Target–Language Culture in EFL materials

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Introduction

Culture, aside from its references to the artifacts of a given community, involves socially acquired knowledge,. This knowledge is organized in culture-specific ways which normally frame our perception of reality such that we largely define the world through the filter of our world's view. Put differently, schemas, which are cognitive structures through which we interpret information, evolve largely as part of society's imposition of its own differential view of reality on its individual members. Culture, then, as'socially acquired knowledge', can be said to play a central role in cognition.

Schematic and systemic knowledge

Widdowson(1990) refers to socially acquired knowledge as'schematic knowledge', which he contrasts with'systemic knowledge'. The latter, in his view, is the knowledge of the formal properties of language, involving both its semantic and syntactic systems. In native language learning, the child's schematic and systemic knowledge are said to develop concurrently, each supportive of the other. However, as Widdowson states, the foreign language learning experience is quite different : Here learners have already been socialized into the schematic knowledge associated with their mother tongue : they are initiated into their culture in the very process of language learning.' For example, while a child from the Anglo–American world will normally think of a dog as 'man's best friend', Southeast Asian children are likely to perceive it as dangerous and dirty. Similarly, whereas the image of the secondary-school teacher in Japan is one of an intelligent, high-status authoritarian, and humble male, the image of the typical Anglo–American teacher does not necessarily match these traits. It follows that when learners confront uses of the foreign language they are acquiring,'their natural inclination is to interpret them in reference to this established association' (Widdowson, 1990 : 110).

The role of schematic knowledge in language acquisition

The 'fit' or consistency, between the culture-specific aspects of cognition and the native language undergoes a substantial degree of conflict when one begins to learn a foreign language. The acquisition process causes learners' schema to be subjected to novel cultural data whose organization for purposes of comprehension and retention becomes difficult or even impossible to achieve. As a case in point, a learner of English who has never resided in the target-language culture will most likely experience prob-

lems in processing English systemic data if these are presented through such unfamiliar contexts as, say, Halloween or English pubs. Even if these are explained, the learner may still fail to perceive Halloween or the pub in the same way in which they are normally evoked in the mind of the native English speaker, as one's tendency is to assess a novel stimulus with respect to one's own cultural system. As such, it is possible that the learner in question will react to Halloween or the pub context with less than full comprehension, regardless of how much explanation is provided. And if one cannot fully access the schematic data, one can hardly be expected to learn the systemic data with any ease.

One area where the violation of the 'fit' is shown to influence foreign language learning negatively is that of reading comprehension. It is well-established that readers make use of culture-specific schemas in relating input to what they already know and, consequently, construct the writer's intended meaning. When the relevant cultural background assumptions and constructs are missing, however, reading tends to become a time-consuming and frustrating experience. In fact, familiarity with the dictionary definition of the lexical items and knowledge of the sentence structures in a text do not seem to be enough for learners to comprehend new information. Wallace (1988) attributes this problem to a lack of what she calls 'cultural competence' on the part of the learner, that is a lack of a 'very complex package of beliefs, knowledge, feelings, attitudes and behavior.

Elements of the target-culture in EFL materials

Writing operates in terms of schemas molded by the social context in which the writer lives. Writers not only construct mental representations of their socially acquired knowledge, but such schematic knowledge also influences their writing in various areas such as the rhetorical organization of a text, audience awareness, topical priorities, etc. Numerous studies in contrastive rhetoric (e. g. Clyne, 1981 ; Hinds. 1983 ; Kobayashi, 1984 ; Johnstone, 1986 ; Nishimura, 1986) demonstrate how thinking and writing operate in terms of culture-specific schemas. As a case in point, Clyne (1981) shows the fundamental contrasts between English rhetorical patterns-which are generally characterized by linearity in the presentation of ideas and German rhetorical patterns-which are marked not only by digressions, but also digressions from digressions. In the same vein, Jenkins and Hinds (1987), speaking of audience awareness skills, indicate that while American business letters are reader oriented, the French ones are writer oriented, and the Japanese ones, after opening with customary formal phrasings, are oriented to the socio-linguistic space between the writer and the reader. Finally, it is no secret that topical priorities change from one culture to another. For example, while the White House seems to be a favorite topic with American EFL textbook writers, the British Royal Family appears to be a popular topic with British EFL writers.

Such examples show that EFL textbook writers, like everyone else, think and

compose chiefly through culture-specific schemas. Because native speakers have face validity in EFL circles, most textbook writers are native speakers who consciously or unconsciously transmit the views, values, beliefs, attitudes and feelings of their own English speaking society-usually the United States or the United Kingdom. As such, when learners acquire a new set of English discourse as part of their evolving systemic knowledge, they partake of the cultural system which the set entails.

Rationale for using elements of the target-language culture

One reason for EFL textbooks focusing on elements about the American or British culture stems from the fact that it is generally not cost-effective for publishers to set materials in the learner's society, as such a decision would cause other learners from other societies not to make use of the materials in question on account of their irrelevance to their own cultures.

Furthermore, the schematic focus on the target-language culture may offer a lucrative deal to the writer(s) as well as the publisher in those cases where the textbook is made use of in both EFL and ESL contexts. Another reason is that native-speaker textbook writers, who normally reside in their own Anglo-American culture, find it hard to compose data that go beyond their `fit'. By contrast, the presentation of the`fit' through sets of discourse particular to the target language culture is relatively easy and practical. They write about their own culture and in tune with that culture's formal schemas, where they are`at home' so to speak.

Many writers in the field, when discussing the necessity of teaching the target language in relation to its own culture, tend to repeat the orthodox yet unsubstantiated notion that language and culture are inextricably tied together, and that it is impossible to teach a foreign language without its culture base. Stewart (1982), for instance, regards the target-language culture as an essential feature of every stage of foreign language learning, and asserts that teaching the formal aspects of the foreign language while referring to the native culture of the learner is virtually useless.

Problems with the rationale

Although practical advantages do exist in teaching and presenting the target-language in relation to its own culture, there are several problems associated with this approach as well. To begin with, it forms part of the`strange paradox' that, while in mother-tongue teaching the clarity of children's ability to express themselves is emphasized, in foreign language teaching learners are forced to express a culture of which they have scarcely any experience(Brumfit, 1980 : 95). Secondly, developing a new identity, or what Byram(1989 : 57) calls `otherness', as a result of one's sudden exposure to the target-language culture, is likely to cause a split between experience and thought which is conducive to serious socio-psychological problems affecting the learner's mental

equilibrium negatively.

Of course, not all culture-specific schematic knowledge leads to such serious problems. Most often, the effects are more subtle. Edge(1987), for example, points to one such area. He says that the task-based and problem solving activities which characterize communicative approaches and materials are not value-free modes of behavior. Rather, they involve Western modes of communication which may not be in harmony with the traditions of some cultures including learning conventions. Therefore, argues Edge, learners from those cultures cannot learn English properly by behaving in ways which are both alien to their educational culture and proscribed in their daily life. Little wonder then that Chinese EFL teachers, for instance, seem to shy away from communicative procedures and materials (Burnaby and Sun, 1989); Chinese EFL students prefer teacher-centered instruction over task-based learning involving the contribution of peers (Young, 1987). After all, Chinese students are accustomed to simple transfer of information from the teacher and retaining such data through rote learning. So, to sum up, rather than indulging in an over-simplification such as the inseparability of language and culture, it would be more realistic to speak of one language which is not always inextricably linked to one particular culture, as is the case with English. English already represents many cultures and it can be used by anyone as means to express any cultural heritage and any value system.

What further exacerbates the problem of presentation of the target language in relation to its own culture is the generally stereotypical representation of that culture in much instructional material. Hartmann and Judd(1988). for example, show how many American EFL materials present stereotyped portrayals of men and women (often to the detriment of the latter), through one-sided role allocation, overt put-downs, or simple omissions. Likewise, Clarke and Clarke(1990) point to numerous instances of stereotyping in British EFL materials in areas of gender, race, class and religion. In general, the authors argue, Britishness seems to be the standard, and crosscultural perspectives in communication are de-emphasized or denied.

Pedagogic implications

Language has no function independently of the social contexts in which it is used. In the case of English, as a lingua franca, such contexts are as varied as they are numerous. Similarly, the schematic knowledge of the speakers of such contexts is quite diverse. Therefore, to confine English to one of its native settings and, what is worse, to present that setting in a stereotypical manner is not only unrealistic and misleading, but also a disservice to EFL learners in that they are likely to find themselves in the undesirable position of tackling unfamiliar information unnecessarily while trying to cope with novel systemic data.

Instead of diving simplistically into the narrow confines of a given target-language

culture, in a manner devoid of comparative insight and critical perspective, EFL writers should try to build conceptual bridges between the culturally familiar and the unfamiliar in order not to give rise to conflicts in the learner's 'fit' as he or she acquires English. Such bridges can be built, among other ways, through the use of comparisons as techniques of cross-cultural comprehension or the exploitation of universal concepts of human experience as reference points for the interpretation of unfamiliar data.

Finally, given that the traditional notion of the communicative competence of the native speaker is no longer adequate as a goal to be adopted in an EFL program, the transition from familiar to unfamiliar schematic data should not necessarily be thought of as moving from the learner's native culture to the culture of the native speaker of English. Even though this still remains a strong option, other options may involve transitions from the learner's native culture to the international English of such areas as pop culture, travel culture, and scientific culture, or the culture of one of the indigenized varieties of English (e. g. Indian, Jamaican or Nigerian English).

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