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İÇİNDEKİLER:

THE IMPORTANCE OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

Şahin Gök*

Her toplum kendi kültürü ve diline sahiptir. Kültürel farklılıklar dil öğreniminde önemli bir rol oynarlar. Bir kültürde yetiştirilen bir kişinin diğer kültüre konulduğunda, reaksiyonu öfke, düş kırıklığı, merak veya kafasının karışması olabilir. Bundan dolayı yanlış anlamaların iki farklı kültür bireyleri arasında görülmesi olasıdır. A dili bir olay için bir isime sahipken, B dili böyle bir kelimeye sahip değildir ve aynı anlamı ifade etmek için yardımcı sözcükler kullanmak zorundadır. Örneğin Fransızca "entamer" in anlamı için İngilizce uzun ve dolaylı bir anlatım yapmak zorundadır, "to make the first cut in" (bir parça kesmek ya da kesmeye başlamak). Eskimo kabileleri değişik kar tiplerini (yağan kar, yerdeki kar, yumuşak kar, lapa kar vs.) ayırmak için yedi farklı kelimeye sahipken, Zaire'nin ekvatoral ormanlarındaki bazı Afrika kültürleri kar için hiçbir kelimeye sahip değildir. İspanyol ya da Meksikalı bir seyircinin yanına oturan bir Amerikalı için boğa güreşi silahlı bir adam tarafından savunmasız bir hayvanın boğazlanmasıdır. Boğaya karşı adil ve sportmence değildir. Sonuç olarak, dil öğreniminde farklı kültürlerden dolayı bir çok yanlış anlamalar ve hatlar vardır, bundan dolayı ikinci dil öğretmeni bu sorunlardan kaçınmak için kültürel farklılıklar üzerinde daha fazla durmalıdır.

INTRODUCTION

The members of the community share sets of political or ethical beliefs, they share to a large extent the way they interpret the world, how they classify objects, what meaning they give to this classification. They agree about the right and wrong ways of getting things done, of dressing, eating, marrying, worshipping, educating their young and so on. All these things are their *culture*" (Corder, 1973).

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Culture is a *blueprint* that "guides the behavior of people in a community and is incubated in family life... it helps us to know how far we can go as individuals and what our responsibility is to the group. *Different cultures are the underlying structures which make Round community round and Square community square.*" Larson and Smalley (1972, p.39)

Every community possesses both a culture and a language of its own. But the question that has been common and argued for long by linguists emerges: What is the relation between them? It is an important fact that the child acquires the attitudes, values and ways of behaving that we call its *culture* largely through the language of the community. Learning these behaviors is the process of socialization, and is principally carried out through language, first in the home, later in the school and in the life of the community. Thus we can say that *language mediates between the individual and the culture.* Because it is largely through language that he acquires the cultural patterns of thought and behavior of his community (Corder, 1973).

It is conceivable that lack of acceptance of artificial languages such as Esperanto may be explained by their isolation of language from culture. No one can *feel* or therefore *think* deeply, in an artificial language." Valdes (1986, p. 1)

CULTURE AND LANGUAGE

Cultural differences play an important role in language learning. On this difficulty, Valdes (1986) notes that when a person who has been nurtured by one culture is placed in juxtaposition with another, his reaction may be anger, frustration, fright, curiosity, entrenchment, repulsion, confusion. Misunderstandings are therefore likely to occur between members of different cultures.

According to the research that has been produced in this century, a native culture is as much of an interference for second language learners as is native language. Likewise, just as similarities and contrasts in the native and target languages have

been found to be useful tools in language study, so cultural similarities and contrasts, once identified and understood, can be used to advantage (Valdes, 1986).

If the learners are guided to a recognition of the cultural base of their own attitudes and behavior, they can easily consider others in a more favorable light. Through this process, the events that have seemed quaint, peculiar, or downright reprehensible, become more reasonable and acceptable. Once the second language learner comes to understand the behavior of the speakers of the target language, the task of learning the language becomes far simpler, both through acceptance of the speakers of the language and through increased knowledge of what the language means, as well as what it says (Valdes, 1986).

Corder (1973) notes that it is the task of the language to recognize distinctions in a society. This is most clearly seen in the *lexical* encoding of experience. Thus we would expect to find differences in the vocabularies of two different languages. Where language A has a single name for some phenomenon, language B has no such word and has to resort to periphrasis to express the same notion. Corder (1973) exemplifies this as follows:

> "German has the term *Gemütlichkeit*; English has to resort to a whole phrase or conjunction of terms, such as *kindly, easy-going, good-natured.* French has the simple term *entamer* for which the English is a whole phrase such as *to make the first cut in.* On the other hand, French has to resort to periphrasis in the case of the English *to kick, to punch*: *donner un coup de pied, donner un coup de poing.*"(p. 73)

A slightly different situation is where language A has a single term for some phenomenon and language B has, perhaps, two or three terms covering the same area of experience, and therefore making distinctions which language A does not. Corder (1973) maintains to illustrate the phenomenon:

> "English has the single generic term *horse*, where Arabic has a whole series of different words for different breeds and conditions of horses, but no word for horse as such. This does not mean that the English speaker is debarred from expressing the distinctions,

> only that he has more work to do: *spavined horse, racehorse, piebald horse, skewbald horse*, and so on" (p. 73).

As an ingrained set of behaviors and modes of perception, culture becomes highly important in the learning of a second language. Brown (1980) notes that *a language is a part of a culture and a culture is a part of a language*; the two are intricately interwoven such that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture. Thus, *the acquisition of a second language means the acquisition of a second culture.*

So, it is the responsibility of foreign and second language teachers to recognize the difficulty their students experience in the other culture and to assist them to lower the negative effect of it to the point that culture becomes an aid to language learning rather than a hindrance. To do so, what teachers need is a perspective of how language and culture affect one another in the human mind, considerable knowledge of cultural differences per se, specific traits of several different cultures, and some background and insight on how to use this knowledge in the classroom (Valdes, 1986).

LANGUAGE, THOUGHT AND CULTURE

Brown (1980) says that culture is, in fact, an integral part of the interaction between language and thought. Cultural patterns, customs, ways of life and culture-specific world views are expressed in language. Cultures, for example, have different ways of dividing the color spectrum, illustrating differing world views on what color is and how to identify color. Gleason (1961:4) notes that the Shone of Rhodesia and the Bassa of Liberia have fewer color categories than speakers of European languages and they break up the spectrum at different points, as Table 1.1. shows:

Table 1.1. Color categories in three cultures

ENGLISH	Purple	Blue	green	yellow	orange	red
SHONA	Cips^{w}uka		citema	cicema	cips^{w}uka	

BASSA	Hui	ziza

Of course, the Shona or Bassa are able to perceive and describe other colors, in the same way that an English speaker might describe other colors, but the labels which the language provides tend to shape the person's overall cognitive organization of color and to cause varying degrees of color discrimination.

The similar difference is seen in the overuse of the certain words in a certain place while others are never used or known by the community. For example, "Eskimo tribes commonly have seven different words for *snow* to distinguish among different types of snow (*falling snow*, *snow on the ground*, *fluffy snow*, *wet snow*, etc.), while certain African cultures in the equatorial forests of Zaire have no word at all for snow." (Brown, 1980, p.142)

A question emerges from such observations on interrelationship among language, thought and culture. Does language *reflect* a cultural world view or does language actually *shape* the world view? Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf proposed a hypothesis that has been now known as the *Sapir-Whorf hypothesis*, the *Whorfian hypothesis*, *linguistic relativity*, or *linguistic determinism* (Brown, 1986).

Benjamin Lee Whorf started people thinking rigorously about the problems of *linguistic determinism* or *linguistic relativity*, as the study of relations between language, culture and thought. He expressed the *extreme view* that our view of the world, the ways we can categorize our experience and conceptualize our environment, is effectively determined by our language (Corder, 1973).

Whorf (1956) sums up the hypothesis:

> "....the grammar of each language is not merely a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas but rather is itself the *shaper of ideas*, the program and guide for the individual's mental activity, for his analysis of impressions, for his synthesis of his mental stock in trade....We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages....We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significance as we do, largely because we are parties to an

> agreement to organize it in this way-an agreement that holds through our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language." (pp. 212-214)

Edward Sapir (1941, cited in Whorf, 1956: 134), also, maintains that it is the language that shape our thought. He illustrates his view as follows:

> "Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but we are at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society. It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and that language is merely an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication or reflection."

Brown (1980) states that the Whorfian hypothesis has few enthusiastic supporters today. Most linguists have little or no concern about a debate over whether language shapes thought or thought shapes language. They are more concerned with the fact that language and culture interact, that world views among cultures differ, and that the language used to express that world view may be relative and specific to that view. The universality of language and consequently the universality of cognitive and affective experience have come into the focus.

Guiora (1976) tested the Whorfian hypothesis for the effect of the gender of nouns between English and Hebrew, and found no support whatever the pattern of our data may suggest the existence of the universality of symbols, at least across these two languages and these two cultures, thus adducing support to the notion of the universality of affective experience. As a result, probably no one these days would defend either *extreme determinism* or *extreme relativity.* But there is much to be said in favor of a *weaker version* of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis that *the language that one speaks does not determine thought but it influences it* (Lyons, 1981).

Brown (1980) concludes that for second language teachers a knowledge of the commonalities between two languages or of the universal features of language appears to be fruitful for understanding the total language learning process. While we can realize different world views and different ways of expressing reality, we can also recognize through language and culture some universal properties that bind us

all together in one world. Learning to *think* in another language may require a considerable degree of mastery of that language, but a second language learner does not have to learn to think all over again. The second language learner can make positive use of prior experiences to facilitate the process of learning by retaining that which is valid and valuable for second culture learning and second language learning. If an analogy may be permitted, "*it is just the bath water of interference that needs to be thrown out, not the baby of facilitation.*" (p. 144)

Besides Brown's conclusion, Valdes (1986) sums up the interrelationship among language, thought and culture and notes that whether one begins or ends with language, thought, or culture, the other two are woven in; the circular pattern holds, with each influencing and being influenced by each of the others. They are not all the same thing, but none can survive without the others. Second language learners must not only be aware of this interdependence but must be taught its nature, in order to convince them of the essentiality of including culture in the study of a language which is not their own.

CROSS CULTURAL MISUNDERSTANDINGS

Valdes (1986) notes that the comparison of native culture of the learner with the language being taught opens great vistas for the teacher and provides a basis for better understanding of persons from other backgrounds, as well as supplying new insights into approaches to teaching a second language. Obviously no one can learn everything about all cultures but even rather sweeping generalities, so long as they are not false, may be a help. Only after understanding and appreciating something of other cultures, one can realize the importance of providing cultural clues to assist the language learner in a new environment and to recognize what values and behavior patterns of the new culture the learner has most need to know.

To Lado (1957), culture is also an important element in second language teaching and he says that the application of the techniques of linguistic comparison to cultural comparison has already shown positive results. If we ignore cultural differences we

will misjudge our cultural neighbors for a form of behavior that to them has one meaning may have another one to us. So, we should be able to describe specific patterns of behavior in a given culture and through comparison with the native culture of the student we should be able to discover that there are certain misunderstandings that take place again and again. And, if we know that an item of behavior has a different meaning in the other culture we will not misunderstand.

Lado (1957) goes further to investigate the ways of systematic comparison of native and foreign cultures in terms of *form, meaning* and *distribution.* A problem occurs when the same form has different classification or meaning in the two cultures. Bullfighting is a clear-cut example for cross-cultural misinformation. It is a particularly difficult pattern of behavior to explain convincingly to an unsophisticated United States observer. A bullfight has a very precise, complex *form.* A man, who is armed wit a sword and a red cape, challenges and kills a fighting-bull. The form is prescribed in great detail. The specific words such as *the bullfighter, the bull, the picadors, the music, the dress* etc. are part of the form (Lado, 1957).

Form, meaning, and *distribution* can, of course, be interpreted by a person from another culture. For example, an American observer who seated next to a Spanish or Mexican spectator will see a good deal of the form, thought not all of it. He will see a man in a special dress, armed with a sword and cape, challenging and killing the bull. The *meaning* of the spectacle is quite different to him, however, it is the slaughter of a "defenceless" animal by an armed man. It is unfair and unsportsmanlike to the bull. It is cruel to animals, etc.. (Lado, 1957).

Misinformation here is that the meaning of *cruel* is found in Spanish culture, but it does not attach to the bullfight. The American observer who is ascribing the meaning cruel to the spectator and fighter is getting information that is not in Spanish culture (Lado, 1957).

Lado (1957) notes that a form in culture B which is identified by an observer from culture A as the same form as one in his own culture, actually has different meaning. A *hiss*, for example, a sharp, voiceless sibilant sound, expresses disapproval in the United States. But in Spanish-speaking countries it is the normal way to ask for silence in a group. Fries (1955) reports being taken aback the first time he faced a Spanish-speaking audience and heard them *hissing*. He wondered if they were hissing at him. Later he learned that they were calling for silence.

Another trouble occurs when the same meaning in two cultures is associated with different forms. The foreigner seeking to act in the culture being learned will select his own form to achieve the meaning, and he may miss altogether the fact that a different form is required (Lado, 1957).

A young man, for example, from Izfahan, Iran, gets off the train in a small town of the United States. He takes his luggage and attempts to hail a taxi. A likely car with a white license plate and black letters goes by. The young man waves at it but the car does not stop. Another car appears with the same type of license plate. The young man waves again, without success. Consequently, he picks up his suitcases and walks to his destination. He later finds out that taxis in the United States are distinguished not by a white license plate, but by bright flashing lights and loud colors. In Izfahan at that time the signal for a taxi was a white license plate (Lado, 1957).

The trouble occurs when a pattern that has the same form and the same meaning shows different distribution. The foreign language learner assumes that the distribution of a pattern in the second culture is the same as in his native culture, and therefore he generalizes his observation as if it applied to all variants and therefore to the entire culture. Distribution is a source of a great many problems (Lado, 1957).

For example, it is puzzling that on the one hand Latin American students complained that North American meals abused the use of sugar, while on the other hand the dietitians complained that Latin Americans used too much sugar at meals.

We can observe that the average Latin American student takes more sugar in his coffee than do North Americans. He is used to drinking milk at meals, bet when milk is served he sometimes puts sugar in it. The dietitian would use less or none at all. The dietitian notices this use of sugar in situations in which North Americans would use less or none at all.

On the other hand, Latin American student for his part finds a salad made of sweet gelatin, or half a canned pear on a lettuce leaf. Sweet salad! Turkey is served on Thanksgiving Day, but when the Latin American tastes the sauce, he finds that it is sweet-it is cranberry sauce. Sweet sauce for boiled turkey. North Americans obviously use too much sugar in their food. As a result, the notion of *too much sugar* differs in distribution according to people who prepare and eat such meals (Lado, 1957).

Finally, systematic observation of the culture in operation will do much to eliminate the errors mentioned above. Lado (1957) concludes:

> "Even though a total analysis and comparison of any two highly complex cultures may not be readily available for some time to come, the kind of model and sample comparison discussed in this paper will be helpful in interpreting observations made in the actual contact of persons of one culture with another culture." (pp. 122-123)

Morain (1978) also touches another aspect of communication across cultures, that is, *body language* and she narrates her experience about learning French, as follows:

> "I grew up in Iowa and I knew what to do with butter: you put it on rostin' ears, pancakes, and popcorn. Then I went to France and saw a Frenchman put butter on radishes....I realized then something I hadn't learned in five years of language study: not only was *speaking* in French different from speaking in English, but *buttering* in French was different from buttering in English. And that was the beginning of real cross-cultural understanding." (p. 64)

It is clear that being able to read and speak another language does not guarantee the correct *understanding* between the members of the two different cultures, as seen in

above quotation. Words in themselves are too limited; thus, the critical factor in understanding has to do with *cultural aspects* that exist beyond lexis (Morain, 1978).

Consequently, cultural differences causes misinformation in body language, too. As a way of communication, people from different cultures use body movements such as *facial expression, gaze and eye management*, and *gestures* in different styles and therefore these differences cause misinformation (Morain, 1978).

Parker et al. (1976) notes that cultural differences cause misunderstanding between the second language learners and the speakers of the target language. They determine that Middle Eastern students, whether Arab or non-Arab, Muslim or Christian, share many distinct characteristics. Growing up in a paternalistic society is a factor which helps determine the behavioral characteristics of Middle Eastern students. Likewise, the Middle Eastern student needs a *paternal relationship* with his faculty and administration advisors. *Respect* is also a very important element for friendship. One of the Middle Eastern students was sure his American roommate hated him. Every night when they were studying, the American put his feet up on his desk, soles pointing directly at his Arab roommate. In most Arab countries, this is an *insult*.

MISUNDERSTANDINGS IN COMPLEMENTING

Since the communicative competence is widely recognized as an important goal of language teaching, it is useful to examine *complimenting* in some detail. The results of Wolfson's study have showed that a single speech act may vary greatly across speech communities. In particular, what counts as a compliment may differ very much from one society to another. An Indonesian student, for example, reported the following examples of compliments which he had heard in Indonesian and translated:

S: You have bought a sewing machine. How much does it cost?
A: Oh, it is cheap. It's a used one. My wife needs it badly.
S: You've saved a lot of money in your account, ha?
A: Oh, no. Please don't tease me.

(Wolfson, 1981, cited in Valdes, 1986: 113)

Of course, one could conclude from looking above data that the non-native speaker had simply not understood the meaning of the term *compliment* in English. It is much more difficult for English speakers to understand why it is complimentary in Indonesian to mention that a friend has bought a sewing machine, saved money or done a lot of shopping (Wolfson, 1981).

In contrast with these Indonesian examples, the examples collected and translated by Japanese present a great deal of resemblance to American English compliments. Although there is so much similarity between Japanese and American compliments, some of the material collected as compliments in Japanese would certainly not be considered complimentary by a speaker of American English:

S: Your earrings are pure gold, aren't they?
A: Yes, they are. They must be pure gold when you put them on.
S: Money is a necessary condition to become attractive, indeed.
A: I think so too."
(Wolfson, 1981, cited in Valdes, 1986: 114).

For speakers of American English it is difficult to accept the idea that it is considered complimentary to suggest that another's attractiveness depends on having money. So this misinformation causes a breakdown in communication (Wolfson, 1981).

Another significant contrast between American English compliments and those collected and translated by speakers of other languages is the difference in the use of proverbs and other ritualized phrases. Compliments collected and translated by Iranian and Arabic speakers illustrate this case particularly well. While two Jordanian women speak, one says about a still a third woman:

X is a nice girl and beautiful. (p. 115)

Her friend, responds with a proverb in order to express the view that speaker is even more beautiful.

Where is the soil compared with the star? (p.115)

In complementing her friend's child, an Arab speaker says:

> She is like the moon and she has beautiful eyes. (p. 115)

while an Iranian boy says to his mother:

> Boy: It was delicious, Mom. I hope your hands never have pain.
> Mother: I'm glad you like it."
> (Wolfson, 1981, cited in Valdes, 1986)

Since Americans do not make use of such proverbs and set phrases in giving compliments, they, of course, have difficulty to understand them (Wolfson, 1981).

Wolfson (1981) concludes that if true communication is to take place among people who come from differing cultural backgrounds, and if *interference* is to be minimized in second language learning, then we must have cross-cultural comparisons of rules of speaking. That is, *contrastive analysis* must be generalized to include not only the level of form but also the level of function.

CONCLUSION

As a result, culture is, of course, an inevitable element to be considered in teaching the second language. Therefore, it is a need for a second language teacher to consider the systematic comparisons between the target and native cultures in order to be successful in teaching. Artificial languages such as Esperanto is not accepted as a language because of their isolation from culture. Consequently, no one can *feel* or therefore *think* deeply, in an artificial language (Valdes, 1986). Since the learner first thinks in his native language, he will, of course, transfer some features of his language to the target language in both speech and writing. For example, a Turkish learner of English starts his letter with a cliché: "How are you and how is your mother..." So, this causes a cultural interference in his writing. Likewise, many other cultural features such as proverbs, idioms and other attitudes can be seen in Turkish EFL students' foreign language.

To sum up, while teachers of English teach a second language, they also teach a second culture without which the second language teaching is not complete. As we have examined above, lack of the consideration of L2 culture in second language teaching causes mmisunderstandings and errors. To avoid them, the teacher should, as Lado (1957) suggests, stresses more on cross cultural differences between L1 and L2.

ABSTRACT:

Every community possesses both a culture and a language of its own. Cultural differences play an important role in language learning. When a person who has been nurtured by one culture is placed in juxtaposition with another, his reaction may be anger, frustration, curiosity, or confusion. Misunderstandings are therefore likely to occur between members of different cultures. Where language A has a single name for some phenomenon, language B has no such word and has to resort to periphrasis to express the same notion. For example, French has the simple term entamer for which the English is a whole phrase such as to make the first cut in. Eskimo tribes commonly have seven different words for snow to distinguish among different types of snow (falling snow, snow on the ground, fluffy snow, wet snow, etc.), while certain African cultures in the equatorial forests of Zaire have no word at all for snow. For an American observer who seated next to a Spanish or Mexican spectator, bullfighting is the slaughter of a "defenceless" animal by an armed man. It is unfair and unsportsmanlike to the bull. Finally, there are a lot of misunderstandings in learning a second language so an EFL teacher must focus on cultural differences.

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