Cultural Competence and Foreign (*)
Language Learning / Teaching

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Abstract

Attaining the cultural competence by the learner is necessary in order to learn and master the language found in a particular culture. The cultural competence which is defined as the unconscious knowledge of the culture of the community in which the individual lives is considered one of the important competencies needed to attain communicative competence.

The present study examined the cultural competence and concluded that it was not given adequate attention at the level of learning and teaching compared to that given to communicative competence which is viewed as a prerequisite for attaining communicative competence. Finally, the study pionted out that culture teaching is inadequate to attain relative cultural competence. In order to learn foreign language, English in this case, successfully, the Arab learner has to learn the cultural patterns simultaneously with learning the linguistic patterns.

I. Introduction

Fifty years ago, Charles Fries (1945:1) raised two important questions about learning and mastering a foreign language. He asked the following questions : « Just what does learning a language mean? », and « When can one be said to have mastered a language.? » In answering these questions, Fries (1954 : 3) states that « A person has « learned » a foreign language when he has thus first,. within a limited vocabulary mastered the sound system (that is, when he can understand the stream of speech and achieve an understandable production of it) and has, second, made the structural devices (that is, the basic arrangements of utterances) matters of automatic habit.

He, then, goes beyond this to talk about another dimension or aspect of language learning, that is, language use. He says that « A thorough mastering of a language for practical communication with real understanding demands a systematic observation and recording of many features of the precise situations in which the varied sentences are used » (1945:57). He further declares that « If one wishes really to master a foreign language so that he may understand with some completeness the some substitute for the kind of background experience he has in his own language » (1945 : 58). The expression « background experience » denotes a significant factor or variable in language learning which belongs to paralinguistic

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aspects; that is the cultural aspect. In order to attain this « substitute for experience », the learner « must be extremely sensitive to impressions of the specific things of the environment in which the language is spoken and he must be really interested in the details of the whole life -experience of the people- as individuals, not the people as a mass » (ibid).

Fries continues his remarks about learning the patterns of foreign life. He explains that « In our observations of the « life » of the speakers of the language, we seek to learn, we must arrive at some conception of the « patterns of living » as a basis upon which to classify and evaluate the particular items we note, just as we seek the distinctive features of the « sound system » among the innumerable differences of individual sounds » (1945 : 60).

Fries' characterization of the process of learning and mastering a foreign language involves some important issues. He, it may be said, has laid down some of the basic principles in foreign language field which, later on, have received serious discussions and attention. He seems to have suggested implicitly what is known today as the « linguistic competence », (cultural competence), and « communicative competence » It should be pointed out that such terms or expressions were established many years later by linguists and anthropologists.

Fries' leading remarks about the goal of language learning and teaching are reiterated by another leading applied linguists. For example, Lado, (1976 : 25) states that « The goal in learing a foreign language as the ability to use it, understanding its meanings and connotations in terms of the target language and culture, and the ability to understand the speech and writing of natives of the target culture in terms of their meanings as well as their great ideas and achievments ». The ultimate goal in foreign language will, then, be to achieve communicative competence in foreign language; that is to use language appropriately in different situation. (Robinett, 1978). But this competence is seen as an outcome of, at least, another two competencies; namely linguistic competence and cultural competence. The purpose of the present study is to examine those competencies and other relevant issues which play important roles in language learning. The main focus will be directed to cultural competence and other cultural issues. The rationale that stands behind the study is the fact that the notion of cultural competence has not been given adequate attention in language learning and teaching compared to other competencies.

II. Communicative and Grammatical (Linguistic) Competence

Criticizing Chomsky's theory of generative grammer proposed first in 1957 and more comprehensively in 1965, Hymes (1972) points out that the theory is inadequate to account for everything about language. Chomsky (1965 : 3) focuses on grammatical (linguistic) competence of the ideal speaker -hearer that is, knowledge of his language and ignores the use of language. It is competence rather than performance, the actual use of language, which deserves a linguistic description. He puts it as follows:

Linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogeneous speach - community, who knows its language perfectly as is unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitation, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, and errors (random

or characteristic) in applying his knowledge of the languae in actual performance.

This abstraction has been rejected by Hymes because it does not take into account the fact that language does not exist in vacuum. In other word, in Chomsky's theory there is no place for the socio-cultural dimension of language which Humes considers as an integral part of linguistic theory. For Humes, a strong linguistic theory has to incorporate the socio-cultural or the social meaning of language. Regarding communicative competence, Hymes (1972 : 279) says that:

The acquisition of competence for use, indeed, can be stated in the same terms as acquisition of competence for grammar. Within the develpmental matrix in which knowledge of the sentences of a language is acquired, children also acquire knowledge of a set of ways in which sentences are used. From a finite experience of speech acts and their interdependence with sociocultural features, they develop a general theory of the speaking appropriate in their community which they employ, like other forms of tacit culture knowledege (competence) in conducting and interpreting social life. It should be made clear from the beginning that such discussion is concerned with native languae acquisition and linguistic theory in general. It has nothing to do with foreign language learning.

However, Hymes' introduction of « communicative competence » has influenced the methodology and the goal of foreign language learning and teaching. Applied linguists have borrowed the concept and employed it in their literature in order to propote language teachin. Suleiman (1993:66) summerizes such influence. He says:

Hymes' views an « communicative competence » served as a formative influence in the development of communicative language teaching, which, in turn brought the insights of sociolinguists more firmly than ever before into the realm of practical application in the classroom. This led to the development of fresh objectives, materials, and approaches which reflect the importance of training the learners in the appropriate manipulation of the linguistic code sociolinguistically and pragmatically. Needless to say, the net result of these developments was to pave the way for the promotion of a fresh perspective on the pedagogic dimension of the interaction between language and culture.

The notion of comunicative competence has also been tackled by some other scholars such as Savignon (1972), Paulston (1974) and Rivers (1976), but Hymes remains the forerunner in dealing with it at a more sophisticated level.

III. Cultural Competence

Learning a foreign language involves learning a number of competencies as alluded to earlier, principally, the grammatical or linguistic competence, rhetorical or discourse competence, strategic competence and sociolinguistic competence (Savignon, 1983). The latter competence does not, however, as some might think, imply exactly the cultural competence, though they both share some features. We think that we should add cultural competence which has not been introduced to foreign language literature although it was alluded to occasionally in different contexts and situations. One thing seems quite obvious is the fact that since the goal of foreign language learning is the achievement of communicative competence, it becomes necessary and logical to assume that all the remaining

competencies are to be taken as a prerequisite for this compentence; that is the communicative competence. We may, then, put the whole issue of mastering a foreign language as the mastering of the knowledge of language (linguistic competence) and the knowledge of other parameters especially culture.

The term « cultural competence » has been introduced in the same context of communicative competence as shown earlier by Humes (1972) and suggested by Keesing (1974:89) who draws an analogy between it and grammatical or linguistic competence. In this regard, he says:

Culture, conceived as a system of competence shared in its broad design and deeper principles, and varying between individuals in its specifities, is then not all of what an individual knows and thinks and feels about this world. It is his theory of what his fellows know, believe, and mean, his theory of the code followed, the game being played, in the society into which he was born... But note that the actor's « theory" of his culture, like his theory of his language, may be in large measure unconscious. Actors follow rules of which they are not consciously aware, and assume a world to be « out here » that they have in fact credited with culturally shaped and shaded patterns of mind.

It is noteworthy that applied linguistis have borrowed and elaborated the notion of communicative competence and used it to improve the foreign language learning and teaching strategy, whereas the notion of « cultural competence » which has occurred in the same context has largely been ignored by such linguists.

IV. Language Learning and Culture Learning / Teaching

Although the term « culture » is recognized as being a broad and sometimes vague concept, most definitions seem to share certain features concerning the nature of the concept. The concept is characterized as being one form of social, cognitive and inherited knowledge in addition to its actual manifestation in a form of behaviour. Sapir (1921:218) notes that culture is simply « what a society does and thinks. « He, then, defines it in an explicit and precise way as « The socially inherited assemblage of practices and beliefs that determines the texture of our lives » (1921:221). Greenberg, a well known anthropologist, lists a number of things which altogether form what is known as culture. They include the ((knowledge, technological skills, modes of interpersonal adjustment, values, beliefs)) (1968:3). Popenoe (1974:112) defines culture as ((the system of values and meanings shared by a group or society, including the embodiment of those values and meanings in material objects)). Finally, Al-Kasimi (1982) suggests three major components of culture: (1) Cognitive aspect of culture, (2) Normative aspect of culture, (3)Material aspects of culture. However, we think that the normative aspect which is, indeed, viewed as one type of knowledge, should be included in the cognitive aspect of culture. By so doing, culture is best seen as having two levels: Cognitive or epistemological and material level.

The relationship that exists between language and culture has been repeatedly emphasized by different scholars, specialists and nonspecialists alike. There is no question that the intimate relationship that exists between language and culture is quite obvious. When the Arab culture, for example, is mentioned, the Arabic language is implied in this culture and when the Arabic language is examined, the Arab culture is presumbly there. Language is the carrier of culture. ((It is largely)) as Corder

(1973:70) points ((though not exclusively, through the language of the community that the child acquires the attitudes, values and ways of behaving that we call its culture)). Language, therefore, may be viewed as one component of culture. On the relationship between language and culture, Brooks (1964:85) argues that ((it is better to see the special characteristics of a language as cultural entities and to recognize that language enters into the learning and use of nearly all other cultural elements)). In this regard, Sapir (1958:1) states that ((of all aspects of culture, it is a fair guess that language was the first to receive a highly developed form that its essential perfection is a prerequisite to the development of culture as a whole)). Hannerz (1973:237), as well, asserts that ((language is at the same time a cultural phenomenon and the major medium of cultural expression)).

In the light of the above characterization of such relationship between language and culture, it is reasonable to assume that learning a language implies the learning of a culture. That is, it may be put as follows: Successful language learning requires a learner to learn, understand and internalize the knowledge of the culture in which language exists whether that is a native or foreign culture. Hartman and Judd (1978:383) state that ((language learning is necessarily a culture learning process)). Similarly, Brown (1978:123) suggests that ((the acquisition of a second language...is also the acquisition of a second culture)).

It follows, then, that, learning a new language entails the learning of a new culture. Just as previous linguistic experience is known and confirmed, several times by different scholars from differnent countries, to interfer in the learning of new foreign linguistic items such as sounds, the

same thing may be said about cultural experience. So, it is expected that the learner of a foreign language will transfer his native cultural patterns to new foreign cultural situation [1]. Lado (1976:30) makes this point explicit as he says that ((The native culture experience will interfer with those cultural patterns and meanings that are not equatable with similar one or that are partially similar but function differently in the target culture)). This is, of course, logical simply because culture, especially its cognitive aspects, as is language, is unconscious knowledge stored in the mind in a form of rules which are most likely transferable to new situations. Therefore, it is necessary for the learner to learn the rules of the foreign culture if he is willing to learn the foreign language successfully and use it effectively because according to Gumpers (1964:150) ((The more we know about a particular society, the more effectively we can communicate in it)). Also Applegate (975:271) reminds us that ((Communication can only be effective when the student is also sensitive to the social and cultural aspects of language use and how these differ between his first and second language)). In addition, the learner has to learn the rules of speaking which, of course, are culturally determined and conditioned in order to communicate appropriately in foreign language. Such rules include ((When to talk and when to keep silent, how loud to talk and with what intonation, what constitutes a polite request and what a refusal, how to initiate a conversation and how to end one, when to interpret an utterance literally and when to take it as a formulaic convention)) (ibid).

This whole discussion brings us to the significance of teaching culture simultaneously with teaching foreign language. By so doing, we attempt and hope to overcome learning difficulties

encountered by the learner. In fact, we, as language teachers, have no choice but to teach cultural elements or patterns along with linguistic patterns. Politzer (1959:100-101) asserts that:

As language teachers we must be interested in the study foreign culture... not because we necessarily want to teach the culture of the other country but because we have to teach it. If we teach language without teaching at the same time the culture in which it operates we are teaching meaningless symbols or symbols to which the student attaches the wrong meaning'; for unless he is warned, unless he receives cultural instruction, he will associate American concepts or objects with the foreign symbols.

A close look at what is going in the foreign language classrooms in the Arab countries shows that culture teaching is almost neglected and it occupies a secondary position in the teacher's daily teaching plans as well as in the curriculum designer's strategy. The teacher's main concern is to introduce linguistic items without necessarily relating them to their cultural contexts. But, relating the communicative activities to their social meanings in terms of reflecting the foreign culture has become an important issue in foreign language literature (Paulston, 1978).

To what extent is the notion of acculturation relevant to culture taching in foreign language classroom.? Acculturation is known as the gradual adaptation of the individual or group to foreign culture. This adaptation includes a process of modification in the learner's cultural knowledge and behaviour. The process of acculturation does not necessarily require an individual to abandon his life-style and values in favor of those of the target language. Originally, the notion of acculturation was dealt with at the group level by Schumann. We think that the situation is applicable and may be extended to the individual, too. Accordingly, the individual simply adapts to ((the life style and values of the TL group, but at the same time maintains their (his) own cultural patterns for use in intragroup relations)) (Schumann, 1976:136). Acculturation is, as Linton (1986:29) notes ((a reflection of mind as well as culture)). In culture teaching the goal should not be directed to acculturation bacause of three reasons. Firstly, acculturation process could be viewed as a threatening process in the first place in foreign language class. Secondly, it is a difficult thing to achieve in a foreign language class. Secondly, it is a difficult thing to achieve in a foreign language class. And, thirdly, acculturation is, according to Mclauglin (1987:132) ((addressed to naturalistic adult second language acquisition, where learners have more or less contact with the target language community. The model says nothing about classroom second language where learners do not have contact with native speakers other than teacher)). What we should aim at in culture teaching is what we call relative cultural competence but not absolute one because the latter which is usually acquired in the native society during the early years of life, is extremely difficult to achieve in a classroom through foreign language course. But differently, it seems unrealistic to identify our immediate goal of culture teaching as the absolute cultural competence. We want the learner to become competent in manipulating cultural patterns unconsciously while manipulating the foreign language patterns and vice versa. That is, the learner is expected to employ both his linguistic and cultural competence effectively in order to achieve the ultimate

goal, namely communicative competence.

Relevant to culture teaching is the issue of similarity between the native and foreign cultures.The treatment of the issue is not recent; it goes back to the early writings of leading linguist such as Lado (1957) who introduced the notion of cultural interference. However an extensive treatment of this issue has been done under a different title known as « social distance » by John Schumann (1976). He summerizes the notion of social distance as follows: ((The greater the social distance between the two groups, the more difficult it is for the members of 2LL group to acquire the language as the TL)) (1976:135). Social distance is determined by a number of factors including the degree of congruency of the two cultures and the attitudes held by the members of the two groups towards each other. Therefore, the degree of similarity and the nature of the attitudes involved will determine the learner's sucess in foreign language learning. The social distance hypothesis faces a problem of how to determine or measure the distance that exists between cultures. To solve this problem, Acton (1979) suggests to measure what he calls the perceived social distance rather than the actual social distance. Theoretically, the assumptions of this hypothesis sound reasonable and even logical, but some challenge could arise from practical results, either in situations in which English is taught as a foreign language in English speaking countries or in nonEnglish speaking countries such as the Arab countries.

Theoretically, too, if we examine the Arabic culture of the Arab students and the British or American (Western) culture. which represents the foreign culture, we conclude that they are two totally different cultures because of a number of reasons. Firstly, Arabic and English languages found in the cultures belong to two different language families; the Semitic and the Indo European families respectively. The languages are different in many respects; sounds, word structure, sentence structure...etc. They also use two different writing systems. Secondly, religion which is considered one of the major components of culture is different in both cultures. Islam stands in opposition to Christianity. Religion in the Arabic life, generally speaking, in taken to be a constitution for this life from which the social, economic and political values are derived. Thirdly, the Arab culture is mostly considered a bedouin tradition. (Al-Kasimi, 1982). Originally, the Arab culture had grown in the Arab Peninsula; specifically in the desert, and the bedouins were the originator of this culture. Nowadays, the bedouin tradition and desert life occupy a minor sector in the Arab life. Urban life is the dominant life. Finally, the two cultures have been in historical conflict for centuries. The conflict originated in the Crusades and culminated in the new colonialism in the nineteenh and the twentieth centuries. In the light of the above characterization, the attitude of the Arab learners toward English and its speakers is unquestionably negative. The Arab learner's situation in this case is undoubtedly dissimilar to a Brazilian, for example, learning the English language.

What is expected in the light of the above incongruity of the two cultures is the fact that the social distance which exists between these two dissimilar cultures seems to be great. Accordingly, the Arab learner of English will, theoretically speaking, face serious difficulties. Not only this, but he is even expected to fail in adapting to the foreign culture, which in return, will affect his learning and mastering of the English language. Svanes (1987:357) explicates the

situation.

It is...reasonable to assume that the more one has in common with the target language group, the easier it will be to learn the language... If the TL group belongs to the same type of language as the mother tongue, this will facilitate language learning. And if one is familiar with the culture of the host country, the easier it will be to communicate, and this again will promote language learing. Closeness in cultural background will also imply that one's own culture is respected and one is in a way a member of a cultural majority. Learning a second language will, then, be felt as « additive » and not as « substracting » something valuable from one's culture... When one belongs to the same cultural majority as the TL group, interest in the TL group, interest in the TL culture and people is not felt as a threat to one's identity.

The English syllable designed for the Arab learners in different Arab countries lack a well defined strategy for teaching foreign culture. It is noticeable that teaching cultural items occurs accidently and without any teacher's serious attention [2]. Texts or lessons included in the syllabus are concerned with the Arab life or culture [3]. English is employed to describe various cultural aspects of the Arabic culture on different occasions. This situation invites one to venture and claim that, although language, and culture are intimately related, foreign culture could be relatively or partially neutralized in one way or another. Now, imagine that the English language is used to describe one of the traditional features of the Arabic culture practiced in an Arab country or the language is used to describe a famous dish or an annual Arab festival, where will the learner encounter foreign cultural items and learn them? What is expected is that those symbols, their arrangements and their meanings, altogether known as language, will carry a few or none of the foreign cultural items. Therefore, it is safe to argue that culture teaching in the Arab countries is very limted although it varies from one country into another. In fact, a drastic change and significant measures have to be initiated so as culture teaching will improve.

One of the reasons suggested for the failure of the Arab learner to attain good proficiency in English is attributed to a limited exposure to foreign culture. Of course, there are other important reasons for this faillure, but this reason sems to be essential. The problem is not a matter of adaptability to the foreign culture and its speakers. In other words, it is not a matter of social distance. Observations and comments regarding this issue reported by foreign specialists, who worked with Arab students, referred to somtimes as Middle Eastern students, are amazing and surprising. Are the Arab students more or less adaptable to American culture, for example, than other students from other cultural backgrounds? The answer is simple and given by Parker, et al (1968:94).

They say that ((Almost all who deal with foreign students in the U.S. agree that Middle Eastern students are among the most adaptable. They can become fully « Americanized » within a short of time. Those who have seen them in the U.S. and in their own countries can only marvel at how differently they behave in each culture.)). They continue their remarks and reason such adaptability by arguing that: Such adaptability is not a weakness. The Middle Eastern is not being fickle or shallow. The roots of such behaviour lie within a basic characteristic of his society. Social morality prevails over personal morality, thus concepts of right and wrong,

sin and shame, derive not from an idividual determants of appropriate behaviour, but from what society in general dictates as the social norm. (1986:95).

The reasoning is not, however, so convincing especially if we go back to those elements which contribute to the dissimilarity of the two cultures. At any rate, those remarks should be taken seriously and brought up as forceful evidence against the social distance hypothesis although they concern the Arab learners Learning English in an English speaking country. In fact, such evidence is adequate enough to weaken the hypothesis or even turns it up side down. Of course, given the fact that the Arab learners of English are good adapters to foreign culture, one may conclude by saying that they must be good language leanners, too.

The quick adaptability of the Arab learner to foreign culture arouses curiosity with regard to the real reason or reasons for such type of change. What really makes the Arab learner more adaptable to western culture (s) than other learner from different linguistic and cultural background attending the same school and living in the same community in the U.S.? The answer will be revealing because it will likely reveal interesting things about widely held views and neglected issues concerning language and culture learning and teaching. However, it is beyond the scope of the present study to attempt to deal with this issue. We believe that before a definite answer is given, a full research has to be conducted within the field of anthropology rather than in linguistics.

V. Conclusion

The present study explored the issue of cultural competence and its relationship with foreign language learning teaching. The discussion involved a number of important and various aspects of this issue including the relationship between language and culture, acculturation, social distance and culture teaching. Finally, the following conclusions may be made:

1) Learning and mastering a foreign language require the learner to learn the linguistic patterns as well as the cultural patterns.

2) Relating linguistic paterns to their appropriate cultural contexts and meanings is essential in foreign language teaching.

3) The goal of learning a foreign language is to achieve communicative competence which is the outcome of learning other competencies such as grammatial or linguistic, cultural, strategic and others.

4) Cultural competence, compared to communicative competence, has not been given adequate attention although it is a prerequisite to achieve the latter.

5) Cultural competence comes next to grammatical (linguistic) competence in terms of its significance.

6) The goal of teaching and learning culture should be directed not to achieve acculturation or what we call absolute cultural competence. Rather, it has to aim at achieving relative speakers who acquire it during the early years of life.

7) Language teaching can benefit substantially from linguistic theory, for example the concept of communicative competence and other concepts.

8) Learning a foreign culture is essential to language learning and it should be done systematically and simultaneously with linguistic patterns in order to achieve successful learning.

9) It is not enough to prepare English texts dealing with the learner's native culture. These texts should reflect the culture of the speakers of the foreign language in

the first place. In other words, harmony is needed in teaching foreign culture. The linguistic items are preferably devoid from the context of the Arab culture.

10) Most of the cultural items may be neutralized in the above case if English is employed to describe the Arabic cultural items.

11) Acculturation could be threatening and unrealistic objective in the case of teching English in the Arab countries.. In fact, acculturation is somehow irrelevant to classroom teacbing. Alternatively, cultural competence should promoted.

12) Social distance hypothesis, as it stands, is questionable because it cannot account well for certain issues such as the quick adaptability of the Arab learners in English speaking countries such as the U.S. despite the fact of the dissimilarity of the two cultures involved.

13) English texts in some Arab countries are not foreign culture oriented. Therefore, mor culture teaching is highly recommended.

14) The study assumes or claims that the Arab learners are good learners of English whether they learn English in the Arab countries of in English speaking ones provided that they are well instructed in the first place in terms of culture teaching and other types of teaching.

15) More research is needed in order to determine the real reasons of the quick adaptability of the Arab learners to the western culture.

Notes:

1) A simple low and weak « yes » or « no » from a native speaker of English to indicate a positive or negative situation was not adequate enough to mean exactly what they are supposed to mean to a native speaker.

This is what happened with the writer when he first went to the U.S. in 1980 as a graduate student and started communicating with native speakers of English.. I expected to hear a loud and strong « yes » or « no » instead of the above ones. I think this situation may be safely extended to other Arab students.

2) This judgment is based on the writer's experience in teaching English in intermediate schools for six years in an Arab country.

3) The pupil's book of the first secondary level in an Arab country contains only three lessons which deal with foreign life style (culture) out of total of twelve lessons directed to Arab culture.

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