2

Language, Culture and Learning

What is language?

KEY IDEAS

- Language is more than just the code: it also involves social practices of interpreting and making meanings

- The way we teach language reflects the way we understand language

- What is learned in the language classroom, and what students can learn, results from the teacher's understandings of language

- There is a fundamental relationship between language and culture

- It is important to consider how language as code and language as social practice are balanced in the curriculum

Understanding language

Language is at the heart of language teaching and learning and teachers need to constantly reflect on what language is. This is because our understandings of language affect the ways we teach languages.

Language as code

Traditionally, language is viewed as a code. In this view, language is made up of words and a series of rules that connect words together. If language is only viewed in this way, language learning just involves learning vocabulary and the rules for constructing sentences. This understanding of language is, however, a very narrow one. It sees language as fixed and finite and does not explore the complexities involved in using language for communication.

Language as social practice

An understanding of language as 'open, dynamic, energetic, constantly evolving and personal' (Shohamy, 2007:5) encompasses the rich complexities of communication. This expanded view of language also makes educational experience more engaging for students. Language is not a thing to be studied but a way of seeing, understanding and communicating about the world and each language user uses his or her language(s) differently to do this. People use language for purposeful communication and learning a new language involves learning how to use words, rules and knowledge about language and its use in order to communicate with speakers of the language. This understanding of language sees a language not simply as a body of knowledge to be learnt but as a social practice in which to participate (Kramsch, 1994). Language is something that people do in their daily lives and something they use to express, create and interpret meanings and to establish and maintain social and interpersonal relationships.

If language is a social practice of meaning-*making* and interpretation, then it is not enough for language learners just to know grammar and vocabulary. They also need to know how that language is used to create and represent meanings and how to communicate with others and to engage with the communication of others. This requires the development of awareness of the nature of language and its impact on the world (Svalberg, 2007).

Our understanding of language, as languages educators, becomes part of our professional stance and, as such, influences our curriculum, planning and classroom pedagogies. Teachers who view language simply as code make acquiring grammar and vocabulary the primary, if not the only, goal of language learning. Within such a limited approach, students do not begin to engage with language as a communicative reality but simply as an intellectual exercise or as a work requiring memorising.

> *A professional stance that understands language as a social practice requires students to engage in tasks in which they create and interpret meaning, and in which they communicate their own personal meanings and develop personal connections with the new language.*

The understanding of language that is part of our stance also affects what happens in the classroom and the ways in which learners begin to understand the relationship between their own languages and the languages of their learning. If the language learning program focuses on the code, then it models a theory of language in which the relationship between two languages is simply a matter of code replacement, where the only difference is a difference in words. If the language pedagogies focus on the interpretation and creation of meaning, language is learned as a system of personal engagement with a new world, where learners necessarily engage with diversity at a personal level.

Within a professional stance that understands language as a social practice, teachers need to ensure that students are provided with opportunities to go beyond what they already know and to learn to engage with unplanned and unpredictable aspects of language. Learning language as a complex, personal communication system involves ongoing investigation of language as a dynamic system and of the way it works to create and convey meanings. This involves learners in analysis and in talking analytically about language. Kramsch (1993:264) notes that: 'talk about talk is what the classroom does best and yet this potential source of knowledge has not been sufficiently tapped, even in communicatively oriented classrooms'. The emphasis on ongoing investigation and analysis assumes that learners are involved in learning which promotes exploration and discovery rather than only being passive recipients of knowledge as it is transmitted to them by others. These learners require learning skills which will give them independence as users and analysers of language (Svalberg, 2007).

Language and culture

Understanding the nature of the relationship between language and culture is central to the process of learning another language. In actual language use, it is not the case that it is only the forms of language that convey meaning. It is language in its cultural context that creates meaning: creating and interpreting meaning is done within a cultural framework. In language learning classrooms, learners need to engage with the ways in which context affects what is communicated and how. Both the learner's culture and the culture in which meaning is created or communicated have an influence on the ways in which possible meanings are understood. This context is not a single culture as both the target language and culture and the learner's own language and culture are simultaneously present and can be simultaneously engaged. Learning to communicate in an additional language involves developing an awareness of the ways in which culture interrelates with language whenever it is used (Liddicoat, Papademetre, Scarino, & Kohler, 2003).

A matter of balance

In developing a professional stance to language teaching, it is important to consider how language as code and language as social practice are balanced in the curriculum. In developing language capabilities, students need to develop their knowledge and understanding of the code and also to come to see language as a way of communicating between people. Both of these goals need to be present in language teaching and learning from the beginning.

Questions for reflection

1   Consider the tasks you have used for a particular class or module. What do these tasks show about what you have been emphasising in your own teaching? Do these show a balance between treating language as a code and as a social practice of meaning-making and interpreting?

2   How might you develop new tasks for use in the classroom which present a more balanced or more elaborated understanding of language?