

Culture-based curriculum fosters language learning: A pilot study on a culturally distinctive tribal learners of Mizoram

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Abstract

“Cultural pluralism in second language acquisition focuses on pluralistic cultural learning in a culturally diverse setting” (Lokho, 2010:115). In the teaching of English as a second language, culturally diverse setting proves to be a great pedagogical tool. This has been observed from a culturally distinctive tribal learners of Mizoram. As such, this paper attempts to evaluate how these learners achieve proficiency in their target language using their own culture-based activities. For the purpose of this paper, two kinds of activities based on learners' immediate environment is used which involve three different tribal schools of Mizoram. It is observed that learners are progressing in different ways using their very own culture-based activities. This paper also tries to create awareness using activity based on one of the most significant components of Mizo culture known as *Tlawmngaihna*. However, using learners' own culture-based activities only as a pedagogical tool for the teaching and learning of English could be at risk as cultural pluralism suggest appreciating and celebrating the diversity of different cultures existing in a single society.

Key words: Culture, culture-based curriculum, tribal learners, Mizoram, target language, *tlawmngaihna*, assimilating own culture

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Introduction

In a pluralistic country like India, where diversity often fails to recognize its diverse culture even though different cultures enjoy their own diversity, it is important to understand and acknowledge culture which seems to be less recognized and less appreciated, and perhaps, how this culture could foster in acquiring and learning one's target language. India, which is largely multicultural, multiracial, multilingual, and multi-religious suggest a curriculum sensitive to learners' own contexts. "A curriculum sensitive to cultural pluralism would boost cross-cultural or intercultural learning and communication in that no cultural group is treated superior or inferior and the view point of each cultural group is equally represented in the curriculum" (Lokho:115). As such, it is the objective of this paper to put forward the culture which seems to be less recognized within the Indian educational context and how this could be used as a pedagogical tool for learning a second language. This paper attempts to evaluate how culturally distinctive tribal learners of Mizoram achieve proficiency in their target language using their own culture-based activities. However, it is important to first understand how we understand and define culture.

Defining culture

Researchers and experts from various academic disciplines proposed different definitions of culture. The term culture is an umbrella term which encompasses various forms of humans' lives with their interpretations. According to anthropologist pioneer Tylor, it is "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (Web source). Concise Oxford English Dictionary eleventh edition defines culture as "the customs, ideas, and social behavior of a particular people or group". Behavioral scientists defines it as the full range of learned human behavior patterns. Simultaneously, from a linguistic perspective, "language is the culture; there is no culture without the language because culture is living. The culture is not separate from language" (qtd. in Hermes: 50). Language is an integral part of a culture, or an expression of culture. (NCERT: 2000:6). Thus, culture can be seen as a whole way of human lives in relation to his immediate environment.

Getting to know Mizoram

Mizoram is one of the tribal states of India located in North-Eastern part of India bordering Myanmar and Bangladesh. The people of Mizoram are physically very different and culturally unique from the mainland India and because of this, the people of Mizoram are usually considered as foreigners in their own country due to lack of awareness amongst the people of the country as their culture and identity are hardly found in educational textbooks and the like though certain privileges are given to them at a higher educational institution. Hence, it is one of the objectives of this paper to create awareness about the culture of Mizoram.

Accordingly, an activity based on one of the most significant components of Mizo culture known as *Tlawmngaihna* is used as a tool for the study. *Tlawmngaihna* as a cultural concept generally means volunteering oneself to do any kinds of task demanded or undemanded no matter even if one has to suffer physically or financially. "It incorporates behavior that is self-sacrificing, self-denying, doing what an occasion demands unselfishly and without concern for inconvenience caused, persevering, stoical, stout – hearted, plucky, brave, firm, independent, loath to lose one's

good reputation” (Wiki source). It is a humble act without demands or expectations. Some of the major traits of *tlawmngaihna* are mentioned below for the purpose of Mizo culture awareness.

- Participating in social activities such as *Hnatlang* (*Hnatlang* is any social work where the young Mizos would clean their own town/village together; decorating town/village especially during Christmas; making dustbins; cleaning town’s cemetery; constructing houses for anyone when there is calamity; fixing something which needed to be fixed which are owned by the society; or any work which credits the society as a whole and not the individual.
- Participating in *Mitthi lumen* and *Khawhar in riah*. In Mizo tradition, when someone (anybody) dies, and if that person dies after 8:30 am in the morning, the deceased body has to be buried the next day at 12 noon. Thus the society members where the deceased person belongs to would gather together singing songs the whole night to console the family members. This is known as *Mitthi Lumen*. During this time, young men and women are expected to join this. *Khawhar in riah* is when all the official funeral programs of the deceased person is over, young men would sleep over to the deceased home to soothe the loneliness of the other family members for other 7 days.
- Participating in activities such as grave digging task. (This task is usually done by young men. During this time, young women are expected to volunteer to make tea for these men)
- Giving a lift to older people on the street.

The Acculturation Model and Accommodation Model Versus Assimilating own Culture

The Acculturation Model which is seen as an important aspect of second language acquisition (SLA) view language acquisition to the degree the learner acculturates himself to the target language (TL) culture. If the second language (SL) learner acculturates himself more to the target language culture, the level of acquiring his target language increases. As defined by Brown

(129) “it is the process of becoming adapted to a new culture”. According to Ellis (251), “language is one of the most observable expressions of culture because in second language settings acquisition of a new language is seen as tied to the way in which the learner’s community and the TL community view each other”. This model is largely determined by social and psychological factors which govern the learning situation. Schumann (qtd. in Ellis: 25) listed certain social and psychological variables which determine positive and negative learning situation. These variables include language shock, culture shock, motivation, attitude, and ego and these have largely contributed to the degree of language acquisition. Learning becomes positive or negative depending upon how the TL learner and the TL community view each other.

Likewise, the Accommodation Theory shares certain similarities with the Acculturation Model as both underpin SLA in terms of the relationship between the TL learner group and the TL community group. However, the Accommodation Theory sees SLA in terms of how the TL learner identifies himself to the TL community. According to this theory, the level of motivation strongly determines the level of proficiency. “The key variables include identification with in-group (within the TL learner’s group), inter-ethnic comparison, perception of ethno-linguistic vitality, perception of ingroup boundaries, and identification with other social categories” (Ellis: 257).

The above theories of SLA suggest assimilating one’s target language culture for acquiring a language. The empirical study conducted by Schumann in 1976 found out that one of his subjects Alberto remained in his first stage while the others were progressing. This was explained as a result of not acculturating himself to the target language culture. However, as contrary to these theories, as these theories seem less applicable to the Indian classroom, this paper attempts to justify that learning from one’s own culture could as well facilitates in learning and acquiring one’s own target language. Learning a TL from one’s own culture could promote self-learning and develops interest, motivation, and confidence in the learners which further enhances their level of learning. It is believed that learning from familiarity would be more meaningful and would boost the level of learning as it would reduce learner’s stress, fear, and anxiety as this is when their affective filter would be low.

Methods of study

The study was conducted in the month of November and December 2015, with 58 participants from three different schools of Mizoram ranging from Government owned schools to privately owned school. All the participants were in their eight standard with age ranging from 12 to 14 years having at least a minimum of six years exposure to English. After learning and observing the background of the participants through questionnaires, classroom teaching observations and interview, an intervention was carried out based on learners' culture and data were collected using open-ended questionnaires, informal interview and participant observation. The activities of the learners were observed by the English teachers in each school and the author. Both performed as a facilitator. Participants were give approximately about 40 minutes to do the activity. After performing the activities to each school, questionnaires were given to them for self-evaluation and they were asked to fill them up in their mother tongue if they find it difficult to give their answers in English. A structured interview was also held for the teachers to determine their attitude of the developed material.

For the sake of this paper, we would discuss two types of culture-based tasks that were used for this study. The first activity was adapted from the book *Cultural Awareness* (Tomalin and Stempleski, 1993) which was followed by the task developed by the author respectively as shown below.

Activity 1: This activity involves the following steps

- The class was asked to divide into groups of five or six.
- The learners were asked to write down the first five words that come to their minds when the name of their home state or home town is mentioned.
- Learners were given approximately about 15 minutes to write them down.
- Learners took turns to read their words to the whole class and explained why they had chosen those words.

After the students had finished, a whole class discussion was conducted based on what they had learnt about their own cultural values from the activity they had done.

Following are the responses given by the participants for this activity.

Table 1: Learners' responses for the activity

School 1	Group A	mountain, shy, bamboo, Mizo-dishes, rivers
	Group B	small eyes, alcohol, Lalthanhawla (Mizoram Chief Minister), green trees, rain
	Group C	Mizo festivals, football, bamboo dance, bad roads, fair
	Group D	pumpkin, Mizo dance, beautiful, meat, clean
School 2	Group A	trees, lakes, hills, Mizo culture, environment
	Group B	trees, fish, crab, monkey, birds
	Group C	Tlawmngaihna (selfless-acts), good manners, Mizo eggs (country brown eggs), mountain, lakes
	Group D	Aizawl (Mizoram capital), Chipte (one kind of birds found in Mizoram), box, eggs, Sony phone
School 3	Group A	Trees, lakes, water, mountains, bamboo
	Group B	Crabs, cow, pig, dog, horse

Table 2: Learners' justification for the activity

School 1	Group A	Mountain- because there are so many mountains in Mizoram Shy- because most of us are shy and we cannot express ourselves properly Bamboo- there are so many bamboos everywhere
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		Mizo dishes- It is very tasty and good for health Rivers- 'Tlawng' (one of the rivers of Mizoram) is famous
	Group B	Small eyes- because Mizo people have small eyes Alcohol- Many people talk about alcohol permission and people like to drink Lalthanhawla (Mizoram Chief Minister)- because he is very famous and the Chief Minister of Mizoram Green trees- because our environment is full of green trees and forest Rain- because it always rain and we cannot play when we want
	Group C	Mizo festivals- because I like festival and we can get holiday. There are also many festivals. Football- There are many footballer and football is a fun game bamboo dance- It is very famous Mizo dance bad road- because the roads are bad and difficult to drive fair- because many people are fair and they are beautiful
	Group D	Pumpkin leaves- because it is popular dish and many people grow in their garden Mizo dance- because Mizo dance is nice Beautiful- There are many beautiful things around us Meat- We love eating meat and especially pork is famous clean- because Mizoram is quite clean and we clean our school many times
School 2	Group A	Trees- there are many tree around us Lakes- there are many lake and I want to go there sometime Hills- We can see many hills and it is full of hills Mizo culture- Tlawmngaihna which is a famous Mizo culture Environment- because of good environment
	Group B	Trees-many trees we can see near us

		<p>Fish-we like fish and it stay in river</p> <p>Crab-people go and catch crab and sell which is also tasty</p> <p>Monkey-<i>Rilru awm ve tawp</i> (no reason just came into my mind)</p> <p>Bird-there are many birds in the tree we catch them sometime</p>
	Group C	<p>Tlawmngaihna (selfless-acts)- because it is very good and Mizo culture</p> <p>good manners- good manners are important to learn and must have</p> <p>Mizo eggs (country brown eggs)-because it is different and healthy and only in Mizoram it is there</p> <p>Mountain-there are mountains in Mizoram</p> <p>Lakes- In Mizoram, there are many lakes and good nature</p>
	Group D	<p>Aizawl (Mizoram capital)- Aizawl is a big city and famous</p> <p><i>Chipte</i> (one kind of birds found in Mizoram)- there are so many <i>Chipte</i> near our house to play them</p> <p>Box-we need box in school for bring every day</p> <p>Eggs- eggs is popular dish and is there everywhere</p> <p>Sony phone- many people use Sony phone</p>
School 3	Group A	<p>Trees- many tree we can see around us</p> <p>Lakes- many lake is there in Mizoram</p> <p>Water- fresh water we get in Mizoram</p> <p>Mountains- many mountains in Mizoram</p> <p>Bamboo- many bamboo in Mizoram</p>
	Group B	<p>Crabs-In Mizoram crab is famous</p> <p>Cow-cow is useful animal</p> <p>Pig- <i>Vawk vulh an tam a</i> (there are many people who rear pigs)</p> <p>Dog- dogs also</p> <p>Horse-I am not see horse in Mizoram.</p>

Discussion: Learners seemed reluctant and shy to have a whole class discussion after they had done this activity as they had never done before. Both learners' L1 and L2 were used during the time of discussion. Learners discussed that though the activity seemed easy, it was difficult as they had never thought about their own State in that way. They said that words did not come easily to their minds. They also said that they had never done group activities before and found a little difficult to cooperate within their groups. They said that this activity helped them value what they used to take for granted and noticed the uniqueness of their own home state through this activity. They believed they were what formed their own State.

Activity 2: This activity involves brainstorming and the task was to think of the different ways in which learners could show Mizo *Tlawmngaihna* in their society. Learners listed down in points and told their friends.

Steps of the activity:

- The task was first explained to the learners.
- Learners were divided into groups and were given 15mins to think about how they could show this act to their society or people around them.
- Learners listed them down in a sheet of paper.
- After the learners were done, each group were asked to tell their friends what they had written down.
- When learners hesitated to volunteer, the teacher picked them one by one.
- Learners were allowed to give comments of what other had written and were allowed to clarify their doubts.
- After this was done, a whole class discussion was held to see whether they had really done this act to someone or for the society.

The responses of the learners for activity two are given below.

Table 3: Learners' responses for the activity

School 1	Group A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Doing social work when necessary • By obeying our parents • By helping the poor
	Group B	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Doing what elders ask us to do without complaining • Picking up garbage lying on the floor • When we obey our teachers
	Group C	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By helping the blind cross the road • By planting more trees • Helping our friends and family
	Group D	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Distributing our old clothes to orphanage • Helping the one who carry heavy things • Giving money to poor
School 2	Group A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When we help the poor • When we clean the street • When we help the old people
	Group B	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We will guard our animals • At our friends and our village we will guard
	Group C	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We should help those who need help • We should help each other • We should have good manners
School 3	Group A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We help people • Give food to other • Manners are important
	Group B	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By helping people • Clean toilet

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be good to animals
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Discussion:

Based on a whole class discussion, it was discussed that learners were not very aware of their own culture as most of the points they had written down proved it. They seemed to confuse this cultural concept with doing good things for others as this concept is different from that. Learners confessed that they had not really done this act and were motivated to do it in future. Learners also discussed that they had learnt the importance of showing this act to someone or to the society.

Findings

The main aim of the tasks was to develop learners' speaking skill using tasks generated from learners' immediate environment. From the open-ended questionnaires, informal interview and observation of the participants, the following results were found out.

Learners' open-ended questions with their responses. It is a self-assessment tool for the learners.

Table 4: Learners' responses for the two activities

What have you learnt from the activities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learnt the value of own culture and value of helping others • They were aware about their own proficiency level the
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	<p>needs to improve. They realized how shy they were and why they shouldn't, and also realized that all tasks need to think hard</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learnt how to construct sentences, learnt to speak out and to be confident
Which activities did you enjoy doing?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 15.78% enjoyed doing both the task • 26.31% enjoyed doing the first task • 57.89% enjoyed doing the second task
How did they improve your spoken English?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 12.5% said that they did not find any improvement • 87.5% said that they improved by having confidence to speak in TL, they had increased vocabulary range as they were given instant correction, they knew appropriate words usage. Learning was fun
In what ways would similar activities help you learn English better?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personality would improved • would be more brave to speak and participate • would use English for discussion • would feel free in speaking before teachers who can correct instantly • activities required more interaction which helped • varieties of topic would help
Did the activities motivate you to speak in English? Why?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 9.37% said that they were not motivated • 90.62% agreed. For them, discussion about own culture in itself was motivating. They were inspired when they saw their friends participating enthusiastically. They would like to talk about their own culture in English. They were aware about of their level of proficiency, and were motived to speak more

Explain in brief, how the activities helped you learn English better? If they do not, explain why?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 12.5% said that activities did not help them because they needed more activities and needed longer period to improve. • 87.5% said that activities helped them because it reduced their shyness and gave more confidence to speak in English. Code mixing was possible, they tried their level best to speak correctly in front of others. It helped to think and express oneself in English. The teacher helped in sentence construction in improving their spelling. Group work promoted learning as mistakes were corrected by other group members.
Have you ever done the same type of activities before?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 100% of them said they had not done the same type of activities in the past
Would you recommend similar activities in your textbook? Which one?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 56.25% of them recommended similar activities • 18.75% of them did not recommend similar activities • 21.87% were not sure • Among those who recommended, 9.37% recommended the first task and 34.37% recommended the second task
Would you like to continue the same type of activities in the future?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 90.62% said “Yes” • 9.37% said “No”

From the participant observation made by the author and the concerned teachers, it was observed that learners were making progress in different ways. At first, when learners were made to do the first activity they were a very shy but when they were doing the second activity, they gained confidence as they enjoyed doing the task which they had never done before. The following positive points were observed.

- Learners became more confident speaking in their target language while talking about their own culture.
- Since the activities interested them, they gained motivation to speak.
- Such activities promote peer learning. While doing the activities, learners fell short of vocabulary but was soon provided either by their group members or from the other groups.
- From the activities, learners not only learnt their L2 but also learnt about their own culture. While doing the tasks, learners give incorrect and inappropriate answers. For example, in activity two, a learner responded by saying “giving away our old clothes to the poor.” This is not *Tlawmngaihna*. They tended to mix this concept with good deeds.
- Such activities kindled interest to learn more about other culture as well.

Conclusion

Culture in the language classroom seems to have positive impact in learning a language. It can be said that culture-based curriculum fosters language learning. In order to make the teaching-learning meaningful and relevant, the sociocultural context of the learners has to be given importance. Not only the learner’s culture but also the culture in which meaning is created that have influence on the ways in which possible meanings are understood. “Students grounded in their heritage language will be able to learn other course content without fear of assimilation” (Hermes: 53). This includes culture as language is an integral part of a culture as mentioned in the earlier.

Following the checklist given by Brown in *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching* (2007:213), the author likes to conclude that such types of activities-

- value the customs and belief systems that are presumed to be a part of the culture(s) of the students.

- do not refrain from any demeaning stereotypes of any culture including the culture(s) of the learners.
- do not refrain from any possible devaluing of the learners' native language(s).
- are not sensitive to the perceived roles of males and females in the learners' culture.

(Brown: 213)

Therefore, "Culturally indigenous materials for teaching of English are required if at all the curriculum is to be socially and culturally sensitive" (Lokho, p.117). However, this does not indicate restricting materials to one's own culture only. Inclusion of different cultures in the curriculum may prove to be relevant and beneficial for the learners.

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