RAISING CULTURAL AWARENESS IN EFL/ESL IN THE CLASSROOMS IN THE REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA

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Abstract

Understanding a foreign language does not mean just understanding the grammar, the phonology and the lexis. It also means understanding certain characteristics of the culture. Language without culture is unthinkable, and so is culture without language. “It is an additional change that is expressed through the use of language”. (Farnia, Rozina: 243) In the teaching process, future teachers of English have to master the target culture for a successful mastering of the language they are teaching. They have to make sure that their students master and become bilingual not just in the linguistic expressions but also in the literature and culture part. The aim of learning a foreign language is to master both the linguistic expressions and the cultural elements incorporated in the language.

“Culture in language learning is not an expandable fifth skill, tacked on, so to speak, to the teaching of speaking, listening, reading and writing. It is always in the background, right from day one, ready to unsettle the good language learners when they expect it least, making evident the limitations of their hard-won communicative competence, challenging their ability to make sense of the world around them.” (Thanasoulas, 2001).

The aim of the paper was to explore the methods and techniques used in raising the cultural awareness in schools with students of Macedonian who are studying to become proficient teachers of English in elementary schools in Bitola, Macedonia. The underlying and long-term aim is to make them aware of the existence of the other (target culture) in studying all level of the target language- phrasal verbs, tenses, grammatical categories, sociolects and many other language and literature aspects.

Cultural Influence on Foreign Language Teaching

To understand the importance of culture we need to know to what extent cultural background knowledge influences language learning and teaching, and how can we take advantage of that influence. To account for the roles culture plays in language learning and teaching, it is necessary to demonstrate the functions it may perform in the components of language learning and teaching. More closely, the influence on vocabulary will be taken into consideration and the teaching aspect of English as a foreign language.

Cultural influence on vocabulary

Language is the carrier of culture and vocabulary is the basic ingredient of language. The cultural difference will inevitably be exhibited on the vocabulary, and the explanation of vocabulary will also reflect the national or cultural difference. Take colour as an example. In

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Chinese, white, denoting a colour, often associates with “pure, noble and moral goodness”, and the bride is dressed in white during the wedding in most western countries. In China the bride must wear red in the traditional wedding, definitely not white. Because Red means “happiness, good luck, flourishing and prosperous” in the future and people only wear white in funerals when one’s family member or relative is dead. White in China, is associated with “pale, weak and without vitality”. Thus, learning a language implies not only the knowledge of its grammar rules and the denotative meanings of words but it involves much more, such as the culture phenomena.

**Teaching culture in EFL classroom**

It is not an easy task to teach culture. Teachers can show the way rather than regulate a specific way of seeing things, which has the inclination of cultural imperialism. Making students aware of the important traits in the target culture help them realize that there are no such things as superior and inferior and there are differences among people of distinctive cultures, as well. (Wang, 2008:4). Kramsch (1993) argues that a foreign culture and one's own culture should be placed together in order for learners to understand a foreign culture. Learners’ interaction with native speakers or text will require them to construct their own meanings rather than having educators simply transfer information about people and their culture, and non-native speakers should have opportunities to make their own meanings and to reflect on both the target culture and their own. Kramsch (1993) refers to this as establishing a “sphere of interculturality”. Moreover, what educators should always have in mind when teaching culture is the need to raise their students’ awareness of their own culture (Straub, 1999) and ‘the target culture’ (Wei, 2005:55), to cultivate a degree of intellectual objectivity essential in cross-cultural analyses (Straub, 1999, cited in Wang, 2008:4).

Teachers and program developers are asked (Coleman, 1996; Holliday, 1994; McKay, 2002) to take the learners' sociocultural background into consideration in choosing materials and pedagogical approaches for particular contexts of teaching since ignoring the students' norms and expectations.

**Techniques for Developing Cultural Awareness**

There are many opinions about which techniques should be used in the classroom in order to develop cultural awareness in learners. Literature and drama have been found to be very effective for making learners sensitive to alternative cultural perspectives (O'Dowd 2004). Planet and Byram consider importance of learner-centeredness in intercultural teaching (Planet, Byram 1999). This principle should ensure that learner’s own culture is not dealt with as an abstract concept but the focus is put on learner’s involvement in it. Learners are encouraged to reflect on their culture on the basis of their own experience. The fact that these analyses take place in English lessons and learners use techniques which they would use to explain their own culture to people from other cultures, make this different from culture teaching in other subjects. Planet and Byram warn not to provide learners with ready-made information which they might need in their analysis but instead, with information and sources where they might use themselves. Even though learners were born into the culture and are familiar with it, they need to require a more distant and general look on their culture together with some information in these analyses. Byram urges teachers to start with reflecting on learner’s own culture and only later introduce the target culture. The principle in which learners are supposed to discover their own knowledge applies even to dealing with the target culture. Culture assimilators, developed by social psychologists for facilitating adjustment to a foreign culture, are used as a brief description of a critical incident of cross-cultural
interaction that would probably be misunderstood by the students. After the description of the incident, the students are presented with four possible explanations from which they are asked to select the correct one. If they make the wrong choice, they are asked to seek further information that would lead them to the correct conclusion. Culture assimilators are supposed to be a good method to promote understanding of cultural information and emotional empathy (Hughes in Valdes 1986). Among other techniques are culture capsule which draw learner’s attention to comparisons between the home and the target culture by presenting isolated items about the target culture. This technique uses visual aids which illustrate the difference, and a set of questions to stimulate class discussion. Cultural problem solving covers presentation of a problem for learners to solve and to evoke discussion about culture differences. Participants read or hear briefly about a real-life problem. The problem should illustrate the topic or theme of the discussion and can be set out quite elaborately with a number of points to discuss. Both previously mentioned techniques are using discussion which should allow students to express their own ideas. It can be also used to form a way into a topic which can stimulate students’ imagination and give a teacher an indication of how much the students already know. The emphasis should be always on the ideas which are being expressed rather than on the accuracy of how the thought is being expressed. Discussion can be approached through brainstorming. Pupils can work in small groups as long as there is a clear and concrete focus of the activity and it is kept short. Very effective techniques are role play and drama (O’Dowd 2004). Role play is a popular method for communicative use of language where students are encouraged to use language imaginatively and creatively. Being based on real-life situations it is always welcome in a role play to use authentic aids from English speaking countries (for example train tickets, menus). Sometimes it is useful to record the role play on a video or audio cassette for future reference (McKinnon, Rigby 2005). Drama is similarly useful for directly involving students in cross-cultural misunderstanding. In this technique selected members act out in a series of short scenes a misinterpretation of something that happens in the target culture and is clarified in the final scene. Among other techniques which can be used to teach culture can be mentioned Audio motor Unit or Total Physical Response, primarily designed as a listening exercise, employs a carefully constructed list of oral commands to which students respond. These commands are arranged in such a way to make students act out a cultural experience (Bowen 2005).

References:
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