

The Problem of Teaching Linguistic Units with a National-Cultural Component of Meaning

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Abstract. *The teaching of linguistic units embedded with national-cultural meaning presents a complex and multidimensional challenge for educators in second and foreign language acquisition. These units—idioms, proverbs, culturally loaded vocabulary, and expressions—reflect the historical, social, and psychological experiences of a people and are essential for developing both communicative competence and intercultural sensitivity in learners. The traditional focus on grammatical and lexical accuracy often overlooks the significance of cultural nuances that influence meaning and pragmatic use. This article examines the theoretical foundations, challenges, and methodologies involved in teaching language with culturally significant components. Drawing upon recent pedagogical studies, cross-cultural analyses, and classroom experiences, it explores the role of teachers as cultural mediators and the importance of selecting authentic, context-rich materials. Special attention is given to how linguistic units reflect national identity and worldview, as well as how their effective teaching fosters greater empathy and intercultural understanding. The article concludes with practical recommendations and strategies to support educators in embedding cultural components meaningfully into language instruction.*

Key words: *Linguistic units; national-cultural component; intercultural competence; language teaching; idioms; cultural semantics; communicative competence; second language acquisition; language pedagogy; cultural identity.*

In an increasingly interconnected world, the ability to understand not only the language but also the cultural context in which it operates is crucial for effective communication. Language is far more than a collection of grammatical structures and vocabulary; it is a living, dynamic representation of a society's values, traditions, history, and worldview. This is particularly evident in linguistic units that contain a national-cultural component of meaning—expressions that cannot be fully understood or translated without knowledge of the culture from which they originate.

Such units include idioms, sayings, metaphors, culturally specific terms, and pragmatic expressions that reflect national mentality and cultural attitudes. For instance, the phrase “kick the bucket” in English or “как у Христа за пазухой” in Russian carries a meaning far beyond the literal interpretation. The successful interpretation and use of such expressions require both linguistic and cultural competence. However, language education often prioritizes linguistic accuracy over cultural depth, resulting in learners who may speak correctly but fail to grasp the subtleties of meaning or use culturally appropriate expressions.

This article addresses the problem of teaching linguistic units with a national-cultural component of meaning, a challenge that remains underexplored in many educational contexts. The main aim is to analyze why these components matter, the difficulties teachers and learners face when dealing with them, and the strategies that can be employed to overcome these obstacles. The discussion is

supported by both theoretical frameworks and empirical insights from language teaching experiences in various cultural and linguistic contexts.

By investigating how cultural meanings are embedded in language and how they can be effectively taught, this article seeks to contribute to the broader field of language pedagogy and intercultural education. It proposes that language learning should go beyond mastering structural knowledge and instead embrace the richness of the cultural dimensions of communication.

Linguistic units, in the context of language education, refer to segments of language—words, phrases, idioms, proverbs, and grammatical structures—that carry meaning. While many of these can be translated semantically from one language to another, those with a national-cultural component often resist straightforward equivalence. Such components embed within them the traditions, beliefs, values, history, and social norms of a culture, which can significantly influence their meaning and usage.

For example, an idiom like “spill the beans” in English, or “тоқсан ауыз сөздің тобықтай түйіні” (Kazakh for “the gist of a long speech”), reflects culturally situated metaphors and ways of thinking. National-cultural components are more than linguistic curiosities; they are manifestations of cultural memory and collective identity. They serve to express not only ideas but also social roles, humor, values, and emotions that are specific to the speakers of a language.

Cultural semantics explores the ways in which meaning is shaped by culture. According to Anna Wierzbicka (1997), even the most “universal” words are deeply embedded in cultural scripts. She argues that understanding the cultural context of a language is essential to comprehending its semantics. Words such as “freedom,” “respect,” or “honor” vary widely across cultures not just in usage but in conceptual content. This variability becomes especially visible in culturally embedded linguistic units.

For instance, the English term “privacy” does not have a direct equivalent in many Asian languages, as the cultural construct it represents may not exist in the same way. Similarly, food-related terms such as the Japanese “umami” or Uzbek “non” (bread, with a cultural-religious value) transcend literal translation. Such examples underscore the importance of teaching language as culture-laden rather than culture-free.

Michael Byram’s (1997) model of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) provides a vital theoretical framework. He argues that successful language learners must acquire not only linguistic and sociolinguistic skills but also intercultural skills. Byram identifies five essential components:

Attitudes: Curiosity and openness toward other cultures.

Knowledge: Understanding of social groups and cultural practices.

Skills of interpreting and relating: The ability to interpret a document or event from another culture.

Skills of discovery and interaction: The ability to acquire new cultural knowledge and apply it in real-time.

Critical cultural awareness: The ability to evaluate perspectives, practices, and products critically, including one’s own.

In teaching linguistic units with cultural meaning, ICC emphasizes that language learning must be accompanied by a systematic exploration of cultural patterns and perspectives.

Another relevant field is sociolinguistics, which studies the relationship between language and society. Cultural elements such as politeness strategies, speech acts, and honorifics are sociolinguistically governed and culturally situated. For example, in Japanese, the use of honorific language (keigo) reflects a complex social hierarchy that must be respected in communication. Similar patterns exist in Korean, Arabic, and even among Slavic languages.

Pragmatics—the study of language in use—also contributes to understanding how context and cultural expectations shape meaning. Language learners may fail to understand indirect speech acts, humor, sarcasm, or emotional connotations without knowledge of the underlying culture. Therefore,

pragmatic competence is inseparable from cultural competence when it comes to understanding and using language effectively.

Cognitive linguistics, as developed by scholars such as George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, shows how metaphors are deeply embedded in cultural experience. Their notion of conceptual metaphor explains how we structure abstract thinking using culturally specific source domains (e.g., “argument is war” in English). These metaphors permeate everyday expressions and require cultural unpacking for learners to understand.

For example, “time is money” is a metaphorical construct in many Western societies, but it may not have the same urgency or resonance in other cultures. Teaching these metaphors thus involves teaching worldviews, conceptual systems, and experiential knowledge.

Language is one of the most powerful tools of cultural identity. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, though debated, supports the idea that the structure of a language affects its speakers’ worldview. This hypothesis suggests that learning a language means adopting a new way of thinking—what Kramsch (1993) refers to as a “third place” in intercultural communication, a space where learners negotiate between their native and the target culture.

For example, using diminutives or expressive suffixes in Russian (-очка, -енький) carries emotional and social meanings that are difficult to convey in English. Mastery of such forms deepens the learner’s emotional engagement with the language and fosters a more nuanced cultural understanding. The teaching of linguistic units with national-cultural components is not merely an enrichment of the language learning process—it is an essential element of communicative competence in a globalized, multicultural world. Such linguistic units embody the lived experiences, values, and worldview of a people, serving as carriers of cultural memory and national identity. By learning to understand and use these culturally embedded forms, language learners gain deeper access to the internal logic and emotional rhythms of the target culture, moving beyond functional proficiency toward true intercultural competence.

However, the process is complex and fraught with pedagogical, institutional, and psychological challenges. Issues such as cultural untranslatability, limited teacher preparation, curriculum constraints, learner resistance, and assessment limitations hinder the effective integration of these units into language education. Moreover, the risk of stereotyping or oversimplifying target cultures remains a pressing concern.

Despite these difficulties, a number of promising approaches exist. Emphasizing intercultural communicative competence, selecting authentic and diverse materials, incorporating project-based and task-based learning, and training teachers as cultural mediators are essential strategies. Furthermore, leveraging technology—through multimedia content, virtual exchanges, and digital storytelling—can offer rich, immersive contexts for learning cultural linguistic units.

Incorporating culturally rich linguistic units into the curriculum is not just about teaching “colorful language”; it is about fostering empathy, reducing prejudice, and cultivating learners who can navigate diverse linguistic and cultural worlds with awareness, respect, and sophistication. Teachers, curriculum designers, and institutions must collaborate to ensure that language education is not divorced from the cultural fabric that gives it life.

In conclusion, addressing the problem of teaching linguistic units with national-cultural components requires a shift in both pedagogical philosophy and practice. The integration of language and culture must become a central goal of language instruction, ensuring that learners are not just grammatically competent but also culturally intelligent, socially sensitive, and globally aware.

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