DEFINING CULTURE IN THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM: A THEOLOGICAL APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

Culture touches many aspects of our life, including language. It is thus considered one of the most significant issues in English language teaching. Due to this interrelation of language and culture, there is a general agreement that culture should be taught in a language course. But because of its diverse use, the meaning of culture is perceived differently in various contexts. Such variations in meaning may create several problems for both teachers and learners. For teachers, it appears to be as a challenging issue while selecting or developing culturally sensitive teaching materials and discussing them in the classroom. Learners are always cautious about learning others' culture and it can even contribute to causing culture shock to them. To resolve these problems, at the beginning, culture requires a definition different from the existing ones. However, in the areas of human understanding, conceptual issues like culture cannot be exclusively defined and made acceptable to all. But, it is possible to explore alternative ways of defining such ideas to convey the intended message, so as to make them understandable to those concerned. So the new definition will mainly serve two purposes: explore the term from an angle not done before and secondly, present it as a possible solution for antagonisms arising from cultural differences. This paper, divided into five sections, establishes, in the introduction, the relationship between culture and language, and the importance of teaching it. The review of relevant literature in the second part evaluates what has been said about culture, the justification for a new definition followed by a presentation of theological approach to define it. Next section tries to explain how this new definition can be presented in the language classroom. The conclusion summarises the whole discussion, highlighting unanswered questions and suggestions for future research.

Keywords: culture, language, learning, teaching, theology

1. Introduction

Culture, with its many meanings, occupies one of the most significant current discussions in English language teaching. Due to the association between language and culture, 'there is general agreement that culture should be taught in a language course, but just what this means is unclear' (Brooks, 1968:204). This ambiguity may result from the lack of comprehensible definition of the term and consequently the way of teaching it, since culture has been described as a 'muddied concept…..elusive of any definitive definition' (Hall, 1981:20).

1.1 Relationship between Language and Culture
To show the depth of the relationship between language and culture, it is claimed that 'language does not exist apart from culture' (Sapir, 1970:207). Similar view is echoed by Peterson and Coltrane (2003:1), according to whom, culture is 'inherently tied to many of the linguistic concepts taught in second language classes'. Moreover, language contains cultural elements, so "everyday language is 'tinged' with cultural bits and pieces" (Thanasoulas, 2001:5). These views simply establish the notion that language and culture are related to each other.

1.2 Teaching Culture in the Language Class
In spite of no clear and acceptable definition of culture which can be referred to, its importance in language class is rightly appreciated and recommended by many. Teaching culture is thus seen as 'a means of developing an awareness and sensitivity towards the values and tradition of the people whose language is being studied.' (Tucker and Lambert, 1972:26). The effect of culture in language learning is highlighted by Thanasoulas (2001:1) who reminds us that 'foreign language learning is comprised of several components, including……..a change in attitudes towards one's own or another culture'. In spite of the availability of multi-dimensional definitions of the term, its importance is well manifested in various writings in a precise manner. One of such views is expressed by Politzer (1959:100-101) who thinks that '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.'

There are many, though, who are not in favour of discussing cultural issues in language learning process. To them, foreign language teaching materials containing target language culture to present language are detrimental to language learning (Alptekin, 1993). Such negative attitude may result from observing the effects of culture shock, but opposite views with positive stance warn that without cultural base, foreign language learning is not possible (ibid).

Fleet (2006) pointed out some reasons to establish the importance of teaching culture in the language classroom. Accordingly, cultural knowledge is necessary for 'increasing communicative competence', 'more authentic language learning' and to 'motivate students to learn languages'. In addition to these, 'to dispel myths' about people of other culture and 'instilling intercultural competence' among the learners make it necessary to discuss culture in the language classroom.

Few points are clear from the above discussion. Firstly, language contains cultural elements and secondly, culture needs to be presented in language class in various forms, such as idea, belief or practices. But the missing point is a definition that can give teachers and learners a new and comprehensive view of the term. To fulfill this gap, theological approach is adopted for the new definition so that the term can easily be explained to people of various world views.

2.   Literature Review

2.1 Definition of Culture in Existing Literature:
Duranti (1997:24) defined culture as 'something learned, transmitted, passed down from one generation to the next, through human actions, often in the form of face-to-face interaction, and, of course, through linguistic communication'. Here 'something' is not specified, so too general to comprehend. In another attempt to explain it, Sapir (1921:218) has termed it 'as what a society does and thinks'. If this is taken into consideration, then we face the problem of separating culture from other practices of a society. Not all actions and thoughts prevalent in a society are related to culture.

There are also two other definitions seemingly similar, one is general and the other is specific in nature. On a general level, culture has been referred to as 'the ways of a people' Lado (1957) whereas anthropologists defined it as 'the whole way of life of a people or group'….including 'all the social practices that bond a group of people together and distinguish them from others' (Montgomery and Reid-Thomas, 1994:5). It is true that people belonging to a particular culture manifest certain common social practices, but the question that needs to be asked is what actually binds a group of people- is it the common practices or the thoughts behind them? To elaborate the point, let us consider the definition of Peck (2001:7), who sees culture as 'the accepted and patterned ways of behavior of a given people'. Because of the common thought, people accept ways of life which then is manifested in a pattern. It is not clear though what is meant here by group in these definitions, as this can refer to people of a particular geographical location, tribe staying together but not in a fixed place or people living anywhere on earth sharing a common thought, thus belonging to the same culture. In another attempt to define culture, Goodenough (1963) shows it as a set of 'standards' for doing certain things and ends up in comparing it with 'a ubiquitous force'. It hints the presence of thought process behind our behaviour.

There is a growing tendency of labeling anything and everything as culture which, eventually, will make the concept vague and obstruct the way of teaching it. This is clearly evident from the discussion of Hall (1959) (cited in Brooks, 1968:112) who offered a list of ten points to consider. Another ten points were then recommended by Brooks (1968) to elaborate those ideas. In another all encompassing definition, culture is seen as an "integrated pattern of human behavior that includes thoughts, communications, languages, practices, beliefs, values, customs, courtesies, rituals, manners of interacting and roles, relationships and expected behaviors of a racial, ethnic, religious or social group; and the ability to transmit the above to succeeding generations" (Goode, Sockalingam, Brown, & Jones, 2000 cited in Peterson and Coltrane, 2003). Here again, it becomes difficult to find out cultural traits from other practices. One common aspect of these definitions is that they all try to include as many cultural practices as possible, but fail to include the root from where culture emanates. One exception to this tendency is Brooks (1968) who tried to explain what is not culture by showing how geography, history, folklore, sociology, literature, civilization are not the same as culture. This clarification helps understand culture better by excluding confusing elements from the list.

Few points are obvious from the review. First of all, there is no well accepted definition of culture. This old truth is recorded in the findings of Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) who compiled 164 definitions - too many to grasp its essence by language learners. After considering definitions given long ago, for example, by Tyler (1870) to the recent one by Spencer-Oatey (2008), it is clear that no one tried it from purely theological approach. Secondly, problems rooted in cultural differences, for example culture shock, still persists that need to be tackled. Finally, looking this issue from theological perspective deserves a chance as a large number of language learners all over the world view life from this angle. For instance, in my current work place, Bangladesh, definition of this kind can offer clearer understanding to the learners so that they feel no hesitation in learning foreign language.

2.2 Renewed Importance of Teaching Culture in the Current World
As an integrated part of language course, the presence of culture in the language classroom is felt for long, but the increasingly hostile attitude of competing nations made it a pressing need to renew our understanding of the term and discuss the topic from different and comprehensive outlook. Through language, we express our thoughts and actions - our unseen and seen activities. Many of these activities are linked to our culture. Without clear understanding, many teaching and learning materials and concepts may mistakenly appear as culture shock or cultural imposition. The existing understanding of the term offers little help in removing such gaps in understanding cultural differences. It mainly highlights the differences among people but fails to point out the workable solution to the problems resulting from these differences. To make things worse, the current global events and their cultural cause, rightly predicted by Huntington (1996), may leave a negative impact on, among other things, English language teaching and learning. In the midst of such bitter geo-political environment, English is seen, in one hand, as a tool of imperialism and, on the other, as a must for communication in the globalised world. In this context, definition from a theological outlook is worth considering as a workable alternative in combating cultural misunderstanding.

Theology deals with the question of God and religious beliefs. Many learners and teachers of English as a second, foreign or other language all over the world subscribe to theological world view. They tend to see things from religious angels. To them, culture has its root in religious beliefs. But the existing definitions of the term exclude this dimension that made it incomplete in their eyes. To fill up this gap in current literature, an attempt has been made to provide a definition based on theological approach.

3.   Theological Approach to Define Culture

What has been defined by culture so far can be termed either as tradition, norms or custom-according to definitions given in Cambridge Online Dictionary (2016). Here tradition is 'a belief, principle or way of acting which people in a particular society or group have continued to follow for a long time, or all of these in a particular society or group'. Norms mean 'an accepted standard or a way of behaving or doing things that most people agree with', whereas custom is seen as 'a way of behaving or a belief which has been established for a long time'. It will become evident from the following discussion that culture shares many of these aspects, but it certainly contains something else which makes it different from others. This special aspect is the very concept about life.

3.1 The Theological Viewpoint
Theologically, different views prevail on people's perception about life on earth. Broadly speaking, three views are commonly found -theistic, atheistic and apatheistic. According to theistic view, the world is created by a creator who sets guidance about how to conduct life affairs. Based on these criteria, concepts of 'good' and 'bad' or 'lawful' and 'unlawful' are defined. Mainly major religious views fall under this category. Atheistic view is opposite to that of theistic one where the concept of creator is absent. The place of supernatural entity is replaced with natural one and thus human being, as the centre of importance, decides what is 'acceptable' and what is 'unacceptable'. Apatheists claim neither faith nor disbelief in creator. But on the issue of criteria for our actions in this life, it considers 'benefit' and 'harm' as the arbiter. As a result, whatever is deemed 'beneficial' by human mind are 'accepted' or 'allowed' and whatever seems 'harmful' is rejected.

Regarding the source of these world views, theists accept the direct instructions; indirect indications and general permissibility of the creator in governing human actions. On the other hand, both atheists and agnostics consider human intellect as the supreme judge. They only accept theistic practices as long as they are, after judging by human logic, found beneficial and acceptable for public life. Therefore, these views keep changing with the passage of time as well as human understanding of the reality (Robinson, 1988).

3.2 Culture Redefined
From theological perspective, those ideas and practices emanating from our world view- theistic, atheistic or apatheistic are called culture. According to this understanding, human being is composed of physical needs and instincts. When satisfying them, the criteria used to justify certain things as acceptable, good or lawful and others as opposite originates from whole concept about life (i.e. theistic, atheistic or apatheistic) held by individuals. So the concept of culture varies from person to person and what is seemed as cultural to one may not be the same to others. Also, similar thoughts and deeds, if not come from similar world view, will not be considered as part of the same culture. To make the definition clear, let us consider our thinking process that can explain this mechanism more clearly.

We perceive reality through our senses. Then the sensed information is carried to our brain, where with the help of the criteria (our outlook towards life), judgments are passed or actions are carried out. If we hold different perception about life, our criteria of judgment will be different and eventually it will be reflected in our opinions and actions. That is why, the same incident receive different tags-good or bad- by different people. So theologically, our thoughts and actions stemming from views related to life are called 'culture'.

4.   How to Present Culture in the Language Class

Presenting the new definition may require a background discussion with the language learners about our individual and collective identity.

4.1 Public versus Private View
As an individual, we hold different views about life, but as a social being, we live a collective life where personal view may sometime be different from the collective or social one. Therefore, views of each individual are not always manifested in societal level. There are common thoughts shared or accepted by the majority or influential members which are labeled as the views of that particular society. That is why, there exits always a gap between culture of individual members and that of the society. If this distinction is not kept in mind, then there is a risk of passing stereotyped judgments on cultural issues. Such wrong presentation of culture is a matter of concern highlighted in the writings of Alptekin (1993) and others. Once we know what culture is, then it will not be difficult to appreciate individual culture and the culture of a society.

4.2 Examples of Cultural Phenomena
Many thoughts and actions we encounter in our daily life can in one way or other be related to the question of culture and deserve a fresh analysis. As an example, food is taken to satisfy physical need- hunger; so eating is a common phenomenon in all societies. That is why eating itself is not a cultural issue, rather what and how to eat is the matter of cultural question. Based on the world views discussed above, different foods and ways of consuming them are regarded culturally acceptable to some and unacceptable to others. For example, meat is considered lawful to eat by many but vegetarians- theists, atheists or apatheists; consider eating it unacceptable. However, meat eaters have different preferences according to their world view as well. Many eat any meat, some eat meat of particular animals, and others take any meat slaughtered in a particular way whereas there are people who consume only meat of particular animals slaughtered in a particular way. This difference of choice originates from the individual cultural outlook originating from theological understanding.

Regarding the distinction between culture and other similar looking concepts, the main difference lies in the fact that culture is always linked to views about life, whereas other concepts, such as tradition or customs are related to, among others, geographical locations, weather and biological factors. Examples can be given from Bangladesh and Nigeria where rice and yam are respectively the staple food. Because of the geographical setting, such crops grow in these areas. In Nigeria, yam festival is observed each year at the time of harvesting yam and in similar way, people of Bangladesh celebrates 'new rice' in the Bengali month of 'Agrahayan'. Such celebrations, according to the new definition, are traditional, not cultural.

4.3 Presenting the Term to the Language Learners

In existing literature, much has been talked about teaching culture in English language classroom, but few examples are given with practical guidelines on practicing it. The reason behind such absence of instructions is that culture cannot be taught, but it can be explained to 'help students develop an understanding of the fact that all people exhibit culturally-conditioned behaviors.' (Tomalin and Stempleski, 1993:7-8). Language is a medium of expressing views and culture is the view about life. So language, when used for communication, naturally contains cultural elements. In English language teaching classroom, cultural phenomena can be explained to give the learners ideas about the life of the people whose language they are learning. For example, when presenting a picture of popular food of the British, fish and chips should not be viewed as cultural, rather they are part of the English tradition. But when celebrating Christmas is presented, this manifests the cultural views of the people concerned. In British society, a large number of people are Christian (theist) and many are atheists and apatheists. Theists celebrate it as a religious ceremony whereas others enjoy it as a seasonal festival. Therefore, Christmas, to some, is cultural whereas to others, it is merely traditional.

5. Conclusion

For more than two and a half centuries, English is being spoken in the region now called Bangladesh. We tend to learn it to compete in today's global village but cultural differences play a major part in preventing us from going for it. This alternative definition may successfully resolve this conflicting situation. Learners will understand that language, like culture, may evolve from a particular area, but they can spread to other parts of the world if adopted by the people over there.

The new definition is not free from limitations. Though it has been used in language classes and appreciated by the learners, the whole process of testing was not done following the scientific method.

Culture has made its cutomised impression on people's mind already, but the necessity of a clear understanding has not finished yet. Theoreticians who are at the forefront of defining ideas can consider such alternative definitions and researchers can test it in the language classroom to find out its validity or effectiveness in their own geographical regions. Based on this idea, writers may develop new teaching materials. Regarding the questions that may arise from such alternatives, further researches will help us get the answers and understand the issue better.

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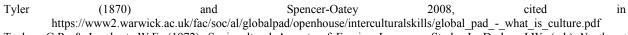Alptekin, C. (1993). Target-language culture in EFL materials. *ELT Journal*, Vol. 47/2. pp 136-143

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