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Teacher as a Cultural Mediator

Abstract

These times we are living through, and everything is changing so rapidly, it is required to prepare students for the 21st century. It is widely accepted that culture is a very important element while learning a foreign language. It is impossible to learn a language without learning its culture. Teachers of foreign languages are indeed the mediators between two different cultures. The obligation of a teacher is not only to teach grammar, vocabulary but as well as helping and instructing students to understand and raise familiarity of the foreign language culture, encouraging learners to reflect on their own culture and other cultures, acquiring skills necessary for a successful communication with individuals of other cultures. Teachers have a crucial role as mediators of language and culture. This paper focuses on foreign language teacher as a cultural mediator. The methodology used is questionnaire with the teachers of secondary and high schools.

Keywords: *foreign language, culture, English language teachers profile.*

1- Introduction

It is widely accepted that culture is a crucial element while learning a foreign language. Language and culture are closely inter-related, they cannot be separated. It is not enough to learn only the linguistic competence in order to have a successful communication. Teaching a foreign language doesn't mean you should teach only the theoretical aspects of a language (grammar rules, vocabulary etc.) but also some cultural competences that will help learners to communicate effectively.

The society we are living nowadays is experiencing a massive mobility of people from one country to the other for different reasons such as work or study. A lot of businesses are requiring people who can speak more than one language to help establish international agreements. Due to this mobility it is required to prepare students not only for today but also for the future, to face all the changes and conflicts that may occur as a result of culture differences. In fact, learning a foreign language is closely related to all the fields of life.

People belong to different social, religious, and ethnic groups and they have different norms, values, traditions, beliefs and if you are not willing to accept diversity that exist in the society it may be the first thing to cause cultural conflicts. Students must learn to accept and understand people of a different cultural background.

Nowadays, the foreign language teacher is seen as the mediator between two different cultures. Foreign language teachers bear the responsibility to help students to understand and raise their awareness and familiarity of the target culture. Their role as a cultural mediator in foreign language classes is crucial.

2- Methodology

The methodology that I have used is questionnaires with teachers. The questionnaire was filled in by 15 English teachers of different secondary and high schools. The reason why I choose this

methodology is to prove whether the English teachers considered themselves as cultural mediator. It resulted that teachers do not know how to develop intercultural competence even though they considered themselves quiet familiar with the culture of the foreign language or they do not consider it very important because in the state exams there are no questions regarding the culture aspects. Based on these quantitative findings I can divide the teachers in two sections: those who prefer to develop intercultural competence but don't know how to transmit and teachers who are against developing intercultural competence. To sum up foreign language teachers are not trained how to be a cultural mediator.

3- Foreign language teachers' role

The changes that are occurring are affecting our society. Even teachers are facing with lots of changes, finding themselves with the role of cultural mediator. The teacher is considered as a person who prepares and equips the students with the right competence needed in their everyday life. Foreign language teachers are the cultural mediators of two languages and their goal is also to teach culture. When you talk, you also represent your culture. For this reason, besides teaching the linguistic competence *a. listening b. speaking c. reading d. writing*, we should teach an important element *e. cultural learning*.

Teaching culture is not an easy thing. Teachers have a lot of difficulties to sort out what type of culture information they should teach. It is very important to know how to teach culture, the way how they present the culture will affect the students since students have the tendency to take everything for granted. They need to be aware of the fact that culture should be taught from the beginning up to the advanced levels. From the data collected, I came to a conclusion that the methods the teachers use in the classroom are to enlarge students' knowledge of the English culture and don't develop skills to acquire intercultural competence.

3.1 What does a teacher need to do...

Let's imagine a discussion between two people who belong to different cultural groups, the meaning each person creates based on what is said during the discussion is completely different from each other if they don't have knowledge about others cultures. In order to avoid these cultural conflicts we need to acquire the adequate skills

to have a meaningful communication.

Teachers need to have the skills, knowledge, and ability to complete the task of the cultural mediator. They are going to be the mediator of two cultures by interpreting and analyzing the culture. They must help the students to reflect and understand their source and target culture despite the level of proficiency in the foreign language. They should work hard on students' attitudes; teach them how to be tolerant, to be free of prejudice of people from other cultures.

To be cultural mediator they must have very good knowledge about the target language:

- Topics of everyday life, history and geography
- Art, music, films related to culture
- Norms, values, traditions, beliefs etc.
- Religious, ethnic groups

In Albanian secondary and high schools it resulted that most of the English teachers feel familiar with these topics but are not willing to take the role of cultural mediator for these main reasons:

1. They hesitate to teach culture because they may encounter aspects that they are not enough competent to deal with.
2. They see the acquisition of language competence much more important than the cultural competence.
3. They don't see themselves as a cultural mediators or moving in this new direction.

Answer to the problems:

1. It is important to keep in mind that culture is not a static but instead an on-going process. They are not going to teach facts, but help students to acquire the skills necessary to understand and interpret the target culture on their own.
2. The opinion and general goals of teachers are import-

ant in order to understand if they are willing to teach culture and the effect it has in teaching intercultural competence but it's crucial to keep in mind that teaching linguistic competence is not enough if it is not supported by cultural skills.

3. This is due to the fact that they lack training on the form and moments when to teach culture or it's not part of their goals.

3.2 How can teachers help...

Teachers should develop teaching techniques that encourage the acquisition of intercultural competence. Their role is to help the students to create an image of English-speaking countries through different discussion, analysis that can be done in the class. Their duty is not only to present facts but to interpret and analyze those facts. This can be done by encouraging comparison between students' own culture and the new culture they are learning. They should not focus only on teachers-center approach but to make a combination with student-center approach. The students must be encouraged to bring into the classroom their own contribution. They should take care in order to present and improve their syllabus by inserting the cultural element as a key point in learning a foreign language and improving the overall quality. This means that they have to:

- Prepare very carefully the lesson plans to insert cultural activities
- Use all the materials presented in the textbooks including here even pictures, maps graphs etc., even though the information provided in the textbooks is superficial regarding culture
- Use of the role-plays or group pairs during discussion of different topics.

They should aim that every task should be active not passive: Their role is to help the students to have an active role by:

- Encouraging discussions in the class

- Encouraging tolerance towards other cultures.
- Guiding students to reflect on their own culture
- Comparison between both cultures
- Accept other cultures
- To identify problems and avoid obstacles as a result of cultural difference
- Help the students to develop their points of view in different cultural context
- Help the students to freely express themselves on different topics raised in the class

It is necessary for the teachers to learn how to perform deep cultural analyses of textbooks, in order to present in its best way the cultural diversity. They need to explain the cultural difference, facilitate any discourse and listen very carefully to the students' opinion. In the topics raised in the class teachers should aim at exchanging ideas in order for students to learn from each other.

4- Conclusion

Foreign language teachers are considered to be important mediators of two different cultures. As a result it appeared that all the English teachers are not trained to develop competence. English teachers should teach ways how to facilitate the process of communication between people of different cultures. By including cultural competence in their classes they will prepare students to know themselves and the others. Teachers should not focus any more on language development; they are charged with the responsibility to equip students with intercultural skills. It is now the time to change the goal of teaching a foreign language. In this article were given only some suggestions to prepare teachers to work more effectively.

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