

CHAPTER-5

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5.1 Introduction:

English-as-a-second-language (ESL) students have several challenges in their academic studies. A problem due to cultural differences is also one of the factors affecting English learners while learning the target language. It is important to remember that learning a second language involves much more than learning the words and the sounds of a language. The failure of communication occurs not only due to the more commonly understood syntactic problems and pronunciation difficulties but because when we learn a language we also learn a culture. This is due to the fact that a language is a part and parcel of culture as it is always embedded into the culture. It is obvious that learners face some problems while learning English due to cultural differences of the first and target languages. It has been seen that just as similarities and differences have been found to be useful in language studies so too cultural similarities and differences, once identified and understood, can be used to advantage. We can recognise different world-views and different ways of expressing reality.

The purpose of this chapter is also to give an idea about the problems based on cultural differences in language learning. Further it shows the relationship between culture and language learning and also concerns about the integration of culture in the second language learning with the view that a successful communication in language

learning hardly ever takes place unless second language users have obtained a kind of cultural competency of the language they use.

5.2 Culture:

We will first make a brief summary of the meaning of the term culture. It is extremely difficult to define what culture is. The concept of 'culture' is something that everybody implicitly understands but nobody can define precisely. A lot of time can be spent on trying to give a precise definition of the word. According to different scholars culture is define as:

According to Hinkel (2007), the popular definition of "culture" refers only to that part of culture that is visible and easily discussed. This can include the folklore, the literature, the arts, the architecture, styles of dress, cuisine, customs, festivals, traditions, and the history of a particular people.

Peck (1998) refers to culture as, culture is all the accepted and patterned ways of behaviour of a given people. It is the facet of human life learned by people as a result of belonging to some particular group; it is that part of learned behaviour shared with others.

For Goodenough (1963: 258-259), [c]ulture...consists of standards for deciding what is, standards for deciding what can be, standards for deciding how one feels about it, standards for deciding what to do about it, and standards for deciding how to go about doing

it. Clearly, culture is a ubiquitous force, forging our identities and our relationships with other things and individuals.

The National Center for Cultural Competence defines culture 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, and Jones 2000). This means that language is not only part of how we define culture, it also reflects culture. In short then, culture is; “...the sum of a social group’s patterns of behaviour, customs, way of life, ideas, beliefs and values” (Fox 2004).

Culture embraces all that contributes to the survival of man, such as art, craft, drama, dress, education, music, politics, religion and technology. It is absorbed by living in it and changed by contact with outside cultures or inspiration from within. Clearly, culture covers a wide territory. Its broadness is certainly an attraction but can also be considered as a problem. However, it is worth making a list of the areas it includes: literature, the arts in general, customs, habits and traditions, humans’ behavior, history, music, folklore, gesture, social relationship etc. These are ingredients and it is different to give a whole picture of them. This can be considered a problem deriving from the complicated nature of culture.

5.3 Language and Culture:

Language is the product of culture. One important instrument of cultural expression is language. Language is both an expression of culture as well as a vehicle for cultural transmission. Language is a part of culture and plays a very important role in it. On the one hand, without language, culture would not be possible. On the other hand, language is influenced and shaped by culture; it reflects culture. The relationship between language and culture is deeply rooted. Language is used to maintain and convey culture and cultural ties. "Culture is in language, and language is loaded with culture" (Agar 1994). Brown (1980) puts that culture is a "deeply ingrained part of our being and language is the most visible and available feature of culture" (Gao 2006) notes that "[l]anguage is a product of the thought and behaviour of a society." The thought and behaviour of a society is the aggregate of the thought and behaviour of individuals, which itself is shaped by culture; thus on a very practical level culture is the force that makes communication between individuals through language possible. "Culture and language are so tightly related that may be regarded as parts of the same thing. No case is known of either a language or a culture existing without the other. Obviously, no language can survive in isolation and no civilization can be built up without language. Cultural changes tend to occur along with changes in language; the two proceed reinforcing each other" (Krishnawamy 1992). "Knowledge of a language is undeniably part of one's cultural heritage. A good portion of one's identity as a member of a cultural group comes from being

able to speak the group's language. Much of our cultural knowledge is expressed to use in that language" (Baker 2001). Through the study of other languages, students gain a knowledge and understanding of the cultures that use that language; in fact, students cannot truly master the language until they have also mastered the cultural contexts in which the language occurs (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project 1996 pp 27). In other words we can conclude that language and culture are intricately interwoven to one another and cannot be separated. Language definitely is a manifestation of culture. Language reflects what is there in the culture.

5.4 Culture and Language Teaching: The Importance of Culture in Language Teaching

Linguistic competence alone is not enough for learners of a language to be competent in that language. Language is rooted in culture and culture is reflected and passed on by language from one generation to the next (Emmitt and Pollock 1997). From this, one can see that learning a new language involves the learning of a new culture (Allwright and Bailey 1991). Consequently, teachers of a language are also teachers of culture (Byram 1989). As Holmes (2001) points out, "Learning another language usually involves a great deal more than learning the literal meaning of the words, how to put them together, how to pronounce them. We need to know what they mean in the cultural context in which they are normally used. And that involves some understanding of the cultural and social norms of their users". Culture and teaching language cannot be separated, thus culture must

be recognized as an important area in language learning and teaching. If languages are taught without their cultures, students are only the strangers who are not familiar with the target languages. It is important to mention that cultural elements of the target language should be taught carefully, that the teaching of culture can aid motivation and understanding in students studying English as a second language.

Agar (1994:60) demonstrates how language is bound up with culture by the coined word 'languaculture'. Languaculture forms peoples' traditional ideas, values and behaviour. The author adopts the languaculture to refer to the intrinsic link and inseparable relation between language and culture. Language is culture and culture is mediated through language; there is no language outside culture and no culture outside language. Therefore, the teaching and learning of a language should be handled together with the culture that gives the language meaning and life. Culture should not be treated as something additional to language, but must be treated as one organic entity in language teaching/learning processes. Valdes (1990:20) estimates that there is no way to avoid teaching culture when teaching language. She argues further that, since every language lesson must be about something, that something will almost invariably be related to culture in one way or another. Indeed, she goes on to say, the focus of a lesson may be on syntactic or phonetic features, but the content will be cultural. Jiang (2000) implies that it is impossible to teach the target language without teaching the target culture. The students can be

exposed to an empty frame of language if they don't learn cultural aspects of the target culture.

It can be said that cultural content is a key for effective teaching and learning a second or foreign language. Necessarily, students cannot master the language unless they have mastered the cultural contexts in which the language occurs (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 1996, pp 27). Moreover, we should be cognisant of the fact that '[i]f 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...' (Politzer 1959: 100-101).

Thus, from the above, it is clear that language teaching is indeed culture teaching and every aspect of culture should include in language teaching and in the study of language.

5.5 Cultural differences between English and Manipuri:

Language seems to be woven into the very fabric of every human culture; and to such an extent that it is hard to imagine what human culture would be like without language. A proper understanding of a language is impossible without a full awareness of the cultural context in which it is used. Lado (1957) argued that lack of cultural competence in the target language would surely lead to transfer from the native language to the target language. Since language and culture are closely interrelated to one another, Manipuri ESL Learners

encounter some difficulties when they tend to speak the target language clearly.

A rough comparison /contrast between Manipuri and English cultures provide some clues as to how to eliminate some misunderstandings that Manipuri ESL Learners may have. Let us look at the following examples:-

- (1) The first cultural differences that encounter by Manipuri ESL Learners are the way that English-speaking people say and write their names. Unlike English speaking people, Manipuri put their family name first, followed by their given name, showing the importance of the family. For example, in Manipuri, Laishram Tomba, here 'Laishram' is the family name and 'Tomba' is the given name of the particular person.

Likewise, Korean speaker English learners tend to have the same problems. Korean put the family name first, followed by their given name, showing the importance of the family (Cho, Byung-Eun 2004). Also “ in writing Chinese, the surname precedes the first name” (*The New World Encyclopedia* www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Chinese_surname).

- (2) To speak English appropriate to the occasion, Manipuri ESL Learners should understand the western way of life and customs in order to avoid misunderstanding while speaking. Many fixed English ways of expressions cannot be changed randomly. For example, the answer to, “How do you do?” is “How do you do?”

but to Manipuri ESL Learners, they replied as “I am fine”. If we asked a student “How are you?” they would still answer “I am fine”.

- (3) Again another example, when asking the other one’s name on the telephone, “Who’s speaking, please?” or “Who is it, please?” instead of “Who are you?”.
- (4) As peoples are diverse, customs are diverse. It is only natural then that with differences in customs, differences often arise in using of language. For example, when someone praise that your hair is very beautiful, English and Manipuri responds to compliments are different. According to Manipuri customs, they generally reply about not being worthy of the praise while English customs, they tend to accept the compliment with the pleasure. The reply like “No, my hair is not that beautiful”— is thought to be impolite by English people. In the similar way of Manipuri, in Chinese customs, if someone praise that your English is very good they generally murmur some reply about not being worthy of the praise. The reply like “No, I don’t speak good English”—Americans think which seems to criticize the other side, is impolite (Chinese and Western Cultural Studies. <http://c.zhiwenweb.cn>).

(5) Another example is “red–letter days”—which is a simple phrase and is easy to hear, meaning holidays such as Diwali, Christmas and other special days. But Manipuri ESL Learners are often unable to understand them without teacher’s explanation.

(6) Unlike English, Manipuri students’ substitute ‘our’ instead of ‘my’. This may show a sense of belongingness to one collective group such as family, organization, associations etc. Instead of saying “my mother”, “my house”, “my teacher”, Manipuri ESL Learners tend to say “our mother”, “our house”, “our teacher”, even when the listener is not a sibling, even when talking to stranger and even when the listener is not a classmate respectively. On the same note, one of the most noticeable characteristics of Korean is that Koreans use the word “our” a lot more often than “my.” Some English phrases like “my home,” “my school,” and “my country” would be translated into “our home,” “our school,” and “our country” in Korean even when you are only talking about yourself without the actual existence of others to refer to “our.”(‘An Insight into Korean Culture through the Korean Language’ www.lexiophiles.com/.../an-insight-into-korean-culture-through-the-korean-language).

(7) In countries whose mother tongues are European languages such as English, it is a face of the Man in the moon (Kameda, Naoki 2007). Whereas, to Manipuri culture it ^{has} different

references to the moon, i.e. it refers to the face of a lady to Manipuri culture.

- (8) Manipuri ESL Learners find difficulty in the English way of addressing. The problem arises when it comes to calling other people by their given name or nickname. Given names are used by elderly people for addressing younger ones for examples, parents calling their children or elder brother or sister calling their junior siblings, friends of the same age group call each other by names etc. But to call one's elder brother and sister for example, by their given name is regarded as a breach of etiquette, whereas English speaking people often call people by their given names.
- (9) It is quite surprising for Manipuri to find that English women using their husband's name while addressing or referring to them. This is because in Manipuri culture, it is regarded as undesirable for a woman to call her husband by his first name. In Manipuri Hindu culture, it is considered to be a sin for a wife to call her husband by his name, 'even to pronounce the name of her husband' (Pramodini 1989). But this would be unusual in English culture, as women habitually use their husbands' names for addressing and referring to them.
- (10) One of the perplexing phenomenon Manipuri ESL Learners experience in learning English is the fossilization of certain mistakes caused by interference from their first language. For

example, many Manipuri speakers repeat the question-answer format of Manipuri negative questions when communicating in English. To the question, “Are you ^{not} going to school?”, English speakers answer either, “No, I’m going to school..”, “No, I’m not going...”, meanwhile many Manipuri ESL Learners respond either “yes, I’m not going to school”, or “No, I’m not going to school”. Manipuri ESL Learners used a combination of both positive and negative elements of discourse, which speakers of English would find very puzzling.

- (11) Unlike English students, most of Manipuri students may avoid eye contact as a sign of respect to their elders and teachers or may look down when approached by a teacher or elders, as they have been taught that looking straight or directly to teachers or elders is a sign of manner less and disrespect.
- (12) In English culture, when somebody says ‘Thank You’ to the other person, then the receiver either responds ‘welcome’ or ‘you are most welcome’. In such context Manipuri ESL Learners mostly respond either with the expressions ‘mention not’ or ‘it is ok’. It is an apparent transfer of Manipuri culture /yaidə/ ‘its ok no need to mention it’ while speaking English.
- (13) Then another example is that English people say e.g. ‘John come here’ to call someone. But unlike English, Manipuri ESL Learners usually say ‘John you come here’. Manipuri ESL Learners used both the noun (John) and pronoun (you) at the

same time. Where as in English both noun and pronoun cannot be used successively.

In the light of above discussion, for effective learning of English, we should not only pass on knowledge of language but also enhance teaching of relative cultural background knowledge. Knowledge of cultural background is also important. Otherwise, misunderstanding and displeasure are inevitably aroused.

5.6 Chapter summary:

In this chapter we have discussed that culture and language are both inseparable part and culture is therefore relevant to the teaching and learning of a second language. Language and culture are intertwined to such an extent as one cannot survive without the other. It is impossible for one to teach language without teaching culture. 'Culture should be our message to students and language our medium' (Peck 1998). Understanding the cultural context of everyday language functions means more than just being able to produce grammatical sentences. It means knowing what is appropriate to say to whom, and in what situations, and it means understanding the beliefs and values represented by the various forms and usage of the language. The main point is to discuss the difficulties faced by Manipuri ESL Learners due to cultural differences while learning English as a second language. It also points out that cultural differences give rise to cultural misunderstandings. To make the learning of English interesting and useful for the learners, culture must entirely integrate as

a central component of language learning. Manipuri speaker English teachers should identify key cultural items in every aspect of the language that they teach and will have to take cognizance of the relationship between language and culture. Teachers themselves should identify their students' needs and decide which elements of culture could be usefully incorporated into a lesson or a syllabus while teaching English. Culture teaching should allow learners to increase their knowledge of the target culture in terms of people's way of life, values, attitudes, and beliefs. Students can be successful in speaking a second language only if cultural issues are an inbuilt element of the core curriculum.