CULTURAL COMMUNICATION THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE SECOND OR FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

Foreign or second language learning can be enhanced through the interaction with the target language and cultural context. However, it has always been a great difficulty to create the authentic cultural exchange which can give students a chance of experiencing the target language. For culture based language learning, social media can be a great tool. First, direct communication with the target culture and language will keep the students motivated and give them better language skills and critical literacy. This authentic interaction will ultimately increase their reading, writing and sociocultural knowledge. Second, the interrelation between reading, writing, speaking and the need of critical literacy in learning a language can be emphasized through the use of social medias. Finally, different content-based email or internet projects are important but teachers' role in making those effective is of prime importance. Teachers have to design the courses considering the benefits and the problems of using internet communication, along with the ways to facilitate the cultural/critical literacy through different later activities. In general, the need of cultural communication in language learning and in achieving critical literacy is undeniable.

Key words: Socio-cultural apprenticeship, Critical literacy, Social media, Contextualized language learning, Teachers as facilitators

Foreign or second language learning can be enhanced through the interaction with the target language and cultural context. However, it has always been a great difficulty to create the authentic cultural exchange which can give students a chance of experiencing the target language. For this content/culture based language learning social media can be a great tool. This direct communication with the target culture and language will keep the students motivated and give them better target language skills and critical literacy. So, this paper will discuss the ways and effects of internet-based cultural communication in EFL/ESL classes and a teacher's role in making those successful. Our main focus is the literacy based instruction. First, the contextual language learning should occur in an anxiety free environment. Then, enhancing language learning through the interchange of authentic cultural information and interaction is also emphasized. Most importantly, facilitating students' critical thinking and literacy by motivating them to interact and communicate in the target language and target culture should be our goal. All these will give them a continuous contextual learning and increase all the language skills. In achieving this goal of infusing language and culture, email, Skype, online communication, face book, chatting, blogging, multimedia texts or WebPages can be really helpful. These can increase the time of association with the target language, both inside and outside the class. Overall, we can use the above mentioned media in creating a cultural interaction between the target and the native culture to facilitate the language learning. Though it has a few limitations, we can minimize those problems with the teachers' careful course design and monitoring.

From Kern's (2000) perspective, sociocultural dimension is very much important in understanding how languages work. In the context of academic second and foreign language learning:

"Literacy is the use of socially-, historically-, and culturally-situated practices of creating and interpreting meaning through texts. It entails at least a tacit awareness of the relationship between textual conventions and their context of use and, ideally, the ability to reflect critically on those relationships. Because it is purpose-sensitive, literacy is

dynamic- not static-and variable across and within discourse communities and cultures. It draws on a wide range of cognitive abilities, on knowledge of written and spoken language, on knowledge of genres, and on cultural knowledge." (p. 16)

This clearly shows the need of cultural and social apprenticeship in learning a foreign or second language. We learn the language through situated practices which are part of an active process of critical evaluation and never just passive learning of the vocabulary and grammar. This is a real change in the way we used to see literacy or language learning earlier.

The new approach to literacy emphasizes the importance of culturally and historically situated practice, the need of interaction and communication, thinking, interpretation, reflection, responding and redesigning the meaning. Now we have a shift from the linguistic and cognitive view of literacy to the sociocultural and communicative dimension of literacy which involves both linguistic literacy and critical literacy. Kern (2000) rightly says

> *"...this kind of literacy is essential to real communicative ability in a language, and is therefore an indispensable goal in our efforts to prepare future generations for the challenges associated with the increased internationalization and 'interculturalization' of many aspects of our society."(P.2)*

Now, we are saying that cultural interaction is needed for critical literacy. But what is critical literacy? In this regard, the *Handbook of Literacy and Technology: Transformations in a Post-Typographic World* (Myers, J., R. Hammett, and A. M. McKillop, 1998) explained the importance of the triad of "sign-object-interpretant" and said, "the interpretant brings to the surface, so to speak, one particular meaning from many in a sign's potential, and thus contextualizes the moment's particular object."(p.64). Thus critical literacy depends on the contextualized interpretation and interaction. Interaction performs four literacy aspects: critiquing aspects; power aspects; transformative aspects; emancipatory aspects (p.69). Kern (2000) also emphasizes the importance of the intercultural exchanges and partnership between language learner and the native speakers for multiple perspectives. Thus critical literacy involves

activities like creation, interpretation, response, juxtaposition and negotiation of meaning. All these are very much functional and attached to the cultural and social sharing.

The necessity of sharing cultural literacy becomes evident, if we look at the themes of literacy and language education. Technology can be a way of creating this 'interculturalization'. This effectiveness of technology becomes clear from the seven principals of literacy-**interpretation, collaboration, conventions, cultural knowledge, problem solving, reflection and self-reflection, language use** (Kern, 2000). All these can be practiced through the use of technologies like email, Skype, face book, chatting, blogging, multimedia texts, which not only create linguistic interaction, but also cultural sharing for a better contextualized language learning. These approaches are especially useful for the EFL and ESL (or any foreign and second language classes also) classes as in both these cases, cultural inputs and direct interaction play significant roles.

This use of technology in language learning is beneficial in many ways. Souzzo (1995) mentions that it requires an immediacy of communication and direct interaction to get an authentic idea of the target culture and people which enhances the foreign language learning. Again, Kern (1996) introduced Vygotsky's (1978) theory of the *zone of proximal development.* It shows the importance of social interaction in creating our literacy. According to Bakhtin all speech and writing are dialogical. He said meaning "is understood against the background of other concrete utterances on the same theme, a background made up of contradictory opinions, points of view and value judgments" (1981, p. 281). These ensure the importance of direct cultural and social communication in creating critical linguistic and cultural literacy and use of online mediums/internet can be instrumental in achieving this immediate dialogue. Souzzo (1995) also explained the importance of interaction and response to each other in learning a second/foreign language which is absent in the books but can be practiced through email, Skype, face book, multimedia text and so on. The benefit of the immediacy of this face-to face/one-to-one direct communication is that it lowers down the learning anxiety, saves money, there is also sharing of culture, question, and response which make them active learner rather than passive.

Kern (1996) mentions how these online communications can be contextualized and made content-based to learn language, history and culture. This interaction gives a chance of knowing the language in context, cultural information and negotiation of meaning between the partners creates 'readerly writer' and the 'writerly reader'-two major concepts of critical literacy. So, Kramsch envisions **"'a new type of literacy'** in foreign language education: one which is **'centered more on the learner, based more on cross-cultural awareness and critical reflection'."**(Kramsch and Nolden 1994: 28).And no matter how advanced technologies we are using, one cannot deny the importance of the teachers role in keeping everything on track and also in guiding and motivating the students. The following section will discuss how we can use these medias for cultural and linguistic literacy, for practicing all the language skills and for achieving the ability to question, reflect, response, reshape meaning and to use the target language spontaneously.

First we will talk about Souzzo's suggestion of using emails to create the dialogue and cultural interaction in a foreign language or second language learning class. Andrew Souzzo (1995) in his article "Dialogue and Immediacy in Cultural Instruction: The E-mail Option" talks about how he used the emails in his French Civilization Course (Spring 1994) to create an interaction between culture and language learning. From this it is evident that the informal and friendly interaction between the learners of a foreign language and the target culture can facilitate the language learning process. Souzzo's purpose was to create a spontaneous and anxiety free interaction between the learners and the target culture and also to create a continuous intercultural friendship which will make the learning process continue. Obviously, the ultimate goal of the whole communication was to learn the language through situating it in its culture and to facilitate the learner's critical literacy/thinking while doing so.

Like many others in the field of literacy (here for second/foreign language), Souzzo also believes in the importance of interaction and response as the driving force behind the target language learning. This immediacy of communication or the dialogue is not possible through the books, films, and letters as they don't response and not even answer your questions. Letters do give a response but it costs more and takes a longer time than the emails and

also not entirely secure. This is why he proposes the use of emails to create this intercultural and interlinguistic communication. Though there are chances of insecurity, still it is a great way of creating authentic cultural and contextual language practices. As this is very interactive and instant, students feel motivated and interested to response. Here teacher can play a major part in designing the course and in starting the communication. Teacher has to create a relationship between the online interaction and the in-class activities to facilitate both the cultural and linguistic learning.

Here, the question is how to start this communication. Finding the correspondents can be the first obstacle. To solve this problem, teachers can contact with different foreign universities and language societies. After finding the participants of the target language, teacher can add one participant with one learner and they can communicate once a week through the email. To start the discussion Teacher can give a set of topics and then the students can move to different directions according to their interest. However, teacher needs to keep an indirect monitoring through the class discussions and sharing of their communication. So that teacher knows what is going on and can also see whether the purpose of critical and linguistic literacy is being served or not. Project works and assessments, designed to assess the skills of the contextual use of target language, might determine the level of literacy achievement.

There are many benefits of this email communication. First, as this is in dialogue format and spontaneous, students feel motivated to interact and response in an anxiety free learning environment. The sense of immediacy makes the learners exchange the information and thus they learn about the target culture and social values. From the linguistic side, they learn new vocabularies, better grammar structure, and contextualized use of the target language. They practice writing regularly. Not to mention, to continue this writing communication they need to read (both the emails and other sources), reflect, response, interpret, understand the cultures which are part of literacy/critical literacy. Again, the language correction-always a very sensitive issue-can be done in an indirect way. Here the main focus is not grammar but the learners can get corrective input from the target language writers' write-ups and improve their writing on their own. Among the other benefits of email communication,

mutual friendship can be one which encourages them to continue their connection and learning will go on.

However, this email connection can face a few barriers, such as the unavailability of internet access, the problem of privacy and cultural prejudice. We can use the language labs for the computers. Teacher can encourage the students to keep the privacy of each other and not to be offensive in their response. Two major questions can be the need of taking part in the class and the teacher's role. But teacher actually relates the email interaction with further classroom activities and discussion for better learning and critical literacy. Students can discuss the things they have come to know from this communication and prepare projects on those. There can be reading and presentation based on their communication topic. Teacher may ask them to response or write a reflection and there can be in class dialogue between the students about the different cultural – social issues, showing the similarities and differences of the native and the target cultures. Even though we have writing and reading enhancement due to this communication, there are no speaking and listening activities of the target language which are needed to make everything even more interesting and useful- both linguistically and culturally. To do these, now we can use Skype, Yahoo messenger and thus practice the listening and speaking in target language. In addition, the visual can give direct association to that person and place.

Second, we can use the World Wide Web for literacy based curriculum and instruction. Through this we can do situated practice, overt instruction, critical framing and transformed practice (Kern, 2000). The process of creating a web page or multimedia text needs the students to practice all the above as they need thinking, analyzing, prioritizing, summarizing and writing in doing so. And then students from the target language and the learners can interact and communicate regarding this, by using discussion forum or email, Skype and so on. However the problems of quantity and quality of information on the page and the need of cultural authenticity can be a problem. To solve these problems teacher can guide the students towards critical and effective analysis by putting oneself in the readers' position. This can be done through various reading and writing activities in the class and by using different cultural materials.

Thus the students will gain content knowledge and critical literacy in the process of creating these texts and also while sharing these with the target language speakers in the form of exchange of opinion and negotiation of meaning. However, this interaction between the learner and the target language speaker is not direct.

For this direct dialogic communication, Kern (2000) suggests the use of networked communication and chatting. The use of chatting can be very effective as this is a real time communication compared to the email. The good thing about chat is that it is informal, more expressive, and instead of one-to-one, many can participate together. The teacher's role is not authoritative, rather participatory. It increases student participation and creates a writing-reading community. Most importantly, in chatting writing is done for instant communication, situated in social context, from which students can benefit a lot. It is true that there can be some problems -both logistic and pedagogical. For instance, finding the partners for less commonly taught languages, languages without roman script, losing interest from the students' part and making them go beyond the situated practices. The teacher can create discussion and other linguistic and critical framing with the printed scripts of chat. Teacher can also keep the communication focused and help the learner think about the language use and content.

Along with the above, Kern (1996) gave examples of some projects which we can also be used in the ESL/EFL classes. For example, reading (following Kern' reading design) and discussion of stories of the two languages. Then there can be argumentative and research projects based on the issues raised during their email communication or chatting. Teacher can be a guide in doing the content-based email projects and students can discuss with the teacher about their language problem. Again if the students lose interest and the emails become shorter and shorter, teacher can arrange some activities and add new content to motivate the students and sometimes can do group projects and discussion to keep them going.

In the same way, Wrigley (1993) explained five specific ways of using technology in the language learning classes. For example he starts with making the students familiar with the technology and proceeds towards literacy task where he uses different literacy projects like posters, illustration,

biographies, stories and so on. Then the use of video projects to promote visual context and the use of social media for interaction(cultural and linguistic) are very much in tune with whatever we have talked up to now. At the final stage he suggested using different linguistic and socio-cultural projects based on those communications.

In general the benefits of email, World Wide Web and the chatting are interaction with real people, language learning, motivation, metacognitive awareness, critical thinking, better understanding of own and target culture. It also brings a change in the traditional structure of the language class and incorporates an informal environment for linguistic and socio-cognitive learning. According to Kern (1996) as a result of using these communication media in foreign language classes there comes a big change in the students' role. They become active, ask question, provide example, compare, interpret, interact, and collaborate. Similarly the teacher changes from being a director or authority to a guide, counselor and facilitator. He/she is also a partner of their discussions and activities. Kern (1996) has also suggested the use of different groups of students and teachers to facilitate group discussion and communication. We can divide the project in to various parts (description, narration and argumentation) for better result. Through this students will not lose interest and they will learn the target language use for specific purpose and cultural context. Finally, after each email/online contact, there can be reflection and discussion amongst group or as a whole class. These techniques could be appropriated according the specific need of any foreign and second language classes.

In the above discussion, several literacy experts have suggested the benefits of using the direct communication through email, World Wide Web, chat and other social medias in a second or foreign language class. Similarly, everyone has emphasized on the need of the teacher's careful planning and monitoring. As Kern (1996) says, "The degree to which computer-mediated communication promotes language and content learning, cultural awareness and critical reflection depends fundamentally on the teachers who coordinate its use." (p. 118). We assume that the combination of culture and language, made possible through the social medias and technologies, can make the language learning very effective and the critical literacy will also increase. Definitely, we need to go through relevant contextualized experimental researches to find out this assumption as valid.

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