

Relationship Between Language and Culture in the Learning and Teaching of a Second Language (English Language)

Shamsu Muhammad

shamsumuhammad1983@gmail.com

08065532351

Department of English,
Yusuf Bala Usman College of Education and Legal Studies, Daura,
Katsina State.

Abstract

The culture of any country or group of people is best understood as a sort of continuous flow, with the creative energies of new talents contributing to change. Scholars in the field of sociology, sociolinguistics, anthropology and ethnology have argued that there is a very close relationship between language and culture. Language and culture are seen as two concepts, which are so closely related that one affects the other. In this paper, the writer has tried to investigate the assumption. Followed the roots of the concepts by explaining them individually, trying to find definition(s) for them as well as the very main focus of this paper-the relationship or otherwise of two concepts, language and culture in language learning and teaching. The implications of language and culture to language education programmes in Nigeria, the implications to English as a second language to teachers and implications of English language to a second language learners (L2). At the end, the writer has attempted a summary of the paper and offered recommendations.

Keywords: Language and Culture.

Introduction

The existence of any people as community or society presuppose the existence of group understanding, way of life and doing things, a means of phonic communication, vocal sounds or otherwise which is cognitively shared and which makes meaning to and within the group and promotes the group's interest.

Scholars in the field of sociology, sociolinguistics, anthropology, ethnology, etc have argued that there is a very close relationship between language and culture. Some hold the view that language influences culture and people's perception of the universe. Some even believe that, it is a vehicle for transmitting culture. One may say without any fear of contradiction that language enables man to relate to his environment, to describe and identify natural and cultural objects and to organise and coordinate man's activities (Adeyanju, 2008). People, however, disagreed about whether language determines culture, influences it and even transmits it. On the view about the relationship between language, culture and thought, it is generally agreed that the three are interrelated in some respects and especially in the area of communication. It is, therefore, necessary to define the terms: 'Language', 'culture' and 'thought' for clarification purposes.

Language

Language is as old as nature probably older than man because, the general knowledge is that even man was created by God with the use of language descriptively in the language of Stella Anyanwu in Amadi et al. (2001). She further maintained that, "Language is man's most prized possession."

She says that, “Language is man’s major vehicle for the expression of self and his mark of personal and group identity and of course, without which he finds himself as belonging to nowhere”.

Every linguist writes about language and virtually starts from or attempt definitions of language abound. Anyanwu in Amadi et. Al. (2001) defines language as, “A complex and arbitrary system of vocal sounds used by man for communication in a given community”. Martinet (2000), defines language as, “A formidable instrument of communication of vocal character by which human experience is analyzed in a given community”. Adolph in Amadi et al. (2001) defines language as, “A group of accepted words, signs and symbols with specified structure designed to convey meaning from speakers to listeners. Stella defines language in her words. She says, “Language is an arbitrarily selected and organised speech sounds common to a given culture and used in expressing meaning among members of that culture.

From an analysis of the various definitions offered by various linguists above, one finds out that language is the general faculty of speech or a nation’s unique means of communication since it refers to the aspect of human behaviour that involves the use of vocal sounds in meaningful patterns and, when they exist, corresponding written symbols to form, express, and communicate thoughts, ideas, facts, propositions, attitudes, desires and feelings. As a nation’s distinctive means of communication, it embraces all, historically established pattern of such behaviour adopted by the nation for the purpose of effective information transmission and feedback.

Language has other characteristics which include the following:

Language is a hierarchical system, composed of sound, grammar, and meaning. Sounds build up into words and conduce to meaning(s). Sound is subdivided into phonetics (the study of sounds produced by speakers), grammar comprises morphology (words structure) and syntax (sentence structure), and meaning, the concern of semantics, explores the meaning of words and sentences.

Language is characterised by four independent activities/skills: Listening, speaking, reading and writing. Each of these skills, if judiciously transferred, affects and enhances the development of the others.

Language is culture-bound and, therefore, it has a national character. It makes a nation unique, for it is both an instrument for expressing the people’s world-view and repository of the people’s culture heritage. Even when it moves beyond the shores of those who use it as their mother tongue, and becomes a second language to other nations, it still bears features of its socio-cultural roots.

Language acquisition and usage are, to some extent, spontaneous and unconscious. Hence, a child of six years learns his mother tongue almost imperceptibly and uses it automatically in response to certain stimuli. Second language learners and users also express the subtle internalisation of certain idioms and expressions of the language as they listen to speakers or read through the literature of that language. Yet, the mastery of any language is difficult and time-consuming because, it requires a careful understanding of the intricate system of symbols embodied in the language.

Notably, every language is replete with a complex body of communication symbols that are systematically organised. The order and meaning(s) which these symbols display arise from a series of recognisable rules (otherwise referred to as grammatical conventions) in the language.

Language is, therefore, dynamic; that is, it grows in space (environment), time and functions. The growth may come through acculturation, socialisation, or conscious eclecticism or hybridization of two or more languages (Hetherington 2000).

Culture

In a most simply way, culture may be defined as the way of life of people or society. Every society or people have a way of doing everything that society does. Every society has a way of dressing habit, types of foods and their modes of preparation, way of expressing fear and sorrow, hate or anger, songs and dances, technologies, transportation and even ways of healing diseases (Amadi et al., 2001). The above definition is not different from what Hammerly (2002) defines it to be. I can therefore, say, it is the totality of people's way of life, including the ways they live, eat, dress, their traditional norms, the way they are born and the way they die. Communication wise, it involves knowledge of how people relate with others in their choice of words and patterns behaviour.

Characteristics of Culture

Some characteristics of culture are discussed below:

The culture of any society is within a present generation and is passes on, this means that culture is transmitted, of course from a generation to another.

Culture forms the bias of education in any society. Actually education whether formal or non formal is an offshoot or is taken from the culture of the society and is meant to satisfy the needs of the same society.

Culture changes or is dynamic, no culture is static, as it has contact with extraneous cultures, it changes. This it does through borrowings; patterned and relative, that is what is otherwise known as cultural relativity.

Culture is interwoven with language, especially as I have said that it is expressed in language. So, richness of a culture implies the richness of the language that expresses it (Amadi et al. 2000).

Having seen these many characteristics of culture the way I have examined 'language', let us now see the link that exists between language and culture.

Relationship Between Language and Culture

The inextricable nature of language and culture has been studied and commented on by many anthropologists and linguists. They seek to prove that language is related to culture. For instance, Rubel and Rosman (2009) put their view of our topic in the following lines: From one point of view, "Language is part of culture and yet it is more than that. It is the means through which most of the culture is learned and communicated". The inextricable nature of these two phenomena is

such that one does not engage in the learning or studying one without learning the other. Rosman and Rubel (2009) underscore the present assumption when they wrote: Infant learns the culture into which he/she was born and simultaneously learns the language of the culture. In similar fashion, an anthropologist carrying out field research, studies the language as he studies the culture.

Both language and culture exhibit relatively what is known as language and cultural relativity. Both are complex, structured and systematically patterned. Language is used in organising experiences by individuals in their culture. This also means that experiences of people in their culture are organised with and in language. Roman and Rubel (2009) say that, the relationship between language and how the society organised experiences in a given culture was explored by Sapar (2007), who argued that language was guided to social reality and cognition and that “real world” was to great extent built up on the language habits of a society. They also say that Sapir’s argument was carried to extreme position by Whorf (2004), who in his argument considered that the conception of the world by a member of a particular society was determined by the language or fashion of speaking.

Again, ethno semantic portend that every aspect or category of cultural domain is given a nominal identity by language and the same separated the various domains of culture; hence, culture domains of the animals world, plants, system of colours even realm relatives. Language serves the use of recording and keeping the norms of the society. The National policy on Education (1998:6) among other things says, “In addition to appreciating the importance of language in the educational process, and as a means of preserving people’s culture...” The above lines agree with the fact that culture of a people preserves its language. I have said earlier that culture determines the education of the people; it is through language that education is given to people of any culture. Amadi et al., (2001) support this argument when they say, “Language whether spoken or written is not only the vehicle for the propagation of educational values and cultural activities, but also the repository of their legacies.” Culture and language both borrow from one another to grow, hence cultural growth, which includes expansion in the language. Rich culture means rich language because, new concepts of culture must be followed by new language for the same concepts. An instance, is the entrance of the word “mahadum” into the Igbo language diction to cater for a new entrant in the culture, “University”. This kind of culture exchange enriches not only language and culture but also what Sengbor (2004) calls, “Universal Civilisation”

We have noted that language is inseparable from society. This is because, as we had seen earlier, language can only exist in the presence of a society and which cannot exist except with binding force, which is language. When we talk of society, we talk of culture.

Lastly, the inextricability of these concepts is shown in the fact that language is the means which preserves the people’s culture and expresses it.

Culture in Language Teaching and Learning

The dialectical connection between language and culture has always been concern of second language(L2) teachers and educators. Whether culture of the target language is to be incorporated into L2 teaching has been a subject of rapid change throughout language teaching history. In the course of time, the pendulum of English Language Teaching (ELT) practitioner's opinion has swung against or for teaching culture in the context of language teaching. For example, during the first decades of the 20th Century, researchers discussed the importance and possibilities of including cultural components into L2 curriculum (Sysoyev and Donelson, 2002). The aspect of culture of language help the learners of language to understand and even admire it better. The advent of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in the late 70s marks a critical shift for teaching culture, for the parading shift from an approach based largely on form and structure to a plurality of approaches causing unintended side effects: The negligence of culture (Pulverness, 2003). He said that second language(L2) learners who learn language from form and structure neglecting cultural aspects will learn the language efficiently.

Recent studies focus on the seamless relationship between L2 teaching and target culture teaching, especially over the last decade with the writings of scholars, such as: Byram (2009) and Kramsch (2001). People involved in language teaching have again begun to understand the intertwined relation between culture and language (Pulverness, 2003). It has been emphasised that without the study of culture, teaching L2 is inaccurate and incomplete. For L2 students, language study seems senseless, if they know nothing about the people who speak the target language or the country in which the target language is spoken. Acquiring a new language means a lot more than the manipulation of syntax and lexicon. According to Bada (2000:101), "The need for cultural literacy in ELT arises mainly from the fact that most language learners, not exposed to culture elements of the society in question, seem to encounter significant hardship in communicating meaning to native speakers". In addition, nowadays, the L2 culture is presented as an interdisciplinary core in many L2 curriculum design curriculum design and textbooks (Sysoyev and Donelson 2002).

The Implication of Language and Culture to Language Education Programmes in Nigeria.

Basically, the foundation of language education programmes in Nigeria was led down by foreign culture. To learn that language, the Nigerians have to appreciate the culture of that language owners. To this end, the privileged Nigerians, who studied abroad came back to speak and dress like a white man. A very good number of African writings is an imitation of the white man. Sometimes, a translation of original copy of the white man's writing and their native or English language is rendered. Since, the education is that of our colonial masters, to understand it better, we have to study both their language and culture. As the fact remains inevitable that, one's language cannot be learnt neglecting his culture as that culture stands to be part and parcel of that language. In the aspects of culture, language is considered to be one part of cultured aspects.

The Implication of Language and Culture to English as Second Language Teachers.

For teachers, to teach English as a second language in Nigeria, there is need to study the culture of the English man. As teachers teaching English as a second language, they have to lead the foundation on the background of the language and the culture of the language owners. Already, second language teachers of English have their own language and their culture. To this end, even if there is appreciation of the English man's language and culture, we still have to have that already existing knowledge of our language and culture. English language teachers should have to see and

teach the link between first and second language so that second language learners will be motivated to learn the second language.

The Implication of Language and Culture to Second Language Learners.

Although, language and culture are related and, therefore, help the second language learners to understand it better. Learners of a second language should be allowed to see the need to study and understand the language and the culture of the target language. However, the fact remains that second language learners may have the danger of their language interfered into the second language they want to learn as well as corrupt their culture with that of the second language they want to learn. Furthermore, they may see their language and culture as inferior to the ones they are learning. So, second language teachers should encourage and motivate second language learners to study and understand the language and the culture of the target language. For example, Hausa situation, where a good number of sounds are pronounced with effect from the second language learners' background language. For example, English sounds with similar effect from other Nigerian languages, like: Igbo, Yoruba, Tiv, etc.

Conclusion

We have seen in this paper the unending definitions of language linguists and anthropologists offered, particularly that language is a complex and arbitrary system of vocal sounds used by man in communication despite the fact that Rosman and Rubel (2009:26) try to propose that language is not as arbitrary as we think and hence, there are occasionally some intrinsic and natural connections between some sound and their words, like: "buzz and hiss". We have also seen many functions of language and culture alongside their characteristics. On the relationship between language and culture, it is said that, language and culture are intertwined and cannot be easily separated. We have seen that culture remains meaningful and has meaning because, it is accorded this by language. Yet language is rich or poor as a result of what the culture provides. We noted that culture and language both exhibit relativity and are structured and patterned. Language serves the use of preserving culture for generation unborn, communicating and teaching society's young the norms of the culture. The paper also talked about culture in language teaching and learning where we have seen scholars with different opinions on whether to include or not the culture of the target language in teaching and learning.

I summed up in the words of Amadi et al. (2001) that language is the vehicle for people's culture, a means for its preservation and inculcation to the young. And, for a child to be a fully accepted member of his or her society, he or she has achieved this, which they termed 'cultural competences' or 'an integrative orientation into a language community'. This was also supported by Gardner and Lambert, (1972).

Recommendations

The writer of this paper recommends that:

Cultural aspects of language should be included in teaching and learning of language since the two cannot be separated.

Second language teachers should motivate second language learners to see the need to learn the culture of the target language.

Good background knowledge of the culture should be provided to ease the understanding of the second language learners.

Chances should be provided to avoid second language learners taking their culture and language as inferior to that of the target language.

Language should be seen as aspects of culture.

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