Language and Culture: an overview

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Abstract: *This paper was solely based on bibliographical research and its objective is to shed some light in the field of teaching culture in a second language acquisition context. At the event of language death spread around the world, some needs to maintain a language alive are discussed. Culture and language are two sides of the same coin and reflections about their relation are provided. It is argued that discourse is an important part of the duo language/culture; and the idea that we should teach language related to culture is defended.*
Keywords: *culture and language, language and discourse, foreign language teaching, language maintenance.*

Introduction

Language is part of the nature of human beings; it is what defines us. Language is part of our daily lives and our nightly dreams. Language allows us to communicate, express our ideas, feelings, thoughts, behaviors, etc. We think through language. Without language, we are not able to enjoy the world. Unfortunately, and for some years now, we have been facing what linguists call language death, spread around the world (Lovgren, 2007). A lot has been discussed about language death, about the implications of losing a language, and questions have been raised on the subject regarding political programs to protect endangered languages (for a more detailed discussion about language death see Dorian, 1978; Brenzinger, 1992; and Hale *et al.,* 1992). Some linguists say we are witnessing a catastrophic event similar to the extinction of biological species (Krauss, 1992), that by losing a language we are therefore losing a "truly vast cultural content" (Dorian, 1993:578). Culture and language are two faces of the same coin, they are deeply intertwined, and one is part of the other. In order to prevent a language from extinction, a multiple approach needs to be taken into account, and cultural aspects should not be set aside. Related to this subject is the teaching a foreign language. What are the tools necessary to teach a language from scratch? Should cultural aspects be included in the process of learning? This paper was based on bibliographical research alone and its goal is to discuss the relation between language and culture and the multiple strategies needed to keep a language alive. What comprises a language in its full use? What can be said about the tripartite relation: language/culture/teaching? Tentative answers will be reached for some questions, for others further research is required.

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Language and Culture

Language is a complex unit. It comprises lexicon, grammar, phonetic/phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics, discourse and culture permeates more than one aspect of a language. An example of a cultural aspect in discourse is the difference between American native speakers and Thai learners of English in paying a compliment and responding to it (Cedar. 2006). Based on the results, Cedar pointed out the necessity to teach culture and language together to EFL students (English as a Foreign Language) in order to prevent misunderstandings (p. 23). As pointed out by Hale (1992:36) some forms of art, especially verbal art (music, poems), are highly dependent upon "properties of the language" in which it was originally conceived. Language is what defines us as humans and humans are culturally and socially entwined. Other authors have pointed out that a language loss represents the loss of "linguistic and cultural knowledge" (Ladefoged, 1992:810), the loss of the "cultural tradition connected to it" (SASSE 1992:7). There is no way to dissociate language from culture. If we look up the definition of culture from the *American Heritage Dictionary,* we will find:

> **cul·ture** *n.* **1.a.** The totality of socially transmitted behavior patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought. (…) **2.** Intellectual and artistic activity, and the works produced by it.

Human thoughts, human intellect, human beliefs, all of them are embedded by language. Although linguists will not deny the connection between culture and language, the relation might not be so strong. The extreme version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, "that perception and cognition are determined by the structure of whatever language one happens to speak," has been refuted by Chomskyan linguistics (Crawford, 1995:29). The flexible version of the hypothesis (the relatedness aspect) however, is not a subject for contention: "culture, influenced by language, influences thought" (Crawford, 1995:29).

I tend to agree with Hale (1992), when he says that language expresses cultural systems. Nevertheless, culture and language are not static and they change over time: "a living tradition implies change" (Hale 1992:41). According to Kubota (2003) "culture has a diverse and dynamic nature" and "culture is (…) constructed and transformed by political and ideological forces" (p. 70). The author criticizes the static and fixed view of culture from the

"National Standards"[1]—a document created by the government of United States to provide learning goals for pre-college students—adopted for most languages, from kindergarten through college. When we lose a language, the cultural context of its original tradition is irrecoverably lost, because the survivors of that period no longer exist (Hale, 1992). For example, in some indigenous tribes, which were engulfed by civilization, the native language may be lost if children stop learning it in order to learn the "civilized" one, sometimes out of prejudice, thinking the "white" language is better than the indigenous one. When the last old man or woman of the tribe dies, with them dies their language.

Even if we manage to reconstruct effectively a language that was once dead, the context in which this language will flourish again will be a different one. The nuances of metaphors, of semantic, pragmatics and of discourse will be different from the original set. What is lost will be lost forever and. unfortunately, language death is not a rare process nowadays; we estimate that 400 languages are on the verge of extinction and half of the roughly 7,000 "known living languages (…) will be gone by the end of the 21st century" (Ostler, 2003:30). We will be facing the loss of a treasure comparable with the loss of a specie, a misfortune event in Biology as in Linguistics: "the less variety in language the less variety in ideas" (Crawford, 1995:29).

What we can do now? Safeguarding the linguistic and cultural diversity in the world (Hale, 1992) and promoting bilingual programs seems to be an appropriate direction to follow. However, this may not be enough. In order to maintain a language alive, a great amount of input is required and multiple aspects should be taken into account. Some of these were already listed above, regarding linguistic aspects but the cultural side of the coin is deeper than it seems. In a model of the dynamics of language death, Abrams and Strogatz (2003:900) showed that status is the most relevant linguistic parameter to measure the threat to a given language. Regarding status, the joy of reading literature in minority language situations as a way to enhance the status of the mother tongue was mentioned by Bhatia (1978:93) as an important tool to prevent language loss. Formal and informal situations should also be considered, especially after Major (1992:202) pointed out a higher loss of L1 (mother tongue) in casual situations than in formal ones, correlated with proficiency in L2 (target language). A significant amount of speakers; bilingual programs in schools; TV, newspaper and media in general; art, music, poems, and other socio-historical and cultural

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[1] National Standards in Foreign Language Project. 1999. *Standards for foreign language learning in the 21st century.* Lawrence, Kansas. Allen Press.

programs; funds and support from governments and politicians—in sum. the more the input the more the chances to maintain a language alive and running. Nevertheless, we should not regard the conservation of language in an overly protective way (for instance, prohibiting neologisms and foreignisms,) neither should we add values or prejudices: each language has its inherent importance.

Teaching culture and language

The matter of culture and language teaching is not an issue that has been avoided, on the contrary. The Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition (CARLA) from the University of Minnesota holds a bibliography list of almost one hundred articles in the field of *Language and Culture Teaching and Learning*[2]. Still, it is a relatively recent area, considering that more than half of the articles are from the 1990s. Recent works also emphasize the importance of teaching the 'culture' of the foreign language. Chavez (2002) conducted a research with students of German as a foreign language and compared the definitions of "culture" from both teachers and students, also providing an overview of how students understand culture in foreign language teaching and learning. A few students (5 out of 212) related linguistics aspects with culture and one of the qualitative data is, in fact, inspiring: "language is how a people express itself. The essence of a people (or the culture) seeps into the language. So, when you learn the language of a people, you are invariably learning about its culture" (p.133). However, most of the results are dismay: students' views are so that "teaching culture takes away time from the real object of language instruction, i.e. grammar" (p.135); "many students do not share our [teachers] consensus view that culture (…) has a firm legitimate place in the language classroom" (p.135). One student even said, "this is a course on language *not* culture" (p. 136). As dreadful as this may sound, it appears that this wronged view is not surprising. According to Robinson-Stuart & Nocon (1996:434) "the tendency of students to separate language from the culture of the people who use it" was influenced by the "context of the history of language pedagogy, which has for the last 50 years focused on the four language skills, that is reading, writing, listening, and speaking".

In Brazil, most of EFL programs do not include cultural aspects in extensive amounts. Frequently, the cultural aspects are considered extra activities and are performed only when the teachers have the time and the effort to produce the extra material, and if the

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[2] CARLA Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition. University of Minnesota. Available at http://www.carla.umn.edu/culture/bibliography/language.html [accessed on 03 January 2008]

basic program has already been fulfilled. Some institutions even prohibit extra material with the excuse that their franchising has to maintain higher standards and claiming that high level of homogeneity is required. Most students who are learning a second language do not realize that culture should come together with it. The students have the wrong idea they are learning new vocabulary and grammar and that they will be using them to talk or write the same way they do in their mother language. It is the "attendant notion that culture is an addendum to the 'real' focus of language study" (Robinson-Stuart & Nocon, 1996:434). What students—and some schools—do not understand is that in order to be fluent in a second tongue they need to think accordingly to the language they are learning. If culture influences thought via language (as discussed above), culture and language should be taught together.

Fortunately, this scenario seems to be in the process of changing, as more and more teachers and school managers realize the impending necessity to teach culture in a second language acquisition context. It is not an easy job. but it is doable. Teaching a foreign language is much more than pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar. The nuances of second language learning are far more complex. According to Holmes (1996:35) in some cases, a sophisticated sociolinguistic competence is required to deal with cultural aspects of language in use. The difficulties in learning cultural aspects, however, can be extensive. Rufino (2003:135), for instance, showed that textbooks might allow the rising of meanings that carry a skewed view of a given society and may provoke stereotypes and prejudice. The author pointed out that cultural and socio-historical aspects should be discussed with the students in order to broaden their range of discourse possibilities in the second language. In addition, when we are learning a second language, we face a lot of difficulties not only associated with different symbolisms, rules, grammar, sounds, but also mainly discourse discrepancies. According to Ré (2006:29), discourse assumes the articulation of language with parameters other than linguistics. In my point of view, those parameters, so far as discourse, are related to culture. Discourse has been considered an important part of the duo language/culture:

> language, culture, and society are grounded in interaction: they stand in a reflexive relationship with the self, the other and the self-other relationship, and it is out of these mutually constitutive relationships that discourse is created (Schiffrin, 1994 apud Radney, 1996).

In addition, Sherzer (1987:305) considered discourse "to be the concrete expression of language-culture relationships". The author also discusses the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis and re-conceptualizes it (p. 296):

> It is discourse which creates, recreates, modifies, and fine tunes both culture and language and their intersection, and it is especially in verbally artistic discourse such as poetry, magic, verbal dueling, and political rhetoric that the potentials and resources provided by grammar, as well as cultural meanings and symbols, are exploited to the fullest and the essence of language-culture relationships becomes salient.

In a situation of bilingualism, the bilingual competence seems to be related to a bicultural identity, allowing the person to "navigate" between two communities (Vasseur, 2006:103). At this point, the strong version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is discordant with a bilingual situation because the 'world views' would be radically incompatible, but in fact, bilinguals are able to say the same thing in both languages (Lyons, 1981 apud Flory, 2007: 90). Language and culture influences the perception, the organization and the significance of the world, but not in a deterministic sense (Flory, 2007:92). The important point here is the perception itself, the perception of other cultures as inferior or superior to ours. This is an equivocated view and teaching culture and foreign language together is a tool that may help demystify this vision.

Some ideas have already been proposed and used in order to facilitate culture teaching, such as mini projects in which the students are supposed to perform ethnographic interviews with speakers of the target language (Robinson-Stuart & Nocon, 1996; Cedar 2006). Results in this aspect have already been achieved: "students at various levels of study can experience culture as a process of producing meaning regarding each other's way of being in the world" (Robinson-Stuart & Nocon 1996). Projects such as OSDE3 (Open Spaces for Dialogue and Enquiry), Through Other Eyes4 and Critical Literacy5 in a Global Education perspective (from the Centre for the Study of Social and Global Justice6 (CSSGJ) University of Nottingham and University of Southampton, UK and other affiliated universities around the world) already contribute to the issue at hand. Their projects open a wide range of possibilities with teaching methodologies to provide a real notion of globalization, the idea that we are part of a community that is part of the world. As pointed out by Kubota (2003:67) "learning a foreign language may reduce conflicts among different racial, ethnic, or religious groups, as well as among nation states". The author also gives some insight to "help teachers reconceptualize their approaches to teaching culture:

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[3] http://www.osdemethodology.org.uk
[4] http://www.throughothereyes.org.uk
[5] http://www.criticalliteracy.org.uk
[6] http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/cssgj/

(1) descriptive *rather than prescriptive understandings of culture;* **(2)** diversity *within culture, which addresses notions such as diaspora and hybridity;* **(3)** *the* dynamic *or shifting nature of culture, which allows one to interpret cultural practices, products, and perspectives in historical contexts; and* **(4)** *the* discursive *construction of culture — a notion that our knowledge about culture is invented by discourses, which requires us to understand plurality of meaning as well as power and politics behind cultural definitions"*. (p.75)

(In order to get an extensive description and discussion of the four concepts mentioned above see Kubota, 2003).

Some of the proposed questions will remain unanswered but with changes in attitude and behavior we may be able to respect other views of the world and communicate in a way that would allow our children to live at peace in a future that does not know what language death is.

Final considerations

Facing language extinction throughout the world it is mandatory to promote bilingual programs, encourage the documentation of data from dying languages, and bring out discussions about teaching cultural aspects of the target language in an extensive way. For this, the better tools seems to be discourse practices and ethnic interviews, which will provide the students with the skills and the competence necessary to be considered bilingual in the strict Bloomfield concept (1933 **apud** Vasseur, 2006) in which a bilingual is a person who has an equal competence in the two languages. If we are able to communicate (especially listening to each other), the world will be a better place to live in. I would like to finish this paper by quoting Cedar (2006:26):

> (...) language is a dance to the music of culture. Dance steps and the music they go with convey more than just rhythm and joy – they also help the dancers negotiate a relationship. We must teach language relative to culture.

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