



A Survey on Necessity of Cultural Awareness in Language Teaching and Learning in EFL Contexts

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received: 16 August 2013;

Received in revised form:

29 September 2013;

Accepted: 4 October 2013;

Keywords

Culture teaching;

EFL learners;

EFL teachers.

ABSTRACT

Based on a well-known saying in the field of language teaching, teaching language is nothing but teaching culture. This study is also another evidence for this saying. In other words, the aim of this study was, in fact, to highlight the role of teaching foreign language culture in language learning and teaching. To conduct the intended purpose, two questionnaires were distributed among the student and teacher participants of the study in Shiraz, Iran. The purpose of using the two questionnaires was to find out first, to what extent teachers and students are aware of the role of foreign culture awareness in language learning and teaching; and second, to what extent does teachers are aware of the strategies and techniques of teaching foreign language culture and how students benefit from it. The study revealed that first, both students and teachers do believe that culture and language are inseparable and second, teachers were able to conduct strategies and techniques of teaching foreign language culture to emphasize it in class. The study also provides a few implications regarding the culture and language teaching.

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Introduction

It is a widely agreed comment that teaching culture is an important factor in foreign language instructions. The teaching of culture, as Chastain (1988) also believes, is an integral component of the course content. Chastain further adds that in an ideal language class the basic aspects of that language cultural knowledge are included, students know that these pieces of knowledge are among the most important goals of the course, they also know that they will be tested on these types of knowledge, and on the whole, they know that they are expected to both learn a people (culture) and a language.

Moreover, teaching culture has been considered important in foreign language instruction for almost a century. We all know that understanding a language involves not only knowledge of grammar, phonology, and lexis, but also certain features and characteristics of the culture. Some authors mention different aspects of teaching and learning culture as a basis of learning language and they should be taken into consideration when they are teaching foreign language in order to motivate their students. Besides, the culture associations that are part of language, as well as the socio-cultural background of the participants in teaching and learning environment, ultimately affect how and how well the language is learnt. Since one part of foreign language learning is rooted in culturally-influenced use of language and sociolinguistic rules that underlying it, Albertini (1993, p.60) suggests that an examination of assumption is especially important for teachers of students from non-dominant culture – that is student from non-Eurocentric, non-English background – because their school achievement typically falls below that of dominant culture students. Therefore, here we can have some opinions towards the importance of teaching foreign language culture along with teaching structures.

However, there are some problems in teaching foreign language culture, especially in the way it should be taught. One

of them is how to provide the culture information needed. Many Iranian teachers, through no fault of their own, are simply not equipped to teach culture. The other group of the teachers doesn't know the value of teaching foreign language culture in the classroom and they think just concentrating on form and the syllabus of the course is enough. Another major problem is how to device ways of presenting culture in such a manner that the students can comprehend and relate to the information. The third problem is that of finding time in the class period to include culture. Therefore, many of described techniques take relatively little class time and some take more time than the teacher might desire.

All in all, there are some valid reasons why there is a need to discuss some Iranian teachers' unawareness of teaching foreign language culture. First, it is necessary to explore foreign language culture in general and compare it with the Iranian teachers' tendency on teaching foreign language culture. Moreover, it is beneficial to prepare Iranian teachers with regards to teaching foreign culture and provide them with some techniques and strategies which are useful and effective in class environment. Thirdly, it is useful to motivate students by exposing some cultures related to the subject which is teaching at the time. Therefore, a study on some shortcomings which exist in teaching target culture and by clarifying some of them in order to improve them has practical value and for it may help to overcome some difficulties which relate to misunderstanding of the native speakers' message. In this study, the following research questions were treated:

1. Do students need to be familiar with the culture of the second language they are learning?
2. Do teachers teach their students about culture and how much do they emphasize it?

Literature Review

So far a lot of studies have been conducted to show the effect of teaching FL culture in the classroom, and it was found some strategies and techniques which are useful to utilize in the class environment. It is extremely difficult to define what culture is. "Culture" is believed to be one of the most complicated words in English language, and giving a precise definition of it is time-consuming. Kenneth Chastain (1988, p.302) says that culture may mean different things to different people. He states that in the anthropology sense, culture is defined as the way people live. He also argues this definition encompasses the types of information that would seem to be of most interest and importance to the typical student enrolled in a language class. Another definition, which Chastain (1988, p.303) declares, focuses on the major products and contributions of a society in general or of outstanding individuals in that society.

Brook (1975, p.20) has proclaimed several meanings of culture, two of them are of major importance for us: culture as everything in human life and culture as the best in human life. Then, base on this definition, culture can play the main role in every aspects of human life and that can be the best. In another definition, Seelye defines culture as a broad concept that embraces all aspects of human life, "from folktales to carved whales" (1984, p.26). Byram (1989, p.15) refers to culture as: "the whole way of life of a foreign country, including but not limited to its production in arts, philosophy, and "high culture" in general. According to this definition we can conclude that culture has a wide range of meaning and it is not constrained to the just theories.

Other authors emphasize dynamic, on-going nature of culture: culture is not a given, but constituted in the everyday practice of groups and individuals (Robert et al. 2001, p.30 cited by Bateman, 2002, p.319). From this perspective, it is hard to imagine "teaching culture." That is precisely the point, Tomlinson and Masuhara (2004) believe that: "teaching culture" has to be "teaching cultural awareness" since, as Tseng (2002, p.13) puts it, "understanding culture is a process of rather than external knowledge to be acquire." Then, both teachers and students of FL need to understand culture differences, to recognize openly that everyone in the world is not "just like me", that people are not all the same beneath the skin (Cakir, 2006). There is another author who discusses language and culture in the aspect of teaching method and material.

Hardly (2004, p.22) also claim that when teaching an international language such as English, teachers must consider the characteristics of such a language, and language teaching in specific, the role language plays in the cultural expressions we make and the role of teaching materials and methods. These materials and methods, as McKay (2003, cited in Hardly, 2004, p.22) makes clear both have differing and important impacts on language acquisition. The other author (Halverson, 1985 cited in Moran, 2001) discusses the great achievement of people as reflected in their history, social institution, works of art, music and literature which commonly referred to as 'big C' culture. He says culture is also viewed as the customs, traditions or practices that people carry out as part of their everyday lives which it is referred to as 'small C'. In the other side, linguistic competence is not enough for learners of a language to be competent in that language (Krasner, 1999). Language learners need to be aware of the culturally appreciate ways for addressing people, greeting, expressing needs, and agree or disagree with someone. In some points of view, some authors believe that there are real

differences between groups and cultures (Brown, 1994, p.167). Therefore, language teachers cannot avoid conveying impressions of another culture whether they realize it or not (River, 1981, p.315). So, by considering these utterances, we can conclude that the language cannot be completely separated from the culture in which it is deeply embedded.

Kitao (2000) giving reference to several authors, lists some of the benefits of teaching culture. For example, as Chastain remarks (1971); from the perspective of learners, one of the major problems in language teaching is to conceive of the native speakers of target language as real person. Although grammar books give so called genuine example from real life, without background knowledge those real situations may be considered fictive by the learners. In addition providing access into cultural aspect of language, learning culture would help learners relate the abstract sounds and forms of a language to real people and places. In other side, the effect of motivation in studying of L2 has been proved by experts like Gardner and Lambert (1959, 1965, and 1972). In achieving high motivation, culture classes do have a great role because learners like culturally based activities such as singing, dancing, role playing, doing research on countries and people, etc.

By broad studying, there are some other authors who focus on teaching culture in childhood. Teaching is a mode of cultural transmission that varies across cultures (Stevenson & Stigler, 1992; Stigler & Hiebert, 1999 cited in Ashley, 2004, p.517) and activity settings (Cole & Cole, 2001; Greenfield, 1984), and that develops in childhood (Maynard, 2002; Strauss, Ziv, & Stein, 2002; Wood, Wood, Ainsworth, & O'Mally, 1995 cited in Ashley, 2004). Learning how to teach occurs in activity settings that are situated in cultural places. There is variation in the activity settings of teaching across cultures, and sometimes across practices within the same culture (Ashley, 2004, p.517).

Another aspect of teaching that should be considered in teaching culture is cultural awareness. In this field, there are some authors and writers who have a very clear introduction to their concept of cultural awareness. Tavares and Cavalcanti (1996, p.19) emphasize on teaching target culture in the class and stress that the aim of teaching culture is to increase students awareness and to develop their curiosity towards the target culture and their own, helping them to make a comparison among cultures. Then by focusing on teaching FL culture, student can have a great knowledge in the target culture. Some of these authors tried to make distinction between cultural awareness and cultural knowledge (Tomlinson, & Masuhara, 2004). Elspeth Broady (2004, p.68) states that cultural knowledge (that is, information about the target culture, its typical patterns of behavior and its attitudes) is likely to be external, static, stereotypical, and reduced; that is, it tends to be knowledge that is passed on to a learner from someone else, rather than arising from the learner's own experience; it reflects broad generalizations often based on a narrow selection of evidence and while such knowledge can give us pointers to differences in behaviors and values, it can also be misleading.

There are a handful of studies of how people acquire second culture. These studies refer to the mid 1980's which can be found in the literature of applied language and culture studies in that decade. During the past decade, several recent European studies have been particularly helpful in developing methods and theory for clarifying processes in second culture learning (Berwick, R., F., & Whalley, T., R. 2000). The seminal study in this area is Byram, Estarte-Sarrie and Taylor (1991 cited in Berwick, R., F., & Whalley, T., R. 2000), an extensive

description of the culture learning of secondary students in French-as-a-foreign-language classrooms. The focus of this study was to understand the process and sequence of changing perceptions of French culture among British secondary students.

Method

Participants

The participants of this study were 62 teachers and students selected randomly from Atlas English Language Institute and MA students of English Department of Shiraz University. Out of this, 20 were teachers and 42 students. The teachers were both male (8) and female (12) aged between 25 and 40 and were all M.A students of Shiraz University function as teacher in Atlas Language Institute, Shiraz, Iran. As for the students, 42 students aged from 15 to 25, both male (28) and female (14) learning English in the same institute, took part in the study. It should be mentioned that these students were at advanced level of proficiency.

Instrument

In order to conduct the study, two likert questionnaires were utilized. The first questionnaire consisted of two sections (developed by an international team supported by the Council of Europe's European Center for Modern Language in Graz, the British Council and Minister of Education) which the author used section A of this questionnaire for administration. This section included 53 items. Each item contained 5 choices. The second questionnaire contained two sections; the first section included 6 questions (The purpose of the first of which to answer to this question that how often the teachers include activities based on these topics in their English lesson) and the second section contained 7 questions (The purpose of this section was to evaluate how much the teachers emphasize teaching culture in second language classroom), which was adapted from the work of Gardner and Symthe (1974) and Snow (1985). As for the reliability and validity of the instruments, Cronbach Alpha was used for the reliability and it turned out to be almost .85 and .75 respectively; and for the validity, they were both looked into by some professors of Shiraz University and were confirmed to be apposite for the study purpose.

Data Collection

First the questionnaire related to the teacher participants of the study was administered and then the questionnaire pertaining to the learner participants of the study were distributed. The purpose of these questionnaires were to determine the teachers and students' cultural awareness and that how much the teachers emphasize on teaching culture in the class and how much students were familiar with the target culture and how much that caused students to improve their motivation in learning second language. It should be pointed out that before administering the questionnaires, the significance of the work and their responses were explained and they were asked to read the items carefully and then respond to items. Besides, they were apprised that they would be given enough time to respond the items.

Data Analysis

The responses of the participants were analyzed through the SPSS statistical package version 16 in general and observing frequencies of values and their chi-square dependent significance in particular. It should be mentioned that for each questionnaire a Chi-square was run separately. The result obtained after running the SPSS program are explained and interpreted in the result section.

Results

Having carried out the study and analyzed the data, interesting finding resulted. First, the results obtained from the

questionnaire of the students are represented. Table 1 reveals the summary of the case processing information. It is obvious that all of the participants responded all the items of the questionnaire and there is no item missing. It should be pointed that N in this table shows the number of all responses not the participants.

Table 1. Case Processing Summary						
	Cases					
	Valid		Missing		Total	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
Questions * Opinions	2226	100.0%	0	.0%	2226	100.0%

The other table gained was question-opinion cross tabulation which due to its being too big to be included in the paper is just described. It contains 53 items, 5 opinions for each item. It indicates how many of the participants selected *disagree a lot*, *disagree a little*, *don't know*, *agree a little*, and *agree a lot* (Disalot=disagree a lot; Disalittle=disagree a little; Dontknow=don't know; Agalittle=agree a little; Agalot=agree a lot) (See Appendix 3a). In this table, the total number of each choice has been provided. In addition, for each item there are 42 perspectives. As it was illustrated in Table 1, the total number of these perspectives is 2226 which the number of *disagree a lot* opinions are 277, *disagree a little* 234, *don't know* 232, *agree a little* 584, and *agree a lot* 899.

The last and the most important table in this analysis is Chi-square test table, Table 2, showing the result of Chi-square test. The table reveals that most of students who participate in this study are familiar with the role of culture in learning second language ($p < .05$).

Table 2. Chi-Square Tests				
	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	
Pearson Chi-Square	1.839E3 ^a	208	.000	
Likelihood Ratio	1.764E3	208	.000	
Linear-by-Linear Association	.253	1	.615	

The second questionnaire was related to teachers' awareness towards the importance of culture teaching. This questionnaire contained two different sections. The purpose of the first section was to answer to this question that how often the teachers include activities based on these topics in their English lesson. After running Chi-square, three tables were again obtained. Table 3 involves the summary of case processing. Again, this table indicates that all participants answered all questions.

Table 3. Case Processing Summary						
	Cases					
	Valid		Missing		Total	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
Question * Opinion	120	100.0%	0	.0%	120	100.0%

The other table incorporated question-opinion cross tabulation that like the previous case due to its big space, it has been omitted from the manuscript. It contains 6 items; for each item there are four choices. It presents the information about how many of participants selected never, rarely, sometimes, and often choices (N=never; R=rarely; S=sometimes; O=often) (See Appendix 3b). It also presents the total number of each choice.

Table 4 represents the main findings of Chi-square test. It revealed that teachers' awareness toward the role of culture teaching is significant ($P < .05$).

Table 4. Chi-Square Tests			
	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	59.133 ^a	15	.01
Likelihood Ratio	72.589	15	.01

As with the second part of the second questionnaire, like the previous section, three tables were obtained. The first table, that is Table 5, showed the summery of the case processing. It obviously shows the 100 percent participation of the participants in this survey.

Table 5. Case Processing Summary

	Cases					
	Valid		Missing		Total	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
Questions * Opinion	140	100.0%	0	.0%	140	100.0%

Table 6 is the cross tabulation table that indicates the number of questions, the total number of each choice, and the total number of each opinion. The items included three choices. The choices, with comparison with the previous section, limited to never, sometimes, and always (N=never; S=sometimes; A=always) (See Appendix 3c).

And finally is Table 7 that represents the main findings of Chi-square test. Like the two previous cases, the table shows a significant difference; meaning that teachers emphasize adequately the culture aspect of foreign language ($P<0.05$).

Table 9. Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	40.900 ^a	12	.000
Likelihood Ratio	46.559	12	.000

Discussion

All in all, in this survey, based on the results which were gained, it was understood that firstly, the majority of the students were significantly aware of the important role of culture in language teaching and learning. In other words, student participants of the study preferred learning culture during their studying their foreign language and had motivation in doing some activities in relation to the foreign culture and consequently, understanding the foreign language culture. This finding is in accordance with the theoretical studies previously done on the same issue. As an example, Özyaka (2001) argues that cultural familiarization of language activates learners’ relevant schemata and they can employ suitable strategies to ameliorate the effectiveness of language learning process. Garner, Gillingham, and White (1989), Schank (1979), Brown (2007), Alexander and Jetton (2000) also emphasize that learners and teachers of a second or foreign language need to understand cultural aspects of the specific language. In fact, obtaining cultural knowledge cause students’ motivation to improve. Brown (1980) also states that both learners and teachers of a second or foreign language need to understand cultural information and cultural differences.

Secondly, the study results showed that most of the teachers are aware of the inevitable and unignorable role of culture activities in teaching the foreign language. Some of them believed that teaching these activities would make the students more motivated to learn the language. They further state that these activities make them to be familiar with culture of the target language and the inseparable connection between language and culture. The study also revealed that the majority of teachers are familiar with the target culture and therefore they always try to introduce students to the target culture using different techniques like telling them the real fact of the target culture, putting the students in the real situations, using different foreign culture tools and materials including clothes, poems, etc. As with the related studies on the same issue, Numerous authors (Kramsch, 1993; Byram, 1989) have highlighted the impossibility of teaching a language without teaching its receptive culture Savignon and Sysoyev (2002) also

emphasizing the necessity of teaching culture for EFL learners proposed that if it were not English but any other language in the world, then it would be possible to teach the culture with the language; but that is not the same for English as it is a global language. Whether culture is consciously or unconsciously part of teachers’ pedagogic aims, the transmission of culture is unavoidable. The content of what we teach will always be in some way linked to culture, as Tseng (2002) pointed out “every lesson is about something and that something is culture” (p. 20).

Conclusion

It has been several times highlighted that the studying of grammar and structure is not enough for learning a foreign or second language. Further, it should be pointed out that understanding the cultural context of day to day conversational conventions such as greeting farewells, thanking making requests, and so on means much more than just being able to produce the grammatical sentences. Rather, students need to be informed about both linguistic and non-linguistic aspects of the intended language. Amid non-linguistic aspects cultural knowledge plays an important role. In other words, it is important for students to know that studying English culture is not an arbitrary but a necessary activity. Of course, the idea of culture is nothing new to second language teachers. Most of the time, teaching culture has meant focusing a few lessons on holidays, customary clothing, folk songs, and food.

As a result of this study, the teachers should consider the needs of students in relation to the target culture. There are a lot of techniques and strategies which teachers can rely on them in conducting the class. Students believe that if they are provided with more situations related to the target culture they can get it better. Teachers are responsible for making students to be familiar with the target culture. Teachers should also be up-to-date, because they are expected to inform students some attractive and important aspects of target culture and they are expected to compare them with the first culture. They should be sensitive about comments they make that relate to cultural values that might run counter to the values held by students.

As with the implications drawn from the study, First, Culture and language are inexorably linked and as such cannot be separated. Numerous authors (Kramsch, 1993; Byram, 1989) have highlighted the impossibility of teaching a language without teaching its receptive culture. Savignon and Sysoyev (2002) emphasizing the necessity of teaching culture for EFL learners propose that if it were not English but any other language in the world, then it would be possible to teach the culture with the language; but that is not the same for English as it is a global language. Besides, in the light of this research, teachers may be recommended to activate learners’ schemata before any activity. Another and probably the most important finding of the study is that teaching cultural materials and texts helps students achieve better comprehension and provides them with more motivation in order to perform better.

Finally, the following topics can be suggested for those who are interested in conducting research in the area of reading and listening comprehension.

1. To investigate the probable impact of level of proficiency, another research can be undertaken with participation of learners from three different level of proficiency, i.e., beginning, intermediate, and advanced.
2. The effect of culturally-oriented materials on productive and receptive skills of learners, namely, speaking, writing, listening, and reading can be explored in another study.

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