Juxtaposing Culture and Language: An effectual approach to teaching of ESL

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Abstract : Culture is the fulcrum on which the life style, beliefs, behavioural mores, modes of expression and ultimately the linguistic traditions function. Culture and language are believed to be indivisible and hence, an understanding of and thorough grounding in any language boils down to the understanding of the basic constituents of its culture. When a foreign language is taught, it must be borne in mind that this language is basically an outcome of a culture. This entails the teaching of essential culture along with the language. The absence of such a phenomenon has its debilitating impact on teaching-learning process.

The paper deals with this less-trodden yet highly effective lingua-cultural approach to language teaching. A deeper understanding of the foundations of language and its usage could be achieved through this approach and, more importantly, it makes the learning process thoroughly enjoyable to the learners of the foreign tongue. This paper makes an attempt in which an interlacing of linguistic patterns and their underlying cultural aspects is taken up as a means to facilitate natural language learning.

Key words: Lingua-Cultural Approach, Second Language Pedagogy

I. INTRODUCTION:

Words in a language clutch at contexts more than mere texts. They have long associations with the culture of the land as well as the race in which they are born and brought up. Every language has evolved to its present form by being moulded, for centuries or even millennia in some cases, on the anvil of its core culture after being pounded by multiple influences. This background is naturally available for the native speaker of the language for it forms part of his very social makeup and hence doesn't require any special emphasis in the teaching of that language. But for a non-native speaker, this, being totally absent, requires to be allotted a specific role in the teaching of it for want of understanding of the underlying behavioural mores and the resultant communicative modes in the language. While an unconscious comparison is inevitable between his native tongue and the other tongue, the learner of a foreign tongue needs a basic appraisal of the cultural foundations of that language on which are built the interactive and communicative expressions typical of it. Hence it is obvious that in the absence of this awareness, the non-native speaker of a foreign language uses it under the spell of his own linguistic system which is termed MTI (Mother Tongue Influence) in the current jargon.

English is the case in point here. Having sprung from Anglo-Saxon stock and enveloping in its stride, over the last millennium, numerous influences and absorbing lexis very liberally from almost every language - both classical and modern - in the world, English the lingua franca of many countries today is to be considered in this context.

This kind of lingua-cultural approach to teaching English as the Second Language is taken up here at lexical and structural levels so as to facilitate more effective pedagogical practices.

II. LEXICAL LEVEL

Much of the English usage in India is permeated by our cultural moorings. A ubiquitous expression of regular pleasantries like "May I know your good name please?"/ "Your good name please", is a direct translation of "aapki subhnam kya hai?", the common Hindi expression for enquiring a stranger's name, used across the north India. Referring to a person's name, not dryly but with an adjective like 'Subh' which means 'auspicious', is typical of Indian culture and it has found its way into Indian English usage.

A profound observation from a renowned Indian English professor of Andhra University brings out another significant cultural idiosyncrasy which distinguishes the Indian English from the native variety. He exposits aptly that the Indian believes in overstatement as against the understatement of the Englishman. An Englishman exercises a constraint in the expressions of wonder, praise, excitement, appreciation and the like as in the following expressions:

"Not Bad" for something "Really good",

"I'm afraid" for politely saying something against someone else's opinion or statement and "You have done well" for something extremely well.

On the contrary, an Indian heaps praises, exclamations and highly intense expressions in language by virtue of his hoary literary traditions, unconscious yet affluent linguistic background and a deep rooted belief in the

immortality of human existence. Animated expressions like marvelous, fantastic, excellent, awesome, unbelievable etc., abound in an Indian's praise.

Another distinctive characteristic of Indians which is very discernable is, they always affix honorifics like "Sir/Madam, Sri, Sab, Ji" etc., to address their superiors and in all the expressions concerning them. This is a result of a cultural norm which behooves them to invariably respect the elders in letter and spirit.

One more nugget of this kind is the use of the word 'doubt' for 'a question' that frequently figures in the Indian class room. 'A doubt' in the Western context is tantamount to suspecting the credibility of someone, whereas 'a question', for them, is more academic in its import. But in the Indian parlance, posing a question to a teacher is considered literally questioning a teacher's integrity and thus is omitted.

III. STRUCTURAL LEVEL

A structure is not a randomly composed phenomenon with words and phrases but an order determined and driven by the conscious choice of what element should a sequence start with and what follow. The prioritization of elements, which is culture-specific, is the underlying force for any language pattern. For instance, the canonical word order of all South Asian languages including Dravidian, Indo-Aryan, Austro-Asiatic and Tibeto-Burman (except language isolates) is SOV (Subject+Object+Verb) the counterpart of which is SVO (Subject+Verb+Object) in English.

Though India shelters many linguistic groups of different language families, it has the same cultural sensitivity. It is typical of Indians to accord importance to fellow beings which is reflected in the very basic sentence pattern of all Indian vernaculars. The doer is always the first priority to start a sentence with and then immediately the receiver of the action and not the actual action as we see in the following Telugu and English expressions respectively.

1.   raamuDu (S) nannu (O) aDigaaDu (V)

    RaamuDu   me asked

    Rama asked me.

2. RaamuDu (S) asked (V) me (O).

As we can notice in the aforesaid expressions, the cultural make-up of an Indian cannot place the object after the subject and keep the receiver of the action waiting. In other words, a + animate (living beings) is always considered greater than a – animate (non living). However, in English, the action is more important than the receiver of the action which is evident in the word order as in (2).

Also, when there are two elements supposed to form a phrase, the main meaning carrier will be the initiating element of that phrase in Indian languages while it is the other way in SVO languages. Here is an example.

3. un**may** (Hindi)

   he.locative

   In him.

4. atani**lo** (Telugu)

   he.locative

   In him.

5. In him.

As we see in (3) and (4), the locative markers or the prepositions may and lo, in a way, appear to be just as particles giving primary importance to the pronouns, un and atanu respectively though they are prepositional phrases. On the contrary, in English, i.e., in (5), the preposition, a structural element, stands out prominent enough to be called the head of the phrase. Thus, the content word is more important than a structural one in Indian culture which is expressed clearly in the languages. This is one of the possible areas where the learners may go wrong and a mention of this cultural background will be of great help to them.

Another major distinction between the two linguistic groups is honorific agreement inflection on the verb. As known to us, there is only person and number agreement in English but in Indian languages there is person, number, gender and also honorific agreement. It is an offence in the Indian context and in native languages to use the pronoun 'You' referring to an elderly man which is not there in English. Here is an example.

6. miiru ranDi. (Telugu)

   You.nom come.honorific.

   You come

7. You come.

As we can see in the aforementioned expressions, the pronoun miiru in (6), the second person plural, is used to be polite to the listener we are speaking to. Also, the verb takes honorific agreement anDi to agree with the subject as well as reinforce the respect intended. English does not have such honorifics as in (7) which stands for their culture and poses a problem for an Indian to make an imperative statement in English to an elderly man.

IV. CONCLUSION:

When learners are introduced to the structural patterns of a foreign tongue, they may find the patterns odd-looking from the lens of their own language and thus fail to own them. But when the learning is backed up by the cultural nuances of the alien tongue, the learning becomes better and more complete. Hence, providing an adequate exposure to the cultural intricacies of the target language to the students must form a crucial component of language teaching in general and Second Language pedagogy in particular. Finally it is hoped that this practice will find its due place in the design of academic

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materials and its incorporation in the actual teaching arena.

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