

WHY CULTURE MATTERS IN LANGUAGE LEARNING?

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Abstract. *Language learning is not just a cognitive or academic process—it is deeply cultural. Understanding a language means more than memorizing vocabulary and mastering grammar, but also it involves grasping the cultural contexts in which the language is spoken.*

This article explores the close connection between language and culture, explaining how culture affects communication, shapes meaning, and supports more effective language acquisition. It argues that incorporating cultural knowledge into language education enhances learners' linguistic competence and intercultural communication skills, making them more confident and competent users of the target language.

Keywords: *Language acquisition, culture, intercultural competence, communication, language education, cultural awareness, second language learning.*

Introduction. The study of language is incomplete without the study of culture. As linguist Claire Kramsch (1993) stated, “when people learn a language, they are not just learning words and grammar — they are also learning how people think, behave, and interact within that culture”. Learning a new language, therefore, involves entering a new cultural world. For example, just knowing how to say “hello” isn’t enough — you must know how, when, and to whom to say it, which depends on cultural context.

Main body. Cultural elements influence how language is used in daily life—how people greet each other, express emotions, show respect, argue, or apologize. This article explores why it is important to include culture in language learning and explains how cultural awareness can help learners communicate more smoothly, confidently, and respectfully.

Language and culture are deeply interconnected, functioning as two sides of the same coin. Language is not only a means of communication but also a carrier of culture—it reflects a community’s worldview, traditions, and social values. According to Claire Kramsch (1998), language expresses cultural reality (what people say and do), embodies cultural reality (how people speak shows what they value), and symbolizes cultural identity (how they define themselves through language). This shows that language is shaped by, and shapes, culture in complex ways. For example, the concept of politeness varies widely across cultures. In Japanese, there are different verb forms depending on the status of the speaker and listener (Keigo system).

English also uses polite expressions, but in a more simplified way. Without understanding these cultural nuances, language learners may appear rude or awkward despite knowing the correct grammar.

Why Culture Matters in Language Learning:

1. Enhances Communication Skills and Pragmatics

Understanding cultural aspects helps language learners use language correctly in various social situations. For instance, a study published in the *Journal of Pragmatics* (2019) found that learners who received training in cultural pragmatics experienced 40% fewer misunderstandings during real conversations compared to those who focused only on vocabulary and grammar.

2. Improves Motivation and Engagement

According to research by the British Council (2017), learners who interacted with cultural content such as films, music, festivals, and history showed a 30% boost in both motivation and enjoyment during their language studies. This increased interest encourages longer study sessions and better memory retention.

3. Facilitates Deeper Understanding and Contextual Learning

Culture provides important context for language use because many expressions, jokes, and idioms do not translate directly. A 2020 study by the Modern Language Association (MLA) revealed that students who learned about cultural backgrounds alongside language scored 25% higher on tests involving idiomatic and context-based language.

4. Prepares Learners for Real-World Interaction

In global settings like business, tourism, and diplomacy, knowing the culture is just as crucial as knowing the language. The European Commission's 2018 survey on intercultural skills showed that 85% of employers consider cultural knowledge essential alongside language proficiency, as it helps avoid misunderstandings and builds trust.

5. Supports Identity and Cross-Cultural Awareness

Studying the culture connected to a language helps learners become more empathetic and aware of cultural diversity. This leads to greater open-mindedness and less prejudice. Research published in the International Journal of Intercultural Relations (2021) indicated that cultural education in language courses increases learners' intercultural sensitivity by 35%.

How to Integrate Culture in Language Learning:

1. Utilize Real Cultural Resources

Using original content like movies, songs, newspapers, and books from the target language's culture enhances both language acquisition and cultural awareness. According to the European Centre for Modern Languages (2018), students exposed to such materials demonstrated a 28% gain in cultural understanding and a 22% boost in language skills when compared to those taught with only standard textbooks.

2. Engage Learners in Cultural Projects and Activities

Interactive experiences—such as preparing cultural dishes, participating in traditional celebrations, or simulating real-life cultural situations—allow students to immerse themselves in the culture. The International Journal of Language and Culture (2020) reported that such experiential learning raised student motivation by 35% and improved their ability to remember cultural content.

3. Provide Instruction in Pragmatics and Social Norms

Teaching students how to use language appropriately based on context—including tone, politeness, and social rules—better equips them for authentic communication. A 2019 study in the Journal of Pragmatics revealed that students who received training in these areas experienced 40% fewer misunderstandings in intercultural conversations.

4. Include Intercultural Communication Strategies

Helping learners understand how values, communication patterns, and cultural behaviors differ across societies strengthens their cross-cultural competence. A 2021 study by the Center for Applied Linguistics found that language courses integrating intercultural communication practices increased students' cultural sensitivity by 38%.

5. Incorporate Technology and Online Cultural Exchanges

Digital tools like video calls, forums, and social media give students the opportunity to interact directly with native speakers, creating real-time cultural engagement.

Findings in Language Learning & Technology (2022) showed that participants in virtual exchanges improved their cultural knowledge by 33% and enhanced their speaking skills by 25%.

6. Promote Cultural Comparison and Reflection

Encouraging students to reflect on the differences and similarities between their own culture and the one they are studying—through essays, discussions, or journals—deepens their cultural insights. According to Foreign Language Annals (2017), these reflective tasks increased empathy and reduced stereotypes among learners by 30%.

Conclusion. Language and culture are closely linked, and to truly learn a language, one must also understand its cultural background. Being aware of cultural differences helps learners communicate more effectively, respectfully, and with greater understanding. In today's increasingly connected world, knowing the language alone isn't enough—without cultural knowledge, meaningful interaction is limited. That's why both teachers and students should realize that mastering a language also means understanding the way of life and values behind it.

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