Culture in Second Language Learning

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Synonyms
Beliefs and values; Civilization (archaic); Social norms; Way of life; Worldviews

Definition
The term "culture" is famously difficult to define. Within the research on language teaching and learning, the term "culture" has diverse and disparate definitions that deal with forms of speech acts, sociocultural behaviors, social organizations, knowledge constructs, and ways in which knowledge is transmitted and obtained. Culture is sometimes identified with and may find its manifestations in notions of personal space, body language, eye contact, concepts of time, and various customs and traditions.

Theoretical Background
In the early 1900s, linguists and anthropologists who researched the structure of American Indian languages, e.g., Franz Boas (1858–1942), found that relationships among thought, abstract notions, and language as a means of expressing ideas and concepts was complex. In the 1920s, following Boas, Edward Sapir (1884–1939) and his students concluded that a language and the culture of its speakers cannot be analyzed in isolation. According to Sapir, language can be seen as a way to describe and represent human experience and understanding of the world, and typically, members of a language community share common systems of beliefs and assumptions in regard to how the world is constructed. Their views of objective phenomena and shared beliefs and histories are communicated through language, and communication establishes a connection between language and the culture of a community.

In a number of important studies published between the 1920s and the 1950s, Sapir and Benjamin Whorf (1897–1941) further determined that, in different languages, linguistic systems, discourse (units of connected speech and writing), and word meanings demonstrate different ways of looking at the world and constructing its realities. To Whorf, for example, differences in word meanings reflected the thought processes that set American Indian worldviews and beliefs apart from those of Europeans in their definitions of time, space, and a broad range of natural phenomena. Although various languages often have distinct grammar attributes and lexicon (vocabulary), it may be misleading to define the differences among languages exclusively in terms of word meanings and grammar rules.

The Sapir–Whorf hypothesis of linguistic relativity also applies to a great many abstract features of lexical, grammatical, referential, and communicative systems.

In the 1960s and 1970s, investigations of the connections between language and culture produced such impressive and seminal works as those by Dell Hymes and John Gumperz on interactional sociolinguistics and Edward Hall on behavior and cognition. In their publications in the early 1970s, Hymes and Gumperz and Hymes (1972) advocated the view that the uses of language and its analyses are inextricable from the society and its cultural norms. Language users’ social backgrounds and identities, as well as social meanings, are conveyed by means of language. Hymes (1972) noted that in linguistics, a descriptive theory of speech and interaction has to take into consideration how language is used in a particular community both in speech and writing. According to Hymes, language in interaction is defined by social and language norms for the use of speech, as well as their communicative content, linguistic form, interactional setting, and social goals. Speech events and speech acts are not universal and are fundamentally defined by the social structure, values, and beliefs, and the sociocultural order of the community. Hymes (1972) was also the first to introduce the notion of “communicative competence” that in the last half a century has had an indelible effect on second language research and pedagogy.
In the 1980s and 1990s, educational and linguistic studies investigated manifestations of culture in language teaching and learning and concerned primarily the effects of body language, eye contact, and other overt communicative behaviors. Comparisons of culturally defined behaviors focused on such common anthropological constructs as hand and head movement, eye contact, lexical references to broad-range tangible and abstract entities (e.g., measures of distance, shapes, colors, and time), forms of address, or terms of kinship and personal relationships that do not exist outside the specific societies in which they are used. In the 1980s and 1990s, language teaching methodologies began to include various techniques for analyzing and teaching cultural behaviors together with instruction on second language skills. Many such teaching techniques associated with culture learning, however, encompassed primarily the anthropological views of culture and only briefly touched on underlying cultural assumptions, beliefs, and values (e.g., metaphors or conversational norms) that are invariably reflected in language uses and interaction.

At present, two parallel strands of research have evolved to identify the role of culture in society and its influence on human behavior and language use. The first strand includes studies of culture as it applies to social norms, beliefs, assumptions, and value systems that affect practically all human activities and is prevalent in the domains of anthropology, sociology, ethnography, and intercultural communication. Research in these disciplines examines culture as it applies to the structure of human societies and organizations, as well as the differences and similarities that exist in social worldviews. Applied linguistics, and sociolinguistics in particular, undertakes the study of the interconnections between language and sociocultural norms and societal frameworks. Specifically, the subdisciplines of sociolinguistics and pragmatics have the goal of analyzing how members of particular cultures use language to refer to, describe, or function within social organizations. For example, politeness is considered to be a universal feature of language use in social organizations, but its pragmatic, linguistic, social, intentional, and conceptual realizations vary substantially among different languages and cultures. Even speakers of the same language, such as Chinese or Spanish, or different dialects, e.g., American, British, or Indian English, may belong to different cultures or subcultures and thus have different notions on what it means to be polite and how politeness should be realized in speech and behavior.

The second strand of research in anthropology, ethnography, and applied linguistics also includes studies of specific cultures, such as Brazilian, Chinese, Japanese, or Korean. Such studies examine and describe ways of doing, speaking, and behaving in specific cultural and language communities, without necessarily undertaking to identify commonalities and differences among various cultures. Both research into culture in general and specific cultures can be useful to language teachers and learners who seek to raise their awareness of the inextricable relationships between the culture of the community and the language usage of its speakers.

**Important Scientific Research and Open Questions**

In second language pedagogy, a dominant perspective has emerged that language usage and the culture of its speakers are closely bound up, and, together, they constitute a unified domain of sociolinguistic experience. Many researchers in language learning and methodologists in language teaching currently hold the view that it is simplistic to imply that culture can be examined, taught, and learned through exercises on reading news media reports and advertisements. Few believe that folklore, festivals, facts, and foods (the 4-F approach to teaching culture) are directly relevant to the impact of culture on learners’ linguistic production and interactive behaviors.

A substantial body of research has demonstrated convincingly that various aspects of second language learning are affected by the interpretive principles and paradigms in learners’ natal cultures. Specifically, language learners’ understanding of conceptualizations and constructs in second culture is crucially affected by their culturally defined assumptions, presuppositions, beliefs, and worldviews. For example, for learners socialized in the cultures with a strong tradition of deference to elders, more egalitarian terms of address, such as the use of a first name, may seem somewhat inappropriate at best.

The teaching and learning of sociocultural and linguistic norms implicitly or explicitly pervades the teaching of conversational discourse, social interaction, and the spoken and written language typically employed in a language community. Second language learners inescapably become learners of the second culture because a language cannot be learned without considering the cultural context in which it is used (Hinkel 1999).

In the current understanding of the place of culture in second language pedagogy and learning, the work of Michael Byram has played a prominent role. Byram (1989, p. 1) noted that culture represents a “hidden” curriculum in second language teaching. That is, language teaching can rarely take place without implicitly teaching
the culture of its speakers because language invariably refers to their common and shared knowledge and perceptions of the world, as well as the concepts of culture, and cultural learning. Currently, many researchers and language teaching methodologists largely assume that, in real terms, communicative competence involves socially and culturally appropriate language use, which is almost invariably culture specific.

Unlike the foundational language skills, such as speaking, reading, or writing, second culture does not represent a separate domain of language instruction. Rather, the learning of the second culture makes learners better – and more competent – communicators. In language learning, the foundational sociocultural principles that determine the norms of appropriate language use and behavior within the social networks and paradigms represent the invisible culture (Hinkel 2001). As Stewart (1972, p. 16) comments, “[t]he typical person has a strong sense of what the world is really like, so that it is with surprise that he discovers that ‘reality’ is built up out of certain assumptions commonly shared among members of the same culture. Cultural assumptions may be defined as abstract, organized, and general concepts which pervade a person’s outlook and behavior.”

To members of a particular community and culture, these fundamental assumptions usually appear to be self-evident and axiomatic. On the other hand, they are not always shared by members of other language communities and cultures whose values are similarly based on unquestioned fundamental assumptions and concepts. It is also important to acknowledge that ways of using language (e.g., speaking, listening, reading, and writing) and sociocultural frameworks in different communities may conflict to varying extents (Hinkel 1999).

The conceptualization of culture as inextricable from ethnolinguistic and personal identity, however, leaves open the question of whether adult learners can be fully socialized in a second culture. Learners’ awareness of sociocultural norms and frameworks and the concepts they acquire as a part of their socialization into assumptions, beliefs, and behaviors remain predominantly first culture-bound even in the case of advanced and proficient second language users. As many researchers have noted, language learners cannot simply shed their own cultural identity and fully adopt another because their natal culture is a part of themselves, and their socialization processes have formed and created them as social individuals (Byram and Morgan 1994).

Without an understanding of the manifestations and outcomes of sociocultural values, norms, and concepts on speech and behavior in language use, it may not be possible to become fully linguistically competent in another language. Being aware of the sociocultural frameworks does not mean, however, that learners have to become “native-like,” but an awareness of the second cultural norms can allow learners to make their own informed choices of what to say and how to say it. Because language use reflects the culture of its speakers in a myriad of ways, teaching the second culture together with the essential linguistic skills more adequately represents the connections between language and culture than teaching second language linguistic skills – or culture – in isolation.

Cross-References

References


