

Culturally Speaking: Should Culture be an Integral part of Language Pedagogy?



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There is a movement these days to start teaching a second language in U.S. elementary schools. This has long been the standard for most schools in India, where children learn both national languages (English and Hindi) and often their regional language. Americans are now following suit in raising children to be bilingual or even trilingual. So why do we seek to learn languages other than our mother tongue? Why spend hours memorizing the genders of new nouns, different verb conjugations and how to pronounce letters in a new alphabet? Each person has his own answer to this question. Whether it is to communicate with a beloved grandparent, to stay competitive in a global market or simply to increase your knowledge, it is essential to learn culture in tandem with the language you are learning. We need to understand culture in order to get the perspective of native speakers, understand the history of the language, and so that we can visit the region in which that language is spoken.

Before going further, however, we must address: what do we mean by “culture”? The word has 164 definitions, according to a book published by Alfred Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn (1952). For the context we will refer to in this paper, culture is defined as the set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterizes an institution, organization or group. This includes traditions and societal norms but also cuisine, music, art, attire, stories and much more. And culture is hardly static—it adapts with time and is influenced by surrounding cultures, giving it a rich and colorful identity. The culture of various groups of humans throughout time is, in fact, the focus of study for anthropologists. The concept of culture, in an anthropological sense, refers to the process of civilization in humans through gaining of the ability to symbolically and socially encode experiences. Thus, language is a crucial component to the existence and spread of culture. Whether through literature, poetry, music or cinema, culture is being emulated and spread. This spread of culture through language affects how and in what light we view the world. Our interests, concerns and values that we live by on a daily basis are all based upon the tenets of our culture.

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In the initial stages of learning a language is it overwhelming enough to learn the basics such as alphabet, basic vocabulary and verb tenses. At that point, being able to write and speak in coherent, grammatically coherent sentences is an accomplishment in itself. But becoming an advanced beginner or intermediate student of a language requires more than just being able to count to twenty, name colors/ animals and introducing yourself. It requires you to see the language from the viewpoint of a native speaker, and for that, you need to learn the culture.

Knowing traditions and values better allows us to understand the idioms. An idiom is an expression whose meaning is not predictable from the usual meanings of its constituent elements, or from the general grammatical rules of a language (Masica: 2001). Idioms are used in every language but often seem foreign to nonnative speakers because they cannot be translated directly. Understanding their usage requires a certain amount of exposure to the language as well as insight into the culture. Take for example, the Hindi phrase “Khichdi pakaana.” Literally translated to English, it means “to make khichdi” but this makes no sense without knowing what “khichdi” is. Khichdi, mixture of rice and lentils cooked with spices and sometimes vegetables, is the quintessential north-Indian comfort food, a meal cooked on rainy days when people are cooped up indoors. Armed with this tidbit of information, it makes sense that the phrase figuratively means “to scheme secretly/hatch a plan.”

Intermediate level language students begin the progression from grammar to reading and analyzing text. In order to analyze text, the reader needs a cultural context. Fortunately, the “reading” itself helps because most texts are culturally-based. Whether poetry or prose, written works are direct and indirect reflections of the surrounding culture. By seeing what authors write about, we get a sense of what is important to them at that moment in time. For example, the moon plays a large role in Indian culture-- both Hindu and Muslim calendars are lunar. Therefore it is not surprising to find the prevalence of the moon in Hindi-Urdu poetry, often as a synonym for beauty.

Another aspect linking language and culture is history. Just as culture evolves with times, so does language. Thus, the culture’s past shows us the factors that have gone into shaping the language as we know it. A great example of this is the Hindi-Urdu language, otherwise known as Hindustani. In the early second millennium BCE, Sanskrit was brought to the Indus valley by those who settled there. A member of the Indo-European family of languages, Sanskrit soon became the standard (both spoken and written) in the region. In the mid 16th century, the Mughal Empire (a Muslim Persianate imperial power that ruled much of India for the next few centuries) brought Arabic and Persian languages to the region (Canfield et al: 2002). These, combined with the Sanskrit derivatives spoken by natives, created a blended language called Hindustani.

The mid 19th century saw the introduction of British Raj in India. To allow for communication with the colonial rulers, English words were incorporated into the

Hindi vernacular (such as the months of the Judeo-Christian calendar). Even the partition of India in 1947 brought changes for the language. Political leaders in mostly-Muslim Pakistan pushed for a more Arabic-influenced version of Hindustani, yielding Urdu, while primarily-Hindu Indian leaders called for Sanskritization, yielding Standard Hindi. While Urdu and Hindi are written in different scripts, they share a common set of sounds, words and grammatical rules due to their common history. In fact, speakers of Hindi, for the most part, are able to understand Urdu and vice versa.

Perhaps the most pressing reason to learn culture along with language is to feel comfortable visiting the country and/or region where the language is spoken by natives. It is well known that while learning in the classroom is great, there is no better way to really get a grasp of the language than to immerse yourself in it. This is why so many university students study abroad after taking a few semesters of a language. In order to get the most out of their experience, however, students must know a thing or two about cultural boundaries and expectations. Take the example of an American student of Hindi traveling to India for the first time. He/she can practice language skills at the local shops and restaurants as well as hear it spoken in public places. The student should know that outside of metropolitan areas, much of India is quite conservative and women, especially, are expected to abide by a dress code that emphasizes modesty (though not complete cover as is required by women in some parts of the Middle East). This especially applies to places of worship, mosques and temples, where shoes must be removed as well.

Indian society also places great importance on respect for elders, which is why pronouns and the ending of verb are changed depending on the formality between two parties. A student who knows this will be able to avoid miscommunication, by using the “Aap” (most formal) construction to be safe. Even knowledge of “less serious” social customs can be useful, such as knowing that in Indian street markets, haggling is the norm. Whoever is fortunate to have a host family will likely find themselves doted on because most Indians show their guests great hospitality. By stepping outside their comfort zones, students also learn to appreciate of other cultural beliefs and practices.

Of course, the converse of this is also true—to fully embrace your cultural heritage, you need to know its associated language. I grew up in a Bangla-speaking household and often visited my ancestral home in Kolkata as a child. While I can speak Bengali fairly fluently, I never learned how to read or write Bengali because where I grew up there were no accessible Indian language schools (as there often are in larger U.S. cities). The summers spent with my grandparents and cousins in Kolkata are indeed among my favorite childhood memories but I always felt like an outsider for not knowing how to read Bengali. My extended family has great admiration for the renowned Bengali laureate Rabindranath Tagore; they love listening to Rabindra Sangeet, a melodious form of music composed by Tagore (Sangeet: 2009). I would be better able to appreciate the subtleties of Rabindra Sangeet lyrics and could read

stories by the author Sarat Chandra Chatterji if I was familiar with the Bengali alphabet.

One of my students Sudeshna said “when I came to college, I wanted to formally learn Bengali but upon discovering that Washington University did not offer it, I decided to pursue Hindi instead. My only prior exposure to Hindi had come from watching Bollywood films but curious classmates and a patient professor quickly made Hindi the class I most looked forward to. If I could go back in time and do it all again, the only aspect I would change is making sure not to miss a single lecture, because so much of a language is learned by interacting with others. Nonetheless, I have gained a lot this year—from not knowing even the alphabet to being able to read and compose simple Hindi communications. My aural understanding has improved by leaps and bounds as well. When listening to BBC Hindi, I am now better able to understand the formal language used in the newscast. I have already begun composing emails to my cousins in Hindi and am quite excited to try out my new language skills the next time I visit India. While I still plan on learning to read & write Bengali someday, my experience in learning Hindi has been invaluable”.

Culture affects a language in many different ways. First off, culture is a set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterize an institution or group. With many people from India coming to the United States, Indian culture itself has changed drastically. Looking at the culture in America and traditional India, we can see its effects on its respective languages. Culture has many effects on the way the language is spoken between people. For example, people of the same social status may speak a more polished, proper form of the language while people of lower socioeconomic wealth, may speak a rougher, courser form of the language. These are different portrayals of the language, but do not actually change the language itself. Changing the intonation or tone of a language is one aspect of language that is altered depending on the cultural standards of those speaking.

Culture also causes different dialects and accents to emerge in a country. For example, in America, there are several dialects and accents of the traditional English depending where you live. For example, if you live in the South, there is Southern English and if you live in the North, there is a Northern Upstate English. There are New York accents and Southern Illinois accents. Depending on where you live, the accent/dialect changes. This can be seen in India through its numerous languages. From Kannada to Hindi to Tamil to Telugu to Tulu, there are a vast number of languages in India. These languages formed from the culture and location it originated in. Culture can also affect language by changing it to modern forms. Jargon, slang, etc are common ways culture is seen to affect language. In order to appear “cool” and “westernized”, slang and jargon are often portrayed in Bollywood movies. This shift in cultural focus to become more westernized affects the language many youngsters speak. In order to fit in to “Hollywood”, Indian teens occasionally forget their own culture and incorporate more English words when speaking Hindi (Warsi: 2003). This is because, for them, English is more proper and cooler.

Nevertheless, it can be said that culture does play a major role in language. Culture causes language to change depending on location (dialect, accent), modernization (slang, jargon), and social relationships (male and female). As a result, in terms of language learning in the classroom, culture is very important. Linguistic competence without cultural knowledge is insufficient for a learner of a foreign language to be competent in that language. In order to master a language, the linguistic learner needs to understand the cultural context where that language presides. He/she needs to learn the correct and culturally acceptable way to address people, express thanks, make requests, and agree or disagree with someone. Depending on their intonation when speaking, they may offend a native if they are not following culturally appropriate behavior. For example, in China, it may be frowned upon if a person talks in a sarcastic manner; while in America, a sarcastic tone may be perceived as humor. Hence, it is very important for a learner of a language to thoroughly understand culture in order to succeed at communication.

If the language is a person's primary language, culture is usually learned implicitly. Through the person's everyday experiences and by watching elders, a kid grows up learning cultural norms without ever having been taught how to interact with people. Unlike primary languages, when a person is learning a foreign language, it is important that the teacher explicitly teaches the student about culture. Unable to learn in a cultural setting, the student must learn cultural norms by sitting in a classroom. For example, a teacher may explain the differences when talking to an elder person or a person of the same age. In Spanish, it would go something like this. "Class, when you address a less familiar person say 'Usted' and a familiar person say 'Tu'." In Hindi, the teacher would say to address a less familiar person with 'aap' and a more familiar person with 'tum' (Warsi: 2007). This can also be seen when writing letters to someone. If the person is less familiar and it is necessary to be more respectful, an English person will write "dear" in the title. If the person is a friend, the English person might write "hey" or "hi" instead. As a result, it is very important that a student fully learns the culture of a language in order to communicate properly.

Linguists and language teachers can incorporate culture when teaching language in many different ways. It is often helpful for students to watch movies as it allows them to observe cultural acceptable behavior that cannot be easily taught. Intonation and verbal behavior can also be observed which may help the student picture how they should speak. Role play is also a great way for students to learn the language. By getting into the persona of a native of the foreign country, the student pretends to act like he/she is very fluent in the language. While fun, this exercise helps the student develop confidence and forces him/her to speak more fluently (as they have to act like a native). Reading literary works helps the student empathize with the writer and get more invested in what is being read. Students can learn about cultural values and ideals through stories read (especially if those stories have a moral). Proverbs and religious texts help a student learn more about the religious aspect of the culture.

The best way a student can learn a language successfully is by going to the country associated with that language. Study abroad is a common program offered at many universities that allow a student to go to a foreign location to study its culture and language. Study abroad programs to India, China, Spain, London, etc are available year round and last about four months. By doing this program, a student is forced to speak the language as English may not be spoken at the foreign country. Also, the student learns a lot about the culture of the place as they live there for a very long time.

Currently, Hindi is one of the most widely spoken languages of the world. Not only is it the national language of India along with English, but it is also spoken in several other countries. Hindi is derived from the ancient language, Sanskrit. Between 100 BC and 100 CE, the language of literature, which was considered impure, began to replace Sanskrit. These languages were referred to as Apabhramas or more commonly the Prakrit family of languages. Prakrit is the common language from which the majority of the languages of the Indian subcontinent are derived. From Kharboli stemmed both Hindi and Urdu. Several centuries' worth of modifications molded Hindi into its current form. Hindi encompasses several different dialects and is the native language of several different regions in India. Upon colonization, Hindi came to be known as the national language. First becoming the standard among government officials, and then on January 26, 1965 Hindi was proclaimed the official language in the constitution. The language became standardized in terms of grammar, spelling and script.

One very influential mode of sharing Indian culture is through Indian cinema and television serials. Bollywood, a very large filmmaking industry, is based out of Mumbai, India. Movies produced through Bollywood are popular in all regions of India, even those that do not natively speak Hindi, and in several other countries around the world. These movies convey integral aspects of Indian culture like family values within the nuclear and the joint family systems, religious customs, the spread of gossip, and the treatment of others. Furthermore, characters are either designed to display essential characteristics that an ideal human being should possess or they have the exact opposite personalities. These characters are based on what has been modeled within religious texts and several other ancient and esteemed sources. The interactions between these two types of characters investigate different ways of reacting to situations.

Other art forms like the famous epics: Mahabharat and Ramayan and the traditional religious texts convey the same values that a person must display. These written forms describe in an enormous amount of detail the importance of being generous, kind, strong, dedicated and passionate. In essence they contain the "code of life." The Ramayana describes the roles of an ideal son, ideal father, ideal wife, ideal king, ideal brother, and ideal servant through the actions of Rama, the seventh incarnation of Lord Vishnu. The Mahabharata focuses more on the goals of life. It is much more religious and philosophical.

In the United States, Hindi is taught in several schools and colleges. Indians as well as non-Indians all gain the ability to share a piece of Indian culture. Taking Hindi is a way to preserve the culture (Warsi: 2007). Reading and writing, as well as speaking are very difficult skills to master. However, having the ability to learn all forms gives a much better rounded perspective on the culture. Several aspects of the language cannot be conveyed through a translation. The very depth of the language is lost upon translation. There are several terms that are not even describable in English because of their complex intertwining with cultural norms and ideals.

Salomi, a second year students of mine shared her feelings by saying “taking Hindi has given me a greater ability to blend more with my family members from India and it is a necessity to be able to communicate with those who you are surrounded with. Such a large portion of culture is encapsulated within the different forms of Hindi language that simply attempting to learn the language can bring you a lot closer to the core values of our culture (Warsi: 2008). Though I will probably never be able to grasp the full complexity of meaning that surrounds each sentence, by having the opportunity to gain basic insight opens up a large breadth of knowledge, guidance, and imagination”.

Several characteristics of the language reflect different values. In Hindi, to convey respect, there are different forms of verbs that must be used depending on the person you are talking to. If someone requires a great amount of respect it is indicated through your speech. There are several different layers of formality that can be expressed. This is a very important concept. Respect is a very crucial aspect to all interactions. Not only is this differentiation needed to convey respect to different members of your family, but also to adults surrounding you like teachers, your friend’s parents, or even an elderly person that you meet.

Every language can express ideas and thoughts in ways that could not be expressed by any other language in quite the same way. Culture is the very aspect that distinguishes the language’s ability. Not only is culture contained within the words, but also in the phrasing, intonation, and interpretation of these phrases.

We can say that culture and language are fundamentally intertwined. The history and nuances of a language derive directly from the culture of its speakers. Thus, attempting to learn a language without learning its associated culture is to miss out on everything that makes the language unique, exciting and beautiful. Culture is very important when studying language. Not only is it important for a student to be able to grammatically greet people, but also it is important for the student to do so in culturally acceptable ways. In order to succeed at a language, a student must have a thorough understanding of the culture and how people of that native country perceive it. Culture is important for day to day conversations. With the help of teachers, culture is incorporated in language learning. This helps students gain the necessary knowledge in order to successfully communicate in a foreign language.

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