

Enjoyable Vocabulary Teaching and Learning With Cultural Differences

Kenan KAPUKAYA*

Abstract

Language learners have to learn sufficient quantity of words to communicate by using the target language, but learning vocabulary is not easy at all. It is essential that learners motivate themselves and pay a lot of attention to the words. This can be done by comparing cultural differences in a context or using the words in sentences, the meanings of which reveal different application of cultural values. For culture is what shapes our behaviour in life, they represent the way we are. So that utterances, statements, sentences which have something to do with our culture or foreign cultures are very likely to attract our attention and motivate us. In fact, by speaking about cultural differences, we give life to vocabulary in class settings. Students are able to learn the meanings of words by actually living them. So that it is not only learning some words but also dealing with different understandings and applications of life as well. These differences can be acted out, discussed, written, or drawn. In any case, students find themselves in an atmosphere where learning is not dull and boring, but pleasant and enjoyable.

Keywords: vocabulary, cultural differences, multiculturalism, ELT methods, EFL, ESL.

Introduction

Teaching vocabulary as one of the most crucial aspects of language learning is just like digging a well with a needle. It requires a lot of patience, endeavour, strength, and resolution while there are so many words for the students to learn. The question is how teachers can teach and students can learn these words in a way that they will be used in daily discourse productively, accurately, and actively.

As our world is growing more cosmopolitan more rapidly than ever, the methods chosen to facilitate vocabulary learning are gaining more importance. The methods of the past like “Grammar Translation Method and Reading Method” have lost all their value because of their lack of practicality. Rather than only understanding a given text and translating it, language learners are more interested in using the language in order to communicate with other people for practical purposes such as getting education in other countries, setting up business partnerships with foreign businessmen, discussing global problems with other people in different countries of the world, etc. Kramsch (1993:4) points out that “functional approaches to language teaching have been adopted with enthusiasm by educational systems in which educational effectiveness is traditionally measured according to its practical outcomes.” Therefore, the ways of teaching that we pick up should lead students to learning the target language with the desired skills like speaking and writing as productive outcomes. If not, the language we teach will be like a tree without any fruit on it.

*Ph.D., Candidate, Lecturer at School of Languages, IBSU., kapukaya72@hotmail.com

Language learners generally complain about how boring vocabulary classes are. They very often find learning vocabulary boring and challenging too. This results in learners interest diminishing. Thus, the ways and the content we choose should be interesting and enjoyable. EFL students can benefit from exposure to discourse behaviors that follow the rules of speaking. These include the appropriate ways people interact in social settings, such as how to greet, make promises, approve, disapprove, show regret, apologize, request, complain, give gifts, compliment, invite, refuse an invitation, offer, and thank. The ways people in different cultures do these things are often quite different, although there is some similarity across some cultures. Hudson (1980:73) defines culture as a term that refers to some property of a community, especially those which might distinguish it from other communities. Comparing and contrasting things are always beneficial in the process of learning. As understood from the definition, cultural values can be compared and contrasted in a natural way that language learners find interesting and stimulating.

From my experience, I can say that using texts, paragraphs and articles that are culturally loaded and show the differences of cultures stimulates learners very much. This is a highly effective way of getting students' attention to vocabulary learning. I think the material I will present below will show how vocabulary teaching classes can be fun and highly interesting if differences of cultural treatments to the same concept are offered to learners.

Time

The concept of time is understood and treated differently in diverse cultures. When these differences are acted out, your class may become an enjoyable place to be, instead of a place students have to come and learn something. Gebhard (1996:114) states that "to illustrate how values and beliefs can vary, let's look at the ways people make use of time in two different cultures, mainstream North American and Saudi Arabian. Time, for the average American, is very important. Americans are constantly setting deadlines based on time, and they will stop conversations before they are finished, looking at their watches and saying, "Oh! Excuse me! I have to go or I'll be late." American English is filled with references to time. Time is something to be on, spent, gained, kept, filled, killed, saved, used, wasted, lost, and planned. In contrast, Arabs see time as "flowing from the past to the present to the future, and they flow with it". In their culture, social events and appointments do not always have fixed beginnings and endings. If a time for an appointment has been set, under many circumstances it is acceptable to be late, especially if the person is engaged in a conversation. It would be rude to leave in the middle of it, as maintaining friendships and engaging in human interaction is more highly valued than being on time". In Turkey, being punctual is highly essential for an individual to be considered as trustworthy. It is not something you may undervalue. But in Kyrgyzstan, when people say "right now" they mean "I will do it within 6 hours time, so they never hurry because of their appointments. In Georgia if you are late up to half an hour, you are not considered to be late at all. (it also depends on comparative social position of people who are late/waiting.)

Food on New Year's Day

New Year's Day is celebrated cheerfully around the world, but in every culture the choice of food consumed in different cultures varies. Richards (2000:59) points out that

- Some Chinese people eat tangerines. Tangerines are round. Round foods end and begin again, like years.
- It is a Jewish custom to eat apples with honey for a sweet new year.
- Greeks eat 'vasilopitta', bread with a coin inside. Everyone tries to find the coin for luck and money in the new year.
- In Spain and some Latin American countries, people eat twelve grapes at midnight on New Year's Eve-one grape for good luck in each month of the new year.
- On New Year's Day in Japan, people eat 'mochi-ricecakes'-for strength in the new year.
- Some Americans from southern states eat black-eyed peas and rice with collard greens. The black-eyed peas are like coins, and the greens are like dollars.

There is no doubt about the fact that such differences can be used effectively in texts and articles to present and practice new vocabulary in an interesting way. This is not just learning about vocabulary but learning different cultures and different ways of life.

Conflict Management

The ways we use to avoid conflict and maintain harmony among people differ from culture to culture very much too. Gebhard (1996:115) says that while some Americans value direct confrontation to solve conflicts, people from Asian countries generally value avoiding confrontations. They have developed subtle, indirect ways to resolve conflicts. For example, if a person in Japanese society is upset with someone, he or she will likely not confront the other person directly but will behave in a particular way such as being unusually silent or ignoring the person, providing the other person with behavior clues that there is a problem. Likewise, Laotians and Thais will avoid direct confrontation by being indirect. For example if a Thai woman is angry with her friend, she will be indirect, perhaps by talking to another friend about the problem within earshot of the offending friend. Or she might invite everyone except the offending friend to eat lunch with her. For some Americans, especially males, being indirect would seem dishonest and insincere. Distrust can result. For many Asians, blatant, blunt, direct confrontation would disrupt the highly valued harmony among people. When discussing these issues in class, we may emphasize some adjectives, as they express attitudes.

New Born Babies

In the United States and Canada when a child is born, the parents often give cigars to friends. In Turkey, some candies or chocolate are served to relatives and

friends. At the same time those relatives and friends buy presents like clothing, toys or golden bracelets or earrings to the child. In Georgia, when a new born baby is male, the ears of the father are pulled by relatives and friends. It is also a custom to offer presents like clothing, toys and candies to the family. Discussion of this issue is useful to deal with vocabulary on the “shopping topic”.

Shaking Hands

Besides many other distinctions, people shake hands differently in different cultures. For example, I show students that some Germans use a firm grip, pump the arm, maintain strong eye contact, and step closer during a handshake. Some Japanese use a weak grip, no arm pump, and no eye contact. Americans sometimes misinterpret Germans as too aggressive and the Japanese as shy or passive (Gebhard, 1996:120). Turkish people use a firm grip, pump the arm, maintain eye contact and step closer during a handshake like Germans, but in addition, they kiss one another on both cheeks. In Georgia, people shake hands too but kiss one another on only one cheek. Handshaking is given a very high value in Kyrgyzstan. People hand shake with one another irrespective of how old the other side is. An eighty year old man shakes hands with a three year old boy. Contrary to Turkish people, they do not kiss each other on the cheeks. Kyrgyz people touch side of their heads and shake hands at the same time. Discussing these issues we may use videos or demonstrate the gestures practically. This permits to involve the learners in total physical response(TPR), which is definitely good for vocabulary teaching.

Space and Distance

The use of space and distance can also vary greatly across cultures. According to Edward T. Hall, cited in (Gebhard, 1996:121), middle class white Americans use space according to the following distance definitions.

- **Intimate distance.** From body contact to a separation space of eighteen inches. This is An emotionally charged distance some used for lovemaking, sharing, protecting, and comforting.
- **Personal distance.** From one and one-half to four feet. Used for informal contact between friends. A small protective sphere or bubble that separates one person from another is acceptable.
- **Social distance.** From four to twelve feet. The casual interaction distance between acquaintances and strangers. It is used in business meetings, classrooms, and impersonal social affairs.
- **Public distance.** Between twelve and twenty-five feet. A cool interaction distance used for one way communication from speaker to audience. It necessitates a louder voice, stylized gestures, and more distinct enunciation.

People raised in other cultures adhere to different rules. For instance, for Arabs the space which is comfortable for ordinary social conversation is

approximately the same as that which North Americans reserve for intimate conversation. Arabs tend to stand and sit very close, perceiving private space as somewhere down inside the body. Latin Americans, Greeks, and Turks are also from high contact cultures and will also stand and sit much closer during everyday social interaction than will those from low contact cultures, such as North Americans, northern Europeans, and Eastern Asians. People from low contact cultures, when interactions with people who like high contact, will back away, feeling very uncomfortable and perceiving the people who like high contact as invading their private space. Those from high contact cultures might interpret this behavior as being distant and unfriendly. Texts on this issue or oral discussions are useful to practice on vocabulary dealing with relations between people.

Gift Giving

Gift giving can be different across cultures. In many countries, a person visiting a friend on a special occasion will take a gift. In America the hostess will open the gift and thank the person. However, in China and Thailand the receiver of a gift will often set it aside, not opening it in front of the guest. This is because the host does not want the guest to feel obliged to give a gift and does not want to hurt the guest's feelings if he or she does not like the gift and his or her true feelings are obvious (Gebhard, 1996:122). I experienced the same situation some time ago myself. When I gave a present to one of my Georgian friends while visiting him at his house in Georgia, his grandmother opened the gift and thanked me for it. Since in Turkey, people treats presents in the same way as Chinese and Thai people do, I remember feeling ashamed and strange.

Conclusion

Vocabulary learning is often regarded as challenging and boring. So that the ways chosen to teach vocabulary should be determined carefully in order to make this process interesting and entertaining. Reading and listening about differences of cultural values and treatments are very promising to make our vocabulary class very enjoyable and interesting because we are as individuals very much related to our cultures. Therefore, when cultural differences are mentioned, we pay extra attention to understand them, which means that we motivate ourselves. Since vocabulary learning requires a lot of motivation and attention, there is no doubt that using such culturally loaded materials will facilitate vocabulary learning.

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