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UNDERSTANDING LEARNERS' PERSPECTIVES OF THE INTEGRATION OF TEACHING OF
CULTURE AND TEACHING OF LANGUAGE AT THE TERTIARY LEVEL IN AN ENGLISH AS
AN L2 COURSE IN ASSAM, INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The perceptions of the learners in relation to a course are as important as the course designers' objectives of it for the successful implementation of the course. In this paper, the data collected from the responses given by the learner participants to the questions of a Course Questionnaire with regard to their views concerning the teaching of L2 and the teaching of culture, and their experience of learning language and culture together, and their evaluation of the course under study are analyzed to understand learners' perspectives of incorporation of the teaching of culture with the teaching of language in English as an L2 course at the tertiary level.

Key words: L2, Culture Teaching, Pedagogy, SLA, ELT

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1. INTRODUCTION

A Course Questionnaire was distributed to the learners after the end of English as an L2 course that attempted at an integration of the teaching of culture and the teaching of language conducted at North Lakhimpur College, Assam, India. It had seven questions in all related to the course under study and the first question focused on the learning achievement of the learners. The second question was asked to know the learners' favourite part of the course followed by the third question which focused on the aspects of the course that the learners wanted to change, given the choice to do so. The next three questions were related to the learners' perceptions of the integration of the teaching of English as L2 and the teaching of English culture in the course under study and their learning achievement in relation to the English language and the English culture. The last question in the Course Questionnaire was about the various elements that constituted the classroom environment. With the help of the responses provided by the learners to these seven questions, the researcher was able to understand the changes that might have happened to the perceptions of the learners with regard to the course under study during the semester.

In the sections that follow, three aspects of the perceptions of the learners gathered from the Course Questionnaire are presented. First, the learners' perceptions of the course under study, second, learners' perceptions of the integration of the teaching of culture and the teaching of the L2, and third, learners'

perceptions of the constitutive elements of the class environment in the course are discussed one after the other. Representative quotations from the learner responses are provided to explain each of these three aspects of the learners' perceptions.

2. Learners' Perspectives of the English as an L2 Course under study

The first three questions in the questionnaire were framed to understand the perspectives of the learners in relation to the course under study in general. These first three questions were-

1. What is your biggest learning in this course
2. What did you like most in this course?
3. If change is necessary, which area of the course would you like to change?

The responses provided by the learners to the first question illustrate the fact that half of the learner participants, 6 out of 12 participants, expressed that the cultural information provided by the instructor and that ensued from class interactions between the instructor and the learners and among the learners themselves was the aspect of the course they liked most. This is despite the fact that majority of the learner participants considered learning of new words and new sentence patterns as their biggest learning benefits from the course.

Referring to the culture-related discussions in the class sessions of the course, a learner participant writes, "The aspect of the course that I liked most was the cultural information as background of the poems." Another learner participant writes, "I liked the background information. Poems are related to the culture. They are composed within a culture. The information helped me understand it better." Still another learner participant observes, "The poems got interesting with the information. I looked forward to the explanations of the teacher. He gave us knowledge of the English culture necessary for the understanding of the poems." The other favourite aspects of the course that some of the learners pointed out are themes of the poems prescribed in the course, background history of the English people, and teaching aids brought in by the instructor in terms of PowerPoint slides and videos. Excluding the reference to the teaching aids, the other two aspects pointed out by the learners can be easily grouped within the same cultural information aspect mentioned by the learner participants. So, the responses given by the learners show that the learners enjoyed the learning of cultural items and perspectives in an advance level English language course like the present first semester Alternative English course, despite the fact the learners still considered the improvement in language skills as their biggest achievement from the course under study. The culture-related discussions in the class sessions actually helped them learn new words and new expressions in English.

Learners' responses to third question related to the aspects of the course they would like to change showed that majority of the learners preferred to have a few essays and short stories along with some other changes in addition to the poems in the course. There were 5 learner participants who were of the opinion that some poems in the course should be left out to make a space for a few interesting essays. There were 3 more learner participants who held that there should be some short stories in the course in lieu of some poems. One of these learners writes, "It will be nice if some prose pieces are included. We have only poems and only poems make the course a bit boring at times." Another learner observes that along with the poems, there should be "some interesting prose also." Still another learner maintains, "Along with the poem, some short stories and prose pieces cab included in this course. That's the thing I would like see changed." A couple of learner participants were in favour of more up to date course content instead of the poems from past years. Another of the learners emphasized the need for using modern teaching aids in the class as he writes, "more videos can be shown. Lectures tend to make us sleepy at times. I want to see all the modern teaching aids available in our class. The course should allow the use of such things." Only one learner participant expressed that there was no change necessary in the course. The learner observes, "Regarding the course, I think there should not be any changes. It is best as how it is now."

3. Learners' Perspectives of the Integration of Culture and Language in the Course

The next three items in the questionnaire were framed to understand the learners' perspectives of the incorporation of the teaching of culture in an L2 course. These three items were-

1. Which area of your L2 did the cultural content of the course improve?

2. Please elaborate on the aspects of English culture that you learned from the course
3. What do you want to add to the cultural content of the course?

The responses given by the learners in relation to the questions focusing on the integration of the teaching of culture and the teaching of language in the L2 course showed similarity with the learners' responses in relation to the first three questions of the Course Questionnaire. There were 5 learner participants who expressed that the cultural content of the course helped them learn new words. 6 other responses by the learner participants were in relation to the learning of new sentence patterns.

One of the learners observes in this connection, "This course helped a lot in building up and expanding my vocabulary knowledge. It helped me learn phrases that are used by English people and some archaic words which are no longer used as well." There were a couple of learner participants who expressed that the course helped them improve their writing skills. Referring to discourse competence, one of them writes, "Basically, it becomes interesting when there are different topics. I have excelled in my writing skills. The course helped improve my composition." When the researcher requested the learner participant to clarify how the cultural content of the course helped him improve his writing skills he referred to the written assignment related to the cultural topics discussed by the instructor. He writes, "Discussions helped me a lot. I had information and I knew them. I was interested in the cultural objects. I wrote well because I wrote about them." There was one learner participant who said that the cultural content of the course helped him know about the dialectal variation of the English language. He writes, "The dialects are important thing to know about. I learned the variations of grammar and words. It helped me understand the present status of the language." These responses given by the learners tend to point to the fact that generation of interest in the course content through a discussion of the cultural perspectives and objects related to the L2 under study assists in providing motivation for the necessary practice drills required in the learning of an L2.

As far as the learners' responses to the fifth question of the Course Questionnaire are concerned, the aspects of culture that the learners learned from the course partly matched the cultural topics that the instructor brought up in the class sessions of the course under study. The cultural topics they identified are English literature, western myths, historical accounts of the English people, English manners, and language change. There were 5 learner participants who said that they learned mostly about English literature from the course under study. One of these learners writes, "By reading the different poems written by various English poets we have come to know about English culture through English literature." Four learner participants pointed out that they learned about English manners and ways of thinking from the course. A learner participant writes, "From this course I learned English culture. There are many poems in the course which talk about English society. We learned the way they behave and make interactions."

With reference to the question of aspects of culture which were not included in the course that the learners wanted to learn about, the learner responses showed high enthusiasm towards cultural topics related to English food and dress habits and culture-specific socio-political information of the contemporary time. Ten learner participants referred to these two areas of culture in relation to their willingness to learn more about English culture. One of the learners writes, "In spite of the amount of attention to English culture in the course, the things which were left out are the way they dress, food habits, house types, economic activities and many more things related to the English society. They should be included to let us know more about English culture." These learner responses suggest that the learner participants were more enthusiastic about the contemporary English life and culture than about the aspects of culture a century old brought up for discussion by the instructor in relation to the English poems prescribed in the course. It may actually point towards the fact that incorporation of contemporary cultural objects and perspectives into the teaching of the target culture to help learners in the learning of target L2 will be more fruitful, at least as per the learner responses gathered in the English course under study.

4. Learners' Perceptions on the Constitutive Components of the Classroom Environment of the course

The final item in the questionnaire was framed to understand the learner's perceptions on the various aspects of the classroom environment. The item was framed as-

"Please rate the constitutive components of the classroom environment as good or bad. Some of the components you may think of are Instructor, co-learners, organization of the classroom, textbook used in the class, videos shown in the class, time schedule of the classes, the speed at which instructor teaches, academic atmosphere, attention at reading skill, and opportunity for oral practice. You may add any component you deem necessary."

The responses of the learners to this item in the questionnaire present the fact that 11 out of the 12 learner participants in the course held positive review of the organization of the classroom and the overall academic atmosphere in the class. Four participants said that they were satisfied with the organization of the classroom in terms of the seat arrangements and audibility of the instructor's voice and visibility of the instructor's facial expressions in the classroom. Seven learner participants said that the academic atmosphere in the classroom was good in terms of the size of the class and the amount of interaction that ensued in relation to culture related topics brought up by the instructor.

One of the learners writes, "Compared to the other classes, the number of students in this class is very few. So there is less noise by the students, and we can hear the instructor's voice with less effort." Pointing to the same fact, another learner observes, "It is very easy to pay attention to the teacher and listen to him. So I like this class very much." Another learner participant maintains, "I like this class because it is not over crowded. Very limited numbers of students are allowed here. I have less difficulty in understanding the topics discussed in this class." There is one negative comment on the overall academic atmosphere of the classroom in the course. Pointing out the different defects of the atmosphere in the classroom, the learner participant writes, "Again, the arrangement of the classroom is not good enough."

Talking about the instructor of the course, 3 learner participants had positive statements to make about him. One learner participant writes, "In the classroom, the instructor taught us very well. He explained the theme, word meaning and everything related to the poems. At the end of the class questions were asked by the instructor to make sure that the pupils got the ideas correctly." Three learner participants were positive about the co-learners in their review of the course. They pointed to the fact that "there is communication between the teacher and the students in this class." They said that the co-learners response to the instructor in this class was very good as one of them writes, "...while the classes were taken the students behaved well and they interacted with the instructor." Another learner observes, "All the students put maximum concentration, as much as they can, in this class." But there is one negative review by Pari with regard to the co-learners. She points out to the disturbing behavior of learners in the classroom and aggressively maintains, "We, the students, are responsible for creating a pleasant atmosphere in the class. But sometimes, I find that some students come to the classes only for the attendance. I don't know what their intention is. They make noise, sing in the classroom etc. I find lots of this garbage in the class. It would be good if they are given special treatment." One learner participant held positive opinion in relation to the development of reading skills in the course.

Some learners stated negative views on some of the other constitutive components of the classroom environment under study. They were unhappy with the textbook prescribed for the course, the duration of the classes, videos shown in the class sessions and oral practice sessions in the class. One learner participant writes, "The textbook given to us is a huge one and it has poems only." Referring to the time schedule of the classes under scrutiny, one of the learners writes, "The classes were held mainly in the afternoon. That makes the classes heavy one. We get tired and hungry by then." One learner participant complained that very few videos were shown in the classroom. The learner also pointed out at the fact that the "videos were poor in quality." Another learner participant was unhappy with the amount of time for oral practice allotted in the class sessions. During interactions, the learner says, they "...have fewer things to say about." They "should be allowed to come prepared" and they "should be given spoken practice in the class sessions. There should be extra sessions for this."

The speed at which the lessons were taught by the instructor was positively reviewed by one learner and negatively reviewed by another. The learner who said the pace was good said that the pace at which the instructor was teaching was in accordance with the "constraints of time in the course." He had "to teach many

poems and discuss them” within “a semester”. The negative comment was about the “lack of revision” on the part of the instructor.

5. Conclusion

It can be safely deduced in conclusion from the analysis above that the 12 learner participants of the English as an L2 course at North Lakhimpur College under study made adjustments to their initial expectations and learning goals as the class sessions went on during the semester. The learner participants had positive attitude towards the classroom interactions related to English culture and they were more or less satisfied with the integration of the teaching of culture and the teaching of language in the language course under study. To be more specific, the learner participants were highly enthusiastic about learning those aspects of English culture which had the potential to help them improve their communication skills in English. Moreover, the responses of the learner participants also illustrated the fact that the constitutive components of the classroom environment are not just limited to the interaction between the instructor and the learners and among the learners themselves, but they also include other infrastructural aspects of the classroom beyond these two.

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