

Teaching English from a cultural perspective

¹ Rustamova Z.R.

¹ Tashkent Institute of Finance "Foreign Languages" Department

Abstract: *Culture is learned from the people you interact with as you are socialized. Watching how adults react and talk to new babies is an excellent way to see the actual symbolic transmission of culture among people. People from different cultures would complete the blank in contrasting ways. our specific interest is in the relationship between culture and interpersonal communication, we focus on how cultures provide their members with a set of interpretations that they then use as filters to make sense of messages and experiences.*

Key words: *communication, culture ,interact, language, English, instruction, development.*

Culture is a notoriously difficult term to define. In 1952, the American anthropologists, Kroeber and Kluckhohn, critically reviewed concepts and definitions of culture, and compiled a list of 164 different definitions. Apte (1994: 2001), writing in the ten-volume Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics, summarized the problem as follows: 'Despite a century of efforts to define culture adequately, there was in the early 1990s no agreement among anthropologists regarding its nature.'

Culture is learned from the people you interact with as you are socialized. Watching how adults react and talk to new babies is an excellent way to see the actual symbolic transmission of culture among people. Two babies born at exactly the same time in two parts of the globe may be taught to respond to physical and social stimuli in very different ways. For example, some babies are taught to smile at strangers, whereas others are taught to smile only in very specific circumstances. In the United States, most children are asked from a very early age to make decisions about what they want to do and what they prefer; in many other cultures, a parent would never ask a child what she or he wants to do but would simply tell the child what to do.

Culture is also taught by the explanations people receive for the natural and human events around them. People from different cultures would complete the blank in contrasting ways. The people with whom the children interact will praise and encourage particular kinds of behaviors (such as crying or not crying, being quiet or being talkative). Certainly there are variations in what a child is taught from family to family in any given culture. However, our interest is not in these variations but in the similarities across most or all families that form the basis of a culture. Because our specific interest is in the relationship between culture and interpersonal communication, we focus on how cultures provide their members with a set of interpretations that they then use as filters to make sense of messages and experiences.[3: 15]

Teaching the standard language from a cultural perspective differs from the traditional language education approach in that it does not blame the victim. Standard English instruction from a cultural perspective does not presuppose the devaluation or elimination of a learner's indigenous

language as a pre-requisite for learning. It recognizes that students need to retain their home dialect where its use is appropriate.

Several major requirements for teaching standard English from a cultural perspective follow. Instruction should:

- Focus on both the structure of language, and on how to communicate;
- Maintain an oral basis;
- Concentrate on the structure of language, situational language requirements and language as a vehicle for thinking;
- Be linked to clearly defined long term goals; and
- Be integrated across the curriculum.

A successful culturally based standard English program recognizes that learning proceeds in an orderly way from the introduction of a particular aspect of language through its mastery. The model which has enjoyed the widest use and greatest success was designed in the late 1970s by the San Diego Oral Language Program. It has been used with modifications in Standard English as a Second Dialect (SESD) programs in Dallas, Texas, and in Richmond and Oakland in California. The model lists several necessary steps for learning a new linguistic system while preserving the student's indigenous system. The model includes the following eight steps:

- *Developing positive attitudes toward one's own language.* The first and continuing job of the teacher is to counteract negative evaluations of the students' indigenous language. Lessons on the historical development of various dialects and on language diversity are useful in accomplishing this goal.
- *Developing awareness of language varieties.* Students develop a sensitivity to the various forms of a given language via stories in standard English, poems in different dialects, and records, tapes or video recordings of various speakers. At this stage, specific likenesses and differences are emphasized.
- *Recognizing, labeling and contrasting dialects.* Students learn to recognize differences in various languages and dialects and to associate specific features with each linguistic system.
- *Comprehending meanings.* Students learn to recognize differences in meanings and intentions when an idea is translated from one language or dialect to another.
- *Recognizing situational communication requirements.* Students determine the types of speech appropriate to various situations.
- *Producing in structured situations.* Students practice producing successive approximations of standard English. Initially, students follow a model at this stage, e.g., a script, choral reading or poem.
- *Producing in controlled situations.* Students receive instruction and practice in producing standard English without a model, e.g., role playing or retelling a story.
- *Matching the language to the situation.* Students practice speaking appropriately in real life, spontaneous situations leading to communicative competence [4: 29].

Before beginning to teach standard English from a cultural perspective, the teacher and school need a clear language arts philosophy which embraces modern principles of ethnology, sociolinguistics and second language instruction. The philosophy and assumptions statement developed by the Richmond Unified School District in California is a good example of what schools and teachers may usefully adopt.

Finally, before beginning program implementation, the teacher and school community must become thoroughly familiar with the following general principles of second dialect instruction:

- Instruction should be preceded by a non biased assessment of each learner's knowledge of his or her first dialect and of the second dialect.
- Students must feel positive toward their own dialects.
- Students must want to learn another dialect. If motivation is not present, the teacher must help students discover the advantages of acquiring the second dialect.
- Instruction must consider the language goals of students, their families and their communities.
- Instruction must take into account cultural values associated with learning and teaching.
- Instruction must accommodate the preferred cognitive learning styles of the students. Some children prefer a field independent (object oriented) cognitive style. Others prefer a field dependent (social oriented) cognitive style. Both are valid, however, schools tend to be more oriented toward the field independent style. See Appendix II for a summary of these two preferred cognitive styles.
- Both the teacher and students must be able to contrast the linguistic and communicative rules of the existing and targeted dialects.
- Linguistic and communicative features of the existing dialect should be compared with those of the targeted dialect.
- Instruction should be integrated with students' experiences.
- Both the teacher and students must believe that it is possible to acquire a second dialect.

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