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The Importance of Including Culture in EFL Teaching

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Abstract

Language and culture are two inseparable entities. Therefore, language learning is at once a cultural learning. One's mastery of the linguistic elements alone does not guarantee he will be able to communicate through a language. Mastering the cultural element is a must. This paper discusses various research findings and opinions on the integration of culture into the teaching of foreign language teaching. The discussion aimed to highlight the foundation, the existence, impact, and technical integration of cultural elements into the teaching of English as a foreign language.

Keywords: culture, incorporating, values, blue print, culture capsules

Introduction

Linguists and anthropologists have long recognized that the forms and uses of a given language reflect the cultural values of the society in which the language is spoken. Observing one's daily experience in communicating with other people using different vernacular, it's obvious that linguistic competence alone is not enough for him to be competent in that language. He needs to be aware, for example, of the culturally appropriate ways to address people, express gratitude, make requests, and agree or disagree with someone. He should know that behaviors and intonation patterns that are appropriate in his own speech community may be perceived differently by members of the target language speech community. Smith (1985), for instance, explains that the presentation of an argument in a way that sounds fluent and elegant in one culture may be regarded as clumsy and circular by members of another culture (p. 2). Thus, in order for communication to be successful, language use must be associated with other culturally appropriate behavior. Based on their observation, Samovar, Porter, and Jain (1981) emphasize:

Culture and communication are inseparable because culture not only dictates who talks to whom, about what, and how the communication proceeds, it also helps to determine how people encode messages, the meanings they have for messages, and the conditions and circumstances under which various messages may or may not be sent, noticed, or interpreted... Culture...is the foundation of communication (p. 24).

Such recognition then cultivated awareness in second language/foreign language teaching experts that language and culture are inseparable. Peck (1998), for instance, emphasizes that "Without the study of culture, foreign language instruction is inaccurate and incomplete" (p. 1). This awareness later developed the perspective that teaching and learning culture in a SL/FL program are inevitable. Despite the awareness, it remains unclear to many foreign language educators just why and how this has come to be the case, what impact this has on their classroom practice, and how to incorporate culture into the FL classroom. This article aims to deal with these issues by working towards an understanding of culture in FL education. In doing so, it will examine why and how FL cultural teaching has developed, where it currently stands, how to incorporate culture into the FL classroom and what directions to take for forthcoming research on this topic.

The Development of Cultural Teaching in SL/FL Teaching

Although the presence of cultural issues are relatively recent in the writings, researches, and forums of SL/FL education, a review of the SL/FL

literature shows that cultural elements have practically been included even from the early phase of SL/FL teaching. Sysoyev & Donelson (2002) explain that during the first decades of the 20th century researchers discussed the importance and possibilities of including cultural components into SL/FL curriculum. This is supported by Allen's (1985) summary on the trends of the early SL/FL teaching that "... prior to the 1960s, the lines between language and culture were carefully drawn. The primary reason for second language study in the earlier part of this century was access to the great literary masterpieces of civilization" (p. 138). In line with this, Flewelling (1993) explains that in the sixties students, through reading, learned the civilization associated with the target language" (p. 339).

The implementation of Structuralism, Direct Method, Audiolingualism, Community Language Learning, Suggestopedia, the Silent Way, Total Physical Response, and the Natural Approach in the beginning of 1970s made culture neglected. These approaches regard ESL/EFL teaching as a matter of linguistics, and thus, emphasis was put on structures and vocabulary. The advent of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in the late 1970s made the negligence of culture became worse. This approach focuses on the teaching of "usable, practical" contents directed to enable learners communicate orally, so that ESL/EFL classrooms initially dominated by dialogues. However, in later development of the communicative approach it was realized that to communicate effectively, one should adapt the properties of his language use (such as intonation, lexical choice, and syntax) to the social 'variables' (such as those of class, gender or race) in which he interacts with others. Consequently, role of culture in the ESL/EFL curriculum grew, as it shown by the appearance a great number of teacher-oriented texts, like those of Rivers's (1981) and Hammerly's (1982), which included detailed chapters on culture teaching for the ESL/EFL class. Other major works concerning culture learning in ESL/EFL contexts appeared in this era are Robinson's (1988) and Valdes' (1986).

In the 1990s, the cultural syllabus has been supported by researches and its importance was reaffirmed in Stern's (1992) book. Recent studies and writings such as those of Byram (1994; 1997a; 1997b) and Kramsch (1993; 2001) strengthened the seamless relationship of ESL/EFL teaching and target culture teaching. What is more, growth of English as an international language causes the inclusion of culture in EFL curriculum unavoidable.

Culture in the Context of Language Teaching

Why is incorporating culture in a ESL/EFL classroom inevitable? There are at least three fundamental reasons we can put forth to answer this question.

First, culture and language are inseparable. Politzer, (as cited in Brooks, 1960) points out:

"As language teachers we must be interested in the study of culture not because we necessarily *want* to teach the culture of the other country, but because we *have to* teach it. If 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; for unless he is warned, unless he receives cultural instruction, he will associate American concepts or objects with the foreign symbols". (p. 85-86)

Concurrent with that, Brown (1994) emphasizes "... a language is a part of culture and a culture is a part of a language. The two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture" (p. 164).

In a more detailed way, Buttjes (1990), by referring to some ethnographic language studies, summarizes several reasons why language and culture are from the start inseparably connected, i.e.: (1) language acquisition does not follow a universal sequence, but differs across cultures; (2) the process of becoming a competent member of society is realized through exchanges of language in particular social situations; (3) every society orchestrates the ways in which children participate in particular situations, and this, in turn, affects the form, the function, and the content of children's utterances; (4) caregivers' primary concern is not with grammatical input, but with the transmission of sociocultural knowledge; and (5) the native learner, in addition to language, acquires also the paralinguistic patterns and the kinesics of his or her culture (p. 55).

The second reason for the inevitability of incorporating cultural matters into an ESL/EFL program is the premise that since language and culture are inseparable, language teaching is culture teaching. Valdes (as cited in Baker, 2003) states: "every language lesson is about something and that something is cultural." After observing some relevant studies, Buttjes (1990) explains how language teaching is culture teaching: (1) language codes cannot be taught in isolation because processes of socio-cultural transmission are bound to be at work on many levels, e.g. the contents of language exercises, the cultural discourse of textbooks, and the teacher's attitudes towards the target culture; and (2) in their role of "secondary care givers" language teachers need to go beyond monitoring linguistic production in the classroom and become aware of the complex and numerous processes of intercultural mediation that any foreign language learner undergoes (p. 55). To accentuate that an ESL/EFL teaching is

a foreign culture teaching, Brown (1994) emphasizes on ‘acculturation’—the process of becoming adapted to a new culture (p. 33).

The third reason for the inevitability of incorporating cultural matters into an ESL/EFL program is the fact that the major goal of a foreign language program is the mastery of communicative competence. To achieve this, a learner should be able to conceive of the native speakers of target language as real person. For many people, this is difficult to do for although grammar books gives so called genuine examples from real life, without background knowledge those real situations may be considered fictive by the learners. In other words, one needs a sound grasp of the background knowledge of the target culture in order to communicate successfully with the speakers of another language. His understanding of the culture would help him relate the abstract sounds and forms of a language to real people and places (Chastain, 1971). Thus, an ESL/EFL learning is fundamentally a foreign culture learning. Samovar et al. (1981) accentuate:

Culture and communication are inseparable because culture not only dictates who talks to whom, about what, and how the communication proceeds, it also helps to determine how people encode messages, the meanings they have for messages, and the conditions and circumstances under which various messages may or may not be sent, noticed, or interpreted... Culture...is the foundation of communication (p. 3).

Finally, cultural learning is very effective to increase learners’ motivation—which greatly affects every learning process. Culture classes do have a great role in achieving high motivation because most learners like culturally based activities such as singing, dancing, role playing, or doing research on other countries and peoples. This is reinforced by Hammerly (1982) that teaching about the target culture when teaching the target language piques the interest of students and acts as a motivator.

What is Culture?

Defining culture into a single definition is very complicated, particularly in an increasingly international world. Even anthropology, the field that concerns itself with the study of different cultures, cannot yet properly define what culture is. Trifonovitch’s (as cited in Croft, 1980) survey reveals over 450 different definitions of the word or concept of culture available in literature (p. 550). To a certain extent, this finding underlines the difficulty and scope of the issues involved in communicating and teaching about culture. Nonetheless, the development of culture teaching in SL/FL education has led to a current understanding of culture, which will be briefly summarized here.

Tylor (as cited in Croft, 1980) regards culture as: ... that complex whole which includes knowledge, believe, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (p. 531). According to Moran (2001), culture is “the great achievement of people as reflected in their history, social institutions, works of art, architecture, music and literature (p. 4)” These three definitions denote that language is an aspect of culture because language is basically ‘learned and shared by man as a member of society’. And, in relation to foreign language learning, strictly speaking, these definitions imply that when somebody learns a foreign language, he participates to some extent in the culture of the native speaker of the language being learned.

Adaskou, Britten & Fahsi (1990) help us define culture on a more specific level by outlining four meanings of culture. Their aesthetic sense includes cinema, literature, music, and media, while their sociological one refers to the organization and nature of family, interpersonal relations, customs, material conditions, and so on. Their semantic sense encompasses the whole conceptualization system which conditions perceptions and thought processes, and their pragmatic or sociolinguistic sense refers to the background knowledge, social and paralinguistic skills, and language code which are necessary for successful communication. While not necessarily all-inclusive or mutually exclusive, these aspects of culture provide more substance to the general definition above and reflect culture's many dimensions. These four senses of culture outline the substance of our culture teaching as we discuss, model, and teach the SL or FL culture in our classes.

Different from the former definitions, which pay greater attention to concrete elements, recent definitions tend to emphasize the abstract element that underlies observable behavior. Condon (cited in Brown, 1994), for instance, defines culture as “a system of integrated patterns, most of which remain below the threshold of consciousness, yet all of which govern human behavior just as surely as the manipulated strings of a puppet control its motions” (p. 123). Thompson (1990) views culture as “... the pattern of meanings embodied in symbolic forms, including actions, utterances, and meaningful objects of various kinds, by virtue of which individuals communicate with one another and share their experiences, conceptions and believes” (p. 132). In a more detailed version, Larson and Smalley (1972) describe culture as a “blue print” that:

“guides the behavior of people in a community and is incubated in family life. It governs our behavior in groups, makes use sensitive to matters of status, and help us know what other expect of us and what

will happen if we do not live up to their expectations. Culture helps us to know how far we can go as individuals and what our responsibility is to the group. Different cultures are the underlying structures which make Round community round and Square community square” (p. 39).

By synthesizing these definitions we can have essential ideas. First, culture is the context within which a member of a society exists, behaves, thinks, feels and relates to other. It is the shared value system of the members of a society. Second, as a system, culture has patterns, which an outsider can understand. The notion, that culture has patterns, is very beneficial for us, because it enables us to understand a foreign culture by comparing its patterns to the patterns of our own culture. Third, developed based on symbols manifested in abstract ways of referring to and understanding ideas, culture is communicated through language. Fourth, culture is shared by people in the same society. Finally, culture is learned. People are not genetically endowed by a particular culture. Children develop their value system and the rules of society by interacting with their surroundings, especially with their family.

The Culture to teach

What type of culture should be taught in the SL/FL classroom? Relating the essential ideas provided by the aforesaid definitions and the reasons for the inevitability of incorporating cultural matters into the SL/FL classroom, it is apparent that the major forms of culture we need to deal with in a foreign language program should be the one that views culture as a “blue print” or integrated patterns of abstraction derived from observable behavior of a group of people. In other words, the major cultural contents to include in a language classroom should be what Tomalin and Stempleski (1993) call with the little ‘c’ of culture, i.e. “culturally influenced beliefs and perceptions, especially as expressed through language, but also through cultural behaviors that affect acceptability in the host community” (p. 6). In relation to this, Brooks (1983) suggests that the cultural elements to be emphasized in the classroom are patterns of living which refers to;

“the individual’s role in the unending kaleidoscope of life situations of every kind and the rules and models for attitude and conduct in them. By reference to these models, every human being, from infancy onward, justifies the world to himself as best he can, associates with those around him, and relates to the social order to which he is attached” (p. 210).

Therefore, realistic elements of culture we should include are notions like when and what people eat; how they make a living; the attitudes they express towards friends and members of their families; which expressions they use to show approval or disapproval, educational attitudes, time and space patterns, work values, etc. In this sense, culture is a body of ready-made solutions to the problems encountered by the group. It is a cushion between man and his environment. Although the concrete forms of culture like painting, music, tools, and facts of history or geography are interesting to discuss, since they do not provide an intimate view of what life is really like in the target culture, they are not of high important to deal with in relation to the teaching of a foreign language.

How to incorporate culture into the EFL classroom

Now that the what, why, and the development of incorporating culture in the foreign language classroom have been established, a focus on the how is needed. Better international understanding is a noble aim, but how can the transition be made from theoretical matters to the active, crowded, and sometimes noisy foreign language classroom? One problem in all classroom work is the involvement of students' interest, attention, and active participation. Learning activities which focus on active rather than passive learning are the best.

Traditional methods of teaching culture in the foreign language classroom have been focused on formal culture and passive learning. Students do need both a geographical and historical perspective in order to understand contemporary behavior patterns but this can be done with "hands on" activities. In order to communicate effectively in the target language, foreign language students should be facilitated to feel, touch, smell, and see the foreign peoples and not just hear their language.

To achieve that goal, cultural activities and objectives should be carefully organized and incorporated into lesson plans to enrich and inform the teaching content. The use of following materials and techniques for presenting culture in the classroom is widely recommended.

1. Authentic Materials

Using authentic sources from the native speech community, like films, news broadcasts, and television shows; Web sites; and photographs, magazines, newspapers, restaurant menus, travel brochures, and other printed materials, helps to engage students in authentic cultural experiences. Teachers can adapt their use of authentic materials to suit the age and language proficiency level of

the students. For example, even beginning language students can watch and listen to video clips taken from a T.V. show in the target language and focus on such cultural conventions as greetings. The teacher might supply students with a detailed translation or give them a chart, diagram, or outline to complete while they listen to a dialogue or watch a video.

After the class has viewed the relevant segments, the teacher can engage the students in discussion of the cultural norms represented in the segments and what these norms might say about the values of the culture. Discussion topics might include nonverbal behaviors (e.g., the physical distance between speakers, gestures, eye contact, societal roles, and how people in different social roles relate to each other). Students might describe the behaviors they observe and discuss which of them are similar to their native culture and which are not and determine strategies for effective communication in the target language.

2. Proverbs

Discussion of common proverbs in the target language could focus on how the proverbs are different from or similar to proverbs in the students' native language and how differences might underscore historical and cultural background. Using proverbs as a way to explore culture also provides a way to analyze the stereotypes about and misperceptions of the culture, as well as a way for students to explore the values that are often represented in the proverbs of their native culture.

3. Role Play

In role plays, students can act out a miscommunication that is based on cultural differences. For example, after learning about ways of addressing different groups of people in the target culture, such as people of the same age and older people, students could role play a situation in which an inappropriate greeting is used. Other students observe the role play and try to identify the reason for the miscommunication. They then role play the same situation using a culturally appropriate form of address.

4. Culture Capsules

Students can be presented with objects (e.g., figurines, tools, jewelry, art) or images that originate from the target culture. The students are then responsible for finding information about the item in question, either by conducting research or by being given clues to investigate. They can either write a brief summary or make an oral presentation to the class about the cultural relevance of the item. Such activities can also serve as a foundation from which teachers can go on to discuss larger cultural, historical, and

linguistic factors that tie in with the objects. Such contextualization is, in fact, important to the success of using culture capsules. Exchange students, immigrant students, or students who speak the target language at home can be invited to the classroom as expert sources. These students can share authentic insights into the home and cultural life of native speakers of the language.

5. Ethnographic Studies

An effective way for students to learn about the target language and culture is to send them into their own community to find information. Students can carry out ethnographic interviews with native speakers in the community, which they can record in notebooks or on audiotapes or videotapes. Discussion activities could include oral family histories, interviews with community professionals, and studies of social groups. It is important to note that activities involving the target-language community require a great deal of time on the part of the teacher to help set them up and to offer ongoing supervision.

6. Literature

Literary works can be an effective means to develop the understanding of other cultures because they provide the readers with insights of other cultures without having to visit the real place. Carter (1995) points out:

Literature, it seems to me, is the surest bridge to understanding. Let students read novels, plays, short stories, and yes, poems from other nations and cultures. Let them immerse themselves vicariously in the other lives, and sort of actually living there for an extended period, they'll have about as intensive an understanding as it is possible to get. I remember reading something in a textbook recently, a piece of advice offered by photographer Burt Glinn to would-travellers to the Soviet Union. "Instead of looking at the book I did on Russia," Glinn says, "you would do better to read Tolstoy or Chekov to understand what the Russians are alike."

7. Film

Film and television segments offer students an opportunity to witness behaviors that are not obvious in texts. Film is often one of the more current and comprehensive ways to encapsulate the look, feel, and rhythm of a culture. Film also connects students with language and cultural issues simultaneously, such as depicting conversational timing or turn-taking in conversation. Herron et al.'s (1999) study showed that students achieved significant gains in overall cultural knowledge after watching videos from the target culture in the classroom.

Issues for Research

The idea of teaching culture is nothing new to ESL/EFL teachers. Cultural elements have practically been included even from the early phase of ESL/EFL teaching. Despite that fact, since the incorporation of culture is one of the most recent issues in the field of language teaching, several areas need to be investigated in order to further develop our understanding of culture in ESL/EFL education.

One area that needs to be dealt with is related to both teachers and students' perceptions of the importance of culture learning in various ESL/EFL programs and contexts. Are certain types of teachers or learners more open to or enthusiastic about ESL/EFL culture learning? How important do they think culture is in learning ESL/EEFL? What do they consider important in a cultural syllabus? Findings of studies on the both teachers and students' interest and perceptions of the inclusion of culture will hopefully provide insights to policy makers (curriculum designers) in preparing more appropriate materials.

A second major area for research concerns the current culture teaching practice of ESL/EFL teachers. What are EFL teachers doing in various places in terms of the cultural component of their classes? What methods do teachers use, and how successful are they? How do students respond to such lessons? What aspects of their culture teaching do they want to improve? Which areas are most difficult? What resources do teachers need to teach more effectively? Morgan (1993) has examined how culture is evident in course syllabuses, but many more needs to be known about actual classroom practice.

The last area is related to how to teach culture effectively. In earlier sections, numerous techniques have been suggested, but just what methods work best, with whom, and in what contexts? How integrated are these techniques into the ESL/EFL curriculum? What assessment techniques are most the most effective, and can such evaluation methods be easily transferred to other classes or language learning contexts?

Conclusion

This article focuses on culture in EFL teaching and learning in an effort to provide an understanding of culture in EFL education. After providing background on culture in the classroom and the pedagogical literature, it was argued that current EFL teaching is indeed culture teaching due to three reason: (1) culture and language are inseparable; (2) an EFL teaching is a foreign culture teaching in order to facilitate the students to experience acculturation; and (3) a sound grasp of the background knowledge of the target culture is

necessary for anyone to communicate successfully with the speakers of the language.

To achieve that goal of cultural instruction, cultural activities and objectives should be carefully organized and incorporated into lesson plans to enrich and inform the teaching content. The use of authentic materials, proverbs, role-play, culture capsules, ethnographic studies, literature and films for presenting culture in the classroom is widely recommended.

Due to its novelty in the field of language teaching, several areas, such as the method, the material, and the assessment technique need to be investigated in order to further develop our understanding of culture in ESL/EEFL education.

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