

Thinking Culture in a Language Classroom: Teaching Gujarati as a Foreign Language

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Introduction and background

It becomes indeed a pleasant experience for the learners of a foreign language to be in an atmosphere where the culture of the target language is present, or has been incorporated in the teaching. This article attempts to demonstrate the significance and function of cultural elements/artifacts in teaching a foreign language. It is an account of a promising practice where the cultural associations of the target language have been attached to language learning. It is an academic reflection, and recounts the experiences of a teacher who teaches Gujarati as a foreign language at an American university¹. The article gives a detailed description of an active classroom where Gujarati vocabulary is taught by integrating cultural elements/artifacts. In the classroom, culture is the main focus of curriculum, hence influencing the content and image of the teaching material. For the purposes of this paper, Gujarati will be the target language for those whose native language is English. The goal of the article is to demonstrate to foreign language teachers how they can incorporate the teaching of cultural elements/artifacts into their foreign language classrooms.

Vocabulary in a FL classroom

Vocabulary is an essential component for successful communication in a foreign language (FL) classroom. When it comes to learning a foreign language, it becomes even more critical. Awareness of words seems to give enough

confidence to learners to produce a language. The task of teaching vocabulary is challenging for most language teachers, for FL teachers it is especially challenging. The teacher needs to be very innovative to design a lesson where learning the vocabulary becomes an interesting activity in the classroom. The teacher also needs to ensure that the new words are taught in the appropriate context ensure maximum retention.

The classroom structure and the learners

At this point, it will be helpful to define classroom structure and learners in order to understand this study. For the purposes of this paper, learners are defined as having beginners' level familiarity with Gujarati, and having an awareness of the Gujarati culture when they first come to the beginners Gujarati class. The process of teaching-learning focuses on communicative approach, therefore the classroom activities are highly dependent on hands-on activities by the learners.

Culture in language learning: From theory to practice

Austrian-British philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein, who worked on the philosophy of language stated, "If we spoke a different language, we would perceive a somewhat different world." Wittgenstein indicates a definite relationship between language and culture-society. Culture is often considered as mere information conveyed by the language, and not as a feature of language; cultural awareness

therefore becomes an educational objective in itself, separate from language. If, however, language is seen as a social practice, culture becomes the very core of language teaching. Cultural awareness must then be viewed both as enabling language proficiency, and as being the outcome of reflection on language proficiency (Kramsch, 1993, p. 8). Language is considered as a human institution. Lado (1964) posits, “language does not develop in a vacuum. It is a part of the culture of a people” (p. 23). It is clear that language is undoubtedly a social phenomenon. It is not possible to break apart the relationship between culture, society and language. Lado (1964) further states, “as the chief instrument of communication, language attaches specific words and phrases to the most frequent cultural meaning” (p. 23). Thus, the beliefs, rituals, customs, thoughts, mannerisms, and arts of any society or culture are reflected in and transmitted through its language. In fact, the linguistic development of human beings is mostly a social and cultural process. Conversely, socio-cultural patterns are reflected in language and in all major aspects of language such as vocabulary, pronunciations, and variations in sentence structures. Involvement of socio-cultural theory suggests that human mental activity emerges specifically as a result of the internalization of social relationships, culturally organized activity and symbolic artifacts (Vygotsky, 1986; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). In this regard, the integration of cultural artifacts/elements may facilitate and ensure a more cognitive way to foreign language learning as it allows learners to experience a more motivating environment. Another important relevance of incorporating cultural elements/artifacts is the consideration of an ‘affective filter’; Krashen (1981) remarks, “... people acquire a second language only if they obtain comprehensible input and if their affective filters are low enough to allow the input” (p. 84). This suggests that integration of cultural elements/artifacts helps in lowering the affective filter, and provides ‘comprehensible input’ in learning a foreign language.

Rangoli and Toran: Cultural artifacts/elements as a tool and authentic material

It is now an acknowledged fact that the study of different cultures aids us to know about different people, and is necessary in order to understand and respect other peoples and their ways of life. It also makes us aware of the similarities and differences in the lives of various cultural groups. If we provide our learners with just a list of facts of history or geography, and a list of lexical items, we will not have provided them with an intimate view of what life is really like in the target culture and language.

After discussing the relevance and the impact of integrating culture into the teaching of a foreign language, I would like to put down the style and method of integrating culture. The practice of integrating the culture of Gujarat for example, should not be limited to simply describing its cultural background, but to actually making use of the cultural elements/artifacts of Gujarat as tools and authentic materials in the classroom to teach new words.

I designed a lesson to teach shape and colour vocabulary, where I used a Rangoli and a Toran as cultural elements/artifacts. Rangoli—a folk and traditional art form of Gujarati culture—is a decorative design made on the floors of living rooms and courtyards during Hindu festivals. They are meant to be sacred welcoming areas for Hindu deities and guests. In Gujarati, Toran is the name given to a sacred or honorific gateway. It is typically a projecting cross-piece that rests on two uprights or posts. In Gujarati culture, Toran may also refer to a decorative door hanging. Both, Rangoli and Toran feature vivid colours and shapes.

Instead of simply describing the shapes and colours used in making a Rangoli or a Toran, I went one step ahead. I asked the students to make their own Rangoli and Toran to learn the colour and shape vocabulary in Gujarati. For this purpose, I did the following:

1. I showed the learners various designs of Torans and Rangolis, and made them aware of the importance of these two cultural elements/artifacts. I also familiarized them with the significance and symbol of different colours and shapes in the Gujarati culture and tradition.
2. The process of showing involved two steps: Displaying a picture of a Toran and a Rangoli; and presenting a PowerPoint Version in which all the shapes and colours were animated to create a complete design of a Toran and a Rangoli. The learners were then asked to identify the different colours and shapes.
3. I asked the learners to make their own Toran and Rangoli. For this I gave them various colors (special sand colours) to make a Rangoli on the floor. I also gave them papers of different colours to cut into different shapes to make a Toran.
4. I gave each student a unique design instruction detailing the colours and shapes they had to use in the making of the Toran and Rangoli so each learner had an exclusive pattern. The learners therefore had ample opportunity to explore various shapes and colours.
5. As soon as the learners were ready with their artifacts, I asked them to identify the colours and shapes of the Torans and Rangolis made by the other learners. Therefore, once again they got a chance to work with the shape and colour vocabulary.
6. This learning was then followed by teaching them to make simple sentences using colour and shape vocabulary. This included asking questions such as “which colour is this?”; or “which shape is this?”; and then answering them.

Observations and discussion

The whole exercise was successful in two ways. Firstly, the learners became aware of the cultural significance of Torans and Rangolis in the Gujarati tradition and art. Secondly, learning became very live and interactive by using and making Torans and Rangolis in a hands-on activity. The experience of interacting with shapes and colours while creating the Toran and Rangoli demonstrated learning. It was also observed that such a method of teaching turned cultural elements/artifacts into authentic materials.

Conclusion

Understanding of the target culture helps to motivate learners to learn the language. The close association of culture and language will be truly successful only if cultural artifacts and elements are incorporated as tools and authentic materials in the narration of theoretical matters. The positive impact of such an exercise enables learners’ involvement, ignites interest, and makes learners active participants in the process of learning. Hence, learning activities which focus on active learning are best practiced in a culturally enabled environment.

¹ I worked as a foreign language teacher, teaching Gujarati as a Fulbright FLTA for the year 2010-11 at Indiana University, Bloomington, USA.

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Images of Rangoli and Toran used for demonstration

1. Source: Stock pictures taken from the internet



2. Source: PowerPoint animation image sample

