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## **Difficulties faced by Manipuri speakers due to Cultural differences in Learning English**

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### **Abstract:**

The purpose of this paper is to describe the relationships between culture and language learning and to point out some of the common difficulties that are faced by Manipuri speakers due to cultural differences while learning English. Different cultures may have different interpretations. It further mentioned some remedial measures or solutions in order to overcome those difficulties. In this paper I argued that cultural elements are a significant part of learning/teaching a second language.

Keywords: culture, second language, Manipuri speakers, remedial measures.

### **Introduction:**

English-as-a-second-language (ESL) students have several challenges in their academic studies. A problem due to cultural differences is also one of the factors affecting English learners while learning the target language. It is important to remember that learning a second language involves much more than learning the words and the sounds of a language. Communication breakdowns occur not only due to the more commonly understood syntax and pronunciation difficulties but because when we learn a language we also learn a culture. Manipuri speaker English learners tend to have some problems while learning English due to cultural differences. It has been seen that just as similarities and differences have been found to be useful in language studies so too cultural similarities and differences, once identified and understood, can be used to advantage. We can recognise different world-views and different ways of expressing reality.



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The purpose of this paper is also to give an idea about the problems based on cultural differences in language learning. Further it shows the relationship between culture and language learning and also concerns about the integration of culture in the second language learning with the view that a successful communication in language learning hardly ever takes place unless second language users have obtained a kind of cultural competency of the language they use.

## **Culture**

The concept of `culture` is something that everybody implicitly understands but nobody can define precisely. A lot of time can be spent on trying to give a precise definition of the word. According to some eminent scholars define the term `culture` as:

According to Hinkel (2007), the popular definition of “culture” refers only to that part of culture that is visible and easily discussed. This can include the folklore, the literature, the arts, the architecture, styles of dress, cuisine, customs, festivals, traditions, and the history of a particular people.

Peck (1998) refers to culture as; culture is all the accepted and patterned ways of behaviour of a given people. It is the facet of human life learned by people as a result of belonging to some particular group; it is that part of learned behaviour shared with others.

For Goodenough (1963: 258-259), [c]ulture...consists of standards for deciding what is, standards for deciding what can be, standards for deciding how one feels about it, standards for deciding what to do about it, and standards for deciding how to go about doing it. Clearly, culture is a ubiquitous force, forging our identities and our relationships with other things and individuals.

The National Center for Cultural Competence defines culture as an “integrated pattern of human behavior that includes thoughts, communications, languages, practices, beliefs, values, customs, courtesies, rituals, manners of interacting and roles, relationships and expected behaviors of a racial, ethnic, religious or social group; and the ability to transmit the



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above to succeeding generations” (Goode, Sockalingam, Brown, & Jones, 2000). This means that language is not only part of how we define culture, it also reflects culture.

In short then, culture is; "...the sum of a social group`s patterns of behaviour, customs, way of life, ideas, beliefs and values." (Fox, 2004, 10)

Culture embraces all that contributes to the survival of man, such as art, craft, drama, dress, education, music, politics, religion and technology. It is absorbed by living in it and changed by contact with outside cultures or inspiration from within. Clearly, culture covers a wide territory. Its broadness is certainly an attraction but can also be considered as a problem. However, it is worth making a list of the areas it includes: literature, the arts in general, customs, habits and traditions, humans` behavior, history, music, folklore, gesture, social relationship etc. These are ingredients and it is different to give a whole picture of them. This can be considered a problem deriving from the complicated nature of culture.

### **Language and Culture:**

Language is the product of culture. One important instrument of cultural expression is language. Language is a part of culture and plays a very important role in it. On the one hand, without language, culture would not be possible. On the other hand, language is influenced and shaped by culture; it reflects culture. The relationship between language and culture is deeply rooted. Language is used to maintain and convey culture and cultural ties. “Culture is in language, and language is loaded with culture”. (Agar 1994:28). Brown (1980) puts that culture is a “deeply ingrained part of our being and language is the most visible and available feature of culture.” Gao (2006, 61) notes that “[l]anguage is a product of the thought and behaviour of a society.” The thought and behaviour of a society is the aggregate of the thought and behaviour of individuals, which itself is shaped by culture; thus on a very practical level culture is the force that makes communication between individuals through language possible. “Culture and language are so tightly related that may be regarded as parts of the same thing. No case is known of either a language or a culture existing without the other. Obviously, no language can survive in isolation and no civilization can be built up without language. Cultural changes tend to occur along with changes in language; the two



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proceed reinforcing each other”. (Krishnawamy,1992). “Knowledge of a language is undeniably part of one’s cultural heritage. A good portion of one’s identity as a member of a cultural group comes from being able to speak the group’s language. Much of our cultural knowledge is expressed to use in that language”. (Baker 2001:201) Through the study of other languages, students gain a knowledge and understanding of the cultures that use that language; in fact, students cannot truly master the language until they have also mastered the cultural contexts in which the language occurs.(National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 1996, p. 27) . In other words we can conclude that language and culture are intricately interwoven to one another and cannot be separated.

### **Culture and Language Teaching: The Importance of Culture in Language Teaching**

Linguistic competence alone is not enough for learners of a language to be competent in that language (Krasner, 1999). Language is rooted in culture and culture is reflected and passed on by language from one generation to the next (Emmitt & Pollock 1997).From this, one can see that learning a new language involves the learning of a new culture (Allwright & Bailey 1991). Consequently, teachers of a language are also teachers of culture (Byram 1989). As Holmes (2001:275) points out, “Learning another language usually involves a great deal more than learning the literal meaning of the words, how to put them together, how to pronounce them. We need to know what they mean in the cultural context in which they are normally used. And that involves some understanding of the cultural and social norms of their users”. Culture and teaching language cannot be separated, thus culture must be recognized as an important area in language learning and teaching .If languages are taught without their cultures, students are only the strangers who aren’t familiar with the target languages. It is important to mention that cultural elements of the target language should be taught\_carefully.

Agar (1994:60) demonstrates how language is bound up with culture by the coined word ‘linguaculture’. Linguaculture forms peoples’ traditional ideas, values and behaviour. The author adopts the linguaculture to refer to the intrinsic link and inseparable relation between language and culture. Language is culture and culture is mediated through language;



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there is no language outside culture and no culture outside language. Therefore, the teaching and learning of a language should be handled together with the culture that gives the language meaning and life. Culture should not be treated as something additional to language, but must be treated as one organic entity in language teaching/learning processes. Valdes (1990:20) estimates that there is no way to avoid teaching culture when teaching language. She argues further that, since every language lesson must be about something, that something will almost invariably be related to culture in one way or another. Indeed, she goes on to say, the focus of a lesson may be on syntactic or phonetic features, but the content will be cultural. Jiang (2000) implies that it is impossible to teach the target language without teaching the target culture. The students can be exposed to an empty frame of language if they don't learn cultural aspects of the target culture.

It can be said that cultural content is a key to effective teaching and learning a second or foreign language. Necessarily, students cannot master the language unless they have mastered the cultural contexts in which the language occurs. (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 1996, p. 27). Moreover, we should be cognisant of the fact that '[i]f we teach language without teaching at the same time the culture in which it operates, we are teaching meaningless symbols or symbols to which the student attaches the wrong meaning...' (Politzer, 1959: 100-101).

Thus, from the above, it's clear that language teaching is indeed culture teaching and every aspect of culture should include in language teaching and in the study of language.

### **Cultural differences:**

Language seems to be woven into the very fabric of every human culture; and to such an extent that it is hard to imagine what human culture would be like without language. A proper understanding of a language is impossible without a full awareness of the cultural context in which it is used. Since language and culture are closely interrelated to one another, Manipuri speaker English learners encounter some difficulties when they tend to speak the target language clearly.



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A rough comparison /contrast between Manipuri and English culture provides some clues as to how to eliminate some misunderstandings that English teachers may have about Manipuri learning English. Let's look at some examples:-

- (1) The first cultural differences that encounter by the English learner Manipuri speakers are the way that English-speaking people say and write their names. Unlike English speaking people, Manipuri put their family name first, followed by their given name, showing the importance of the family. For example, in Manipuri, 'Laishram Tomba', here 'Laishram' is the family name and 'Tomba' is the given name of the particular person.

Similarly, Korean speaker English learners tend to have the same problems. Korean put the family name first, followed by their given name, showing the importance of the family. (Cho, Byung-Eun.2004)

- (2) To speak English appropriate to the occasion, Manipuri speakers should understand the western way of life and customs in order to avoid misunderstanding while speaking. Many fixed English ways of expression cannot be changed randomly. For example, the answer to, "How do you do?" is "How do you do?" but to Manipuri learning English, they replied as "I am fine". If a student is asked "How are you?" the answer would still be the same i.e. "I am fine".
- (3) Again another example, when asking the other one's name on the telephone, "Who's speaking, please?" or "Who is it, please?" instead of "Who are you?".
- (4) As people are diverse, customs are diverse. It is only natural then that with differences in customs, differences often arise in using of language. For example, when someone praises that 'your hair is very beautiful', English and Manipuri responds to the compliment are different. According to Manipuri custom, they generally reply about not being worthy of the praise, while English customs they tend to accept the compliment with pleasure. The reply like "No, my hair is not that beautiful"— is thought to be impolite by English people.

In the similar way of Manipuri, in Chinese customs, if someone praise that your English is very good they generally murmur some reply about not being worthy of the



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praise. The reply like “No, I don’t speak good English”—Americans think which seems to criticize the other side, is impolite. (Chinese and Western Cultural Studies. <http://c.zhiwenweb.cn>)

- (5) Another example is “red-letter days”—which is a simple phrase and is easy to hear, meaning holidays such as Diwali, Christmas and other special days. But Manipuri students are often unable to understand them without the teacher’s explanation.
- (6) Unlike English, Manipuri students’ substitute ‘our’ instead of ‘my’. This revealed a sense of belongingness. Instead of saying “my mother”, “my house”, “my teacher”, Manipuri learning English tend to say “our mother” even when the listener is not a sibling. They say “our house’ even when talking to stranger, and “our teacher” even when the listener is not a classmate.

Similarly, one of the most noticeable characteristics of Korean is that Koreans use the word “our” a lot more often than “my.” Some English phrases like “my home,” “my school,” and “my country” would be translated into “our home,” “our school,” and “our country” in Korean even when you are only talking about yourself without the actual existence of others to refer to “our.”(‘An Insight into Korean Culture through the Korean Language’ [www.lexiophiles.com/.../an-insight-into-korean-culture-through-the-korean-language](http://www.lexiophiles.com/.../an-insight-into-korean-culture-through-the-korean-language))

- (7) In countries whose mother tongues are European languages such as English, it is a face of the Man in the moon.(Kameda,Naoki.2007) Where as to Manipuri culture it has different references to the moon.ie. it is refer to the face of a lady in Manipuri culture.
- (8) Manipuri learning English find little difficulty in the English way of addressing. The problem arises when it comes to calling other people by their given name or nickname. Given names are used by parents calling children, and by elder to the younger one and by very intimate friends calling each other. But to call one’s elder brother and sister for example, by their given name is regarded as very rude and impolite, where as English speaking people often call people by their given name.
- (9) Manipuri learning English are surprised to find that English women used their husband’s name while referring to them. This is because in Manipuri culture, it is



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regarded as undesirable for a woman to call her husband by his first name. In Meitei (Manipuri) culture, it is considered to be a sin for a wife to call her husband by his name, 'even to pronounce the name of her husband'.(Pramodini,N.1989).But this would be unusual in English culture, as women habitually use their husbands' names when referring to them.

- (10) One of the perplexing phenomenon Manipuri speakers experience in learning English is the fossilization of certain mistakes caused by interference from their first language. For example, many Manipuri speakers repeat the question-answer format of Manipuri negative questions when communicating in English. To the question, "Aren't you going to school?", English speakers answer either , 'Yes, I'm going..', "No, I'm not going", meanwhile many Manipuri learning English respond either "yes, I'm not going to school", or "No, I'm not going to school". Manipuri English learners used a combination of both positive and negative elements of discourse, which speakers of English would find very puzzling.
- (11) Unlike English students, most of the Manipuri students may avoid eye contact as a sign of respect to their elders and teachers or may look down when approached by a teacher or elders, as they have been taught that looking straight or directly to teachers or elders is a sign of manner less and disrespect.
- (12) In informal introductions, English speakers use first names and in formal situations, they use titles such as Mr., Mrs., or Ms. Where as in Manipuri, they never use first names in informal introduction. The informal forms, 'n<sup>TM</sup>' and 'n<sup>TM</sup>hak' are used instead of the first name. In Manipuri formal or polite form is 'som' or 'TMdom'. So in language teaching, Manipuri learning English should not only pass on knowledge of language but also enhance teaching of relative cultural background knowledge. Knowledge of cultural background is also important. Otherwise, misunderstanding and displeasure are inevitably aroused.

#### **Remedial measures:**

It is not easy to teach cultural background knowledge. Firstly, teachers must be acquainted with the differences between the two linguistic cultures. Teachers can provide





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cultural information, as well as make students express themselves correctly in different occasions, and the latter is more important.

(2) To make the learning of English interesting and useful for the learners, Manipuri English teachers will have to take cognizance of the relationship between language and culture. 'Cultural understanding becomes a problem-solving device'. (Whiteford, M.B. & Friedl, J. 1992)

(3) Cultural concepts should be introduced smoothly to enhance the students' language skills and foster understanding while showing respect for the students' first language and cultural background.

(4) Teaching material is also important. Teachers should use good native English videotapes and films in teaching, and then organize discussions. When watching videotapes or seeing a film, students and teachers should pay much attention to the scene of daily life, such as conversations between shopkeepers and clients, dialogues on the telephone, chat in the street, etc. After that, teachers and students may exchange views and replenish each other. Next, teachers should explain cultural factors involved in the material with purpose.

(5) Teachers should encourage students to read extensively, including novels, magazines, and newspapers etc. They should also guide students to accumulate relative cultural background knowledge when reading material. Through enormous reading, students' understanding of culture will become ripe and complete.

(6) Teacher should pay attention to proper language forms as well as suitable use of language in the classroom. Furthermore, remind students to pay attention to details such as pronunciation, intonation, countenance wording, gesture etc.

(7) Teachers or the school authority should hold some lectures about cultures and customs, comparing Manipuri culture with western culture.

(8) While teaching, teachers should attach importance to cultural differences and study these differences. They should not only help students to learn a foreign language, but



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also to learn social and cultural background knowledge. Only so, students can widen their knowledge and thus further learn English well.

- (9) Language teachers must instruct their students on the cultural background of language usage, choose culturally appropriate teaching styles, and explore culturally based linguistic differences to promote understanding instead of misconceptions or prejudices.
- (10) Teachers should raise the awareness of the importance of culture in language teaching and studying because making culture a part of language teaching/learning will make the conversation sparkle. To bridge the cultural gap, effort should be made by both Manipuri English teachers and Manipuri English learners.

### **Conclusions -**

This paper has argued that culture and language are inseparable part and therefore culture is relevant to the teaching and learning of a second language. Language and culture are intertwined to such an extent that one cannot survive without the other. It is impossible for one to teach language without teaching culture. 'Culture should be our message to students and language our medium' (Peck, 1998). Understanding the cultural context of everyday language functions means more than just being able to produce grammatical sentences. It means knowing what is appropriate to say to whom, and in what situations, and it means understanding the beliefs and values represented by the various forms and usage of the language. The idea about the paper is to discuss the difficulties that are faced by Manipuri speakers due to cultural differences while learning English as a second language. It also points out that cultural differences give rise to cultural misunderstanding. To make the learning of English interesting and useful for the learners, culture must entirely integrate as a central component of language learning. Manipuri English teachers should identify key cultural items in every aspect of the language that they teach and will have to take cognizance of the relationship between language and culture. Teachers themselves should identify their students' needs and decide which elements of culture could be usefully incorporated into a lesson or a syllabus while teaching English. Culture teaching should allow learners to increase their knowledge of the target culture in terms of people's way of life, values,



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attitudes, and beliefs. Students can be successful in speaking a second language only if cultural issues are an inbuilt element of the core curriculum.

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