contemporary TEFL principle, aims to provide a framework for considering the context in which future intercultural awareness may take place in cross-cultural communication, A review of the issues in English language learning and the classroom context highlights the particular and distinctive English-specific approaches to addressing the issues of effective teaching and learning in school based multicultural contexts. Moreover, Language teachers ought to receive both experiential and academic training, with the aim of becoming 'mediators in culture teaching' (Singhal, 1998). It would be likely to establish the classroom social norms and lay more emphasis on Sri Lankan culture and English culture by comparing and contrasting similarities and differences. That is, how these manifest themselves in linguistic categories and forms. Cross cultural communication based on the interactive way is dynamic and exchanging. Language educators should contribute to learners' understanding that begins with awareness of self and leads to awareness to others (ibid). There is certainly room for improvement in order for things go well for the future. In

addition, we should enhance our intercultural awareness and competence in the light of multiculturalism, from which differences and diversities coexist.

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