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Book Review

Aspects of Culture in Second Language Acquisition and Foreign Language Learning, J. Arabski & A. Wojtaszek (2011), ISBN 9783642202001

Reza Zabihi¹ *

1. Introduction

Teaching is constrained by culture and the socio-cultural contexts in which it is performed. In recent decades, language learning has been considered by some Second Language Acquisition (henceforth SLA) and Foreign Language Learning (FLL) researchers to lie within the ambit of social-psychological processes wherein, unlike the essentially psycholinguistic outlooks on the process of language learning, much emphasis is placed on the role of the broader socio-cultural contexts.

As such, the book edited by Arabski and Wojtaszek features analytical and empirical research data on issues related to the function of English as a lingua franca in intercultural communication. The book's discussion points are organized around four main parts which, in one way or another, consider the nexus between teaching culture and teaching second/foreign language. The discussion below will thus proceed in that same order:

1. Developing intercultural communicative competence

¹ PhD Candidate, Email: zabihi@hotmail.com
Tel: +98-915-102-0840

*Department of English Language, Faculty of Foreign Languages, University of Isfahan, Isfahan, Iran

2. Cultural differences in language instruction
3. Culture-related concepts and constructs
4. Culture-related issues in Polish education context methods

2. Part I: Developing Intercultural Communicative Competence

Following the introductory chapter to this volume by Arabski and Wojtaszek, comes the first section, encompassing five chapters (chapters 2 to 6). Chapter two, by Anna Nizegorodcew, looks at the significant role of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) in understanding culture and intercultural communication. The writer delineates the use of lingua franca from a sociocultural theory perspective, whereby second language acquisition is viewed as a functional and regulatory process in taking on a new identity of a member in a community of practice (Wenger, 1998). Moreover, she summarizes the results of two research projects on European language teachers' attitudes towards teaching culture the results of which suggest that although teachers generally hold positive views on teaching culture, they typically tend to utilize the target language teaching materials and attempt to exclusively teach the target language culture (i.e., British or American culture); hence, showing little concern for multicultural education. The chapter ends with some instances of literary tasks from an international educational project developed with the purpose of enhancing intercultural understanding through ELF.

The third chapter, authored by Liliana Piasecka, addresses the current understanding of teaching language and culture in the second/foreign language learning context, drawing the readers' attention to the fact that sensitizing foreign language learners to cultural diversity should form part and parcel of foreign language teaching practices. Given that foreign language learners come to the

language classroom with an inevitable variety of cultural experiences, the writer contends that "teaching received culture can be enriched by referring to individual cultures in the learners' heads" (p. 21). As such—in "an age of globalization, World Wide Web and the increased mobility of people, which bring a wide range of cultures into contact"—Piasecka opts for a broad view of culture in the second/foreign language teaching context. She further argues that through developing intercultural communicative competence, that is, through engaging second language (henceforth L2) learners in activities that contrast first language (L1) sociocultural practices with those of L2, learners' sensitivity to the differences and similarities among cultures is enhanced.

In chapter four, Agnieszka Otwinowska-Kasztelanica addresses the distinction that exists between teaching English on adult courses and at schools with regards to the amount of cultural content that should be incorporated into their curricula. She surveys Polish teenagers as well as in-service and pre-service teachers of English concerning their attitudes towards teaching culture. The results exhibit preferences for the teaching of English as an international language (EIL) to minimize the cultural content; on the other hand, teaching English at schools should lead students towards gaining a particular level of socio-cultural competence. Although the teenagers showed strong cultural identities as well as strong tendencies to compare their culture with a wide variety of cultures, the teachers examined were not adequately aware of the learners' identity and were not quite ready to accept the role of intercultural mediators.

Chapter five—the contribution of FL learning experiences to the development of multicultural identity—is mainly concerned with shedding light on the extent to which target language culture and foreign language experiences might influence learners' first

language ego. Put differently, having utilized a multicultural personality questionnaire, Dagmara Galajda made attempts at investigating learners' perceptions of the notion of language ego in both L1 and L2 and the way it is related to target language (TL) culture. She came to the conclusion that learners take on a new identity while using a foreign language (FL), though some learners may not be aware of it. The author reckons that the learners know that by learning about the target culture they recreate their own L1 identity and construct some kind of a FL identity. That is the reason why the languages people use activate different behavior, thinking and self-perception. This may result in the development of a new language ego which is usually a combination of a FL and learners' mother tongue.

In the final chapter of Part I, Malgorzata Jedynak examines the attitudes of secondary school English teachers towards developing intercultural communicative competence in foreign language education. The participants expressed their attitudes towards intercultural education, their perceptions of their intercultural competence, and the necessity of incorporating intercultural components (IC) into second language classroom. The results of this study show that the L2 teachers are not familiar with the intercultural approach to teaching English, while associating teaching culture with the transmission of knowledge and information about customs and habits as well as the everyday life of the target language society. The author thus recommends that for the purpose of employing the intercultural approach the teachers should themselves be acquainted with the fundamental framework of intercultural communicative competence—and the notions such as culture, intercultural communication, and acculturation—hence the need in teacher education for interdisciplinary training which necessarily goes beyond the traditional curriculum of foreign language teacher training.

3. Part II: Cultural Differences in Language Instruction

Papers grouped in the second part, collectively titled 'cultural differences in language instruction', bring together the experiences and opinions of language teachers, researchers, and learners from a variety of cultures on different aspects of language teaching. For instance, chapter seven reports the quantitative and qualitative findings of a research project which aimed at comparing the opinions held by advanced Italian and Polish learners of English on different aspects of form-focused instruction. Having employed questionnaires and interviews as research instruments, the researcher found important differences between the two groups, indicating that embracing recommendations that have not been empirically verified in a specific local context should be treated with great caution.

Moreover, in chapter eight, Joanna Nijakowska tries to raise an awareness of Specific Learning Difficulties (Dyslexia) in second language literacy acquisition that might be experienced by learners of English as a second language (ESL). In this connection, she advocates multilingual and multicultural perspectives on the process of identifying dyslexia, and thus focuses on learners from ethnic and language minority communities who learn to read at school in their second language which is different from the language they use at home. The author also recounts the problems related to the identification of dyslexia in multilingual/multicultural contexts, particularly the difficulties that pertain to setting the standards applicable to L2 learning environments.

Chapter nine conducts cross-cultural comparisons of the perceptions of Turkish and Polish teacher trainees on 'language teaching', 'learner', and 'teacher'. Some images are common across different contexts and tackle the same ideas (e.g., learners as plants, teacher as guide, language learning as journey). Pre-

training and post-training questionnaires were administered to both Turkish and Polish trainees at the beginning and at the end of the academic year in order to enable the researchers to examine the images generated by the trainees (particularly through analysis of the metaphors they use) as well as to elicit their associations and images related to teaching/learning process as well as teacher and learner.

The final chapters of Part II look at particular cultural contexts and conditions for learning and using English as a foreign/second language in Australia and Brunei, respectively. Chapter ten, authored by Beata Malczewska-Webb, compares the experience of students in diverse classes at an Australian university. She surveys the perceived difficulties that home (i.e., native Australian) students and international students experience with their academic practices. Further, in an interesting closing chapter to Part II, Ann Gillian Elgar discusses the role of the target language culture in English language teaching in Brunei and seeks to find out whether and to what extent the aspects of the target language culture that can be learnt through reading literature in the foreign language. Having touched upon the merits and demerits of learning culture through literature, the author considers the use of literary works as an indirect approach to teaching the target language culture.

4. Part III: Culture-Related Concepts and Constructs

The third part of this volume groups five chapters under the heading ‘culture-related concepts and constructs’. These are generally centered on such notions as time, modesty, politeness or respect, as encoded and used in diverse cultures, in the perspective of potential problems and difficulties inherent in situations of language contact. They also involve theoretical discussions of the culture-dependent differences in conceptualization of

those notions and their reflection in particular language forms and linguistic devices.

Chapter 12, in particular, examines the extent to which the construct of time is idiosyncratic in nature or whether it is marked as a phenomenon grounded in one’s native culture and hence characteristic of each group. More specifically, Danuta Gabrys-Barker seeks to investigate the extent to which conceptualizations of time are carried across languages in terms of its meaning and its linguistic realization. Thus, given that “language exteriorizes perceptions” (p. 158), the utilization of association tasks could help better observe the cultural conceptualizations of the construct of ‘time’ among Polish and Portuguese users of English as a second language.

Chapter 13 deals with the speech act of modesty in Polish culture. This value is reflected in many aspects of everyday behavior. It is considered to affect the behavior of people especially in intercultural communication. Having referred to ‘excessive modesty’ as a ‘stigma’, the author looks at two modesty-related issues: (a) communication problems caused by Polish modesty in American culture settings and (b) changes in the role of modesty in the Polish culture after 1989. The data came from observations of participants’ spontaneous communicative behavior in Anglo-American and Polish culture.

In a similar vein, chapter 14 discusses the notion of ‘language distance’ as an abstract kind of language basically used in formal situations due to their less expressive and less direct value—the necessary features of words for obtaining some distance in formal situations in different languages. Further, language distance is used for expressing the degree of politeness in language which is a totally culture-bound notion (Cutting, 2005). More specifically, this chapter revolves around ‘honorific’ pronouns that are used for gaining

distance, followed by some ways of increasing and decreasing language distance.

Given the existence of culture-dependent differences in the rhetorical organization of written texts, the next chapter, authored by Andrzej Lyda and Krystyna Warchal, offers a cross-cultural perspective on understatement in English and Polish research articles from two disciplines, linguistics and biology. The authors' main objective was to conduct a comparative analysis of the frequency, type and function of litotes and litotic structures (i.e., the denial of the opposite) in two large corpora of research articles published in English and Polish. Another cross-cultural study is reported in chapter 16 where the author concentrates on cross-cultural transfer and both the participants' achievement and reduction strategies regarding learners' (native language: Polish, English, French, German, Portuguese and Russian) ways of expressing birthday, Christmas and New Year's as well as Easter wishes in their second and third languages.

5. Part IV: Culture-Related Issues in Polish Education Context Methods

The last part of this volume groups four chapters dealing with the culture-related issues in teaching English as a foreign language in Poland. The first two chapters report empirical research findings centering on culture-dependent characteristics of Polish EFL students. Chapter 17, for instance, aims at analyzing the relationship between L2 learners' willingness to communicate (WTC) and their self-perceived levels of FL skills in the context of a Polish secondary school. In another line of argument, the study reported in chapter 18 discusses the relationship between learners' ideal L2 Self or international posture—that is, their willingness to establish and sustain contacts with foreigners, to travel and participate in international activities as well as interest in international affairs—and their motivation and proficiency in English.

The remaining two chapters of this volume pertain to the analysis of and teachers' opinion on EFL teaching materials used in the Polish context as well as their coverage of cultural/intercultural content. For example, considering the fact that culture is an essential part of foreign language learning (Peterson & Bronwyn, 2003), chapter 19 discusses the role of culture in the process of FLL. The chapter specifically concentrates on presenting the place of culture in the school curriculum over the past fifteen years. In addition, learners' needs and expectations regarding the role of culture in foreign language learning as well as the aspects of culture which seem the most significant and absorbing for learners are identified.

These aspects of L2 culture are expected to be included in FL teaching materials. In this connection, the final chapter of this volume considers the role of culture in foreign language instruction by examining the cultural content of the teaching materials used in secondary education as well as the teachers' awareness of the cultural content of the course books they select and later use with their learners. The study implies that through making students conscious of selected aspects of the target language culture, learners will gain access to more diverse ways of seeing the world around them, and will ultimately understand better their own culture, becoming 'less ethnocentric' and 'more culturally relativist'.

6. Concluding Remarks

Taken together, the book is a valuable resource which presents a comprehensible account of the relevance of teaching culture and teaching language. The organization and content of the volume is clear and well thought-out. Despite their variability of focus and perspective, the chapters collected in this volume share a common factor of addressing the issues of second language acquisition and learning from the socio-cultural perspective.

Hence, the chapters generally point to the fact that any attempt at modeling the processes of L2 as phenomena of purely cognitive or psychological nature are inevitably missing out a crucial and vital element.

Cultural issues and practices—from understanding culture and intercultural communication to the inclusion of culture in second/foreign language teaching materials—are clearly discussed across several chapters, while neatly presenting and interpreting hefty amounts of information in an organized fashion. Each chapter starts with an introduction of related cultural aspects as well as the discussion of relevant studies, usually featuring analytical and empirical research data on those issues. In sum, the chapters gathered in this book can make valuable and stimulating contributions by giving the readers several insightful ideas and inspiring suggestions throughout the collection. On the pedagogical level, the book has significant implications for ESL/EFL instruction by presenting some useful principles and strategies.

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