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The Use of Pedagogic Questions in Understanding Culture in ESL/EFL Classrooms

Inayat Shah, Lecturer

Faculty of English and Language Studies

Sohar University, Oman

Abstract

The present review paper aims to discuss the use and efficacy of pedagogic questions in understanding culture in English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms. The ESL and EFL classrooms for adults are often culturally diverse and multifarious where students bring their individual cultural identities to the classroom. Offering a comprehensive definition of culture that encompasses various linguistic attitudes to these students can be a challenging task for any teacher. Even more challenging is the idea of raising awareness of cultural intersections in the students' minds. In this context, drawing mainly upon Ilieva, R. (2000), this article presents a set of questions for developing learners' intercultural understanding in the ESL and EFL contexts. An analytical set of questions relating to ESL instruction may help in dealing with culture in the context of ESL programs for adults. This article offers communicative activities formed to develop the cross-cultural understanding of students whose language levels range from beginner to intermediate. In a multi-cultural

environment cross-cultural awareness of foreign language students who have never lived in another culture or even visited one, can be achieved through the set of questions posed in communicative activities that take place in a classroom. Through culture understanding the abstract knowledge of a target culture is jointly constructed in the classroom and becomes a tool not only in finding one's voice, but also in using that knowledge to act on the world. The set of questions presented in this article may be of interest to instructors, curriculum writers, students, and researchers who want to consider the ways culture is addressed in ESL/ EFL programs.

Key words: Language, Culture, Identity, ESL/EFL

Introduction

Culture is widely accepted as playing a significant part in second-language classrooms. The English as Second Language and English as Foreign Language classrooms for adults and immigrants are often culturally diverse so students bring their individual cultural identities to the classroom. Providing students in a foreign language classroom with an understanding of "culture" that goes beyond food and national dress can be a daunting task for any teacher. Fostering the development of cross-cultural awareness can be even more challenging. For instructional purposes, this article presents a set of questions for developing learners' intercultural understanding in the ESL and EFL contexts. An analytical set of questions relating to ESL instruction may help in dealing with culture in the context of ESL programs for adults. This article offers communicative activities formed to develop the cross-cultural understanding of students whose language levels range from beginner to intermediate. In a multi-cultural environment cross-cultural awareness of foreign language students who have never lived in another culture or even visited one, can be achieved through the set of questions posed in communicative activities that take place in a classroom. The set of questions presented in this article may be of interest to instructors, curriculum writers, students, and researchers who want to consider the ways culture is addressed in ESL/ EFL programs.

Culture is an ambiguous notion; therefore, supplying an all-inclusive definition goes beyond the scope of this paper. Anthropological theory about culture leads to conceptualizations of culture as a stable core set of values, beliefs, customs, and behaviours (Kramsch, 1998; Ilieva, 2000, Murray, 2001; Tang, 2006; Brown, 2007; O'Brien, 2008). The inclusion of cultural content in language education necessarily involves the creation of cultural representations, which are built up in discourses, and convey images or narratives of culture (Warwick, 2009) and

society in particular contexts. Cross-cultural awareness has been defined for teachers as the understanding and appreciation of different values and behaviours as they are experienced in different cultures and through different languages (Koyama, 1992 as cited in Murray, 2001; Brown, 2007).Through cultural understanding students can develop an understanding of humans as cultural beings, of the relationship between "language as a principal means of culture" (Kramsch, 1998. P.3), and of the necessity of grasping implicit and explicit meanings in cross-cultural interactions. Culture exploration consists of using methods of cross-cultural participant interaction in and outside the classroom and holding reflective, interpretive, and critical classroom discussions on students' "cultural realities" (Kramsch, 1998. P.3) and ethnographies. Through this method of discussing their experience of their own and target culture and reflecting on it (Brown, 2001, 2007), the students will be in a position to "share the ways of viewing and interpreting events" (Kramsch, 1998. P.13), develop their own voice and identity and be able to act and fulfill their own goals in their new environment. I suggest that the questions discussed to problematize culture in the classroom can present certainties, fixed knowable items, and concrete answers to questions such as why, what, and how (Ilieva, 2000; Warwick, 2009). This way of approaching culture could lead to stereotyping and equip students with some static sets of problematically generalized features pertaining to a culture. Through the set of questions, the knowledge of a target culture is jointly constructed (Steinman, 2007) in the classroom and becomes a tool not only in discovering one's voice, but also in using that knowledge to act on the world. Recent study in ESL and intercultural encounters suggests pedagogic techniques that emphasize constructivist, process-oriented tasks as more effective. The linguists (*Markee &*

Kasper, 2004; Johnson, 2006; Steinman, 2007; Brown, 2007) propose a Vygotskyan

framework that uses the analytical power of CA seeing in it a possible basis for the development of an approach to SLA that draws on the theoretical insights of language socialization and social participation as a potential methodological resource. The research suggests a way that could relieve instructors from the burden of presenting a load of cultural information to familiarize students with inconclusive widespread cultural prototypes, while letting them be effective in searching for and negotiating the cultural meaning of any expression or action taking place in the classroom (Brown, 2001, 2007). Theories of social actions and learning/socialization such as Vygotsky's (as cited in Steinman, 2007) are useful in helping teachers create practical situations

in which students can learn about social norms. To understand how this learning happens, it is crucial to identify the interactional details of group work discourse (Frazier, 2007). Thus a communicative approach initiated through questions in the language classroom would allow students to view culture as the meaning assigned to objects, events, and relationships in a particular context or situation as participants in or observers of a social situation.

Purpose and Design

On the basis of the set of questions proposed in this article the students will be able to utilize personal experiences in the situations which demand understanding of the diversity. This article delineates an approach to cultural instruction in adult second-language education as cultural understanding which calls for the recognition of difference embedded in cross-cultural encounters. A major goal for both the students' ethnographies and the classroom dialogues in culture exploration is the search for meanings in a culture and their interpretation (*Markee, 2004 et al.*). This supports the Vygotskian notion that language develops thought (Steinman, 2007). The aim of the questions is to make students explore different reasonable understandings of cultural events and explore themselves in the process of culture learning. Students develop the skills to process information rather than obtain it and can look for personal themes in the target culture. The themes they encounter in the target culture relate to their personal circumstances and affect their lives. Although earlier research suggested that answers to the questions would be very short because on the part of students there was nothing to say, recent research (Steinman, 2007) affirms that once the SL learners begin to talk about their...histories, there is a great deal to say. They are enabled to deal with the culture as it is lived, understood, and talked about by real people. Through the classroom discussions, learners are encouraged to use the new language and new identity to act on resolutions or options related to their acculturation in the new language and culture. Thus students are in a position to get involved in the construction of their own third culture and act more efficiently for their own ends in the milieu of the target culture. The students engage in a form of reflexive ethnography, considering the community from which they come and describing their positions in a new and different community (Steinman, 2007 Warwick, 2009). Beyond their conversation-structural actions, the set of questions also works to allow students to demonstrate to each other their cultural understanding (Frazier, (2007), that is, the

questions afford the opportunity to attach a cultural acumen to what they have just heard from other students responses.

This article recommends an approach to cultural instruction that integrates language and culture in multicultural classrooms. Culture should be discussed in a language classroom so as to assist learners to gain knowledge of humans as innately cultural beings and positioned subjects and to allow the development of proficiency to explore culture, question cultural assumptions, cogitate critically with respect to cultural values, and learn to live with the diversity inherent in cross-cultural situations. Thus I suggest that another way of perceiving the place of culture in the classroom is needed, a way that leaves behind the legacy of the term culture teaching and draws attention to the ambiguity of cross-cultural encounters (Ilieva, 2000, Warwick, 2009), a method of culture exploration. I perceive the difference between culture teaching and culture exploration as follows: whereas the first seems to impose views of the target culture on the students and is prescriptive, the second simply aims to ask questions and assist learners in approaching, naming, and understanding their own as well as the natives' experience of the target culture and in searching for possible interpretations of it. Thus the communicative questions elaborated here attempt to integrate both and offer support to students to develop their own voice and act to fulfill their own goals in the new environment.

The students' descriptive accounts of situations that they have observed and participated in together would offer variations in interpretation that are significant for drawing attention to the learners' culturally positioned understandings of a given situation. Developing and asking such questions is to provide opportunity for the exploration of the target culture and the incorporation of ethnographies of students in classroom discussions. The discussions should help learners to find their own voice(s) in the new culture and to deal with the ambiguity inherent in cross-cultural encounters. The goal of the questions would be to generate and discuss cultural issues latent in the societies and develop critical thinking among students. In turn students will be able to perceive themselves as positioned subjects in a new environment with a better understanding of the cultures- their own and the target one. The questions asked in the communicative activities will be as follows:

1. **Who are you?** The question is posed with the idea that we are essentially cultural beings (Kramasch, 1998), who must understand our own culture with the help of "prior knowledge" (Steinman, 2007. P.565), before understanding that of others. As language learning is a complex

process of reinventing oneself through a new language; (for a new immigrant) it is also a struggle to find a new voice. New students "identify themselves...through their use of language" (Kramsch, 1998. P.3) and assert their new identity in a new place through a new language in a new culture. To be able to do this, language learners must have the opportunity to name their own experience in this new culture as "the structure of the language one uses influences the manner in which one thinks and behaves" (Sapir-Worf as cited in Kramasch. 1998. P.11). In culture exploration, the classroom dialogue following ethnographic fieldwork is the means by which the students' experience could be named and translated into their own voice.

2. **Who are they?** The second question that can be asked is who are they- the other? The question asked here is related to the target culture. Students must be engaged with the target culture and compare it with their own. While contrastive approaches are problematic, generalizations have some value. We all belong to many formal and informal groups, each of which requires a common language among its members. By offering answers to the first two questions students present their summaries and interpretations of a target culture situation they have observed. Because the summaries and interpretations provided by the students individually and collectively differ from student to student, these summaries provide the background for the next step in the culture exploration and classroom dialogue. The summaries do not just provide individual perspectives but also present culture as a group membership. The goal would be to place the students in consciously critical confrontation with their native and target cultural experience. These studies challenged the portrayal of L2 learners as unidimensional abstractions and presented them as human beings who have feelings (Bailey 1980, 1983; Schumann, F. 1980; Schumann, J. 1997as cited in Pavelinko, 2007.), who are positioned in terms of gender, race, and class. This confrontation is the process by which the learner will be able to name, unname, and rename his or her experience and thus start to develop an intercultural or third voice and engage in culture creation. The process will also allow students to become aware of the uncertainty and ambiguity of cross-cultural encounters. Students will also experience the ambiguity and inconsistency in the matters of interpreting events, activities, or relationships in the two cultures through classroom discussions. They will be more willing to probe and not assume that their perceptions and understandings of a situation necessarily coincide with or are in sharp contrast with those of other participants in the situation.

3. What do you see? In the course of the discussion, students elaborate on the nature of their experience and on the sense of culture shock they felt during the observation or that they feel now in the classroom while discovering possible meanings of the observed situation, as foreign languages are taught to give access to "the cultural, scientific, and economic life of the foreign nation" (Kramsch, e al. 2000. P.559); the students also discuss their own verbal and nonverbal behaviour in the situations and explore the approaches they have taken to manage or express this sense of culture shock. The culture is found in "national ideologies, intellectual and pedagogic traditions that are grounded in cultural histories" (Kramsch, et al. 2000 p.554) and cultural histories are embodied in the norms, traditions and practices. By comparing experiences and becoming aware of differences in perceiving events, situations and practices; students may be led to speculate on possible reasons for these differences.

4. What is happening? This question is posed to discuss culture as contested. Culture is contested at many levels, often through language. Differences should be identified and negotiated. Ethno-methodology (of which CA is considered a branch) aims to determine the mechanisms by which participants themselves deal with the social world. It is relevant and useful to look not only at "collections of similar interactional instances but also at specific situations in which participants are faced with novel situations and use conventionalized interactional structures" to address them (Frazier, 2007, p.192). While negotiating the cultural differences in the classroom the students and teachers both indulge in dialogue. Analysis of the data would make it clear that in the classrooms, images of culture are frequently co-constructed by the teachers and students (Warwick, 2009) through a variety of classroom activities, which focus on language skills and cultural knowledge.

5. How does this relate to your lives? The next step, a discussion of the type "How does this relate to your lives?" refers to the students' feelings, thoughts, and personal experiences of the observed situation that are addressed in the students' answers when conducting their "Constructivist process oriented tasks" (Murray, et al. 2001) and ethnographies. The experiences of "individuals in relation to other individuals and to their culture as a whole" (Kramsch, e al. 2000. P.565), the conflicts, contradictions, and struggles arise not only at the boundaries of officially recognized cultural units, but also at less formal intersections, such as those of gender, age, status, and distinctive life experiences. In other words, they are a conceptualization of culture in ethnic terms.

6. Why is there a problem? The fourth question in the problem-posing strategy could be modified by a question of the type "How do you react to that? Is this a problem for you?" The results of this study point to the need to reconsider the paradigm of culture as information and introduce learner-centred activities that arbitrate between student's pre-existing perceptions and "the otherness of another culture" (Murray, et al. 2001 p. 63). Here the discussion searches for the students' assessment of the cultural differences observed and assists them to begin to name their experiences and to realize the need to negotiate meanings. In addressing questions like "Why do you think you react in this way?" and "Why do you think you perceive this as a problem/ not a problem?" students may come up with issues like gender, social class, or other identity markers as affecting their understandings of a situation(Menard-Warwick, 2005). Culture is not a relatively harmonious and stable pool of significations, but a confrontation between groups occupying different, sometimes opposing positions in the map of social relations, and the process of making meanings (which is, after all, the process of culture) is a social struggle, as different groups struggle to establish meanings that serve their interests. During this stage of the classroom discussion, eliciting students' experience serves to validate that experience and allows them to explore the contradictions, personal confrontations, and conflicts that arise from cultural differences. The process directs the students to fit their individual experiences into a larger cultural perspective that includes such significant positionings as class, race, gender, or sexual orientation, for example. Through this process, the implication of power relations and struggles over meanings in cultural representations are also addressed.

7. What can the people in the situation do about the problem? The last stage is a discussion about the question "How do you plan to deal with situations like that?" After the probing discussions in the earlier stages, it is hoped that this question will not lead students to generalize, but rather to take nothing for granted and to search for their own third place in cross-cultural encounters. Having contextualized the students' experiences in the social and cultural system, we have provided the background for students to uncover and understand the variability in their own culturally conditioned behavior and thinking as well as that of others. For me, to be able to live with ambiguity is similar to being able to take nothing for granted.

Conclusion

A major goal for both the students' ethnographies and the pedagogic questions in culture exploration is the search for meanings in a culture and their interpretation. The aim, however, is

not for students to produce a chart of a culture's characteristics, but to explore different plausible understandings of cultural events and explore themselves in the process of culture learning (Menard-Warwick, 2005). Participant observation allows students to discern as many variables as possible in a situation and to learn how to observe and interpret situations. Equipped with ethnographic techniques, students develop the capability to practise information rather than obtain it and can look for personal themes in the target culture, that is, themes they encounter in the target culture that relate to their personal circumstances and affect their lives (James, 2000); Markee, & Kasper, 2004). By talking with returnees, students who have had only a limited contact with other cultures can begin to experience a shift in their own perspective, which goes beyond the boundaries of a narrowly prescribed world view and facilitates increased cross-cultural awareness. Through the experiences of their peers, students can learn how to get better in their language skills, make companions in the target culture, and begin to engage in cross-cultural communication. In addition to offering students opportunities to practice the target language and increase their knowledge of another culture, they are enabled to address the culture as it is lived, experienced, and talked about by real people. Through culture understanding the abstract knowledge of a target culture is jointly constructed in the classroom and becomes a tool not only in finding one's voice, but also in using that knowledge to act on the world. One of the precepts of conversation analysis is that action in the social world is centered on the locus of interpersonal social interaction, as culture actually gets 'done' in interaction between two or more people. In other words, it is in the structures of social interaction, whether in the talk or in the orientation of the body or gestures, that social identities are formed and larger social institutions are built (Frazier, 2007p.205). With the help of pedagogic questions and the discussions emerging out of those, learners are motivated to use the new language and new identity to act on solutions or alternatives related to their acculturation in the new language and culture. Thus students are in a position to engage in the creation of their own third culture and act more effectively for their own ends in the context of the target culture.

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