A bottom-up approach towards culture

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ABSTRACT

The current study seeks to provide some insights into three unresolved issues concerning culture from an applied linguistic lens. The first issue attempts to come to grips with what culture is or might be. The second one tries to uncover its role in language. The third one aims to present an applicable representation of culture in course books. Meanwhile, as an instance for the third question, Top Notch Language Series (Saslow and Ascher, 2005) undergoes a scrutiny in regard to culture. More specifically, culture seems to be protean and relational, making sense when it stands in front of its counterpart(s). Further, for the above protean-like and versatile characteristic, instead of saying what culture is, one might logically prefer to say what culture should be. As the study unfolds, culture's relation to language seems to be more of the inextricability, speaking of language without its culture is like thinking of a body without its soul. Finally, it is suggested that the term 'EFL', English as a Foreign Language, is rather bulky and heterogeneous in nature, and is of low efficacy. To enhance its efficacy, one should break it into pieces, for example the English for the Middle East and the English for the Far East.

Introduction

As mentioned in the abstract, the current study seeks to provide some insights into three unresolved issues concerning culture from an applied linguistic lens. The first issue attempts to come to grips with what culture is or might be. The second one tries to uncover its role in language. The third one aims to present an applicable representation of culture in course books. To sum up, for the first question, a post-modern approach to culture is subscribed to. For the next question, its inseparable role in language, stemming from the post-modern stance, is taken. For the last question, a viable approach is suggested.

What is culture?

The bewildering array of definitions of culture has provoked a lot of controversy among contemporary cultural scholars. Based on an often-quoted statistics, there are more than 156 definitions for culture (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1963). However, without a shadow of doubt, to date, the serpentine path of culture has witnessed more turns. Resolving the problem above, cultural scholars have taken different approaches towards culture which might be split into three main camps: some have attempted to replace culture with so-called more academic terms, some have provided a very broad definition of it, and others have taken a post-modern view towards it through portraying its major characteristics and conditions. In what follows, the three approaches are explained. In the first camp, there are scholars who prefer to consider culture in new terms; as Atkinson (1999) holds that

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theses scholars have reduced culture to terms such as difference, hybridity, identity, power, agency, discourse, resistance, and contestation. In the second camp, culture is treated as a voluminous term which virtually embraces all aspects of life (Harris, Moran, & Moran, 2004; Hinkle, 2001; Rivers, 1981). In the third camp, culture, mainly in the realm of language, is regarded "as a way of making meaning that is relational, historical, and that is always mediated by language and other symbolic systems" (Kramsch, 2013, p. 71). This very last one has gained its due recognition lately, and has cast new light on the nature of culture. Based on this frame of reference, a given culture in itself is devoid of meaning unless compared with other cultures. That is to say, a given culture is deeply rooted in the history of a specific country or society and comes into being when compared with its counterpart(s). In a similar vein, Allameh Jafari (2003), an Islamic philosopher, talks about characteristics of pioneer culture as a further step. To him, pioneer culture is not affected by temporarily environmental factors, for it has its origins in ongoing realities of nature as well as truly human dimensions. Moreover, it aims to create relative objectives for human beings to find its ultimate aim in life. The reason for considering this view under the umbrella of post modern lies in the fact that here linearity is broken and instead of saying what culture is the characteristics of ideal culture are investigated. As the mainstream of culture can find itself under the umbrella of post modern, we attempt to stick to this mainstream throughout this paper.

Culture in connection with L1 and L2

The importance of culture in language learning has been that vital that it is considered as the fifth skill by some scholars. However, Kramsch (1998) goes above this notion by stating that culture is more than a skill in that it cannot be separated from language.

Despite its seemingly unapproachable and protean nature, culture does play a significant role in second and foreign language learning from various perspectives: sociolinguistic theory, schema learning theory and cultivation theory, just to mention a few. Canale and Swain (1980) regard the appropriate recognition of culture as a major component of sociolinguistic competence, which is one of the four divisions of communicative competence. Likewise, schema learning theory highlights the appropriate cultural schema as an essential factor in language learning without which learning will be incomplete (Tseng, 2002). In the same way, Cultivation theory focuses on the effect of culture on changes in individual perception. This is of utmost importance in expanding an individual's perspective of the world, and from this viewpoint, culture is crucial in language learning for at least two reasons: first, achieving perspective consciousness and second, cross-cultural awareness (Tseng, 2002).

To crystallise the significance of culture, Wallace (1988) devises the term "cultural competence", by which he means "a very complex package of beliefs, knowledge, feelings, attitudes and behaviour" (Wallace, 1988: 33).

Not only does culture play an important role in second language learning and teaching, but also its pertinent concepts such as acculturation and intercultural communication are the major concerns in this field. Acculturation and intercultural communication, implicated in the relation between a new language and culture, are briefly described below.

Acculturation is commonly considered as a cardinal concept in the interplay between a new language and culture. For Brown (2000), acculturation is tantamount to creating a new identity lying at the heart of culture leaning. In his eye, language is the best expression of a given culture that is why acculturation is deeply rooted in language learning.

The other notion of a considerable significance in a new language and culture is intercultural communication. As Piller (2011) puts:

> Culture is not something that exists outside of and precedes intercultural communication. Instead, intercultural communication is one domain where 'culture' as concerned with the specific – and different – ways of life of different national and ethnic group is constructed.
> Culture is an ideological construct called into play by social actors to produce and reproduce social categories and boundaries, and it must be the central research aim of a critical approach to intercultural communication to understand the reasons, forms and consequences of calling cultural difference into play.

> [Piller (2011: 16).]

In short, although culture as a versatile notion can be viewed from a number of vantage points, its dissociable nature in language, as mentioned by Kramsch (1998), is adopted as the frame of reference in this study.

Objectives of culture and its manner of representations in textbooks

Gaining some insights into the nature of culture and its relation to language, we try to elaborate on its representations in course books. To date, a host of suggestions in connection with the aim and the manner of presenting a new culture have been put forward. The following are a few cases.

Gilmore (2007), drawing on Cortazzi and Jin's (1999) categorization, elaborates on the three types of teaching culture in English language textbooks. Cortazzi and Jin's types split into three main branches. The first type (C1) aims at teaching the source culture in English language textbooks. On the contrary, the second type (C2) refers to the fact that it is the target culture which should be focused on other than the source one. The last category (C3, C4, C5, …), which seems rather odd, refers to the fact that other cultures which are neither target ones nor source ones should be focused on. Importantly, mentioning the shortcomings of each type, Gilmore (2007) subscribes to the second branch, as it is more logical and practical to him. To him, the first one suffers from the fact that the source culture is patronized while underestimating the students' ability in taking the useful language points