

Culture and Foreign Language Reading

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ABSTRACT: *The purpose of this article is to highlight the importance of culture in EFL reading. It provides an insight into the impacts of cultural clues in the language thereby presenting a theoretical considerations from some of the existing literature on culture and foreign language reading. This article tries to relate cultural clues with the school learning of students.*

Keywords: *EFL, Reading, Culture, language teaching*

INTRODUCTION

What is Reading?

While the purpose of this article is to focus on reading, we need to acknowledge that we, too, believe that reading is not separate from writing, speaking and listening. We also acknowledge that when people talk about reading they often mean different things. Thus, we need to have a common working that we all talking about the same thing when we ask the question; what is reading? A fairly broad, functional definition of reading that that we believe most will accept: Reading is understanding written text.

By defining reading as understanding written texts for example print and visual texts, bookish texts, digital and environmental texts, it is meant that the result of any act of engagement with a written text has to be the understanding of the text. For understanding to take place, a reader has to create a meaningful message within his/her head. Without such understanding, it is difficult to claim that reading has actually taken place. Of course, some readers will appear to read it, that understand it, better than or differently from others, depending on their experiences they bring to the text.

Reading is collaborative process so it requires various mental processes being performed simultaneously or at intervals. When students are reading, they possibly continue from processing the text in smaller units of language to larger conceptual units so this can be a bottom up approach to reading.

In fact, readers have an inclination to deal with both micro-level text-driven features, such as form identification, letter recognition, and word access, and macro-level reader-driven features, such as activation of previous knowledge and observing comprehension. Each one of these practices needs valuable memory space and may sometimes overload the working memory, which is inadequate in terms of capacity

What is culture?

Language and culture are inseparable. The Longman dictionary of Language Teaching & Applied Linguistics (2010) very precisely describes culture as it is the set of practices, codes and values that mark a particular nation or group. Sharma (2016) suggest that in language learning and teaching cultural contexts are unarguably significant because they carry with them meaning as embodied in culture. When it comes to learning a language as a foreign language, the learners do not know much about the social context relying heavily on the grammar rules. In such cases the readers get confused because the readers' and the writer's cultural contexts do not match with each other.

Cultural Contexts in becoming readers

Luke (2000) asserts that the social purpose is reflected with the ways we use reading; that is valued by our cultural context. As readers try to attempt to reach a control of their reading, they meet a range of diverse texts. The texts will be erected within a particular cultural surroundings, so that their social purpose is achieved.. At times, it may appear that a particular range of text types are viewed as more legitimate, valuable and significant than other texts. For instance, the text types used within the school context such as the essay, application are often seen to have greater value (that is more legitimate) than those texts used within the community or in the home environment such as a wedding invitation, advertisements, signs, letter to father, labels and more recently the computer and the internet. In reality children start learning about the worth of reading long before they begin their formal school through a variety of media in myriad situations.

Many children who are enrolled on their beginning educational years with skills in the use of language and literacy knowledge that are based around those practices prevailing within their own unique community and home environment. These children already know some of the ways that reading and writing are used within their own families and communities level. They have been exposed to different ways as to how language is used so that it can achieve a range of very individualized and perhaps culturally specific social purposes.

Children see and use environmental print as they use road signs and fast food signs and identify the title of a television program or a drink label in the market. At home they may be exposed to the reading of stories or in navigating a video game or to the power of advertisement leaflets or in selecting food items using a fast food menu etc.

Each of these reading experiences is valuable and significant and worthy of being used in creating links between the community, family and the school. This could be promoted in the classroom by providing students with access to a wider range of text types that includes those found within the community and family context, in addition to those considered as more traditional or school related type of texts.

As students interact in their day to day lives either at home, or school, and in the community, they grow funds of knowledge from their interactions with other people and environment they are surrounded with. .

The social experiences that children undergo in cultural contexts are therefore important in shaping what students learn as readers and high light the significance of instruction to assisting children as readers at school. (Ried & Comber, 2002). Not only do students' experiences shape what students come to know about themselves and their world, but they also mould their ways of perceiving the world and ways of behaving in it. These predispositions are called 'Habitus' (Bourdieu, 1992)

As readers encounter numerous contexts, they find variations in what counts as successful reading in those contexts and what counts as valid and legitimate ways of interacting with and talking about texts. For example, a teacher tells his/her students a story in which all the characters are naughty. A child may relate the story with his/her own cultural context where in his/her home there is exactly the same sort of character in the form a brother, sister or cousin etc. This can be a joyful moment for the students as the relatedness of the school and home situations.

Habitus and funds of knowledge are important concepts for teachers for they raise two closely related questions. Question one is what congruence is there students; predispositions and what my classroom provides and how I should enhance and build on this congruence? The second question which is again very important for teachers to check is what happens when there is dearth of congruence between a student's habitus and funds of knowledge and a situation in s/he finds himself/herself.

Bourdieu (1990) has argued that from the first day a student begins school, s/he is busy struggling to have his/her voice. Research argues that teachers need to be the links to students' home and community experiences. However the concern arises when 'building bridges' is interpreted as intervening in students' home experiences to make them more like what is expected by the school. More positive and student centered approaches build on sociocultural understandings of reading.

Building bridges is not without dilemmas. The place of popular culture in the classrooms is the case in point. Children increasingly bring abundant resources and predispositions to school. Which are shaped by the poplar media texts. It is further noted that it is a serious error to assume

that children do not bring anything to new experiences. And was observed that all the children whose resources did not conform to school, she noted the complex and sophisticated ways in which children recast their home and community resources in the new context of school and created pathways to their new learning. The catalyst for children's participation according to Bourdieu was their desire for social participation enabled by their use and adaptation of old familiar resources to engage in new practices at school.

The discussion of resources and predispositions that are shaped by the students' contexts of culture and situation brings into light that learning to read means one has to engage with his/her identity work and social practices (Harris, 2005). In the struggle finding their voice in school, (Bourdieu, 1990) students put themselves into the ordained practices related with reading at school. To lesser or greater point, students find their voice amidst myriad voices and adapt that voice to one that finds acceptance and validation in the official classroom domain.

Conclusion

Only language cannot serve the whole communicative purposes be it read or spoken and written. For an appropriate achievement in foreign language reading, we need to have a balanced approach to culture so that the foreign language reader may have a desired level of understanding of the text. Taking it into the consideration, cultural impacts on reading comprehension is envisaged in language teaching in the current time.

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