

Context of Culture, a Key to Foreign Language Acquisition

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Abstract

The present theoretical research work is an attempt to describe and examine the relationship between language and culture and the possible influence the foreign culture may exert on learners' interpretation of the meaning of foreign language words, mainly those which they find difficult or alien. Learners usually have difficulties in understanding topics of different types of speech events, responding to different types of speech acts, such as requests, apologies and using written language appropriately. Their efforts made to acquire the target language very often confront various obstacles that hamper their strong will and reduce their rate of learning. These obstacles can be the source of the different errors related primarily to the cultural context of these words in sentences or utterances.

Key Terms: Language, culture, text, context, meaning, schemata

المخلص

السياق الثقافي، مفتاح لاكتساب اللغات الأجنبية

يعتبر هذا البحث النظري محاولة لوصف ودراسة العلاقة بين اللغة والثقافة والتأثير المحتمل للثقافة الأجنبية التي قد تمارس على تفسير المتعلمين لمعنى الكلمات الأجنبية، وخاصة تلك التي يجدونها صعبة أو أجنبية. وعادة ما يكون لدى المتعلمين صعوبات في فهم أو الإجابة على موضوعات أنواع مختلفة من أنماط الكلام، مثل التساؤلات، الاعتذارات واستخدام اللغة المكتوبة بشكل مناسب. وكثيرا ما تواجه جهودهم الرامية إلى اكتساب اللغة المستهدفة مختلف العقبات التي تعرقل إرادتهم القوية وتقلل من معدل تعلمهم. هذه العقبات يمكن أن تكون مصدرا للأخطاء المختلفة المتعلقة في المقام الأول بالسياق الثقافي لهذه الكلمات سواء في الجمل المكتبة أو الكلام.

الكلمات المفتاحية: اللغة، الثقافة، النص، السياق، المعنى، المعرفة القبلية

1. Introduction:

Different linguists agree upon the fact that any context is crucial for the understanding of the language in question, for it is the element that provides cues which make the meanings of the words clear. Thus, one should not only learn to understand the sound segments, the word forms, the sentence structures of the foreign language, but importantly how he interacts with context to get the possible meaning.

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Teachers and learners with their proper incentives and favourable circumstances may contribute to the general improvement of learning L2; however, their efforts very often fail to some extent because of the close contact between languages and cultures. That is to say, Language and culture are interrelated. The cultural aspects can then be a real hindrance to both the teachers and learners' motivation because they may set up barriers to the comprehension process, in general.

2. Context in Foreign Language Learning

Any language is learnt through context. When a child starts gradually learning the words of his mother tongue in the daily activities, he learns them in all contexts. When playing with a ball, for instance, he learns the words and expressions such as 'ball', 'kick', 'throw', 'shoot', 'goal', 'lend me the ball', 'I've scored a goal' and so on. In the mean time he knows that the same word can be associated with different contexts and different types of events. The child will practice the same word on different expressions. Thus, he uses the word 'open' in 'open the door', 'open the book', 'open the drawer', 'open the tap', and will one day use the expression 'open a bank account'. It means that as he learns more expressions, he acquires the language that describes these experiences (Dorre 1985).

2.1. Context as a prerequisite knowledge

In learning a foreign language, one uses the experiences of context he has acquired from his mother tongue so as to understand it. The more he knows about the different situations, the more he uses them to learn the target language. At school, for example, learners are often taught new vocabulary items with no or little regard to context. It means that they are habituated to what Alder and Van Doren (1972:128) call the 'vice of verbalism', i.e. they tend to use words without taking into account the experiences to which they should refer. This is a serious problem that may lead to the slow acquisition and the wrong use of the foreign language.

Our experiences are classified in terms of existing words or expressions. Individuals face problems with how to use words to have new meanings. For example, the English word 'abortion' means a type of 'murder' to one individual and not to another. This means that a sentence containing that word will be about a type of murder in the understanding of one but not of the other. There is, most of the time, a risk of misunderstanding when attempting to communicate. When native speakers use the language, they think with the knowledge shared by the whole speech community including the stock of metaphors and the socio-cultural experience they have acquired along the years. This creates a sort of hindrance for foreign learners to communicate with the natives because they lack both the linguistic experience and the knowledge which the natives use when speaking. Troike (1992) quoted in Kramsch says that

*"Even if they have mastered the forms of the new language, they might still have difficulty in meeting the social expectations of speakers from the new speech community."*Kramersch (1993:43)

Accordingly, how can learners be initiated into the social and cultural expectations of the new language?

Kramersch (Ibid: 34) states the example of the beginner students of German who are preparing a fictitious role play. One student turns to the teacher for help.

S: How do you say 'leave'?

T: It depends; it could be 'weggehen' or lassen'. 'What's the context?

S: 'Leave the children'.

T: Well...'lassen', but it depends on the rest of the sentence.

S: 'Leave the children in the woods'.

T: Ah, then it might be 'verlassen'. Who says that to whom?

S: I'm the mother and I say to the father: 'You should leave children in the woods'.

T: So, you would use the second personal singular, familiar form.

S: And 'should'? 'dumubt' or 'du sollst'?

T: Ah well...that depends...

This example shows that there are several ways of looking at a situation of communication according to the linguistic form of the elements that ensure the text cohesion and which is determined by the internal context of utterance. This idea is situation is explained by Kramersch as:

*"the intentions, assumptions, and presuppositions of speakers and hearers, which ensure that their discourse is perceived as coherent and therefore makes sense for the participants."*Kramersch (Ibid: 36)

Hence, the purpose of communication is to get the message across the interlocutors clearly and unambiguously. This involves efforts from both the speaker and the listener. Great confusion occurs if the message is not well interpreted by the recipient. This means that communication is only successful when the participants understand the shared information, and, in this case, thoughts and ideas can be conveyed effectively, especially if we take into account what audience this message is sent to, and how it will be perceived, without forgetting circumstances surrounding this message such as situational and cultural context.

2.1. Language and culture

Language and culture have been the subject of a great deal of anthropological and sociological study which came up with the theory that words determine thought, and thus, believe that language and its structure are entirely dependent on the cultural context in which these words exist. This means that language does not exist in a vacuum. It is embedded in the culture of people and

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reflects their beliefs, customs and traditions. The linguistic form is tightly linked with the cultural types of a given human group. Accordingly, language is a fundamental factor in inculcating the distinctive cultural aspects in society, for social relationships cannot be established only with the linguistic forms which play a crucial role in the field of cultural accumulation and the transmission of the cultural type through generations. Radgaa maintains that

"Language is the most solid background for culture, for the person who tries to reach understanding with the community but does not know its language is a foreigner who is difficult to understand...Culture is a set of social organization, and language constitutes the full image of this culture." Radgaa (1993:81-82)

Every language has specific vocabulary items, the concepts of which are completely different in another language. The Arabic word 'الجهاد' does not have the equivalent meaning of the French word "la Lutte", nor is it exactly the same as the English word "fight". Similarly, the English word "hypocrite" does not convey the exact meaning of the Arabic word 'منافق'. The French oath "Je vous jure" is not the same as 'أقسم بالله'. The meaning of a word is not absolute in any language. It is conditioned by social conventions. Most linguists agree on the fact that the full meaning of a word for an individual is the result of the experience that he has in the cultural milieu he has grown up in. It is difficult to establish exact equivalences between words and expressions in two languages because of the interrelationship between language and culture. Rivers maintains that

"Even if the words sometimes correspond in denotation, they may vary in connotation, or the emotional associations they may arouse." Rivers (1968:265)

Words represent the medium with which learners grasp the ideas depending on the different meanings in the different chosen contexts of the target language. When this FL is attempted, it is usually in an environment of the learner's first language. i.e., the learner has already been socialized into the schematic knowledge of his mother tongue. This learner, who has not got any idea about the target language culture, will most likely face problems with how the foreign linguistic and cultural system is made.

3. Pragmatics and Meaning of Words

Ellis (2000b:23) gives a long explanation of the term pragmatics which can be summarized as the study of language used in communication to convey meanings that are not actually encoded linguistically. It is particularly concerned with appropriateness, both with regard to what is said in a particular context and how it is said.

Pragmatics is the study of "meaning" and the way it is communicated by a speaker or writer and interpreted by a listener or reader (Yule 1991:3). It deals with what people mean by their utterances. For Green

"Pragmatics is the study of understanding intentional human action...the central notions in pragmatics must then include belief, intention (or goal), plan and act."

Green (1989:3)

This means that this study involves the interpretation of what people mean when communicating between each other in a certain context and how their speech is influenced by this context. How speakers organize their speech is according to certain variables such as the location, occasion, and the participant and under what inferences about what is written or said in order to arrive to the exact interpretation. That is to say, during his process of reading or listening, he investigates an invisible meaning. For Yule (Ibid) this has to do with the analysis of the intended meaning of the utterance rather than what the words and phrases in those utterances might mean by themselves.

Many messages are decoded without being written or said. In pragmatics one is concerned with people's intended meanings, their assumptions, their purposes and kinds of actions such as the request that they perform when speaking. This is all decoded from people's conversations or written literature where things are expressed without providing any clear linguistic evidence to show the explicit meaning of what is communicated. Certain linguistic expressions, to be appropriately used, require that the interlocutor share certain beliefs. For example, in order to say in an appropriate way that "Paul also arrived", it is necessary that the participants in the conversation share the idea that another person other than "Paul" had already arrived. Semantic content of a sentence like "Can you take this patient to the doctor's?" is fixed, but that the pragmatic meaning may differ as between a question and a request. This sentence could be understood either as a question about the ability of the person addressed to take the patient to the doctor's, or as a request that the person addressed should take that patient to the doctor's. Thus, "the semantic meanings of verbal signs must be supplemented by the pragmatic meanings of verbal action in context." Kramsch (1998:26). The selected words represent the medium with which learners grasp the ideas depending on the different meanings in the different chosen contexts.

Trudgill (1992:61) distinguishes pragmatics from semantics. The former as being the branch of linguistics which deals with the meaning of utterances as they occur in social contexts; the latter deals with purely linguistic meaning and has connections with discourse analysis, social context, and the study of speech acts.

In learning FL, linguistic knowledge is of much importance, but knowing when, where, and how to apply this knowledge to different contexts is a necessity. Knowing about people's speech such as conversational routines means being aware of what can lead to natural, casual, and appropriate communication

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with native speakers. In the same subject Dong (1994:32) gave two examples which illustrate it.

A: Your pen can write smoothly.

B: Do you like it? I can buy one for you, too.

This is related to what is referred to as 'illocutionary forces', (Dong: Ibid). Different speakers would understand the message differently. In this dialogue B is mistaken when s/he thinks that A wants the same kind of pen.

The second exchange illustrates the subject clearly.

A: You are not busy, Mr. Smith, I hope.

B: Yes, I'm very busy. I have a lot of work to do.

In this case, Mr. Smith, the native speaker, fails to get the illocutionary meaning of the first speaker which is that he hopes Mr. Smith will help him with something or do him a favour. After hearing Mr. Smith's answer, the Algerian feels hopeless and thinks that perhaps Mr. Smith is unwilling to help.

In a nutshell, providing information to learners as to when to speak and what to say in certain contexts is important in successful communication with native speakers. It is as important as the mastery of linguistic knowledge.

4. Background knowledge (Schemata)

The information that readers or listeners possess as a pre-existing knowledge enables them to interpret the unwritten or the unsaid messages. This information which is referred to as 'background knowledge' consists of previous experience used to interpret new experience. Goodman rejects that

"Reading a literary text or listening to a dialogue is a precise process of perception and identification and describes it as a psycholinguistic guessing game." He suggests that

"The reader begins a reading task already possessing certain information which allows him or her to pick up important ideas on them." Goodman (1967:126-35)

The importance of background knowledge in reading is also central to schema theory (Rumelhart, 1980). This theory claims that reading a text implies an interaction between the reader's background knowledge and the text itself. The knowledge that is organized and stored in the reader's mind is called schemata. Thus, readers relate their schemata with the new information in the text. No text can be considered separate from the reader; there must be a successful interaction between the reader and the discourse to be processed. The readers' prior knowledge is so essential for the reading process, i.e., their own reading strategies and personal and cultural experiences.

about the structural configuration of texts) from context schemata (knowledge about the subject matter of text). She finds that *"a reader may fail to understand a text if s/he does not follow formal schemata."* i.e., if content schema was lacking. Steffenson and Alderson (1979:203-9) found that this

particular content may not exist for a reader if that schema is culturally specific; so the texts should be culturally accessible. Rivers suggests that

*"...previous cultural and schematic knowledge is a factor in the success of the learning process. A text or any other input lacking the learners' background knowledge may easily cause inaccurate progress of the learners' ability and reinforce misunderstanding."*Rivers (1968: 72)

5. Cultural background Knowledge (Schemata)

Background knowledge about the TL is of vital importance to language learners. Different cultures define social situations differently. Although there are many social situations that are common across cultures, there are other practices for which no equivalence exists.

In English, for example, one may acknowledge another's compliment. This can be illustrated in the following:

A: That was a wonderful meal.

B: Thank you. I'm glad you liked it.

In other languages, this may not sound suitably acceptable, i.e. people may not acknowledge the compliment verbally. As in:

A: That was a wonderful meal!

B: No, I'm sorry the food was not delicious.

This does not mean that B is not glad to hear the compliment, but s/he simply refuses it verbally. If native speakers experience the same situation, they may feel puzzled and frustrated about the refusal of the compliment.

In Algeria, for example, when two friends meet, they may talk with each other about anything as health, job, income, prices, the family, etc. This is a result of the intimacy which exists between them. Native speakers of English, however, think these topics are private and should not be the subject to share with people. They may feel offended or hurt if they are once asked about these things.

Thus, information about the life of people and their culture, in general is of much importance.

5.1. Teacher's Schemata

The foreign language teacher is expected to have thorough insight into the culture of the language he is teaching. This may be essential to identify those areas of cultural background that will be unintelligible to his students if presented without explanation.

The problem arises if this teacher is not exposed directly to the foreign culture; as is the case of most of Algerian teachers, for example. This teacher should make up for this lack by reading works on culture and analyzing the differences of interpretations. Cultural insights can also be taken from the various media such as newspapers, magazines, radio and television. Friendly contact with native speakers is also beneficial.

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5.2. Learners' Schemata

Hedge agrees that

*"schematic knowledge does indeed enable the reader to work with the language of the text in order to interpret meaning"*Hedge (2000:189)

This would imply the knowledge the learner has accumulated in his long-term memory about the social, cultural and other aspects of the world around him. Any pre-existing knowledge in the part of the learner is important for the comprehension of any topic of any reading passage. The learner's comprehension will be greater if he has background knowledge of the various rhetorical modes of the target language and is equipped to identify and use those various structures.

A text containing references to the foreign culture very often creates serious problems of comprehension to the reader if he has no knowledge of such cultural specificity. Klein claims that

*"...some elements of this knowledge vary from culture to culture and, within the given culture, from individual to individual. The cultural differences are the source of serious problems for spontaneous learner..."*Klein (1988:114)

The schemata acquired by the learners influence the way they interpret things to be learnt; that is to say, learners' prior-knowledge interferes and helps in the acquisition of the new information. Thus, pre-reading tasks designed to enlighten the EFL learner on matters of culture will prove beneficial.

7. Conclusion:

Learning, understanding and mastering a foreign language is becoming a target for all educators and learners to achieve. However, each language is characterized by its specific norms in writing as well as in speech and is shaped and socialized through the culture of its people. It means that each language has its own cultural criteria. The problem arises when learners make efforts to acquire new habits and behaviour of the foreign language, and at the same time they use the background of their native language habits. Foreign language learners, who have been socialized into the schematic knowledge of their mother tongue, undergo a substantive degree of conflict as soon as they are initiated to learn the FL. This new language makes learners' pre-requisite knowledge subjected to a new cultural reality whose organization is completely different, and thus, it becomes difficult or, sometimes, impossible to achieve. Understanding words to grasp the ideas of the text and attempting to use them to express their thought is also an impediment which confronts them because of their misinterpretation of the exact meaning as well as the context of the situation in which these words are used. These words express facts and ideas that can be well communicated only among the native speakers who share the same stock of knowledge. Thus, making equivalences between words and their meanings in two languages might mostly

be difficult because of the enormous differences that exist between both languages and cultures. Thus, Educators such as teachers should be aware of the culture of the TL. It is their duty to inform learners so as to know more about the people whose language is taught in the classroom. Moreover, regardless learner's level, teaching material should be culture-bound. The right selection of the material is, therefore, crucial to the success of language learning especially when the teacher finds that he is given an assigned textbook that he finds inadequate both as to linguistic and cultural content (Ibid: 3). The ambiguities at the level of the context of the foreign culture very often lead to certain errors which may affect learning negatively.

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