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The Role of Culture in Second Language Learning: A Critical View of Regional Medium of Instruction Schools in India

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Abstract: The issue of teaching and learning culture in second language education has generated much interest among scholars over the years. The aim of this paper is to establish the significance of integrating culture into second language education and how such integration can help improve English learning process in Regional medium schools in India. This paper commences by establishing the significant role that cultural learning plays in English language classroom. This is followed by identifying and analyzing whose culture of English speakers to be taught in Indian English language classroom. Several recommendations and suggestions on how to deploy teaching of culture for effective learning of English are made. This is done by enumerating challenges and obstacles that might hinder effective teaching and learning of culture in the country's second language classrooms. Finally, various areas where future research in the teaching and learning of culture are needed in Indian second language education are highlighted.

Keywords: Culture, Learning, English, Medium, Instruction, India

Introduction

Since the advent of second language learning research, much attention has been given to classroom environment, teacher, and cognitive behavior as a factor that affects the success of an individual in second language learning. But in the last decade, researchers have shifted focus towards the role that culture plays in language learning. This is due to growing awareness among scholars on the importance of culture as a facilitating tool for creating effective second language learning.

Many scholars have reached consensus on the importance of culture in second language learning. Fengping Gao (2006) stated that language learning requires cultural competence. Excluding the paradigm of four language skills, Tomalin (2008) advocates for additional skill which he called culture. Comprehensive studies in Malaysia, United State, and Turkey reported the significant role that culture plays in teaching and learning English as a foreign or second language (Abdullah 2010; Galeano 2014). However, little literature has been published in this area in India especially as it affects regional medium schools.

The aim of this paper is to re-examine the role of culture in second language learning and how it can be used as a tool to improve second language learning in regional medium schools in India. This will open a new vista of research in the area of teaching and learning culture in India.

Role of Cultural Learning in Second Language Learning

Findings of many scholars have established that learning a culture of a target language is very important in achieving success in learning the new language. Kramersch (2008) states that teaching of any language should be focused not only on teaching of linguistics code but also on teaching meaning and the best way to teach meaning of a language is by teaching its culture. This is vital because language can only create and interpret meaning within a cultural context in which the language exists. According to Liddicoat et al. (2003), in order to learn communication in a second/foreign language, it is necessary to create awareness on ways

in which culture interrelates with language whenever it is used. In the findings of Medina (1993), students who truly acquire high competency in the target language successfully are those who have mastered the cultural context such as songs in which the target language exists.

Concisely, culture is not about information but understanding. Hence, in order to learn about culture, there is need to engage with the linguistic and non-linguistics practices of the culture by gaining insight into the way of living in a particular cultural context. This will allow the learner to understand how language is used and how things are said and done in a cultural context.

The Importance of Teaching Culture in Indian English classroom

The concept and value of teaching culture with the sole aim of improving second language learning shed more light on many issues that are germane to English language teaching and learning in India. Firstly, there are two kinds of language school systems in India, the regional medium school and English medium school. The regional medium schools are affordable schools managed by the government while the English medium schools are expensive and managed by the private bodies (in general). Only parents with strong economic capital can afford to send their children to English medium school because the English learning achievements in this medium of instruction schools are higher than the regional medium schools. The main reason for this better English learning outcome is because of the inclusion of cultural activities into the school English curriculum. This provides an explanation to the reason why English is being referred to as language of the savant and elite in India (Vulli 2014).

Secondly, the concept of teaching the learners English language cultures in regional medium school with the aim of gaining high linguistic competence in both L1 and L2 is very important at the time when most of these schools are shutting down at the expense of the English medium schools. However, it has been established that strong knowledge in mother tongue increases learner's chances of learning English successfully. Therefore, the low level of English achievement in regional medium school can be attributed to lack of cultural activities

in both L1 and L2. If that is the case, there is need is to promote learning of cultural activities in L1 so that learner can easily master second language.

Lastly, lack of motivation has been cited as the major problem of students in mother tongue medium school. According to Stern (1992), the best situation to use culture as a tool to facilitate second language learning is when students are psychologically removed from the reality of the second culture. This occurred when there is a huge linguistic distance between learner's native language and target language.

Whose Culture to Teach in Indian English Classrooms?

The question of whose culture to teach along with English has generated different views among scholars in the field of cultural linguistic. The first view states that “target language culture should be taught along with English to acculturate language learners into the culture of native English speaking countries (Byram and Fleming 1998). The second perspective argues that target language culture should not be taught because English in most countries exists as an institutionalized variety (Kachru 1992). The third view supports the teaching of local culture in English Language classroom (Kramsch and Sullivan 1996). The fourth view argues that since English has become a lingua franca, then it should be taught in a culture-free context. The recent view on this issue was presented by (Kumaravadivelu 2008) who states that learners should be taught global culture since the world is now a global village. Meanwhile, in the light of English language education in India, all these views can be analyzed as follows:

Firstly, the world has become a global village. According to Kumaravadivelu (2008), “the contemporary world is marked by dwindling space, shrinking time and disappearing borders, resulting in an unprecedented flow not only of economic capital and consumer goods and but also of cultural values across the but also of cultural values the world (147)”. Therefore, a very good integration of global culture into Indian English language classrooms will help Indian English learners to apply their language skills effectively in a contemporary society. In a nutshell, English should be taught as an

international language (TEIL). According to Mee (1996) on culture content, culture can be divided into three types – the source which involves cultures learner's culture, targets' cultures which comprise inner circle countries, and international target culture. The mixture of these three types of culture is called Blended cultures. Brown (2012) explains that blended culture as content is appropriate for cross-cultural education. Thus, since India has been positively affected by globalization, there is important to promote TEIL in English language classroom. However, teacher should not focus on a particular local or target culture but all should be presented and discussed equally (Holliday 2003).

Regarding the second view on the teaching of learners' culture, Indian English is a distinct institutionalized variety of English. It is used mainly by Indians who borrow words from their native language in order to convey the flavors raciness of the mother tongue (Rizwan 2009). Indian English is a product that has undergone the process in the non-native context with various degrees of culture-boundness (Kachru 1981). Therefore, a successful learning of any variety of English requires a wide understanding of the contexts and culture in which the variety of the English exists. Another major reason for teaching Indian culture is because learners have their own sets of cultural experiences and amalgamation which needs to be addressed during English language learning process. This is necessary so that the language can be meaningful and relevant to the learner (Regmi 2011).

Teaching the culture of the English native speakers alone in India can be supported for various reasons. According to a survey conducted by Hohenthal (1994), 70% of Indians prefer British English, followed by the Indian variety of English (17%) and American English (10%). The preference for British English might be due to long colonial history that India had with the British and the notion that British English is the world standard accent of Standard English. Meanwhile, the increasing global acceptance of American entertainment such as Hollywood movies might be responsible for the growing interest of the younger generation for American English. Additionally, learning of American English might be for instrumental purpose such as securing BPO jobs.

This is evident in the continuous rise of BPO jobs and call centers owned by the American companies in India.

Having examined all the issues related to the kind of culture that should be taught in English language classroom in India. We can conclude that both local culture and other international culture (including both western countries and non-western countries) are important for English learners because of the global status that English has attained in terms of acceptability. Thus, blended culture should be taught as content in Indian English classroom.

Ways to Improve Teaching of Culture in English Language Classroom

Suggestions on how to effectively integrate teaching of culture into English language classroom especially in regional medium schools can only be made by identifying some of the obstacles and challenges that prevent teaching of culture. Some of the obstacles are the following:

Large class size

Many of the regional medium schools' classes are overcrowded. According to Mallika Tripathi (2014), the average number of students in each classroom varies from forty to eighty. This is contrary to the government approved and recommended standard of one teacher to thirty students' ratio per class. A recent study has shown that a smaller class improves the process of gaining competence in L2 (Anjini 2012). This is possible because large classes may cause difficulty for teachers in their language teaching activities as there are many students to work with compared to a smaller size. Large classes may also affect the amount of time that teachers spend with each student or each of the small group divided into certain individual or group-work activities.

Therefore, in order to create an authentic and interactive environment which is required for task-based cultural activities such as drama display, watching of movies and realia exhibition it is important to keep the size of the classroom small. This will help language teacher to facilitate cultural activities in classroom within a short period of time.

Thus, education policy makers and school administrators should also make the classrooms small by adhering to the standard of number of teacher students' ratio in classrooms.

Teachers' unawareness about the importance of teaching culture

Most language teachers are not aware that they are supposed to teach both language and culture in a language class (Liddicoat et al. 2003). This is due to lack of knowledge of the importance of integrating culture into their English language teaching programme. As a result, teachers focus only on the language element such as knowledge of vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, and reading. Moreover, even though English literature is included in the school syllabi with the aim of improving language learning through culture, but the objective has been lost because teaching of the literature is being used to provide cultural information about English speakers rather than using it to improve learner's competency in English. Therefore, in order to make culture a part of language teaching experience in mother tongue schools, there is need for teachers to gain knowledge about the culture of the target speakers and get trained on how to use literature text to improve learners' proficiency in class.

Students' low level of English proficiency

There is a consensus among scholars that the level of English proficiency among students in regional medium schools is low compared to their counterparts in English medium schools (Srivastava and Khatoon 1980; Anand 1971). As a result of this, teachers might have tendency to focus more on development of linguistic competency thereby giving the teaching of culture a marginal status. Nevertheless, students' low proficiency in L2 should not be used be an obstacle to teaching culture. As reported by Crozet & Liddicoat (1999), students' first language is very crucial in developing intercultural competence which in turn improves the teaching and learning process of English in a bilingual classroom. Therefore, even if the student's language proficiency is low in L2, a teacher needs to address culture either in the students' mother tongue or target language.

Teachers' inability to use ICT

Even though English language can be taught without technology because the value and effectiveness of human interaction (teacher-student relationship) can't be challenged, the use of ICT in appropriate contexts in education has been proven to add value in teaching and learning of English language. The usage of ICT is very crucial in generating resources such as songs, histories, film, map, biographies, and literature. On the other hand, the integration of ICT into L2 education can only take place when teachers know how to incorporate and use ICT to teach in the classroom (Cuban 2001). However, many of Indian English teachers in rural schools are not trained with IT and are unwilling to use it as an aid to teaching (Mallika Tripathi 2014). Therefore, effective teaching of culture in English classroom can only be possible only if ICT equipments are provided for teachers, and teachers are trained on how to use them for teaching English language.

The Future of Research on the Role of Culture in English language Teaching and Learning in India

Few studies have examined the role of teaching culture in Indian English language classrooms. However, the country's educational policy makers have realized the importance of integrating culture into the educational system. In 2005, Central Advisory Board of Education of India (CABE 2005) set up a committee whose mandate is to examine ways in which culture can be inculcated into the school curriculum. Some of the suggestions of the committee include

- The teaching of the culture of the local community.
- Curriculum should be designed in a way that hope and aspiration of the local community will be accommodated.
- Teaching of objectified form of culture such as music, drama, drawing, dance, etc.

In line with some of these recommendations in this report, further research should investigate the impact of the implementation of the recommendations in this report. Questions on how those recommendations have been able to improve second language learning over the years should also be asked. Additionally, scholars should also examine the cultural elements that exist in Indian English textbooks,

especially how they promote cross-cultural/intercultural element or foreign culture. This will give insight into the intention of education policy makers regarding the teaching of culture in English language classroom in India.

Conclusion

This paper attempted to analyze how teaching of culture can improve the learning process of second language especially in Regional medium school in India. Following this inquiry, it has been possible to draw some important conclusions. Firstly, teaching of culture plays a crucial role in improving students' second language learning outcome. Secondly, teaching of global culture is considered to be the appropriate culture to be taught in Indian English language classrooms. This is based on the fact that English has become a global language. Finally, research on the integration of culture into English language curriculum remain a fertile area in India, posing more perplex questions that scholars will have to tackle in order to arrive at more satisfactory understanding of the concept.

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