Research Paper English Language Teaching

Cultural Differences and Language Socialization

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ABSTRACT

Language and culture are intricately connected. Language is the most overt expression of culture and most of the learning process, both in school and at home, is carried out through language. The language and culture of home may not necessarily match with the language and culture of school. Thenceforth a child may encounter intercultural diversity in higher education and in the work place. Therefore in today's globalized world, acceptance of this multi culturalism and an understanding of the same is essential to ensure better communication and higher rate of success in a diverse work culture. Therefore multicultural education should be introduced even in places with small populations of linguistically or culturally diverse students. This paper will analyse the connection between the two as well as take up some activities which can foster intercultural awareness and understanding and lead to language socialization.

KEYWORDS Language socialization, globalization, multi culturalism, intercultural diversity

Market globalization is the increasing tendency of the world to act as one market. Technological advances in travel and telecommunications are the driving force behind market globalization. In the global market place natural boundaries and national borders have disappeared as more and more domestic markets open to worldwide competition and as business look for new growth opportunities for their goods and services. Most organizations have gone global but one need not go global or launch a website to interact with someone who speaks another language or who thinks, acts or transacts business differently. An understanding of cultural differences can help in language socialization.

Culture is a shared system of symbols, beliefs, attitudes, values, expectations and norms for behaviours. We belong to several cultures at the same time. The most obvious is the culture we share with all the people who live in our own country. In addition, we belong to other cultural groups, including an ethnic group and a professional group that has its own special language and customs. All members of a culture have similar assumptions about how people should think, behave and communicate and they all tend to act on those assumptions in much the same way.

Language and culture are intricately connected. Language is the most overt expression of culture and most of the learning process, both in the school and at home is carried out through language. The language and culture at home may not necessarily match the language and culture of school. School is the first place which introduces us to intercultural diversity. Thenceforth a child may encounter inter cultural diversity in higher education and in the work place. Therefore, in today's globalized world, acceptance of this multiculturalism and an understanding of the same is essential to ensure better communication and higher rate of success in diverse work culture.

Therefore multicultural education has become a necessity these days especially in small populations of linguistically or culturally diverse students. Education that is multicultural is a dynamic and life-long process of teaching and learning that fosters critical thinking, cultural awareness, language proficiency, co-operation, self-esteem, community concern and transformative social action. Advocates for multicultural education work to promote social justice, educational equity and excellence.

The power of language to reflect culture and influence thinking was first proposed by American linguist and anthropologist, Edward Sapir (1884-1839)) and his student, Benjamin Whorf (1897-1941). The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis stated that the way we think and view the world is determined by our language (Anderson & Lightfoot, 2002). For example in Hindi we refer to the second and third person in different ways. There are different words to refer to a younger person eg tum (a more intimate person is referred to as tu) and an older person as aap. We use vah for the third person singular in case the person is an equal or a junior but use ve for a third person singular showing that the person referred to is a senior who commands respect or for the third person plural. Therefore the code of reference, reflects our feelings and relationship with the person we are talking to or talking about.

Cultural differences have also been noted in the ways in which language is used pragmatically. In the American culture, new skills are typically taught and learned through verbal instruction while in some cultures new skills are learned though non verbal observation. Differences in the social roles of adults and children also determine language usages. Home and school contexts may represent different cultures, subcultures, or both and may influence language acquisition in noticeable ways. Non verbal cues and contextual cues (eg. shared experience) have different communicative roles in different cultures. For eg. In some cultures prelinguist children are spoken about rather than spoken to by adults while in some other cultures children are not encouraged to initiate conversations with adults. They are expected to talk only when spoken to by adults. While in some other cultures, children are free to interact with adults and take initiative in conversations. Thus these children may get confused in a different school setting.

A current hypothesis on why children from diverse linguistic backgrounds experience difficulty in school is the socialization mismatch hypothesis. This hypothesis "predicts that children are more likely to succeed in school when the home language and literacy socialization patterns are similar to those that are used and valued in school" (Faltis, 1998; 23).

Children become linguistically and culturally competent members of their community through interactions with their caregivers and other more competent members of their community (Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984; Schieffelin & Ochs 1986). Through this language socialization, children learn the behaviours that are culturally appropriate in their community. Many children bring to school not only a new language, but also

cultural ways of using the language that differ from mainstream school culture. These differences may lead teachers to underestimate the caliber of the students. Therefore teachers should develop an understanding for these differences and respect the children for these differences rather than undervalue them.

Children also develop their sense of self through their interactions with others. Their concept of self is interwoven with the society and culture to which they belong. In some communities children are socialized to construct a rational, interpersonal or collective self, whereas in others they are socialized to construct an individualistic and autonomous self. (Brown 1996). When interacting across cultures, power relations play a very important role between language learners and target language speakers. Therefore to acquire a new language the SL learners have to go through a challenging or even conflicting process.

In cross cultural communication, an exchange with another culture takes place which leads to a psychological growth and better understanding of one's values, attitudes, traits and identities that may not have surfaced so far and which become visible only once the person crosses the border and confronts a new socio-cultural environment. This encounter with another culture propels the individuals to conduct critical inquiry and self-reflection. This cross-cultural encounter provides a great platform for learning and for experience that offers an invaluable opportunity to develop self awareness and intercultural sensitivity which can transform the newcomers. So while an interaction with other cultures causes psychological disturbance, it is a wonderful vehicle for personal growth. This cross-cultural transformation can lead to changes in perceptions, attitudes, behavioural patterns, changes in linguistic proficiency and communicative competence and changes in social, ethnic or cultural identities. With more integrative cross-cultural perspectives and smoother communicative practices, second language learners/users will gradually rediscover a full fledged intercultural self identity, which may finally lead them to achieve legitimate participation in a new community (Lave & Wenger, 1991)

The components for successful intercultural communication are developing cultural sensitivity and communication skills. Cultural sensitivity can be achieved through cultural awareness and cultural flexibility and good communication skills can be achieved by learning cultural languages, cultural techniques and through cultural exposure. Cultural sensitivity can be achieved by organizing several activities within the class room. The teaching techniques should be revised in order to increase the success and effectiveness of the activities. As teachers we should encourage all students to participate especially during a discussion and as far as possible ask open ended questions, giving adequate time to the students. We should foster a feeling of emotional safety in the class room by respecting every student's opinion and encouraging all students to be respectful to one another irrespective of one's cultural background.

We can have several activities to introduce cultural sensitivity in the class room. For example, there could be awareness activities in which students can be given a quiz about different cultures and the student with maximum correct answers can then be rewarded. Fact sheets about different cultures can be distributed to the students. There could be poetry and story reading sessions in the class room wherein the translated stories and poems from different cultures can be read out in the class. Movies of different cultures can be screened in the class room in order to develop better understanding of each other's culture. Movie quiz could also be a part of this activity. There could be lessons given in the class room on the definition of culture, patterns of culture and application of cultural knowledge.

Cultural evenings can be celebrated in the schools to educate students about each other's cultures. In these cultural programmes the students should strictly adhere to the representation of their culture's customs, dress, language, food, family set-up so as to educate others about their culture. Their folk dances and folk songs can be a part of the evening giving a vivid picture of their culture and generating respect in the audience for other cultures. Culture studies can be given as projects to students where they may be needed to personally interact with people of other cultures, if possible even stay with them and thoroughly explore and understand their culture. Studies of famous people and unique aspects of a particular culture may also be undertaken which will definitely help generate respect for that culture. Studies of a culture's evolution, the struggles of its people and its present achievements can also help develop an understanding and soft corner for its people and even tolerance for some of their idiosyncratic behaviour.

In this way cultural sensitivity can be achieved in the class room and to enhance intercultural communication skills, learning the verbal and non verbal cues of the particular culture can help. One should understand what certain gestures, signs, symbols, expressions mean in the target culture. On should also try to understand the time and space concepts of that culture. In order to develop verbal skills, one should attempt to learn few words of the target culture like greeting words which at once attach one to the people of that culture.

In the class room, students should be familiarized with these intercultural differences and develop an acceptance for the differences and develop an acceptance for the differences in languages, accents and voice modulations of people belonging to different cultures. When communicating interculturally in English, plain English should be used which is free of all idioms and adornments so that the SL learners/users can also comprehend correctly what is being said. Short sentences should be used and as far as possible active voice should be used. Slangs, informal words and discriminatory words should be strictly avoided. Respect for the cultural differences and the desire to communicate are instrumental in achieving language socialization. Therefore when communicating with SL learners/users, language should be kept as simple as possible and there should be tolerance for errors and differences in pronunciation, voice modulation and accent. Infact these diversities enrich the process of learning and by focusing on the opportunity that cultural and linguistic diversity provide, we would be elevating the standard of our education institutes and our language trainers.

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