CULTURAL LITERACY IN LANGUAGE LEARNING: ENRICHMENT OR DERICHMENT

R. Pishghadam[1] and S. Navari[2]

[1]Faculty of Letters, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad,
[2]IranFaculty of Letters, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Iran
Email: [1]rpishghadam@gmail.com , [2]navari@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The major aim of this study is to investigate the relationship between cultural literacy and foreign language acquisition in Iran. According to lots of postmodernists including Bakhtin, language and culture are intermingled and inseparable. Bakhtin with his optimism on the contact of two cultures holds that cultural contact leads to cultural enrichment and awareness. Compatible with this theory, English language textbooks are loaded with lots of cultural capsules and elements, highlighting English culture. But the questions which remain to be answered are: Is it really harmless to expose students to the English culture and does it really lead to enrichment of cultures? Based on studies which have been conducted in Iran, including the one by the authors, it seems that exposing students to English culture in Iran leads to cultural derichment, meaning that, students take distance from their own native culture and sometimes become alienated from their own culture. In the end, it is recommended that syllabus designers, materials developers and educators take the age, location, and attitude of the learners into consideration.

KEYWORDS
Cultural literacy, Enrichment, Derichment, Language learning

INTRODUCTION

Without a shadow of doubt, culture is a fundamental aspect of foreign language learning. As some performance guidelines like *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines* (1986) or the *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines or K-12 Learners* (Swender & Duncan, 1998) have devoted a section to cultural competence, it seems that cultural competence has become the focus of so many textbooks and curriculum designs (Byram, 1998; Bryam & Fleming 1998; Byram & Zarate, 1994; Byram, Zarate, & Neuner, 1997; Damen, 1990; Kramsch, 1993, 1995, 1998). Moreover, since the focus of postmodernists is on diversity and plurality (Pishghadam & Mirzaee, in print) and since the introduction of dialogue of cultures and intersubjectivity by Bakhtin (1981), and Vygotsky `s (1978) emphasis on interpersonal relationship, the idea of

694

sociocultural competence has become a buzzword in TESOL. It seems that there is a shift in second language acquisition from context-independent and lexical and grammatical meaning to a more acknowledgment of context-dependent and pragmatic meaning. Interest in teaching L2 culture has led to so many innovations in what and how of teaching culture in second language classrooms (e.g. Chastain, 1988). A cursory look at the literature of foreign language teaching shows that culture is a part of language, which is teachable and must be taught; however, some questions which have been rarely posed are: Is teaching of a foreign culture without any side effects? Or, does teaching a foreign culture for the sake of language acquisition lead to a cultural enrichment? The fragmentary insights of all psychological and social sciences hardly add up to lucid and coherent accounts for these questions. Therefore, the major aim of this study is to show whether contact of two cultures may lead to a more intercultural communication and enrichment of two cultures as claimed by Bakhtin (1981) or it can lead to derichment and alienation of one culture which is dominated by the other one. To this end, this study first provides the readers with an overview of some important features of modernism and postmodernism, then discusses Bakhtin`s ideas on the dialog of culture, and finally analyzes Iran `s context of language education.

Modernism and Postmodernism

According to Pishghadam and Mirzaee (in print) modernism as an important school of thought in philosophy has the following important features: Modernists

- search for the best, that is, the method that yields the best results in a given period of time;
- have universal claims, trying to prescribe their procedures for all individuals around the globe assuming that a 'one-size-fits-all cookie-cutter approach' benefits all;
- believe in absolutism and certainty;
- are scientific, based on theories taken from hard sciences like physics and chemistry; and
- are expert-proof and guru-based.

And despite the divergence among different usages of "postmodern," one can find some commonalities centering on postmodernists. They:

- are constructivists, in their view, there are no real foundations of truth, for there is no truth, except what the group decides is truth;
- are against absolutism, they value relativism. Knowledge is not stable and eternal as the history of science has shown us, it refers to probabilities rather than certainties, better rather than the best;
- question the notion of expertise. The idea that some people (experts) know more than others (non-experts) are not espoused. They believe that interaction between the knower and non-knower is often best seen as a dialog in which there is mutual influence than simple transmission of knowledge from one to the other. In fact both are involved in an interactive process of knowledge creation. Dialog replaces monolog; and
- reject global decisions. Since reality is culture dependent, changing over time, as cultures do, and varies from community to community, knowledge is not universal. We are cautioned to be careful with generalizations, because they can be deluding.

Therefore, postmodernists are intolerant of truth and values unless they are considered local. Diversity is celebrated.

Bakhtin `s Dialogue of culture

Mikhail Bakhtin's (1981) theory of dialogue, with focus on cultural and interpersonal aspects of language, attempts to examine the discourses which are made by multiple voices (heteroglossia) in society. The basic principle in Bakhtin's ideas is that language as a medium of communication is immersed in a social and cultural context. He addresses the notions of language, culture and the formation of self on a fundamental philosophical level, exploring the dialogic relations between the people, between cultures and between a person and culture.

Bakhtin, allied with Marxist thought, established *dialogism* as the major tenet of his work. According to him, "To be means to communicate dialogically. When the dialog is finished all is finished… One voice alone concludes nothing and decides nothing, two voices is the minimum for life, the minimum for existence" (Bakhtin, 1984, p.213). He developed the idea as a reaction against Saussure's 'abstract objectivism,' or the dualistic (*langue*/*parole*) view of language, that "converts language into a monologic entity that reifies linguistic form, which in turn sanctions its extraction from the domain of human linguistic intercourse" (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, pp. 9-10).

To Bakhtin (1981), dialogue is the core of culture and humanity which can lead to self-consciousness of every civilization. Bakhtin (1984) considers dialogue as more than a verbal act of interaction; it is universal communication and understanding; it is not mere talk, it is not just a linguistic phenomenon, it is a truth-finding process which is a social phenomenon. Bakhtin believes that: "Truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person; it is born between people collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 110). In fact, he believes that through dialogue with other people, one can be more conscious of his own beliefs and can find shreds of truth for oneself.

For Bakhtin (1990), ideas become renewed when they face different and foreign ideas, meaning that, "in the point of contact of these voice-consciousnesses that the idea is born and has its life" (pp. 71-72). This idea is reminiscent of Bakhtin `s concept of *outsideness* which explicates the differences between participants in a dialogue. This concept implies that to have effective communication, one must remain distinct from others, bringing his uniqueness to the dialog. This idea is closely paralleled by Bakhtin `s tripartite scheme of the self, in which he talks of three types of Is: I-for-myself, I-for-other, the other-for-me.

Bakhtin (1986) views culture as the offspring of interaction. He considers learning another culture as a way of enriching one `s own culture not replacing it with another culture. He held "a dialogic encounter of two cultures does not result in merging and mixing. Each retains his own unity and open totality, but they are mutually enriched" (p. 7). To Bakhtin, to appreciate one `s own culture, one needs to be in contact with another culture, which is foreign to it. It implies that bilinguals are more aware of the peculiarities of their own culture than monolinguals. Bakhtin (1986) explicates the view this way:

> There exists a very strong, but one-sided and thus untrustworthy, idea that in order to better understand a foreign culture, one must enter into it, forgetting one `s own, and view the world through the eyes of this foreign culture…Of course, a certain entry as a living being into a foreign culture, the possibility of seeing the

world through its eyes, is a necessary part of the process of understanding it; but
if this were the only aspect of this understanding, it would merely be duplication
and would not entail anything new or enriching. (p. 6)

Bakhtin is quite explicit about the contact of two cultures. He seems to be very optimistic
about the mutual enrichment of two cultures, claiming that interaction between cultures is a
vital condition of their existence.

Iran`s Context of Language Education

Iran (the country in which the authors live) has been dominated by ideas of modernism and
we witness rare vestige of postmodernism in all levels of education in this country. The
country has a conservative, centralized educational system: all decisions are taken by the
authorities in charge in the government, and schools and teachers are there just to conform to
the expected rules and regulations; in fact, there is no room for them to make their voices
heard. Educational institutions are considered to be the mere conveyers or performers of the
governments' central policies.

In this kind of education, a one-size-fits-all policy is predominant; individual differences are
not taken into account; and all people are tarred with the same brush. For example, one math
book is taught for all second graders in all parts of the country, cities, small towns or villages.
The policy is to unify all students from all walks of life (unification & global decisions).

The system of education in the country is reminiscent of Freire's "banking" concept of
education in which students are viewed as "empty accounts" to be filled by teachers (Freire,
1970); students are there just to memorize and regurgitate their teachers` and books' opinions.
There is no room for students to display their abilities and develop their creativity. Teachers
are mere conveyers' of the authorities; they are not allowed to air their own views. The
educational system encourages them to find the best method for teaching English; their
teaching methodology is directly influenced by the national high-stakes tests that are
administered at the end of each year.

In general, it is probably fair to say that in schools there is a tendency towards making
students conform to a perceived status quo, and towards the enforcement of codes of behavior
and discipline.

As noted above, another important feature of modernity in this system of education is holding
high-stakes tests which are quite common in Iran. These tests can shape the future life of the
students; to be allowed to continue their higher education at the university, all students have to
take a high-stakes matriculation test at the end of high school. The test is a competition test,
based on which not all candidates are given opportunities to pursue their education.

English is considered to be a foreign language to Iranians, because it is spoken only in class,
students before getting into university study English for eight years at the school and then
pursue their English studies at the university. It is prestigious to learn English in Iran and to
acquire a native-like accent, because people put more premium on learning English. Besides,
lots of jobs in Iran require a good command of English. Due to the aforementioned reasons,
English language teachers in Iran are perfectionists, demanding correct use of language,
putting lots of pressure on students to apply English accurately and appropriately. In a study
conducted by Akhondopoor (2008), it was found that Iranian language learners like to be

perfect and learn English impeccably, in another study (Pishghadam & Kamyabi, 2008) it was found that there is a negative relationship between accent and culture, meaning that the more native-like accent, the more deculturation. Pishghadam (2007) in an interview with some English language teachers and learners in Iran showed that they generally undermine the idea of World Englishes, underlining the idea of perfect American and British English. The results of his observation also manifested that some teachers in class depreciating their own native culture appreciate the English culture.

CONCLUSIONS

It seems that Bakhtin `s ideas on intercultural communication and intersubjectivity are effective in communities in which postmodern ideas have been embraced and permeated. One important feature of postmodernism is embracing diversity, believing that all voices must be heard. As it was claimed, it seems that in Iran, teachers and learners of English language search for the best, trying to imitate American and British norms as closely as possible. People seem to lose their own culture to get another one. Regardless of social and political issues, one important reason is that the teachers centralize the English culture in class at the expense of marginalizing the Persian culture.

Moreover, one important feature of dialog is mutual respect, which seems in Iran, some teachers and learners don`t have for the Persian culture. It seems that the relationship between English and Persian does not lead to a positive mutual enrichment, mutual development, and mutual renovation. Rather, this type of relationship constitutes a process of acculturation, in the sense of complete and unquestioned acceptance of English culture's norms and values. As a result, the Persian culture may lose its uniqueness and becomes parts of the English culture.

Teachers are recommended first to change their attitudes, trying to embrace postmodern notions like World Englishes and Critical theories, and then they should strive hard to change the learners ` attitudes to appreciate diversity. They are expected to be sensitive to the many currents of language-related opinions and evaluations in their own communities; they must pay attention to their students `s opinions of their own culture and also the foreign one. Teachers are required to design and implement methods, materials, and activities which allow repeated use of the Persian culture in class, including but not necessarily limited to the English culture. In fact, teachers should be aware that they are supposed to be not the enforcers of a foreign culture but the promoters of their own culture.

Besides, learners must be taught to be proud of their own culture, trying to enrich it all the time. They must be taught that absorbing one culture must not be at the expense of losing one `s native culture. Learners are expected to become sensitive to the differences of two cultures, trying to acquire the positive points of the foreign culture, nativizing in a way that the Persian culture is promoted and enriched.

Textbook writers are expected to prepare local materials, meaning that Persian and English cultures both equally must be included and portrayed in the textbooks. Textbooks must be replete with both Persian and English cultural capsules, in a way that even the English culture plays second fiddle to the Persian culture.

Moreover, syllabus designers and educators are recommended to take the age of the learners into account while presenting cultural capsules for them, because it seems that we cannot

expose all learners from different ages to the same materials. Children who have not yet learned their own culture, while encountering another culture may lose theirs.

Finally, language policy makers are required to find ways to provide practical and theoretical assistance in order that they might enrich the Persian culture and preserve it from any imminent danger of exposing the learners to the dominant English culture. Second language learning policy must be in a way that learners are encouraged to attach more to their own culture and preserve their own identity in the face of linguistic and cultural dominance.

REFERENCES

Akhondpoor, F. (2008). *On the role of learner perfectionism in foreign language learning Success, academic achievement, and learner anxiety.* Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Unpublished master` s thesis.

American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. (1986). *ACTFL proficiency guidelines.* Yonkers, NY: Author.

Bakhtin, M. (1981). *The dialogical imagination.* Austin: University of Texas Press.

Bakhtin, M. (1984). *Problems of Dosteyevsky's "poetics*" (ed. and trans. by C. Emerson). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Bakhtin, M. (1986). *Speech genres and other later essays.* Austin: University of Texas Press.

Bakhtin, M. M. (1990). *Art and answerability: Early philosophical essays.* In M. Holquist and V. Liapunov (Eds.), (trans. and notes V. Liapunov). Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press.

Byram, M. (1989). *Cultural studies in foreign language education.* Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.

Byram, M. (1998). Teaching foreign language for inter- cultural competence. In V. Saphonova (Ed.), *Cultural aspects of language education* (pp. 7-21). Moscow: Euroschool Press.

Byram, M., & Fleming, M. (Eds.). (1998*). Language learning in intercultural perspective: Approaches through drama and ethnography.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Byram, M., & Zarate, G. (1994). *Definitions, objectives and assessment of sociocultural competence. A common European framework for language teaching and learning.* Strasbourg: Council of Europe Press.

Byram, M., Zarate, G., & Neuner, G. (1997). *Sociocultural competence in language learning and teaching: Studies towards a common European framework of reference for language learning and teaching.* Strasbourg, France: Council of Europe.

Chastain, (1988). *Developing second language skills.* Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers.

Freire,P.(1970).*Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Herder & Herder.

Kramsch, C. (1993). *Context and culture in language teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kramsch, C. (1995). The cultural component of language teaching. *Language, Culture and Curriculum, 8,* 83-92.

Kramsch, C. (1998). *Language and culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lantolf, J. P. (1996). Second language theory building: Letting all the flowers bloom. *Language Learning, 46*, 713-749.

Pishghadam, R. (2007). *Iranian Language learners' attitudes to English language*. Ferdowsi University of Mashhad. Unpublished materials.

Pishghadam, R., & Kamyabi, A. (2008). *The relationship between accent and deculturationamong EFL learners in Iran*. Ferdowsi University of Mashhad. Unpublished materials.

Pishghadam, R., & Mirzaee, A. (in print). English language teaching in the postmodern era. *Teaching English Language and Literature.*

Swender, E., & Duncan G. (1998). ACTFL proficiency guidelines for K-12 learners. *Foreign Language Annals, 31*, 479-491.

Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind in society.* US: President and Fellows of Harvard College.