

## THE CULTURAL DIMENSIONS OF LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING

### Abstract

*The introductory part of this paper delves into the concepts of language and culture. The importance of language to mankind is stressed. Different views of scholars on what culture is all about are examined. The paper dwells extensively on the relationship between language and culture. The relevance of language to one's concept of reality and the role of language in determining a people's world view are highlighted. The paper goes on to discuss fully the implications of the relationship between language and culture on language teaching and learning. There are obvious implications of this relationship on the culture content of language textbooks and on foreign language teaching. Furthermore, culture conditions people's attitudes which, in turn, determine the survival or decay of language. In conclusion, the paper recommends ways for improving language teaching and learning in view of the relationship between language and culture.*

### Introduction: The Concepts of Language and Culture

The term 'language' is undoubtedly a household word. There is hardly any day one does not encounter the use of the word in one way or the other. Very few people, however, understand clearly what the word stands for and the characteristics of language. Owing to the fundamental role of language in our lives, people should understand not only its characteristics but also its usefulness to mankind.

Language is the vehicle of communication and expression which is used in all human interactional situations. These interactional situations include education, commerce, politics and culture. It is in view of this fact that it is often asserted that language is at the root of human development. As Sangotoro succinctly puts it and quoted by Imo (2001: 189); "If man cannot communicate with his environments, particularly to educate, inform, socialize, request and entertain, life will be sadly incomplete, seriously boring and totally meaningless." Describing language as a vehicle for communication, Obanya (1989: 27) believes

that it is man's most important gift. He further observes that language is a good instrument for thought and creativity.

The word 'culture', although within people's daily vocabulary, is also often misused. Generally, the meaning ascribed to it is too narrow. Many people simply see culture as a term that relates to a people's way of dressing, their dances and festivals. It is in view of this narrow view of culture that Ikegulu (1989: 7) cautions that culture should not be considered as being synonymous with the images brought to us through the media of gyrating buttocks and nude breasts which many refer to as the post-FESTAC syndrome. She regrets that, having been corrupted by such impressions, many people see culture nowadays as merely a wasteful and lascivious activity, a diversion from a more serious business and, in fact, a hindrance to the development process. Ngugi (1972: 11), on his part, accuses African intellectuals of thinking of culture only in terms of dances, jungle drums and folklore and laments that these intellectuals believe that by asserting the need for the revival of these things they are working hard for the revival of the African culture.

Culture is an all-embracing term. It refers to all the aspects of a people's life. Ikegulu (1989: 7) defines culture as the total life and experiences of a people at any given moment of history. Many other eminent scholars have come up with elaborate definitions of the term 'culture'. Ngugi (1972: 4) sees culture, in its broadest sense, as a way of life fashioned by a people in their collective endeavour to live and come to terms with their total environment. In his own elaborate definition of the term, Biobaku (1982: 76) defines culture as

that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs and any other abilities acquired by man. Culture, accordingly, encompasses those conventional understandings and practices which give a people their uniqueness and thus render such a people distinct from all others.

### The Relationship between Language and Culture

It is language that determines one's concept of reality. Language is no mere passive recording instrument which reflects a pre-existing reality of which we are aware. It is an essential factor in forging what our conception of reality is. In other words, a people's world view is a function of the language they use.

In recognition of the important role of language in forging a people's world view, Yule (1996: 196) cautions that the existence of different world views should not be ignored when different languages or language varieties are studied. People in different societies perceive, behave in, and conceive of the world in radically different ways. These differences are to be explained largely in terms of their possessing radically different languages. The people's concept of reality is, therefore, the outcome of the language they use.

### Language and Culture

From the role of language in forging people's concept of reality, as highlighted above, the close relationship between language and culture is quite obvious. A people's world view depends on their culture, and it is language that determines their concept of reality. The relationship between language and culture has attracted the attention of scholars. Cooper (1973: 99) asserts that the relationship between language and culture is a truism. Commenting on the relationship between language and culture, Sapir (1949: 207) affirms that

Language does not exist apart from culture. In other words, language does not exist apart from the socially inherited assemblage of practices and beliefs that determine the texture of our lives. This explains why anthropologists have been in the habit of studying man under the three rubrics of race, language and culture.

Sapir goes further to demonstrate that the mere content of language is intimately related to culture. For example, a society that has no

knowledge of cassava need not have a name for it. The vocabulary of a language, therefore, faithfully reflects more or less the culture of the people whose purpose it serves.

Olagoke (1979: 15) sees language as an important distinguishing factor when talking of different cultural groups. He observes that, of all the elements that characterize a cultural group and distinguish it from other groups, such as art, music, dance, attitude and beliefs, customs, festivals, behaviour, etc, the most central is language. He insists that language and culture are inseparable, adding that to separate a child from his language at an early stage of his school education is to make him have no regard for his culture.

### Language and the Promotion of Cultural Understanding

Scholars have also emphasized the role of language in promoting cultural understanding. Giving a reason for according priority to language learning in society, Adekunle (1995: 70) points out that cultural and social contents usually widen the horizons of the mind. As he puts it, languages are a means of opening the gates to the cultures of other countries. They help us to look out for and participate in the other world. According to him, the fact that language has far-reaching implications for national cohesion, cultural identity and the economic development of all countries makes governments all over the world to try to decide on ways of treating or managing language resources within their territories.

The promotion of cultural understanding in Nigeria through language has also been highlighted. Banjo (1989:46) posits that the efficient use of the indigenous languages in Nigeria is crucial in the areas of intimate interaction. He illustrates his view by pointing out that a considerable part of culture in Nigeria is tied to the use of the indigenous languages. Adama (1989: 15), on the other hand, is of the view that English has become a pattern of life in Nigeria. Quoting Adekunle (1989:15) he asserts that the language has become a part of Nigeria's cultural artefact. The sum total of all the views expressed by these language experts is that language and culture are inseparable. If that is so, we need to consider in the section that follows, the implications of the

relationship between language and culture on language teaching and learning.

### **The Implications of the Relationship between Language and Culture**

It has been established beyond any reasonable doubt in the foregoing section of this paper that language and culture are inseparable. Consequently, the place of culture in language teaching and learning should not be overlooked. In this section, attempts are made to show how culture should be utilized in language teaching and learning.

### **Culture and Foreign Language Teaching**

Teaching a foreign language entails many difficulties. These difficulties include the problem of developing a new set of language habits in the students whose culture is different from the culture of the target (foreign) language. As Yule (1996: 195) puts it, languages are naturally acquired by the process of cultural transmission. Consequently, a student of a foreign language comes face to face with the alien culture in his bid to learn the language. A language teacher should find a way of assisting his students to cope with the special problems arising out of the effort to develop the needed new habits in a target language against the background of his students' different native language habits.

Cultural barrier is, therefore, a serious problem which confronts a student of a foreign language. In recognition of this barrier, Lado (1964: vii) recommends a comparison of the two languages and the two cultures in contact and this must be carried out by the language teacher as his first step in teaching a foreign language. It is his view that the foreign language and the culture to be learnt should be systematically compared with the native language and the culture of the student. Through this exercise, the teacher is put in a good position to predict and describe the patterns that will cause difficulty in learning the language. Lado believes that foreign language teachers who engage in this exercise will acquire insights and tools for evaluating the culture content of the language to be taught. This will, in turn, place them in a position to diagnose students' difficulties accurately and to supplement their learning materials.

### **Culture Content of Language Textbooks**

Reading is a vital tool for academic performance. Accordingly, Yankson (1985: 140) sees reading lethargy among students in Nigeria as being the main cause of the deteriorating language performance in the country. Students should be encouraged by all means to develop abiding interest in reading. One of the ways of getting students to read lies in the choice of the language textbooks for them. Apart from such factors as the mental age, the liveliness of the texts and the language level, the other major factor that should be taken into consideration in the selection of textbooks for students is their socio-cultural needs. Textbooks that are not relevant to the students' cultural background are incapable of sustaining their interest.

Consequently, Lado (1964: 2) also advocates the evaluation of the language and culture content of a textbook to be used for foreign language teaching. Publishers always see to it that their books look attractive and enticing. However, a professionally trained teacher should be able to look beyond attractive illustrations and handsome printing and binding. He should be able to discern whether the book gives due emphasis to those patterns that are difficult because they are different from those of the native language and culture of his students. Ideally, the grading of the English language textbook should be based not only on its grammatical structure and vocabulary but also on its culture content.

### **Culture and Attitudes**

The relationship between culture and attitudes should be borne in mind if one is to appreciate fully the place of culture in language teaching. People's attitudes are conditioned by their culture. It is pertinent at this juncture to define the term "attitudes". Atkinson et al (1987: 32) define attitudes as likes and dislikes – affinities for and aversions to objects, persons, groups, situations, or any other identifiable aspects of the environment, including abstract ideas and social policies. He asserts that the importance of attitudes to the survival or decay, the prominence or marginalization of languages cannot be overemphasized.

People's attitudes to a language are of crucial importance. The role a language plays in society depends to a large extent on the people's attitudes to it. It is in view of this fact that Lewis (1981: 25) offers the following advice:

Any policy for language, especially in the system of education, has to take account of the attitudes of those likely to be affected. In the long run, no policy will succeed which does not do one of three things: Conform to the expressed attitudes of those involved; persuade those who express negative attitudes about the rightness of the policy; or seek to remove the causes of the disagreement. In any case, knowledge about attitudes is fundamental to the formulation of a policy as well as success in its implementation.

The advice above should be taken seriously by both language policy makers and language teachers.

### Cultural Understanding and Communicative Competence

A communicative approach to language teaching is seriously advocated nowadays. In the past, too much emphasis was placed on grammatical theory to the detriment of the students' ability to actually communicate in the language they are learning. One of the major factors responsible for the poor performance of students in their target language is the fact that language teachers do not put in enough efforts towards making students realize the relevance of the language to their experience and communicative needs.

The primary function of language is communication. Brumfit (1995: 105) draws the attention of language teachers to the fact that there is now a shift of emphasis towards the notion of communicative competence in language teaching. He defines communication in this context as the capacity of individuals of different cultures to interact. He goes further to observe that language codes are capable of variable meanings and that these meanings constitute our cultures. Lado (1964: 113) agrees with this view, stressing that meanings are culturally determined or modified. The implication of the views of these scholars

is that breaking the cultural barrier between a student and his target language enhances communicative competence. This fact should be borne in mind by every language teacher.

### Conclusion/Recommendations

It has been amply demonstrated in this paper that language and culture are interwoven. In short, it is not an exaggeration to say that the language of a people is the chronicle of their culture. The implications of the relationship between language and culture for language teaching and learning, as has also been highlighted in this paper, are far-reaching.

Accordingly, the following three recommendations are made:

1. Language teachers should be fully oriented towards understanding and appreciating the close relationship between language and culture. This will put them in a position to appreciate the need for the cultural orientation of their students.
2. Textbook writers in language should ensure that their books are relevant to the cultural background of the students. Textbooks in this category can easily be understood by students and are capable of sustaining their interest.
3. The cultural orientation programmes for students and teachers of foreign languages should be stepped up. The benefits of such programmes are immeasurable.

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