INTRODUCTION

There are a number of arguments both for and against an intricate relationship between language and culture. Whereas Whorf presented the idea that language determines, as well as limits, one’s world view, others - like Boas – are non-believers and feel there is no connection between language and culture at all (as cited in Wardhaugh, 2002). In my opinion, I find it difficult to believe that one does not influence the other to some degree. It is rare that anything in life does not impact something else. Sapir (1929) believed there was an intricate relationship between language and culture (as cited in Wardhaugh, 2002), and I fully agree. However, I believe it to be one of influence rather than linguistic determinism – as Whorf would have us believe. This essay, then, will begin with a definition of culture before exploring research and opinions that establish the existence of a relationship between language and culture. It will then look at how this relationship affects language teaching – which it does to a great extent – as well as language policy.

DEFINITION OF CULTURE

Before venturing into the disputed territory of whether culture and language are somehow related, it is best to explore the definition of culture first. There have been many definitions over the years, many of which tend to have one thing in common – shared values for a way of life in a society. For example, Goodenough’s 1957 definition of culture was “whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members…” (as cited in Wardhaugh, 2002, p 219). Definitions on the web reinforce this characterization as well. One definition reads: “The accumulated habits, attitudes, and beliefs of a group of people that define for them their general behaviour and way of life…” (as cited in Web, retrieved October 2, 2005, p 1). Another definition states culture is the “learned behaviour of people, which includes their belief systems and languages, their social relationships,
their institutions and organizations, and their material goods…” (as cited in Web, retrieved October 2, 2005, p1). Bates and Plog share a more detailed definition with us (as cited in A Definition of Culture, retrieved Oct. 2, 2005, p 1): “The system of shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviours, and artifacts that the members of society use to cope with their world and with one another, and that are transmitted from generation to generation through learning.” Whereas all these definitions refer in some manner to values and behaviour in society, this last definition adds an important point: culture is learned. Most qualities about human life are guided by the human genetic code – but not culture. Culture is socially acquired (Wardhaugh, 2002). Since culture and society have a close relationship and society and language have a close relationship, wouldn’t it be safe to conclude there must a relationship between culture and language as well?

THE EXISTENCE OF A RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CULTURE AND LANGUAGE

Although many researchers believe there truly is a relationship between language and culture, there are a few who remain unconvinced of this. Boas, for example, was a staunch believer in no connection between the two. Comrie found no grounds for it either, while Pinker had “…no patience at all for any of Whorf’s ideas.” (Wardhaugh, 2002, p 225).

Other researchers, however, did find evidence of some influence of one on the other. Lucy was one of these researchers. In his study of pluralization of nouns between English and Yucatec Maya, he discovered that the latter did not have plurals for inanimate objects. This made a difference in how the Yucatec Maya viewed the world. For example, Lucy’s research showed they were not conscious of as many countable nouns as the English speakers were (Wardhaugh, 2002). Whorf, himself, did research on the matter and found in his studies with the Hopi of America that their world view was quite different from that of a Standard Average European (SAE). The Hopi looked at the concept of time as a process while the Europeans viewed it as a definite fixed state (Wardhaugh, 2002).

Brown (2000) is convinced there is a connection between language and culture. He says, “It is apparent that culture… becomes highly important in the learning of a second language. A language is part of a culture, and a culture is part of
a language; the two are intricately interwoven… (p 177). Research done by Robinson-Stuart and Nocon in 1996 as well as Scollon and Scollon in 1995 confirm this belief (as cited in Brown, 2002).

Wenying Jiang (2000) wrote an article discussing the inseparability of language and culture. His study looked at native Chinese speakers and native English speakers. Hammerly (1985) believed language learners were not fully trained until they exhibited the knowledge and behaviour of the culture of the language they were learning (as cited in McGinnis, 1994). Baumgratz (1995) goes on to say that historical languages have embedded within them a reflection of the community that existed. Prins and Ulijn did a study on the readability of mathematical problems in the English language in 1998. They felt it was difficult to “disentangle the role of linguistic and cultural factors.” (Prins & Ulijn, 1998, p 139). Brenneis claims that the close union between language and culture has been widely accepted in American anthropology (2002). He, himself, came up with five characteristics that both language and culture share, thereby reinforcing their close connection (Brenneis, 2002). Gumperz (1996) also hints at a close relationship between language and culture by saying language is more than something you simply use to interact in a society, meaning we need to know how language and cultural differences work.

All of the above-mentioned findings indicate a strong existence of a relationship between culture and language. Wardhaugh deems this connection as obvious – with the only unknown being to what extent and manner culture influences language (2002). If this is truly the case, – and I believe it is – then what are the implications of the existence of this relationship on language teaching?

TEACHING IMPLICATIONS

Learning another language means having to learn another culture (Brown, 2000). This statement calls into question traditional teaching techniques as most of these focused purely on the linguistic side of language learning, not on the cultural. Now that the importance of teaching culture alongside language has gained momentum, it has brought about significant changes in teaching. It is important to note though that even the teachers using past methodologies did to some degree share cultural knowledge with their students as well. This is because culture is so deeply embedded in any language and thus is transmitted unknowingly.
An example of this is given by David Johnson's study (2005) of culture in the classroom. During a vocabulary-building activity, a teacher by the name of Judy had her class read many different kinds of poems about love. One such poem was about a mother's love for her child and how difficult it is to let go. One of the students responded to this poem by commenting that her mother had always encouraged her to be independent. To this, Judy (her teacher), responded, 'Oh, how wonderful that she encouraged you to go out on your own.' Now this may seem innocent enough but if you look deeper, as Johnson asks us to do, you will see an underlying cultural statement – that of encouraging children to be independent of their parents early on in life (Johnson, 2005). Not all cultures hold this same value. In fact, many cultures still believe that until you marry, you stay with your parents. The point Johnson is trying to make here is that even if there is no explicit teaching of culture, there is always a hidden layer of it present in our day-to-day language.

Robinson-Stuart and Nocon (1996) don't fully agree with this view however (as cited in Brown, 2000). While they believe learning a second language means learning another culture, they also feel it is not an automatic by-product of language learning (as cited in Brown, 2000). Learning another culture is a process, not a list of things to learn. It is learned through experiencing life in another culture and takes years to do. So what does all this mean for the second language teacher?

Firstly, the second language teacher must teach cultural competence alongside linguistic and communicative competence (McGinnis, 1994). Before we go any further, let's define cultural competence. Thanasoulas (n.d) defined it as "the knowledge of the conventions, customs, beliefs, and systems of meaning of another country…" (p 1). Cultural competence can be taught in two ways: teaching about the culture of a language descriptively and teaching how to apply cultural knowledge in given situations. The goal of the latter is to have students "perform in a culturally appropriate manner with members of the target language culture" (McGinnis, 1994, p 16). One way of accomplishing this, according to Bambi Schieffelin (1990), is by developing a 'repertoire' of situations on how one can act and talk (as cited in Brenneis, 2002). Nishida refers to these as schemas in her article (1999). The teacher must give classroom and authentic real-world practice to the students in order to do this. Gumperz (1996) seems to feel that teachers need to teach 'discourse analysis' as well in order to foster cultural competence. This refers to deciphering the implicit knowledge embedded in regular native speaker interactions.
Another way to teach culture is descriptively. This refers to the teaching of knowledge about the culture, not the know-how. Examples of this would be teaching about food, holidays, money, marriage ceremonies, festivals etc… However, often teachers assume the teaching of culture is restricted to this and ignore the know-how of cultural competence. Thanasoulas describes this limited belief in the teaching of culture as 'ludicrous' (n.d., p 2) especially because he feels it is as difficult to teach culture as it is to teach someone to breathe. Regardless, he does offer some insight into how to approach the teaching of culture by drawing from others' ideas. He quotes Straub (1999), for example, as suggesting teachers should start by raising the awareness of their students' own cultures and by helping to foster an empathetic understanding of other cultures (as cited in Thanasoulas, n.d.). Ertelt-Vieth (1990, 1991) suggests comparing the two cultures with a "view to identifying common ground"(as cited in Thanasoulas, n.d., p 9). Grove (1982) agrees with this as it is important to understand what it means to be part of a culture. This is best done, according to him, by looking at one's own culture first (as cited in Thanasoulas, n.d.).

Kramsch (1993), Singhal (1998) and Peck (1998) believe a teacher should turn the classroom into a 'cultural island' where culture is experienced rather than taught (as cited in Thanasoulas, n.d.). Peck (1998) suggests teachers begin on the first day by bringing in posters, maps, pictures, and other visuals (as cited in Thanasoulas, n.d.) for realia. Henrichson (1998, as cited in Thanasoulas, n.d.) recommends activities called culture assimilators – descriptions of cultural interactions between people that has four possible solutions for the students to choose from, while Singhal proposes cultural problem solving activities (as cited in Thanasoulas, n.d.). Thanasoulas considers non-verbal communication to be cultural phenomena and suggests work be done on this in class as well (n.d.). Moreover, the use of literature in class can help transmit cultural knowledge because it is authentic in nature, expresses values, and reveals the beliefs of a society (Valdes, as cited in Thanasoulas, n.d.).

As the above sources indicate, the teaching of culture can be varied and complex in nature but should be a necessary task. Not all researchers believe this however. Auerbach (1993), Canagarajah (1999), Phillipson (1993), and Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) have strong words of caution for the teaching of culture in second language classrooms as the teachers or materials used may inadvertently portray the target culture as dominant or superior in some manner (as cited in Johnson, 2005).
IMPLICATIONS FOR LANGUAGE POLICY

Many leaders and politicians have a wish to preserve their communities' cultural diversity. Since language and culture are so intertwined, one way of doing this is to ensure the language in question is being taught in schools and used as an official language. This is where language policy comes in. Language policy, as defined by Harold Schiffman (1998), refers to the government policy about linguistic communication in a given society. Language policy has a strong influence over the existence and usage of a given language (Wikipedia, retrieved October 6, 2005). Furthermore, the summary of Schiffman's work (as cited in Linguistic Culture and Language Policy Summary, 1996) deems language to be the main vehicle for the relaying of one's culture. The implication of the close relationship of culture and language for language policy, then, is that culture must be promoted alongside the language and this must be reflected in a region's language policy. Reference to linguistic knowledge in language policy must now also include reference to cultural knowledge as well. A good example of this can be found in New Zealand. The Maori language act in 1987 made Maori an official language. The University of Otago, in New Zealand, responded to this by establishing five principles in their own language policy. One of these five is the promotion and encouragement of Maori culture (as cited in Maori Language Policy, n.d). Another good example is what South Africa did after apartheid. It adopted a multilingual language policy, making the culture and linguistic knowledge of 11 languages official for teaching in the school systems (Muthwil, M.J. & Kioko, A. N., 2003).

Language policy, however, can be an extremely sensitive and complex issue in a linguistically diverse country. For example, the region of South Asia faces challenges of this kind. India, alone, has over 200 languages which are closely tied to culture, religion, and societal structure (as cited in Linguistic Culture and Language Policy in South Asia, n.d). Of these, only 18 hold official language status, although a handful of others are recognized by the government (Daniel, 2000). In the summary of Schiffman's work (as cited in Linguistic Culture and Language Policy Summary, 1996), it points out that every language policy ends up being culture-specific anyway, whether we like it or not. So, in India, this would mean 18 cultures are being promoted while 182 are left to preserve their cultural and linguistic knowledge in some other way. This kind of selection process can be dangerous for the preservation
of languages around the world and is probably the reason up to half of the 6000 languages currently being spoken will no longer exist by the end of the 21st century (Wikipedia, retrieved October 6, 2005).

Who, then, gets to make the decision of which languages and cultures are promoted and which are not in a given region? Chomsky (1979, p 191) maintained that "questions of language are basically questions of power" (as cited in May 2000, p 368). Crawford (1994) agreed with this by stating "language death seldom occurs in communities of wealth and privilege…" (as cited in May, 2000, p 368). Kaplan and Baldhauf (1997) clearly believe the choice of which languages – and cultures as a result- will be preserved is made by a country's political leadership. Again this can be seen in the example given earlier about New Zealand. It was the government who first declared Maori to be an official language which was then followed by an institution implementing the necessary changes in its own language policy.

CONCLUSION

In summary, there is ample evidence that culture and language are closely linked and thereby have an influence on each other. This close union has a profound effect on language teaching by bringing the teaching of cultural competence to the forefront. This close relationship also affects language policies as legislators must now incorporate the teaching of culture in all language policies. In some cases, this may prove to be a difficult task due to the linguistic diversity of a nation. Moreover, the powers that be may not be interested in promoting a culture other than their own. However, as discussed earlier in this essay, the promotion of any language will automatically expose its learners to its culture to some degree whether the language policy explicitly states this or not.

With over 3000 languages slated for extinction in the next 100 years, let's hope more language policies come into effect soon to protect and preserve the rich linguistic and cultural knowledge of the people of our planet.
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