

Socio-cultural Competence in ESL Education: A Focus on Nigeria

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Abstract

Until recently, Foreign Language Teaching (FLT) failed to give sufficient emphasis to cultural specificity and its linguistic reflections. Emphasis was just on the mechanical learning of the traditional components of the language system without reference to their functional usefulness. This, at times, has led to abysmal performance of the students in the target language. For functional education in Nigeria, English as a Second language (ESL) pedagogy requires developing socio-cultural competence in the learners. This paper examined the components of socio-cultural competence in the English language which should form a significant part of ESL teaching with the aim of achieving effective communication. This is because full proficiency in English is critical for long-term personal, social and economic development of all students in Nigeria and the linguistic, cognitive, and socio-cultural competences that ESL students bring to school are solid base for building their future, in terms of educational and career success.

Introduction

Language is seen as an important aspect of culture and the vehicle for culture expression and transmission. Language expresses the cultural legacy and social experience of a people and transmits them from generation to generation. This means that it is a factor influencing the intercourse of a community and one of the greatest sources of information about lives of its users. According to Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory, learning is facilitated through interaction with the social environment (interpersonal

learning) rather than intrapersonal learning. Language is an important mediation tool in learning as well as in interaction. People learn through and about language in social and cultural interactions.

Patterns of language usage vary across cultures and reflect differences in values, norms, and beliefs about social roles and relationships in each culture. When children learn their first language, they learn the cultural values, norms, and beliefs that are characteristic of their cultures. To learn another language is to learn new norms, behaviours and beliefs that are appropriate in the new culture, and thus to extend one's socio-cultural competence in new environments. A number of general principles derived from current research and theory about the nature of language, language learning, human development, and pedagogy, underlie the ESL education standards. They are:

1. Language is functional: Successful language learning and language teaching emphasize functional proficiency. This is in contrast to the traditional pedagogical approaches that view language learning and teaching primarily as mastery of the elements of language, such as grammar and vocabulary. What is important to ESL learners is to function effectively in English and through English while learning challenging academic content.
2. Language varies: language varies with respect to region, social class, ethnic differences, person, topic, purpose and situation. It also varies from one academic domain to another.
3. Language learning is cultural learning.
4. Language acquisition is a long-term process: Language acquisition moves through developmental stages and gradually growing in proficiency. Rates of acquisition are influenced by individual's educational background, first language background, learning style, cognitive style, motivation and personality. These are in addition to socio-cultural factors. ESL educational programme must take these into cognizance.
5. Language acquisition occurs through meaningful use and interaction: Effective language acquisition takes place when it is used in significant and meaningful situations as the learners interact with others. This means that ESL learners must be given multiple opportunities to use English, to interact with others as they study meaningful and intellectually challenging content, and to receive feedback on their language use.

6. Language processes develop interdependently: Acquisition of functional language abilities occurs simultaneously and interdependently, rather than sequentially. For instance, reading activities may activate speaking abilities and vice versa.

7. Native language proficiency contributes to second language acquisition: This emphasizes the role of background knowledge. ESL students know and use at least one other language. With that, they have acquired an intuitive understanding of the general structural and functional characteristics of language.

8. Bilingualism is an individual and societal asset: Acquisition of a second language can confer certain cognitive and linguistic advantages on the individual. The learners' first language should not be abandoned in the quest for a second language. (http://www.tesol.or/s_sec_document.asp?CID=113&DID=3100)

Why ESL Education in Nigeria?

The goals for learning English as a second language include personal, social, and academic uses of English. English is learnt to avoid the negative social and economic consequences of low proficiency in English and to participate as informed participants in democracy in Nigeria's multi-lingual society. According to TESOL journal online, the use of English to communicate in social settings involves students' ability to

- ☐ Use English to participate in social interaction
- ☐ Interact in, through, and with spoken and written English for personal expression and enjoyment
- ☐ Use learning strategies to extend their communicative competence.

Academically, English competence is critical for success. Nigerian students are expected to learn academic content through the English language and to compete academically with other students of the world including native speakers of English as English has turned into a global language. This process requires that learners use spoken and written English to obtain, process, construct, and provide subject matter information in their schoolwork.

To use English in socially and culturally appropriate ways entails students' appreciation of and understanding people who are different and communicating effectively with them. Such communication involves the ability to

- ☐ Use the appropriate language variety, register, and genre according to audience, purpose, and setting;
- ☐ Use nonverbal communication appropriate to audience, purpose, and setting

- ☐ Use appropriate learning strategies to extend their sociolinguistic and socio-cultural competence.

It is the totality of all the abilities to communicate in social settings, in social and cultural appropriate ways, and in academics that indicates that a learner has acquired socio-cultural competence in English language. Full proficiency in English is critical for the long-term personal, social, and economic development of all students in Nigeria.

Socio-cultural Competence (SCC): Meaning and Components

Socio-cultural competence is a situation whereby learners undergo a kind of acculturation by getting familiar with and appropriation of new codes of expressions, new values and to some extent, new norms of conduct relating to the target language because of the close relationship existing between language and culture which cannot be neglected if we wish our students to understand the language fully and be able to use it proficiently. This close link between language and culture influence both verbal and non verbal communication, for instance, the degree of formality in one's speech or one's body language hold different meaning depending on the culture with which a person identifies himself (Olshtain, 1981). Likewise, the length of a pause or a change in tone depends on and can vary by culture (Chun, 1998). For meaning to be extricated from what is said, a variety of daily and intellectual contexts must be considered. These contexts (socio-cultural) vary and may hinder effective communication with members of different cultures while competence in them facilitates communication.

SCC has been defined as the possession of sufficient background knowledge (BK) and capability to activate this relevant BK in the process of culturally appropriate communication. Background knowledge is generally defined as a body of knowledge that is shared by native-speakers of a particular language. This common knowledge facilitates the ability of individuals to communicate, work, and live together. BK unites a community and is a distinguishing characteristic of a national culture. Socio-cultural competence, according to Puente (1997)

aims at the assimilation and proper management of the distinctive features in the target culture, particularly those embedded in the target language. The culture-specific reference implicit in the language constitutes that peculiar component of its semantics which we

may call socio-cultural meaning. This forms a significant part of the process of acculturation.

The term includes the material and intellectual context of human life which conditions the way in which people mean things to each other and construct their thoughts, and consequently conditions the communicative and logical discursive functions of linguistic codes (Puente, 1997). These life's contexts which differ from place to place constitutes a culturally specific phenomenon.

The aim of socio-cultural competence in English as a second language is to help develop an understanding of general cultural contexts and their implications which enable someone raised in a particular culture to fully comprehend speech or text in that culture's language. The place of socio-cultural competence in ESL programmes is recent and ESL educators need to understand the importance of this topic and implement it in their classrooms. It should be noted, however, that teaching socio-cultural competence in ESL classrooms is not the same as asking students to abandon their own cultures and adopt another identity. Instead, it is meant to offer information on some of the underlying factors that can affect discourse. There is no over or implied prescription. The students can decide to do whatever they want with the information they learn. Teaching socio-cultural competence is simply a way to encourage ESL students to develop an outlook on communication in the English language that is informed and attentive.

In ESL, there are four components of socio-cultural competence: social contextual factors, stylistic appropriateness factors, cultural factors, and non-verbal communicative factors (Celce-Marcia, Dorneyi & Thurred, 1995). The neglect of these components had led to confusion and comprehension difficulties in the English language.

Social Contextual Factors

Social contextual factors deal with taking the setting of a conversation into consideration and paying attention to gender and age differences while speaking. The social setting of a conversation can influence the way in which someone speaks. In particular, it can impact the degree of formality of one's speech and the topic of conversation (TESOL & Applied Linguistics, 2001). For instant, In North America when people meet each other for the first time, they talk about things like family, work, school, or sports. They ask questions like "Do you have any brothers or sisters?", "Where do you work?", "What school do you go to?" and "Do you like sports?" They also ask questions like

“Where do you come from?” and “Where do you live?” These are polite questions. They are not personal or private. But some things are personal or private, and questions about them are not polite. People don’t ask questions about person’s salary. They don’t ask how much someone paid for something. It is important to explain to ESL students which topics are appropriate for small talk, along with the typical length of such conversations, in order to avoid awkward or embarrassing situations that may result from cultural differences. Such cultural differences should be addressed in ESL classrooms so that the students understand the differences between their cultures and that of the target language.

Age and gender differences are also important aspects of the social context of speaking. Children who are in ESL classes generally learn vocabulary or phrases that are appropriate for their grade or knowledge level. Likewise, many ESL programs for adults start off by teaching the students more basic words because they are easier to learn (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001). ESL students are made aware of the age or education level that is associated with the various words or phrases they have learned, they will be able to determine how they should speak to people, based on the age of the listener. ESL teachers should also explain the role that gender plays in communication.

Stylistic Appropriateness Factors

The appropriate language to mark politeness varies from one culture to another. In some societies, direct speech acts are used while in the others; it is the indirect speech acts. Brown and Levinson (1978:142) went further to identify the three situational variables, which influence the choice of level of politeness, and they are “necessity of the request and cultural variables”. For Bardovi-Harlig (2001), Politeness conventions and strategies, degrees of formality and intonation are elements of style which vary from one language or culture to another. Difference in intonation while speaking can cause socio-cultural misunderstanding. In English, a drop in loudness and pitch signals that the speaker is relinquishing his turn to one of the other people in the conversation. In Nigeria, people lower their tones to indicate politeness or conspiracy but in English a lowered tone often indicates boredom or detachment. ESL students ought to know when the formal and informal styles are used. Formal speeches are for formal social events that are serious and often times official which call for caution in the use of language. They include the English used in formal meetings, interview, official reports, business letters, and court of law or with superiors in offices. On the other hand, informal English is conversational English among friends at relaxed

settings such as engagement and birthday parties, social outings, fields of play, etc. (Umera-Okeke, 2009:216).

Finally, differences in formality between English and other languages should also be taught as part of the stylistic appropriateness factors of socio-cultural competence. Other cultures and languages have different tenses which are used to designate the difference between a formal and informal conversation (Van der Wal, 2004). ESL students would need to know these differences in order to prevent confusion or embarrassment from speaking in a manner that is uncommon in English. Furthermore, ESL students must be taught the difference between vulgar or slang words and 'standard' English. Slang was defined by Longman Handy Learner's Dictionary as:

very informal language that includes new and sometimes not polite words and meanings and is often used among particular groups of people and not usual in serious speech or writing (In Umera-Okeke, 2009:218).

Slang has serious limitations. It is often imprecise, understandable to a narrow social or age group, and usually changes very rapidly. Imagine what happens when a student does not understand his or her limitations in the use of slang words! Many ESL programs, particularly those intended for children and teenagers, should address slang or vulgar words. Teachers in ESL programs often believe that by addressing this topic, they are encouraging students to use this language (Bernard-Johnson, Kessler, Lee, McLosley, Quinn & Stack, 1996). However, some studies have shown that when learning a foreign language, people often pick up slang or vulgar terms more easily because they frequently hear these words in spoken conversation (Allwright, 1995; Collier, 1995); like students will say "*what's up, gate crash, you goof, please rewind, fast guy, etc*". Thus, informing ESL students about these words and phrases and their levels of appropriateness is both useful and necessary.

Cultural Factors

Cultural factors should be incorporated in ESL education. Incorporating cultural factors into ESL education will provide students with knowledge of important or common cultural aspects of the United States which will in turn enable them to understand conversations and text more easily (ERIC Clearinghouse on Language and Linguistics, 2000). Some cultural references

which may be of help to ESL learners in understanding the English language because they come up in texts and conversations are things like Christopher Columbus, George Washington, Sesame Street, Thanksgiving, Halloween, and other aspects. The teaching of such cultural factors is not intended to be a means of promoting mainstream American/European culture and values, but its purpose is to provide information that would enable ESL students to understand references that they may hear in conversation or in other situations (Celce-Marcia, Dorneyi & Thurred, 1995). ESL teachers could compile a list of cultural factors which are commonly found in speech or text and provide students with brief descriptions of these factors and their significance in the target language society.

Because ESL students will hear English being spoken with a particular accent in different situations, they should also be taught the different accents and varieties of the English language. Non mastery of these varieties like British and American English leads to pronunciation and spelling errors. Here are some examples:

British	American
Cigar ETTE	CI G arette
ad DRESS	AD D ress

British	American
analogue	analog
programme	program
disc	disk
plough	plow
sceptical	skeptical
cheque	check
skilful	skillful
sulphur	sulfur
gynaecology	gynecology
paediatrics	pediatrics
apologise	apologize
travelling	traveling

Non-verbal Communication

Hybels and Weaver II (2001:6) define communication as “a process in which people share information, ideas and feelings”. It involves not only spoken and written words but also body language, personal mannerism and style (henceforth) to be referred to as nonverbal communication) which add

meaning to a message. This means that communication involves verbal (use of words) and nonverbal ways. There various forms of non-verbal communication which include *chronemics, paralinguistics, kinesics, proxemics and object communication*. Celce-Marcia, Dorneyi, & Thurred, (1995) list them as eye contact, body language, touching, hand gestures, use of space, and silence.

Chronemics (Time): This refers to how people use and interpret time. In communication, timing is very essential. When one devotes time to talk to and listen to someone, the person feels valued. A doctor who listens patiently to the sick and have them examined well had already gone half way in the treatment. Time can be used for psychological effect. Being too early to a first date may be interpreted to mean eagerness. One's control of time is an important form of nonverbal communication

Paralanguage: 'voice quality' or 'vocal tone'. This vocal tone determines sorrow, distaste, love, reprimand, care and even hatred. Hybels and Weaver II (2001:137) identify paralanguage to include "such vocal characteristics as rate (speed of speaking), pitch (highness or lowness of tone), volume (loudness) and quality (pleasing or unpleasant sound). Paralinguistics also includes stress and intonation. They are for spoken English what punctuation is for written English. A sigh when something is said can mean sorrow or distaste. Oh! Or What! when said with intense look of disbelief may mean surprise, shock or disbelief. According to Mehrabia (1968:44-47), about 35percent of the meaning in communication is affected by vocal cues-not words themselves.

Kinesics (Body Language): This is the analysis of body language and it includes facial expression, gestures, posture and eye contact.

Proxemics (Space and Distance): This word was coined by Edward Hall for the study of the space and distance. It "concerns the way people use the space around them as well as the distance they stand or sit from others" (Hybels and Weaver II, 2001:145). Hybel and Weaver II categorized distance and space into:

<i>Intimate</i>	<i>Distance:</i>
<i>(3inches to</i>	<i>18inches):</i>
shows	care, love,
freedom	to touch the
other person	with your
whole body.	

Personal Distance:
(18inches to 4feet):
distance of casual and
personal conversations
among friends.

Social Distance: (between 4
to 12feet): Impersonal
business, social gatherings
and interviews maintain
this distance.

Public Distance: (More than
12feet): People speak loudly
and use exaggerated gestures
so as to communicate.
Communication is very formal

According to Wolcott and Unwin (1983:89), “each person has an individual relationship with others; the closer the relationship with another person, the less necessity there is to keep them at a distance”. In general, native English speakers of the United States maintain some distance between themselves and the people with whom they are speaking. The concept of personal space is very important in the United States and most people try to respect the space of others when interacting with them. Conversely, in other parts of the world, such as Asia and the Middle East, personal space is not an important aspect of daily life. People tend to stand or sit closer to one another while talking, and think nothing of their proximity to each other. Standing very close to speak with someone in the United States is looked at as rude and as an invasion of personal space and can create a very awkward or uncomfortable feeling for many Americans (Leung, 2005).

Object Communication: This is also an element of nonverbal communication. It is common in articles of clothing. The type of clothing one is putting on determines personality, traits, social group, and culture, time of the day or weather, profession and so on. For Dimitrius and Mazzarella (1998:31), “clothing projects a message and by choosing particular clothing, the wearer commits himself or herself to the statements the clothing makes”.

The importance of these forms of communication within culture is often ignored and those who are learning a new language and interacting in a new culture often try to use the same non-verbal communication that is common to their own cultures (Collier, 1995). This can lead to negative consequences. For instance, For example, in the United States it is customary for two people

who are having a conversation to maintain eye contact during most or all of the conversation. People who are unable to maintain eye contact during a conversation are often looked upon as untrustworthy or rude (Furnham, 1993). This is seen as rudeness and being disrespectful in Nigeria and some other African countries especially when there is an age gap between the interlocutors. By avoiding eye contact they are showing their reverence for the other person (Van der Wal, 2004). It is easy to see how such a small gesture would be capable of causing many misunderstandings for an ESL student from one of these cultures.

Silence is another form of communication that can make a situation awkward if used improperly. The acceptable length of silence during a conversation varies across cultures. In many cultures, people are more comfortable with longer pauses or periods of silence in order for someone to think of a response to what has just been said (TESOL & Applied Linguistics, 2001). In the United States, long pauses can become uncomfortable or may be indicative of that fact that someone is upset or choosing to ignore what has been said in the conversation. Thus, ESL instructors need to at least explain the implications of a long pause during a conversation to their students so that they will be aware of the way that this silence will be perceived (Rennie, 1993)

Conclusion

In order to help our students master components of SCC, it is insufficient to simply present relevant information about the linguistic phenomena being addressed. In order for students to learn to use the competence with the level of automaticity and confidence of a native speaker, procedural and not simply declarative mastery needs to occur. The procedural method should involve specifically designed learning activities. There is need for a balance between theory and practice in language learning and it is only through a sufficient amount of relevant practice that students can increase retention of the material and build automaticity and comfort of its use in real-life communication. Also, to achieve the native-like proficiency, educational programmes must be based on acknowledgment of, understanding of, respect for, and valuing of diverse cultural backgrounds. Effective language instruction for ESL must be part of a comprehensive and challenging educational programme that takes into account ESL students' social, educational and personal backgrounds as well as their existing skills and knowledge bases. This is response to the interrelationships between language, academic, and socio-cultural development. The linguistic,

cognitive, and socio-cultural competences that ESL students bring to school are solid base for building their future, in terms of educational and career success. Only if ESL instruction is part of a comprehensive, challenging, and enriching educational programme will the promising futures of ESL learners be realized.

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Socio-cultural Competence in ESL.....

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