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LEARNING CULTURE CONTEXTS OF TARGET LANGUAGE IN ESL (ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE) TEACHING AT +2 LEVEL OF CBSE

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Abstract

Learning another language means having to learn another culture (Brown, 2000). This statement calls into question traditional teaching techniques as most of these focused purely on the linguistic side of language learning and not on the cultural. Now that the importance of teaching culture alongside language has gained momentum, it has brought about significant changes in the teaching process. It is important to note that even the teachers using past methodologies, to some degree shared cultural knowledge with their students as well. This is because culture is so deeply embedded in any language and thus is transmitted unknowingly. Abundant attestation proves that there is a close link between the culture and language and therefore influences each other. This close relationship has a profound effect on language teaching and learning by bringing the teaching of cultural competence to the forefront. In the case of learning English as a target Language we have to keep an eye on the relationship of culture and language for a better acquisition and cultural competency. This paper aims to highlight the significance of integrating cultural contexts in ESL teaching at the +2 level of CBSE. By analysing the interplay between language and culture, it seeks to enhance students' communicative competence and intercultural understanding, ultimately leading to more effective language acquisition.

Keywords

ESL, Cultural Content, Language, Cultural Competence, Pedagogical Strategies, Cross-Cultural Communication, Technology and Human Consciousness.

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Introduction

Language is a tool of communication. It consists of the sounds and words of that language placed together according to the norms of grammar of that language. Ideally speaking it must be understood as objectively as possible. But in the real world it contains many other factors that decide how a sequence of sounds and words is understood. In fact, language is subject to culturally conditioned attitudes and behaviours, customs and traditions, thoughts and lifestyles of the culture in which it operates.

In other words, it conveys culture which cannot be left ignored in the language classrooms. Therefore, when we learn a language, we do not simply learn to interpret the linguistic signs and decode them, we actually learn certain patterns of behaviour as well. The target or second language learning becomes a sensitive and crucial part of a learner's academic and emotional growth. The teaching and learning of English as a second Language at +2 or the senior secondary level in India is no doubt done with the primary purpose to improve the proficiency of the learner in the basic skills of English i.e. LSRW (Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing).

However, apart from enhancing the basic skills of the learner the teaching of English as a Second Language (ESL) fulfills the task related to the cultural sensibility and compatibility. The fact is that no Language learning and teaching can be done without transferring the culture encoded in the Language which is sometimes done with a purpose but most of the times it is integrated or the Second Language learning cannot be separated from this very aspect of cultural education or cultural learning. A number of linguists pointed out towards the role of language in culture learning and vice versa and it has been observed that the teaching and learning of any language as a foreign language or a second language is done to make the learners aware of a foreign culture

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as well. Therefore, when we learn or teach a language, we do not only learn to interpret the signs or to decode them, we actually learn certain patterns of behaviour as well.

Language conveys culture in which it operates. Since a language is a subject to the culture of the community or the civilization; the language can be completely comprehensible by learners if language learning and cultural learning is done simultaneously. Culture in all possible forms: beliefs or value, tangible or intangible, are explained and taught to the learners who possess some base culture before they are taught the elements of the target language and culture. In the teaching of English as a second language we find the cultural transfer particularly in some obvious aspects like social behaviour, greeting, names, relation and relation terms, social and religious function, cuisines and dressing sense, as well as reference to or allusions from religious books or literary works, history of the cultural beliefs of the civilization and the like. For instance, celebration like Hanukkah (the Feast of Lights in Hebrew is a festival) is something new for the students from Indian background; similarly, games like mjolis (a Swedish card game) need explanation from the language teacher.

A proper language learning demands compatibility with its cultural content, as there can be no real learning of a language without understanding the patterns and values of the culture of which it is either a part or which its representing. Fries and Fries remarks (1985):

To deal with the culture and life of a people is not just an adjunct of a particular language course... but an essential feature of every stage of language learning...

Methodology

The paper employs a qualitative methodology based on analysis of published articles and research papers, books and a number of case studies from CBSE schools. From the studies, which have been conducted in India to assess the parameters leading to cultural development.

Aims and Objectives

Each culture or nation has its own unique cultural norms, which are nurtured and shared by its members within the community and manifested in terms of linguistics, paralinguistic and non-verbal forms. Language is inseparable from culture. When a learner learns about language they also learn its culture and when they learn to use a new language they learn to exchange discourses with other individuals from a new culture. The aims and objectives of the paper are to highlight that language pre-eminently embodies the values and meanings of culture, refers to cultural artifacts and signal people's cultural identity. Therefore, to behave in a culturally appropriate manner, to understand the target people and language, and their ways of life, and to gain successful intercultural communication in terms of verbal and non-verbal forms to the language choices become very important issue while learning and teaching the foreign or target language. The foreign language or the second or target language may be misunderstood because its cultural content differs from the native patterns, this difference needs proper interpretation for better understanding of the new language, especially when the language is being taught for "educational purpose", it becomes indispensable. Robert Lado (1964) has very well remarked:

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...to become really educated, it is necessary for a student to absorb the full cultural meaning of the target language where it differs significantly from the native one.

Literature Review

There are a number of arguments both for and against the intricate relationship between language and culture. But before venturing into the disputed territory of whether culture and language are somehow related, it is best to explore the definition of "culture" first. There have been many definitions over the years, many of which tend to have one thing in common- shared values for a way of life in a society. For example, Goodenough's (1957) definition of culture was

A society's culture consists of whatever it is one has to know or believes in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members... Culture is not a material phenomenon; it does not consist of things, people, behaviour, or emotions.

Another definition reads:

The accumulated habits, attitudes, and beliefs of a group of people that define for them general behaviour and way of life...

Another definition states that culture is the

Learned behaviour of people, which includes their belief system and language, their social relationships their institutions and organizations, and their material goods... (As cited in [web, www.knowledgecommission.gov.in](http://web.www.knowledgecommission.gov.in). retrieved Oct. 2, 2005, p. I).

Bates and Plog (1976) say,

The system of shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviours and artifacts that the members of society use to cope with their world and with one another and that are transmitted from generation to generation through learning.

All these definitions indicate a strong existence of a relationship between culture and language.

Discussion and Result

To accentuate the importance of culture we must not forget that English came to India with the East India Company and the Christian Missionaries, and spread all over India during the stay of the British. The idea to get rid of English after the British left India crossed many mind but found no takers. English left but English stayed on. Once the independence was gained the idea of English as being just a foreign language with an alien base needed an afterthought and the perception was now guided by the need of the hour. India's economic, industrial, professional, political, and social life all demanded modernism which could not be possible without English language. Particularly in the present scenario when English has got the global status with the process of globalization. Even though English is primarily a second language in India, it is the medium in which a large number of the incarnations in a variety of remain are carried out. In India, the problem in teaching or learning culture in classroom is not only of what component of culture is to be taught, but the classroom conditions in which the teaching is done. In a multi-cultural and multi-ethnic country like India, students do not share one common culture but they belong too many. They cannot grasp the meaning system of one language due to their own previous cultural background. As the

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knowledge of First Language interferes in the learning of SL or target language, the cultural background of learners too does impede in learning the culture encoded in the second language. While teaching English in the classroom, the teacher of the second languages has to explain certain cultural contents at the level of meaning to the students, hence students invariably learn cultural patterns of the target language. In a multicultural society like India, where we have students from various cultural groups, ethnic or religious faith, a teacher as well as a learner has to face certain problem occurring due to cultural diversity.

Culture, being an important and integral part of human society, deals with the communication of language of the individuals in a variety of situations and circumstances. They tend to learn more than one language for a number of reasons including academic and professional purpose of life. English, being a world language the task to deal with these issues becomes more challenging. The writers using English as their tool of communication belong to diverse geographical regions, social and cultural groups. They use different cultural backgrounds. British, American, Indian, African writers writing in English use different cultural contexts. Therefore, it demands a wider exposure to diverse cultural contexts when English is taught as a second language.

However, after decades of development in language teaching, cultural learning has increasingly become an important component in the language curriculum as well as in the training programmes for language teachers. However, cultural learning while teaching as a second language (ESL) at +2 levels of school education in India has not received its due.

Integrating cultural awareness in a foreign language learning programme requires teacher to be efficient communicators of target language. The use of cultural knowledge in communication emphasizes the importance of negotiating meanings embedded in values, customs, and norms. Most schools in the country do not have proper facilities and proficient teachers needed to cater to the demand of teaching ESL with the cultural aspect attached to it. English language education requires teachers who are skilled and knowledgeable as well as a proper planner to teach the language in its entirety which would include cultural learning as an imperative part of the language learning and teaching process.

Over the centuries, many new ideas, theories, experiments, or debates concerning language teaching and the integration of culture have come up, and then been taken over later by others during the different periods of the history of foreign language teaching throughout the world, in an attempt to improve the existing language teaching methods, and to make the language more effective. These changes have been a response to a number of factors; constantly advancing society which creates new rules for language in society, the development of social science, and new objectives of language teaching. The condition of ESL teaching in India is well defined in the following ways:

English in India today is a symbol of people's aspirations for quality in education and fuller participation in national and international life.....(NCERT 2006)

The English language has evolved as a powerful medium for a revolutionary change in India. English was accepted as the second language in India in a gradual process. Along with the acceptance of English there come the acknowledgements for English culture as well. English in India is not just used as a useful skill, but as an

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influential second language. This language symbolizes standardized better life away from poverty and oppression. The challenges of providing universal access to English are significant, but the speed and outcome of progress is not very satisfactory owing it to a number of reasons. Lack of deliberate strategies for cultural learning in the ESL classroom is one of the major reasons. There is no dearth of grammatically sound curriculum, teachers and trainers in India, the syllabus and teaching material are also found in variedly and plenty. But when the comparison is made on the attention paid to the cultural learning aspect of the language with the attention paid on grammar, phonology, and lexis, cultural learning lacks behind. The study of a language entails the study of the culture in which it operates, and vice-versa. Teaching ESL without promoting an understanding of the target culture and language may result in learners possessing linguistic competence devoid of the cultural competence. The end result of such teaching would only produce a batch of learners, who might be able to speak or write in English language but would not be able to master the language in its true sense.

Generally, Language is connected to social and cultural values which establish language as a social and cultural phenomenon. Naturally, each culture has its own cultural values and aspects and these values change from one culture to another. Sometimes, the values of culture might be entirely different from another. It may lead to communication problems among learners who are not aware of the values and features of other culture. As far as the relationship between culture and language is concerned, there is no such thing as human nature independent of culture. No language could be learnt by completely ignoring the culture of the target language. Rather cultural learning is an automatic process, which takes place when a learner comes into contact with a second language or a foreign language. Sometimes it happens in an ESL classroom, but a deliberate strategy attached with cultural learning could yield better results. The ESL classrooms can act as informal cultural laboratories for the ESL learners, while the learners learn a foreign culture automatically while they are learning the language which was once foreign to them. Therefore, the teaching or learning must be done with keeping in mind the purpose of teaching or learning ESL which is to train learner to participate completely both linguistically and culturally at the global level of communication and sharing knowledge. It is an acknowledged fact that communication in any form invokes culture and communicating in FL (Foreign Language) or SL (Second Language) in performing another culture. The miscommunication of any kind while teaching the language is very much expected, however, when the culture is taken into context along with the language the cross-cultural awareness minimizes the probability of miscommunications also.

Culture is not always taught exclusively to the second or foreign language learner, it is an inclusive part of the language. At senior secondary or +2 level of education the learner of ESL is already acquainted with the major part of English culture needed for his or her standard of learning. Some aspects of ESL culture is assimilated and accepted in such a manner by the learner at this stage of education that they may not be able to separate it from their own culture to target culture.

Teaching material (including textbooks, workbook, teacher's manuals, supplementary materials, etc.) of the present time has evolved as a result of developments in the field of textbook construction for at least seventy years. Efficient

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materials incorporate a number of reframes and innovations that began at different times and in different places during this century. Along with the vocabulary teaching, syllabus and other teaching materials are equally important and crucial for cultural learning at +2 levels of school education. Along with the LSRW goals, both CBSE and ICSE clearly include the use of the language for social and cultural interactions. The syllabus prescribed by CBSE and ICSE include literary texts. Literature has been used as a pedagogical tool in teaching the second language learning and teaching. It can also be used as a fundamental source to expose students to different facets and various aspects of culture and cultural learning. Literature can be utilized as a stimulus in ESL classroom to get a better understanding of the everyday chores and activities of the foreign culture and also to help learners to critically analyse and compare it with their perspective culture. In this whole process, culture learning becomes a dialogue process where the learners are facilitated to study their values, perceptions, and practices in a redefined persuasive discourse, as culture can find its expression through the medium of literature in its best ever form. Literary texts are an indispensable and very important resource of authentic language that learners can avail themselves to. Literature can become a medium of teaching culture in second and the foreign language classroom as literature has the capacity to both language and a situation simultaneously i.e. a learner gets to know a language well through a situation in a contextualized form.

Teaching of vocabulary and syntax in the context of culture in ESL classroom is also important. The cultural aspect, of the meaning and vocabulary remains important and cannot be overlooked at while acquiring and learning vocabulary of a foreign language or second language. The study of vocabulary is at the centre of language learning. While learning a new language one cannot deny the importance of vocabulary not only for reading achievement but also for social and economic advancement. With English being recognised as a universal or global language and its importance and presence expanding with every passing day, an ESL learner needs to be equipped well with the words of English language along with cultural learning which is integral to vocabulary learning, meaning of words are better understood in their association of specific culture and the context they are used. The whole purpose of vocabulary teaching should be to make learners able to grasp meaning of words in a social-cultural milieu as a language is basically culture and so is the meaning of words.

Conclusion

English language teaching or learning, demands to develop competence among the learners linguistically and culturally at the global level and indigenous level in matters of communication and sharing knowledge. Cultural learning research in the domain of English as a second language teaching at the +2 Level proves to be very crucial of language acquisition. The age group of the students in the India studying the CBSE and ICSE syllabi at +2 Level, is very formative. It moulds their psyche and character. The cultural exposure given at this stage of education and age can plug the social and cultural gap by serious initiatives taken towards cultural learning through curricular discussions. English as a discipline of humanities has and should have a purpose of crafting the children in such a way that they have the ideas which humanities as a domain of study and other discipline or as a faculty holds. These are the ideas for promoting culture, mutual understanding, humanity, equality, peaceful co-existence and the like.

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Also, because English language has been accepted worldwide as a global language, advancement and development that India and its people wish to achieve depends very much, if not totally, on the English language. By strategically imparting cultural learning at the +2 levels of school education not only our national goals but also international standards can be met. The necessary inclusion of cultural learning with ESL learning and teaching would open further national and international avenues for Indian learners of English language.

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