

The Role of Heritage Students in Incorporating Culture into Language Teaching

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Introduction

This study will consider how to integrate cultural elements into the teaching of a language that is typologically quite different from the native language. For the purposes of this paper, Hindi/Urdu will be the target language for those whose native language is English. This work is meaningful in the sense that the people of the target and the native language live in quite different cultures even though Hindi/Urdu and English belong to the same language family. The target country is a multi-lingual society, composed of different religions, ethnicities, and regional and cultural backgrounds. Thus, diversities and differences in the knowledge heritage students may have are almost certain to appear. The contributions that heritage students may offer are significant in the sense that non-heritage students may obtain cultural inputs through their peers' life experience and cultural knowledge. These same peers may also offer insight into various verbal and non-verbal communication unique to the target culture by using certain expressions, sounds or gestures naturally in the classroom environment. Of course, there will be "teachable moments" that the instructor must grasp spontaneously, and not something that the instructor can count on occurring.

Before going into a discussion, it will be helpful to define heritage students in order to better understand this study. Heritage students can be categorized into several groups depending on the level of knowledge of the target language and culture¹. For the purpose of this study, heritage students are defined as having some speaking and listening skills, and are familiar with the target culture to some extent when they first come to Beginning Hindi/Urdu class. Heritage students surpass non-heritage students in terms of speaking and listening and cultural competence in Intermediate and Advanced classes.

Importance of Incorporating Cultural Elements

Acquiring cultural knowledge of a target language is often called the fifth skill in language learning. Teaching students cultural differences along with the structural and typological differences of the language is vital. Knowledge of cultural differences helps the students prevent misinterpretation caused by confusing cultural referents, and also avoid associating American concepts with the gestures, objects and grammatical forms of the target language. Michael Byram (1999) writes, "The aims of language teaching are to develop both linguistic and cultural competence, which can be called an intercultural communicative competence." Kramsch (1993, p.8) argues against those who regard cultural knowledge as 'an educational objective' in itself that is separate from language. She says if we regard language as a social practice, culture becomes the core of language teaching. She further claims, "Culture awareness must be viewed both as enabling language proficiency and as being the outcome of reflection on language proficiency." This statement seems to support the idea that students with better linguistic competence appear to have more cultural knowledge or vice versa. Omaggio (1993, p.358) says that a teacher's role is not to impart facts about the target culture, but to help students obtain the skills to understand the facts that they will discover for themselves in studying the target culture. In this way, students will be prepared for various cultural situations they have never previously encountered.

Even though language teachers all know the importance of teaching culture, it has been and is still ignored simply because language teachers feel that they do not have enough time to talk about the target culture in regular language classes. This is a common complaint in language teaching, but teachers come to find out that without bringing in the cultural aspect of the language, language teaching itself cannot bring about the intended results, and students do not fully understand the language in context. As a result of this, students do not advance the way the curriculum would indicate they should. Teachers can solve this problem in part by having heritage students play an active role in class. Most of the heritage students have been to the target country once or twice, and are already familiar with the culture of the target country even if there are differences in terms of the extent of their cultural knowledge.

Points of interest might arise from the differences in how each student perceives, relates to and identifies with the target culture, as this varies individually. Just as no two families are exactly alike, no two students will have the same experience or understanding of any given culture. People and families celebrate holidays differently, use language differently and eat different foods, despite an overall assumption that everyone is “similar” within a culture or country. In this respect, heritage students who have various cultural experiences can be used as facilitators (if they are willing) in introducing, discussing and explaining certain cultural aspects of the target language, thereby promoting peer learning. Of course, an instructor cannot fully plan for or count on students’ input for any given class, but can only be aware when a “teachable moment” occurs and try to take full advantage of it. Otherwise, the instructor can speak to heritage students individually or as a group to see where they might be comfortable sharing with the class. The instructor should always remember to remind the class as a whole that what they are hearing is one person’s point of view or experience and others from the same culture might not see it the same way.

Right from the early stages of instruction, students should be exposed to various aspects of the target culture. For the Hindi/Urdu class at the Indiana University-Bloomington, several different aspects of the target culture are selected, and the introduction of these aspects is evenly spread out throughout the two years of language instruction. They are introduced depending on the students’ overall linguistic ability and their cultural knowledge. So, it is important how you design and organize your syllabus, considering various cultural points and the time frame of the class, i.e., how many years of language instruction are offered, and what can fit into a year-long or semester-based plan.

Omaggio (1993) emphasizes that instructors need to design in advance how they will introduce the target culture. This will help them to choose what cultural content they will introduce and how systematically it can be introduced, as well as consider how heritage students’ input could best be incorporated. Introducing the target culture can be done in two ways: pre-planning or improvisation. When a teacher prepares a syllabus of a course, he/she needs to design the syllabus with the incorporation of cultural concepts in mind in addition to skills that students need to improve linguistically throughout the course. Heritage students can be approached near the beginning of the course to see who might be interested in sharing their personal viewpoint on a given cultural element, and this can be scheduled for the day or week the instructor would like to introduce it. Thus, the introduction of cultural elements can be arranged in a more systematic way. Reading materials could be arranged in a way that could parallel festivals of the target culture, and various other materials could be selected in advance with a focus on specific cultural aspects, including authentic audio-visual materials, such as films, cartoons, and songs.

Introducing culture may be done in a spontaneous way as well, without pre-planning. This occurs when questions pertaining to the target culture are raised from students in class or when heritage students come to class wearing artifacts or a costume of the target culture. A brief introduction of a particular cultural element can also be done when heritage students use non-verbal body language. Or it can happen when reading a literary work: an encounter with new vocabulary can lead to a long discussion of its cultural connotation. For example, a new

Hindi/Urdu word *nazar* 'glance' can lead up to a discussion of folk belief still prevalent in the target culture, such as the word's connection to terms related to the "evil eye" [e.g. "*nazar lagnaa*"(to be afflicted by an evil eye) "*nazar band*" (under watch)]

Cultural Factors Reflected in the Language

Cultural factors are deeply interwoven with the language, and thus are reflected in the forms of the language morphologically and structurally. Henle (1958) raises the discussion with a consideration of the relationship between vocabulary and perception. Sapir (1958, p.19) even argues that the vocabulary of a language clearly reflects the physical and social environment of a people. For example, the word 'sinduur' in Hindi is a word for vermilion powder that an Indian (Hindu) married woman puts on the parting of her hair. The native language does not have an equivalent of this word.

Elements in Hindi are mirrored in the grammatical forms of the language, and specific nonverbal body movements and gestures are interpreted uniquely in the cultural environment of the target language. In Hindi/Urdu, the plural forms of a verb or a noun normally denotes plural numbers, but plural forms are also used to demonstrate formality or to denote politeness. For example, *aap* 'you' conjugates as a plural pronoun even though it only refers to a single person. Help from heritage students can be instrumental in terms of introducing the concepts of body language in the sense that some of the heritage students are already exposed to some specific body movements of the target culture, and some actually use them in their lives.

Students tend to assume that the target language always has an equivalent, or direct translation into their native language. This still happens even after students feel comfortable with the word order of the target language being quite different from that of their native language. For example, there is no Hindi equivalent of the English verb 'to have,' even though there are ways to express this meaning using different sentential structures. Another grammatical difference appears in terms of the role of agent in a sentence. Unlike English, the thematic role of agent plays an important role in Hindi sentence structures. The issue of animacy comes into play here. Normally, an inanimate object cannot take the role of agent, so it does not occur as an agentive subject. For example, "The ball broke the window." is possible in English, but not in Hindi. In Hindi, 'the ball' occurs in an instrument case and 'the window' occurs as a subject. The sentence in Hindi would be, "The window broke by the ball."(M.Verma's 1997 class notes)

Sometimes what is valued and well regarded in one culture has the opposite connotation in another culture. When introducing thematic terms, it is helpful to explain to students if there are any specific cultural implications involved or whether there are any conflicting cultural referents relating to a specific word. The following is a good example. An owl in American (or western culture in general) culture is regarded as being wise, but in the target culture, it is regarded as stupid. Thus, owl is used as a metaphor to indicate a stupid man or a fool. Some animals are very closely related to the people and culture of the target language, such as the cow, peacock, or elephant. These specific animals are projected as being auspicious and inseparable from Indian myths. When introducing thematic words, it is a good idea to talk about how a specific word is used and any story or myth that is tied to the word. Instructors may wish to suggest that the heritage students already familiar with this concept elaborate on this to classmates.

Culture through Literature

The necessity of teaching cultural aspects of the target country can be fulfilled in part by the incorporation of literature of the target culture. Teachers have been using literature to introduce the culture of a target language to students for many years. The need to incorporate the culture of the target language, especially when reading literary works in intermediate and advanced

Hindi-Urdu classes, is impossible to ignore. A reading list is prepared in the beginning of a semester with several criteria in mind. Reading materials are arranged according to degree of difficulty and length, keeping cultural aspects in mind as well. It is still in question whether a reading list for a semester should be prepared first and cultural topics related to the literary texts decided afterwards, or the other way around. In other words, a list of cultural topics can be prepared first and the instructor can look for appropriate literary texts with which to illustrate these. In the end, this probably should be decided depending on which component you wish to put an emphasis. Joyce Merrill Valdes (1986, p.141) says that rather than coming up with a value and trying to find literary works to exemplify it, one should select a work because of its interest to the students. It would be best to keep a balance between these two methods, but there can be a tendency to lean towards the latter in the case of a beginning class. Often this occurs because of a desire to have class coincide with life, such as wanting to introduce cultural elements such as festivals at the time when the actual festival is celebrated in the target country. If the students are in intermediate and advanced classes, then it might be preferable to select literary works first, and then discuss whatever cultural elements are encountered in the course of reading the materials.

Literature in the target language is a good way to open up a door to a whole new world where you can be exposed to many facets of the target culture. Literature is one of many tools used to discuss culture with students and many literary works are actually utilized for language teaching, especially in upper-intermediate and advanced levels. Kramsch (1993, p.130) says that a piece of literary text appeals to the students' emotions, stays in their memories, and seizes their interest. Through literature, students may attain a deeper understanding of the target culture, and this also results in better appreciation of literature. Ignorance of the target culture or looking at things from the perspective of the native culture can mislead students when they read the literary works of the target language.

The following mistakes are often made when students are reading literary works written in the target language. Even though these mistakes themselves are minor, the impact on the sentence and the context in which they are used is huge, and often leads the students to an incorrect interpretation of the literature. A common mistake is one that is related to kinship terms of the target language. Hindi/Urdu has a very elaborate system of kinship terms, and each relation has a different term. For example, there are several different terms for 'uncle' depending on paternal side or maternal side, and younger or older to your father or mother. You have to use a correct word for the person to whom you are referring.

In the native culture, the word, 'mother' or 'father' is used only for one's own parents. However, the word, "mother" in the target culture (e.g. *amma*, *maaN*, *maataa*) can also be used for a friend's mother. This kind of extended usage applies not only to parental terms, but also to other familial terminology like grandmother (*daadii/naanii*), grandfather (*daadaa/naanaa*), aunt (*mausii/buaa*), uncle (*chaachaa/maamaa*) and so on. This kind of broadened use of kinship terms, especially in literary works, is very confusing to students who are not used to such usage. The following happened when the students of Intermediate Hindi read a Hindi novel. In a scene portrayed by a child, the child describes two mothers: one is his own and the other is his friend's mother. There are several words that have the meaning of 'mother' in Hindi.² The students were confused when they encountered the word, mother. However, if we look closely, then we realize that there is a consistency in using these two different words. If the child refers to his own mother, he uses 'mommy,' but when he refers to his friend's mother, 'amma' is used. Students do not often understand this important difference right away. An illustration is given below:

"TiiTuu nahiiN aayaa, ammaaN?" is ghar meN aakar ammaaN kaisaa miiThaa-miThaa bol rahii hai. tabhii puuchne kii himmat huii.

. . .

mamii ka chehraa itnaa laal kyoN ho gayaa

"Titu did not come, mother? Coming to this house, how sweet **mother** is speaking. For this reason, I had the courage to ask her.

...
Why did **mommy's** face become so red?"
(Y. Kachru 1997, p 45 of part I)

In Indian culture, it is regarded as undesirable for a woman to call her husband³ by his first name. This is well represented in a Hindi short story 'Khoii huii dishaaeN' (Lost Directions) written by Kamleshwar. Here, Indra refers to her husband by using 'ye' (3rd person plural pronoun, respective form)⁴ when talking to Chander, a man she loved before marriage. This would be unusual in American culture, as women habitually use their husbands' names when referring to them. This is well illustrated in the following example:

kuchh kshanoN ke baad indraa ne kahaa thaa, 'ab to nau baj rahe haiN, ye aaTh hii baje facTrii band karke lauT aate haiN, pataa nahiiN aaj kyoN der ho gayii. achchhaa caay to piyoge?

"After a little while, Indra said, 'Now, it is 9 o'clock, **he** closes the factory and comes back home by 8 o'clock. I don't know why he is late today. Well, would you like to have tea?"
(Kamleshwar Saxena 1986, p.114)

Interactive Activities

Kramsch (1993, p.136) introduces several interactive activities in dealing with literary texts at the intermediate level. Conventionally, after reading literary texts, comprehension questions are given to check whether the students fully understood the story. Instead, various activities in the style of communicative teaching can follow after reading literary texts, such as acting out a particular scene or discussing the reading in various configurations such as pairs, small groups or the whole class together. What she argues is that literary texts can be used as a 'springboard' to have students express their ideas and relate reading to their own experience. Heritage students can play a very productive role in interactive activities that are especially designed to improve speaking and listening comprehension skills. The effect of having heritage learners in a classroom along with non-heritage learners is more conspicuous when they are engaged in small group activities. They are often seen leading a group and taking initiatives, enhancing everyone's productivity during various group activities. This may be due to the fact that they feel more comfortable when it comes to oral and aural activities than their non-heritage peers.

The following is a list of possible post-reading activities. Even though the activities look like they are focused on oral practice, they are also designed to improve reading skills. Without fully understanding the content, students will not be able to perform the activities. Thus, instead of asking comprehension questions, different types of post-reading activities can be used which can relate the story to student's personal life and experience. These activities are more student-centered in the sense that students are given more liberties.

- 1) What lessons did you learn from the reading? (This is especially significant when the readings are from folk stories and of the kind of didactic literature.) Even if a reading does not give any specific lesson, it definitely makes its readers think, feel or realize something valuable.
- 2) If you were in that position, what would you do? This is one of many ways to relate the reading to each student's own personal life.
- 3) Students can prepare a dialogue in spoken Hindi based on the written text. This proves that a written text can also be utilized to improve speaking skills.⁵
- 4) Students are asked to provide questions based on the text instead of simply being asked

comprehension questions. Submitted questions are then passed around so that other students provide the answers. This particular interactive activity that is student-centered makes students more actively involved and engaged in the language learning process.

- 5) Asking students to draw something that conveys the message of a reading can be given as a homework assignment. Completed drawings can be used for a review of the reading as an interactive activity.

Karen Johnson (1998, p.410) warns that in a student-centered setting, students should be well aware of the pedagogical value of this instructional method, because otherwise students may feel uncomfortable taking liberties in assuming their active roles. If students are aware of how interactivity fuels learning, they may be more willing to be an active part of classroom activities.

Roles of Heritage Students

In a mixed class with heritage and non-heritage students, non-heritage students can be exposed to cultural input not only through instructors, but also through their peers who are heritage students.

Handling the contributions of heritage students can be done in two ways as pointed out earlier: pre-planned discussion on a particular topic related to course materials or through typical gestures, facial expressions, verbal sounds, clothing and artifacts of the heritage students. The former case needs an active participation on the part of heritage students, and interactive activities would be carefully designed in advance by the instructor with an objective of introducing particular cultural aspects to the students. In the latter case, heritage students simply behave naturally and are observed by non-heritage students in class. The very fact that heritage students are in the class allows non-heritage students to learn more about the culture, and provides an opportunity for questions and/or discussions inside and outside of class.

Understanding of the target culture helps students feel more at ease and able to interpret cultural referents better when they go to the target country. Even if a person has advanced knowledge of the target language, ignorance of the target culture sometimes puts him/her in an uncomfortable position, and often creates unnecessary conflict. The following is a good example. The gesture of tilting one's head to the left implies quite the opposite of the gesture that is normally understood in other countries. This head movement often accompanies an affirmative answer in the target country. Aside from physical gestures, a vocal sound, like a clicking sound, is used to convey negative meaning. One of the students in the Hindi class used to produce this sound when he was asked yes-no questions. Instead of saying 'no,' he used to answer this way. The students in that class came to understand the sound naturally and became familiar with gestures and sounds that are unique to the target culture.

Arranging a "Cultural Day" each semester can be a good idea for the students to have an opportunity to participate in and be exposed to the target culture in ways other than typical classroom activities. On that day, a potluck lunch can be arranged, having heritage students voluntarily bring one Indian/Pakistani dish to pass around. Each student takes a turn to explain to his/her peers how the dish was prepared. It is customary that sweets and other specific foods prepared for certain occasions in the families of heritage students are brought the following day to be shared with other students. Some heritage students even have a chance to perform dances in class.

Heritage students benefit not only from being leaders in terms of cultural knowledge, but also from having cultural differences clarified/demonstrated by non-heritage students. The roles of heritage students are more prominent in a student-centered setting. Given the fact that heritage students are of different backgrounds in terms of religion, ethnicity, language, and region, non-heritage students can be exposed to various speech acts and cultural diversity of the target

country as well. Heritage students themselves also have a chance to learn different customs and lifestyles of heritage students of other backgrounds. For example, various ways of celebrating the same festival and different festivals celebrated in different regions are discussed in the class with the help of heritage students. After a specific topic of the target culture is discussed, students are urged to talk about the topic from the viewpoint of their respective cultures and express their ideas. The following is one of many examples that show how heritage students contribute to the class in a productive way. 'Karwaa chauth' is a fast observed by north Indian women to wish for their husbands' longevity. When reading the material, heritage students with north Indian backgrounds become engaged in telling their classmates how their mothers keep and break the fast on that particular day. Non-heritage students and heritage students with different backgrounds acquire cultural information not only through the text but also through their peers' observations. Other group activities, which turned out successfully, were creating comic strips based on written materials, role-playing and the *antaaksharii* game (for vocabulary retention). In activities of this kind which are inspired by a student-centered teaching methodology, students seem to be very excited and engaged in telling their stories. This is a refreshing change for students from what may sometimes be a tedious and arid language class. Heritage students can be instrumental in making classroom activities a success.

Conclusion

The implications of incorporating cultural aspects of the target language into regular language instruction should not be underestimated. Carefully chosen literary works along with companion activities can be a good aid for teaching cross-cultural communication. In many ways, heritage students can be used as facilitators in class. We often hear complaints from teachers who teach classes in which heritage and non-heritage students are equally represented. Most of the complaints stem from the difficulty of running the class with such a disparity between the heritage and non-heritage students in terms of overall skill in the target language. This is a difficulty that most teachers encounter when there are students with different levels of proficiency. However, one needs to make the most out of the circumstances in which heritage students and non-heritage students are represented. Thus, in culture teaching, the teacher's role is to help students develop their intercultural competence. By utilizing the heritage students as much as possible, instructors can not only begin to bridge the cultural proficiency gap, but also can lessen the impact of the linguistic proficiency gap as well.

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- 1 Some of the heritage students who take Hindi-Urdu have a fairly good speaking and listening ability. They take the Hindi-Urdu class to learn Hindi-Urdu scripts and thus to be able to read and write in Hindi-Urdu. There are some heritage students who can understand Hindi-Urdu but cannot speak Hindi-Urdu at all. There are a very few heritage students who do not have any knowledge of Hindi-Urdu at all. It is very rare to find students who have all four skills in the target language at the beginning of Elementary Hindi/Urdu class. There are differences in terms of cultural competence of the target country among the heritage students. Cultural and linguistic competences do not always coincide, but there is a tendency that students with better linguistic knowledge usually have better cultural competence, or vice versa. This might be due to the fact that students with better linguistic competence have more access to authentic material that can convey cultural knowledge to its viewer.
- 2 The writer of the novel *aapkaa baaNTii* "your Banti", Mannu Bhandari utilizes two different words, both of which mean mother: 'amma' and 'mommy' which is an English loan word. The example is taken from one of the readings in *Intermediate Hindi* by Yamuna Kachru and Rajeshwari Pandharipande.
- 3 This kind of cultural element can be also found in the literatures of South Asian diaspora. In Bharati Mukherjee's short stories, the writer provides this information through the mouth of the main character in two different short stories (*A Wife's Story* p.32, *The Management of Grief* p.181)
- 4 Respect is denoted by the use of plural forms in the verb and the plural pronouns. (ye 'these,' 'they' or ve 'those,' 'they').
- 5 Hindi has a diglossia to a certain degree, which means, there are slight discrepancies between written and spoken Hindi.