

## **The Importance of Culture in Second and Foreign Language Learning**

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### **Abstract**

English has been designated as a source of intercultural communication among the people from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. A range of linguistic and cultural theories contribute meaningful insights on the development of competence in intercultural communication. The speculations suggest the use of communicative strategies focusing on the development of learners' efficiency in communicating language through cultural context. However, the teaching of culture in communication has not been paid due importance in a number of academic and language settings of Pakistan and Iran. This assignment study indicates problems in view of teaching English as a medium of instruction in public sector colleges of interior Sindh, Pakistan and prescribed textbooks in Iranian schools. It also aims to identify drawbacks and shortcoming in prescribed textbooks for intermediate students at college level and schools. Therefore, the assignment study recommends integration of cultural awareness into a language teaching programme for an overall achievement of competence in intercultural communication.

**Keywords:** cultural awareness, intercultural communication, communicative competence, cross-cultural interaction, teaching pedagogy

## A. Introduction

Culture may be defined as a ‘social heredity’ transmitted from one generation to another generation with the accumulation of individual experiences, or a mode of activities differentiating people of one society from another society. Culture cannot be a biological phenomenon but a learned pattern of social behaviour to be followed. It is a wonderful and unique phenomenon of human society with colourful diversity always changing its patterns which is the greatest beauty of human society. Culture forms beliefs, conveys ideas, and shares knowledge on customs and values. All of these characteristics are communicated through language which is an integral part of culture (Taga, 1999).

There have been popular speculations regarding the relationship of language with culture and thought. An American anthropologist, Sapir (1921), argues that culture and thought are language dependent on account of conveying the implicit meaning and inherited patterns of life. The acquired knowledge on such patterns reveals ones identity through the ways of thinking, feeling, acting, and behaving in a cultural context. Moreover, the cultural context determines the way people interact and make perceptions regarding any situation or the object of life. Thus, the existence of language into culture serves the means of communication among the individuals of a society.

The existence of culture for human society is possible due to the development and use of a common language among the people, for example the cultural representation of an individual can be observed through the use of language in particular context. It is the influence of culture on human minds that not only constructs human personality but also leads one to behave as per the existing norms of society. It is indicated by Emitt & Komesaroff (2003) that the acquisition of culture requires the learning of a language for the transmission of attitudes, ideas, and values to the next generation. As a result, individuals continue to follow prevailing customs, norms, and values inherited through a social system. Therefore, no human society has ever existed without developing language and culture.

Culture as a social process deals with the use of language and communication experienced by people in given circumstances. They tend to learn more than one language for the satisfaction of communicative needs in their academic and professional career. The process of learning a second or foreign language not only requires an individual to practice linguistic forms but also necessitates to become familiar with the culture of target language in order to interpret intercultural communication. Therefore, in the learning of English as a Second or Foreign language (ESL/EFL), it is necessary to provide learners’ cultural context and awareness so as to obtain proficiency in intercultural communication of target language.

Research in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT) has significantly contributed valuable insights on the integration of cultural

awareness into English language teaching programmes. A range of cultural teaching strategies offer interactive classroom activities to non-native learners for practicing language as a communicative process. These activities also enhance cultural behaviour and attitude of learners as per the patterns of communicating the target language in context. Therefore, teachers need to be competent in cross-cultural communication before its application in classroom context.

In view of Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), this assignment study discusses problems faced by learners in developing competence in intercultural communication. It also recommends an adequate amount of change in the prescribed textbooks taught through Grammar Translation Method (GTM) to the students at intermediate level in public sector colleges of interior Sindh and Iranian schools.

## **B. Literature Review**

### **1. Culture in Second/Foreign Language Learning**

It is observed that language is used in a cultural phenomenon to exchange ideas and opinions or share experiences. It is so much interrelated that without understanding properly the cultural setting and social behaviour of a language use, it leads to misinterpretation and breakdown in the language communication, or it may result into errors and misunderstanding because language is not simply sending or receiving information but it functions as a social behaviour in certain cultural context. There are difficulties which are very complex to understand for foreign or second language learners according to required context to interpret and communicate (Emitt & Komesaroff, 2003).

Research in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT) indicates problems faced by the learners in communicating language in context. A number of language instructed programmes focus on the development of skills, i.e. (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) but the teaching of cultural context has not been introduced in any of the language learning programmes. However, the understanding of target culture not only develops competence in communication but also raises awareness regarding the use of language in intercultural communication.

### **2. Intercultural Communication**

According to Koester & Lustig (2010), communication and culture are closely interrelated in terms of attaching similar meanings and values to the objects of life. Intercultural communication involves individuals of different cultures who have dissimilar orientation and interpretation to the values of life. Insights from research studies indicate efficient intercultural communication reflecting the competence needs to go beyond the mere transmission of facts about culture in order to enlighten the participants with information how and why perform certain behaviours and have certain attitudes during cross cultural encounter. Therefore, the language programmes should be introduced to

familiarize the students with the major differences in the fundamental cultural patterns of attitudes and behaviours (Schmidt, 2000).

This cultural pattern of a society takes hundreds and thousands of years to form and is changing all the times, and compelling individuals of society to learn and adjust, and when an individual comes into cultural communication, it requires cultural understanding, social behaviour, and emotional reactions which help learner develop confidence to use language and interact in communication. There are several social behaviours which sound very strange to others, such as in Tamil, when a child sneezes, in response it is said '*nu ru*', meaning '*hundred*' which is like greeting '*have a long life*' whereas people in Pakistan and Iran say '*thanks God*' (Koester & Lustig, 2010).

Similarly, there are many cultural actions and responses in English language context which vary from American society to British, and from Australia to other English speaking countries like India and Pakistan, where English is spoken in their own political and cultural context and requires cultural understanding in intercultural communication.

The old saying "*When in Rome, do as Romans do*", when you are in Rome lessens cultural conflict and facilitates intercultural communication, but it depends on adapting values, norms, beliefs, and social practices to conform cultural expectations, and respecting differences which is also cultural responsibility in intercultural communication for a learner when interacting the social behaviour which is sometime greatly resisted in some individuals and societies. For example, a European or an American when in Pakistan, Iran and India need to behave in a certain manner, and similarly, an Indian, Iranian and Pakistani need to behave in a certain way when in English speaking country like England and America (Koester & Lustig, 2010).

There have always been difficulties experienced by people while adjusting themselves to the cultural patterns of a particular society. Accommodating as an immigrant in a cultural setting causes changing behaviours and attitudes due to contradiction in the practice of new norms, values, and customs of a society. For example, people from Pakistan and Iran may find it difficult to adjust themselves in a European or American society where gender differences are hardly observed among the people in social context. Whereas, a Pakistani or an Iranian finds it difficult to intermix, as females in Pakistani or Iranian context are distanced and behaved in a very formal manner. However, it may be quite contrary in Western society and considered gender biased attitude.

### **3. Intercultural Communication Competence**

Competence in intercultural communication is the ability of an individual's understanding of key issues involved in the communication of language in culturally different contexts. These cultural differences convey dissimilar meanings and values attached to a social system demanding a great deal of understanding on the part of speakers taking part in intercultural

communication. It even requires higher level of communication skills to make sense of the meaning communicated in culturally diverse contexts. Furthermore, the studies on intercultural communication not only determine the role of competence but also advise the understanding of cultural awareness for meaningful communication (Koester & Lustig, 2010).

In view of Kim (1991), the most challenging issues of intercultural communication are cultural differences, unfamiliarity, and incompatibility among the individuals. The status of English as an international and intercultural source of communication raises a number of issues and challenges for teachers and learners of English. No doubt, acquisition of linguistic knowledge is mandatory for effective communication but more attention needs to be paid on cultural context of the target language. It implies the knowledge of cultural patterns, norms, and values of a society communicating specific meaning to its participants. Therefore, intercultural communicative competence cannot be achieved without the development of communicative competence (p.259).

There are a number of intercultural communicative situations in which participants are expected to behave appropriately as per the cultural context of communication. This behavioural aspect of interaction greatly involves an individual's mental ability of adjusting to new cultures. An individual's capacity of adapting to new conventions reflect how appropriate actions are added to avoid ambiguity in intercultural communication. However, Baxter (1983), suggests the use of cognitive and affective behaviour in analyzing the participants' attitude and cultural background. Thus, the application of cognitive and affective tools for the analysis of communication reveal linguistic and cultural meaning of communication.

According to Koester & Lustig, (2010), competent interpersonal communication may be regarded as the result of appropriate behaviour and attitude of participants reflecting actions that fit the expectations and demands of a situation. It is through effective and appropriate behaviour that results in the accomplishment of social or personal goals based on relationships in communication. No doubt, a number of people act and add nonverbal signs to show positive response to meet the expectations of a communicative situation. Thus, appropriate nonverbal attitude not only softens relationship but also involves understanding of ideas in communication.

Acquiring competence in intercultural communication demands advanced communication skills and the efficient use of language to negotiate meaning in context. It deals with cultural differences creating complex meaning for the individuals participating in a communicative event. The primary concern in developing intercultural competence is to facilitate learners and professionals communicate efficiently in foreign cultural context. Moreover, satisfaction of practical purposes through intercultural communication indicate problems in interaction with others. Therefore, the challenges faced in intercultural

communication are due to the lack of cultural awareness in communicating language in foreign context (Koester & Lustig, 2010).

Analyzing the characteristics of communication may be considered fundamental for the development of competence in intercultural communication. This leads to an overall aim of effective and meaningful cross-cultural interaction among the people tending to adapt to new conventions and behavioural change in cultural context. It is in fact a mental tendency of interactants whose social behaviour and cultural identity come under the influence of cross-cultural communication. Therefore, Martin (1994), attaches importance to three domains, i.e. cognition, affect, and behaviour for the development of intercultural communicative competence.

In view of Emitt & Komesaroff (2003), there are a number of challenges faced by the learners of English in developing intercultural communicative competence. Currently, the practices followed in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT), in Pakistan and Iranian schools, merely focus on the development of reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills but how language works in cultural context has not been introduced in foreign language learning programmes (p.8). In addition to the teaching of English through textbooks, it may help learners acquire linguistic knowledge on grammar structures that hardly develop competence in communicating language in cultural context.

Many foreign language learning programmes tend to develop learners' efficiency in operating language through formal classroom context. A number of teaching strategies involve learners in textbook activities focusing on linguistic aspects of learning a foreign language. However, teaching culture to foreign language learners through textbook instruction has not been practiced by teachers in Pakistani and Iranian classroom contexts. A wide range of such textbooks contain information on science, fiction, poetry, and drama, but the knowledge on cultural patterns and practices has not been included in the textbooks. As a result, learners not only lack competence in using language in cultural context but also fail to satisfy the practical purposes of life.

### **C. Implications on Teaching Language through Culture**

English is undoubtedly a source of international communication among the people having diverse linguistic and cultural background. It has been the medium of instruction in most of the public and private sector institutes of Pakistan and Iran where pedagogical practices applied in a language classroom focus on lexical and grammatical aspects of learning a foreign language. In addition to language teaching pedagogy, the status of English as a compulsory subject is to help students receive and understand information of course books prescribed at intermediate level of education. Therefore, English as a medium of instruction tend to develop language skills of the students required to learn science through prescribed course-books of Physics, Chemistry, and Biology-.

According to Emitt & Komesaroff (2003), students need to become efficient in using language for a range of purposes, such as following directions, requesting information, entertainment, and self-expression' (p.45). These needs or purposes can be fulfilled through classroom activities aiming to enhance communicative competence of the students but the use of traditional teaching methods in Pakistani and Iranian contexts hardly help learners communicate language in cultural context. However, a pedagogical process may be introduced to integrate cultural awareness about using language through textbooks employed in a language class. Thus, the use of appropriate communicative teaching strategies not only raise learners' efficiency in using language but also enhance cultural awareness in communicating language in cross-cultural context.

Integrating cultural awareness in a foreign language learning programme requires teachers to be efficient communicators of target language. The use of cultural knowledge in communication attaches importance to the ways of negotiating meaning embedded in values, customs, and norms. However, teaching cultural practices in target language has not been the objective of language educators in foreign language settings (Kelly, 1969). The practices followed by them focus on the learning of grammatical structures rather than the development of efficiency in communicating language through context. Therefore, a wide range of traditional teaching strategies fail to develop competence in using a foreign language in given context (p. 378).

Development of intercultural competence largely depends upon the effective application of communicative strategies in foreign language learning programmes. The teachers need to be aware of such pedagogical process tending to improve communication skills of foreign language learners in non-native cultural settings. An underlying challenge in these programmes is the usage of textbooks focusing on linguistic aspects of learning an additional language. However, the use of authentic texts and instructional materials may enhance communication skills through classroom activities which focus on the functions of language in context (Kelly, 1969). Thus, the prescribed textbooks for intermediate students in Government colleges and Iranian schools fail to develop competence in intercultural communication in Pakistani and Iranian contexts.

Teaching of English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) has been handled traditionally by the teachers working in public sector colleges of interior Sindh and the Iranian schools nationwide. Most of them follow Grammar Translation Method (GTM) as a part of classroom teaching practice tending to translate text into mother tongue. The texts contain activities on reading and writing skills which raise the issue of developing competence in target language skills. A number of such activities not only lack appropriate instructions, objectives, and interest but also fail to provide context in given tasks. Moreover, the tasks introduced in textbook provide structural view of learning a foreign language but fail to provide opportunities in communicating a non-native language. Therefore,

the prescribed textbook needs to be reviewed in terms of developing communicative competence in intercultural communication (Emitt & Komesaroff, 2003).

According to Emitt & Komesaroff (2003), teaching culture of a target language is unquestionably important for the development of competence in intercultural communication (p.44). It requires English language teachers to be competent in communicating language and underlying values, attitudes, and behaviours followed by people in their cultural setting or context. The teachers imparting cultural knowledge may consider various issues related to learners' linguistic background, attitude, behaviour, and the learning style. All of these factors contribute learning as a mental process of involvement in achieving competence in intercultural communication. However, teachers working in Government colleges of interior Sindh and the Iranian schools pay less attention to the problems faced by learners in developing linguistic and cultural competence. As a result, many of them lose confidence and ability to perform efficiently in foreign language learning process.

No doubt, there is an important contribution of cultural awareness in foreign language learning programmes. The learners can only enhance communication skills after the establishment of familiarity with the cultural patterns of target language. In order to achieve cultural awareness, it is necessary to expose learners to a cultural context by creating interactive/communicative activities through language teaching strategies. A range of multiple texts containing cultural knowledge may be introduced to learners for the achievement of competence in using language patterns. However, an appropriate teaching model integrates cultural awareness with the linguistic knowledge on how language works in developing competence in intercultural communication requires language teachers to go through a kind of cross-cultural training before joining a foreign language teaching programme. These opportunities not only develop understanding about cultural differences but also equip teachers with skills to handle problems faced by learners in communicating a foreign language (Lambert, 1999). The teachers working in Pakistani and Iranian contexts lack such support because teachers' development programmes hardly provide cross-cultural training on how to teach English as a foreign language in an academic context.

Recent research studies by Schmidt (2000) highlight the need and benefits of cross-cultural training programmes focusing on the development of efficiency in intercultural communication. The teachers may also benefit students by introducing cultural specific topics on history, politics, economics, and geography to their respective classroom situations. These strategies to stimulate communication on specific topics may expose learners to raise awareness about target culture. Moreover, the activities on real life situation, such as role plays, and discussion may be integrated as a part of classroom instruction to develop communicative competence in intercultural communication. Therefore, foreign



language learning programmes should train learners' identify cultural differences and patterns followed in intercultural communication.

Many foreign language learners come across challenges in intercultural communication, such as anxiety and stress, adjustment, and the lack of cultural awareness. In order to address these issues, teachers need to involve learners in cross-cultural training process which enables them to manage their emotional reactions and responses appropriately and effectively. Intercultural training is an effective and useful measure for providing necessary information about cultural differences followed in cross-cultural communication. The learners come to know how their native culture influence the way of using language in cross-cultural context. Therefore, the teacher needs to acknowledge the value of cross-cultural training by implementing it in their respective academic and language settings.

#### **D. Conclusion**

Culture being an important and integral part of human society deals with the communication of language by 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 purposes of life. A large number of students and professionals from Pakistan and Iran tend to learn English as a Foreign Language (EFL) for the satisfaction of communicative and practical purposes of life. However, they lack competence in intercultural communication because English is taught traditionally in Government colleges of interior Sindh and Iranian schools. The pedagogical strategies and prescribed textbooks hardly help learners develop skills in communicating language in context. Therefore, this assignment study indicates problems in view of teaching English as medium of instruction and recommends suggestions for an effective application of cross-cultural awareness into language teaching programme.

Research in the field of intercultural communication highlights the importance of cultural awareness in English language teaching programmes. The strategies provide learners an equal amount of opportunities to practice language as the communicative process. It also promotes cultural behaviour and attitude of learners as per the demands of communicating English as a foreign language. Moreover, the use of communicative strategies develop social skills by demonstrating behaviour in cross-cultural communication. Finally, the students in interactive classroom activities can communicate meaning, build up vocabulary, enhance grammatical accuracy, and develop communicative competence.

Many research findings share meaningful insights on how teachers can incorporate intercultural aspects through language teaching process. In order to acquire maximum effectiveness of intercultural communicative competence, it is essential to incorporate cognitive, affective, and behavioural patterns of learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) because English has widely been

recognized as a means or medium of intercultural communication. It is therefore necessary to integrate all characteristics of intercultural communication into English Language Teaching (ELT) programmes.

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