Celeste or Blue?: The Importance of Culture in Teaching Vocabulary

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Nota del editor

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Resumen

El propósito de este artículo es reflexionar sobre la importancia de la cultura en el proceso de adquisición de vocabulario en L2. La primera parte se focalizará en el proceso de formación de conceptos, enfatizando la influencia de la cultura en dicho proceso. Asimismo, se compararán brevemente el determinismo lingüístico, como una versión extrema de la influencia cultural en la lengua, el concepto de *mentalese* de Pinker, y la teoría de la modularidad de Fodor. La segunda parte se centrará en la enseñanza de vocabulario en L2, y la incidencia del aspecto cultural en dicho proceso. Dentro de este ámbito, se mencionará el enfoque lexical, sus principios y las dificultades inherentes a su aplicación. La conclusión intenta suscitar concienciación sobre el tema, con el propósito de enriquecer la enseñanza de vocabulario en una lengua extranjera, y analizar algunos estilos de enseñanza de uso habitual.

Abstract
The purpose of this paper is to reflect upon the importance of culture in the process of vocabulary acquisition in L2. The first part will delve into the process of concept formation emphasizing the influence that culture has in it. Moreover, there will be a brief comparison between linguistic determinism, as an extreme version of the influence of culure on language, Pinker's concept of mentalese, and Fodor's theory of modularity. The second part will be based on teaching vocabulary in L2, and the importance of culture in that process. There will be a reference to the lexical approach, its main tenets, and the difficulties inherent to its implementation. The conclusion is meant to be awareness-raising with the purpose of enriching the way vocabulary is taught, and analyzing teaching styles taken for granted.

Keywords: cognition, concepts, culture, linguistic determinism, language of thought, acquisition.

Concept Formation

The main purpose of this paper being vocabulary learning, a definition of "concept" should be provided foremost. According to Lyons (as cited in Foley, 1997, p. 8), "concept" is defined as "ideas, thoughts or mental constructs by means of which the mind apprehends or comes to know things." Thus the external world is "re-presented" in our minds as concepts or mental representations. This raises a number of questions, such as what kind of link there can be between the sign, external, conventional and objective, and the concept, internal and subjective. This, in turn, gives rise to another question, the idea of how shared it can be among the speakers of a certain language (Foley, 1997).

Foley (1997, p. 12) considers cognition as the association between an organism and its relationship with the environment, or social interaction, "so that together they enact a world of significance." From this viewpoint, words in a language are symbols that arbitrarily match an object with its linguistic form, and culture is seen as a system of symbols that embodies their understanding of the world and directs their actions accordingly. Having the same culture allows people to share this system of symbols that represents the practices and understandings as their common ground.

Meaning and Culture

This leads to the concepts of meaning and culture. How can the meaning of a sign be interpreted? A sign generates a concept or mental representation in our minds, in other words, "a rich inner world of mental constructions, which lies behind and provides meaningful basis of signaling practices in the domain of language and culture" (Foley, 1997, p. 8). Nevertheless, cognition can also be said to be the result of the interaction between the individual and the environment, "so that together they enact a world of significance" (Foley, 1997, p. 12). In this way, cognition depends on the sensorimotor capabilities provided by our bodies, which, in turn, are transformed in the interactions with other human beings. As Foley (1997, p. 13) summarizes: "our biological being, as realized in our human bodies and their capabilities, is a social and cultural construction at least as much as it is an individual one."

From this standpoint, culture is what allows people to communicate, and it is the result of social interaction through generations. Foley (1997) also provides different interpretations of the word "culture". On the one hand, it can be viewed as a "network of signs", relating meanings to their outer forms. On the other hand, the symbolic anthropologists emphasize the public side of culture, the symbols representing public meaning and the behaviour they encode representing a symbolic action. As for the cognitive anthropologists, culture is a "system of knowledge" that helps an individual mentally organize his knowledge in "logical organizing principles".

The Principle of Linguistic Relativity: Boas and Sapir

This part will analyse the relationship between language and culture as seen by Boas and Sapir, who advocate the Principle of Linguistic Relativity.

Franz Boas asserts that language is an aid in the process of organizing experience. Boas ([1911] 1966) concludes that some classificatory system must serve as a backbone to speech, since the sensations experienced by an individual are unlimited, whereas the grammatical structures used to express them are limited. In Foley's words: "the relationship between language and thought is one way; linguistic categories may express (at least partially) those of thinking, but never the other way round: linguistic categories do not determine thought." Boas strengthens these ideas by developing the doctrine of the psychic unity of humanity that advocates that cognitive abilities are universal, and so linguistic differences are a reflection of cultural ones (Foley, 1997, p. 195).

Edward Sapir (1884-1939) (1933, p. 43) considers language essential, both as a means of communication and as a way of developing culture. He defines language as "a perfect symbolic system, in a perfectly homogeneous medium" that allows human beings to handle meanings belonging to a definite culture for the purposes of communication or thought.

However, language can act as an aid or as a hindrance in the process of interpreting reality, as it determines the way in which it is experienced. Moreover, language can be said to interpenetrate reality, since it is hard to separate the objective reality from the symbols used to refer to it. Sapir stated that:

> Language is (...) a self-contained, creative symbolic organization, which not only refers to experience largely acquired without its help but actually defines experience for us by reason of its formal completeness and because of our unconscious projection of its implicit expectations into the field of experience.
>
> [Language] categories (…) are, of course, derivative of experience at last analysis, but, once abstracted from experience, they are systematically elaborated in language and are not so much discovered in experience as imposed upon it because of the tyrannical hold that linguistic form has upon our orientation in the world. (as cited in Lucy, 1985, p. 422)

Both Sapir and Boas coincide in the "doctrine of the psychic unity of humanity", according to which, variation across languages could be due to a "cognitive predisposition", thus making the passing from one language difficult, though not impossible. Foley (1997, p. 198) emphasizes that this universal capacity only applies to the process of thinking, whereas the "concepts" or "forms of thought" are guided by Sapir's Principle of Linguistic Relativity, according to which "language channels thought."

Whorfianism

Benjamin Whorf (1897-1941) was a disciple of Sapir, and the one who further developed the Relativity Principle, thus called the Sapir-Whorf principle or Whorfianism. According to Foley (1997) this principle was thought of as an axiom rather than a hypothesis to be tested through research. There are two versions to this principle: a strong version known as linguistic determinism, and a weak version called linguistic relativism.

The names given to each version are significant. The first one asserts that "people's cognitive categories are determined by the languages they speak", whereas the second one claims that "people's behaviour will tend to be guided by the linguistic categories of their languages under certain circumstances" (Fasold, 1990, p. 53).

Hoijer (1954) illustrates the Principle of Linguistic Relativity by quoting Whorf (1952, p. 11): "users of markedly different grammars are pointed by their grammars toward different types of observations and different evaluations of externally similar acts of observation, and hence are not equivalent as observers but must arrive at somewhat different views of the world." So language is not a means of communication but a means of analyzing experience and segmenting it into categories. This is clearly seen in the following quotation by Whorf:

> … that the linguistic system (in other words, the grammar) of each language is not merely a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas but rather is itself the shaper of ideas, the program and guide for the individual's mental activity, for his analysis of impressions, for his synthesis of his mental stock in trade. (…) We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages. The categories and types that we isolate form the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds – and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds. (as cited in Hoijer, 1954, p. 115)

Hoijer (1954, p. 116) evinces that in his hypothesis, Whorf refers to both, the structural and semantic aspects of language, the first one comprising phonology, morphology and syntax, the second one being a system of meanings. So the speaker of a language has at his disposal this array of structural and lexical patterns, with their corresponding influence in the categorizing of experience, from which he can select those for actual usage. Consequently, these "active structural-semantic categories" reveal the fashions of speaking of a particular group of speakers, which in turn shows the "thought world" of a community, defined by Whorf as "[a] microcosm that each man carries about within himself, by which he measures and understands what he can of the macrocosm" (as cited in Hoijer, 1954, p. 120).

Pinker's Mentalese

Pinker (1994) considers Linguistic Relativism and Linguistic Determinism a "conventional absurdity". He supports his claim by means of different questions: How is it that we say or write something that is not what we actually mean to say? Why is it that we remember the gist of what we hear or read instead of the actual words used? How does a child learn a new word? How are new words coined? How is it possible to translate from one language to another?

He also resorts to colours to support his views. Although physicists affirm that wavelength is a continuum without boundaries that separate each colour, language do use colour terms and they differ in the way that they refer to colours themselves: Latin does not have a word for "grey" or "brown", Navajo has one word for "blue" and "green", Russian distinguishes between "dark blue" and "sky blue". However, Pinker explains that the way that people see colours has to do with their physiology, since eyes contain three kinds of cones with different pigments each, connected to their neurons. So humans all over the world have the same mental palette for colours, and this influences the vocabulary that they learn to refer to them. "The way we see colours determines how we learn words for them, not vice versa" (Pinker, 1994, p. 63).

Pinker (1994) provides other examples that lay ground for his theory. There are examples of people that lack a language but whose mental capacities, such as reasoning about space, time, objects, number, and categories, are not impaired. Babies or monkeys are unable to think in words because they do not have any, and there are human adults, especially artists, who assure that their best thoughts are not produced through words, or even physical scientists whose thinking seems to be geometrical rather than verbal.

Pinker (1994) concludes that images, number, kinship relations, and logic have a mental representation before being put into words. Therefore, people do not think in a certain language but in a language of thought. Pinker (1994, p. 478) defines mentalese as "the hypothetical language of thought or representation of concepts and propositions in the brain, in which ideas, including the meanings of words and sentences, are couched." In other words, mentalese is a genetically determined cognitive component of the human brain.

Against Mentalese

Gaynor (1995) claims that there is a flaw in the concept of Pinker's mentalese, and it resides in "its fundamental misrepresentations of the roles that language plays in thinking, and in the development of thinking skills during each individual's lifetime."

While Pinker's mentalese considers that syntactically determined cognitive reach is a proper subset of genetically determined cognitive reach, Gaynor (1995) claims that they intersect. Thus following Pinker's theory, acquiring the grammar and lexicon of a natural language would enable us to express mentalese into words. However, Gaynor asserts that there is another element in this picture. As the syntactically determined reach, which starts as a subset of the genetically determined cognitive reach, extends beyond it, a new element appears, "transattentional" in Gaynor's terms. This component shares features of the other components, its most prominent feature being "intuitive", which is learned. Consequently, there are syntactically determined and learned-intuitive extensions of cognitive reach.

Nonetheless, Pinker (1994) considers that mentalese is pre-language, and so it is not affected by the acquisition of use of any language. Humans think in mentalese, regardless the language that they actually speak. This being so, the language we speak cannot limit what we think, as Sapir-Whorf's hypothesis claims.

Moreover, Gaynor (1995) questions the scope of mentalese. In his opinion, Pinker emphasizes the nature of mentalese rather than its existence. Consequently, a limitation in its scope would be a first step to its elimination. Bearing in mind that Pinker's mentalese serves the purpose of explaining the acquisition and use of language through genetically determined cognition, the role of mentalese after acquisition should be limited to the medium of some thought. Then a definition of mentalese might be: "a medium for Homo Sapiens-specific, presyntactic cognition."

As regards mentalese and Universal Grammar (UG), Pinker (1994) goes beyond the existence of a UG that fosters the acquisition of a natural language when being exposed to it, since mentalese enables us to learn and behave intelligently. Without it, there is no thought possible, and no acquisition of language through UG (Gaynor, 1995).

Fodor's Language of Thought

Fodor has developed two main theories that have been influential in this field. One is the Representational Theory of Mind that claims that mental representations consist of computational relations that are physically realized in the brain. These representations are similar to sentences in a natural language, since they have syntactic structure and compositional semantics. In this way, thinking is realized by means of a language of thought. Hence mental processes are computational processes that render syntactically-structured thoughts. These computational mental processes empower causal relations among symbols in the brain to represent rational relations between thoughts. According to Fodor, this is the only theory that can explain the productivity and systematicity of thought (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy).

As regards concepts, Fodor rejects theories based on internal structure, such as decomposition, definitions, prototypes, etc., and claims for the so-called "informational atomism", that equates lexical concepts to unstructured atoms that connect informational relations to phenomena in the real world. In this way, there are no limits concerning what to believe in when possessing a particular concept. For Fodor, these are internal symbols he refers to as "tokenings". So the reference is enough to render the meaning of a concept (Fodor, 1998 cited in Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy).

He is also a defender of nativism, arguing that all lexical concepts are innate. He believes that all primitive concepts are innate and triggered by experience, thus accounting for how concepts are acquired (Fodor, 1975). In his *Language of Thought Revisited* (2008), Fodor suggests that there might not be innate concepts but innate mechanisms that take us from stereotypes to concepts in a process of inductive generalizations such as the following: Initial state → (P1) → stereotype formation → (P2) → locking (= concept attainment). Psychology helps you to get from the initial state to P2 leaving the way to concept attainment in charge of neurology.

The other idea is his work on modularity, according to which low-level sensory systems and language are modular and so informationally encapsulated, and are kept distinct from higher-level central systems, such as belief formation, decision-making, etc. (Fodor, 1983, cited in Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy).

Teaching Vocabulary

Most people think that knowing a word just implies knowing its meaning. Most teachers consider that teaching vocabulary merely involves relating form and meaning. But "a word in the Lang5 [the knowledge in the mind of an individual] sense of knowledge in the mind is more than its meaning" (Cook, 2008, p. 50).

According to Cook (2008), knowing a word implies the following:

■ form of the word

    o pronunciation

    o spelling

■ grammatical properties

    o grammatical category: how it behaves syntactically

    o possible and impossible structures: the argument structure of words is crucial in language acquisition

    o idiosyncratic grammatical information

    o word building

■ lexical properties

    o collocations

    o appropriateness

■ meaning

    o general meanings: semantic features or components of meaning

    o specific meanings

Consequently, learning a word implies a more thorough process than just knowing its translation. Acquiring a word involves the phonological

and orthographic system for the form of the word, the morphological and grammatical system for the syntactic structure, the lexical system for its general and specific meaning as well as its uses. "Language acquisition is in essence a matter of determining lexical idiosyncrasies." (Chomsky, 1995, p. 131, quoted in Cook, 2008, p. 51).

The first point to consider when teaching vocabulary is how to convey the meaning to the students. This is done in different ways depending on the methodological approach that teachers follow. In audio-visual teaching, the meaning is conveyed by means of a picture, while in traditional language teaching, by making use of translation. In the communicative language teaching and task-based approach, teachers provide different interactional contexts for the students to grasp the meaning over time. Yet, learning a word is not just learning its meaning, but an array of other information inherent to it (Cook, 2008).

As it has already been discussed, an important question to take into account when examining vocabulary acquisition is whether speakers share the same concepts but differ in the words used to express them, or whether meanings also differ in different cultures. Example of this, among others, is how people see colours, how they refer to speaker's location (front/back, left/right vs. north/south, east/west), or the case of Arabic speakers who have different words for uncles on the father or mother side. Does this mean speakers of different languages see the world differently?

According to Cook (2008), this leads to the question of how language relates to thinking. Do people see the world in a certain way because they have the words for it, or do the words in the language reflect their vision of the world?

Since language is learned and used in a certain culture, Tannen (2006, p. 367) considers that they are inseparable. In her opinion, language serves the purpose of organizing reality by giving shape to the objects, people and experiences that are encountered. As she expresses:

> ... learning a particular language while growing up in a given culture provides ways of representing the world that come to seem natural; later, learning a different language which is associated with a different culture pulls you up short and makes you realize that there are other ways of conceptualizing the world. A language frames the way you see the world.

The Lexical Approach

The Lexical Approach was published by Michael Lewis in 1993, and it partly contradicts Chomsky's notion that a native speaker of a language produces an infinite number of "creative" sentences based on a finite number of rules. According to Lewis, a native speaker counts on prefabricate chunks of language that are at his disposal and render a more fluent communication both written and oral (Rhalmi, 2009).

The main tenet of the lexical approach is that vocabulary outrides grammar, the lexicon being the basis of language. According to this methodology, "language consists of grammaticalized lexis, not lexicalized grammar". Bearing this in mind, teaching should devote more time to vocabulary and the acquisition of phrases in order to convey meaning than to grammar (Rhalmi, 2009).

Lewis (1993) claims that few utterances are novel creations but most utterances consist of pre-fabricated meaningful chunks, and render the following taxonomy of lexical items:

- words (e.g. computer)

- polywords (e.g. upside down)

- collocations (e.g. market share, absolutely right)

- institutionalized utterances (e.g. Let's go, I've got it, If I were you…, To tell you the truth…)

- sentence frames and heads (e.g. That's not as… as you think, The fact is…, The main purpose of this paper is…)

Hence, "instead of words, we consciously try to think of collocations, and to present these in expressions. Rather than trying to break things into ever smaller pieces, there is a conscious effort to see things in larger, more holistic, ways" (Lewis, 1997, p. 204, cited in Rhalmi, 2009).

The lexical approach recommends resorting to corpora for authentic use of language rather than to ELT textbooks, which reflect an artificial use of language based on the writer's intuitions instead of what is really used by speakers of the language in real situations.

How to Teach with the Lexical Approach?

The following should serve as a guide to this approach (Rhalmi, 2009):

■ Pay attention to successful communication rather than grammatical mastery.

■ Help students learn by breaking wholes into parts, or learning whole chunks without understanding their constituent parts, instead of learning individual sounds and structures and then combining them.

■ Help students notice and acquire patterns and collocations.

■ Replace the Present-Practise-Produce approach by the Observe-Hypothesise-Experiment cycle.

■ Explore grammar instead of explaining it.

■ Resort to intensive listening and reading in the target language.

■ Raise awareness of the differences between L1 and L2 by resorting to comparisons of the two languages and translation of chunks rather than word for word.

■ Recycle activities.

■ Foster the inference of meaning of new words from context.

■ Make use of dictionaries and reference tools.

Should we advocate for this way of teaching? According to Harwood (2002), there are still problems to be solved before fully implementing the lexical approach in ELT textbooks. He mentions the following:

Problem 1: Corpora and teaching "real" English

- Corpora cannot be used as such but need to be adjusted for pedagogical purposes:

■ Remove culturally inappropriate items.

■ Reduce the number of items you present the students. Otherwise, students will be overwhelmed and stop learning.

■ Choose the most useful variations.

■ Bear in mind the variables that influence the choice of lexical items to include such as frequency and learners' needs.

There are very few textbooks based on this approach, so this may overburden the teacher willing to implement it, since they would have to produce their own material.

- Some teachers do not have access to technology, or if they do, they have restricted access to corpora, since very few publishers permit its use.

Problem 2: Teaching and learning "real" English

- Teachers may face students' unwillingness to learn real English and sound like a native speaker, being true to their non-native variation.

- Teachers should prioritize students' needs. "If learners' needs remain to the fore, real lexis does not have to be impolite, irrelevant or outlandish."

- Most of the teachers of English worldwide being non-native, they are unlikely to be able to teach real use of slang. On the other hand, they would be fully prepared to teach EAP vocabulary, area in which a native speaker might be less qualified.

- Another question should be what variety to choose. This calls for an open mind on the part of the teacher.

Problem 3: Recycling in practice

- Coursebooks fail to recycle lexis systematically. This failure is reflected in the textbooks as well as in classes where teachers do not seem to regard recycling a key point in their teaching plan.

- Coursebooks have a role to play in encouraging teachers to recycle. Since following a textbook is compulsory in some institutions, recycling should not be left at the teachers' choice but be included in the textbook. Recycling needs

to consist of more than "doing the same thing twice" but engaging students in motivating, challenging and novel activities.

Problem 4: Face validity for teachers and learners

- Face validity: "what learners and teachers expect to devote time to in the language classroom" (Harwood, 2002). If the material used is not conventional both students and teachers may question its validity. Thus Harwood recommends teaching grammar and lexis, but not disregarding grammar, which is seen as key in traditional teaching.

- Besides there are no guidelines or syllabuses as to how this approach should be implemented leaving teachers at a loss.

Problem 5: The world of ELT publishing

- Publishers seem reluctant to implement applied linguistics findings, preferring to publish more traditional coursebooks that cater for the needs of the global market. That can explain the lack of success of the textbooks based on the lexical approach.

Although the lexical approach voices the concerns of many teachers and applied linguists as regards the dichotomy between grammar and lexis, its implementation is still on the way due to poor guidelines for teachers to follow and lack of published material.

Conclusion

Acquiring vocabulary is a complex process that goes beyond the mere definition, or translation of a word. The importance of culture in this process cannot be disregarded.

However, the final aim of this paper is to reflect upon some questions that might lead you to raise your awareness on this topic as well as on the methods you might take for granted.

Do we see the world because we have words for it, or do the words we use reflect how we see reality? Should culture be considered when teaching vocabulary? If so, how? Does translation help to develop the meaning of a word? Is the lexical approach a revolution in language teaching?

This article is meant as a stepping stone into discussion with the purpose of enriching the way we teach vocabulary.

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