

## The Impact of Culture in Teaching and Learning of English as a Foreign Language

**Mohammad Golshan**

Mohammad Golshan, Department of English language, Yazd Branch, Islamic Azad University, Yazd, Iran

**Taleb Ranjbar \***

PHD student in English language teaching, Meybod Branch, Islamic Azad University, Meybod, Iran

### Abstract

Understanding the nature of the relationship between language and culture is central to the process of learning and teaching another language. In actual language use, it is not the case that it is only the forms of language that convey meaning. It is language in its cultural context that creates meaning: creating and interpreting meaning is done within a cultural framework. In language learning classrooms, learners need to engage with the ways in which context affects what is communicated and how. Both the learner's culture and the culture in which meaning is created or communicated have an influence on the ways in which possible meanings are understood. This study aimed to investigate the impact of culture in teaching and learning English as a foreign language and also it suggests some ways of how to teach culture in classroom.

**Keywords:** Culture, Language, English as a foreign language

### INTRODUCTION

The culture of people, in its broad sense, refers to all aspects of shared life in community. We are growing up in a social group learn ways of looking at things, doing things, expressing things and solving certain problems in certain ways. We also learn to value something and despise or avoid other things. These attitudes, reactions and emotions become part of our ways of life without being conscious of them. Yet these culturally determined features actually have rooted in a deeper and more significant social conventions, relations and assumptions which are composed of the main stream of a culture of a people. A language is learned and used within such a context, drawing from the culture distinctive meanings and functions which must be assimilated by language learners if they are to control the languages as native speakers control it.

## Goals for culture teaching

Culture teaching is a long and complex process concerning something more than language use itself. In doing the above activities, the aim is to increase students' awareness and to develop their curiosity towards the target culture and their own, helping them to make comparisons among cultures. The comparisons are not meant to underestimate any of the cultures being analyzed, but to enrich students' experience and to make them aware that although some culture elements are being globalized, there is still diversity among cultures. This diversity should then be understood, and never underestimated. Then where should we go and what to achieve in this field is the next important lesson to deal with. Several goals are thus proposed by Seelye in which student are supposed to demonstrate that they have acquired certain understandings, abilities, and attitudes:

That they can demonstrate how people conventionally act in the most common mundane and crisis situations in the target language;

That they are able to evaluate the relative strength of a generality concerning the target culture in terms of the amount of evidence substantiating the statement;

That they have developed the skills needed to locate and organize material about the target culture from the library, mass media, and personal observation;

That they understand that such social variables as age, sex, social class, and the place of residence affect the way people speak and behave.

## The interrelationship between language and culture

Language and culture are so close that are being identified as synonyms (Scarcella, Oxford, 1992). On the one hand, language is used to express people's cultural thoughts, beliefs and to communicate; on the other hand, culture is embedded in the language. The interwoven relationship between language and culture can be summarized by Brown (2000, p.177): "A language is a part of a 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.

## Language, culture and communication

Both of language and culture have a function of communication because they both carry meanings. On the one hand, language carries syntactic, semantic and pragmatic meanings for language users to communicate (Brooks, 1997). On the other hand, culture carries meanings and cultural meanings are expressed through patterns of behaviour, e.g., language. In order to communicate successfully across languages and cultures, one must understand culturally different norms of interaction and people's values and thought (Saville-Troike, 2003). Sometimes linguistic correct sentences could cause misunderstanding or confusion when they are in a different cultural context (Schulz, 2007).

## CULTURE TEACHING HISTORY

### 1960s

In the sixties, culture pedagogy started in the USA with Lado's (1957), Brooks' (1964) and Nostrand's work (1997).

(1) In Lado's *Linguistic across cultures* (1957), he defines culture as " a structured system of patterned behaviour (Lado, 1957, p.111). Lado(1957) suggests comparing units of two cultures from three levels: 'form'(a cultural phenomenon or action), 'meanings' (what the phenomenon means to the people in that culture) and 'distribution' (on what occasions does the phenomenon happen). Two cultures are said to reflect the same phenomenon when the phenomenon is the same all through the three levels.

(2) Brooks has a culture-anthropology oriented culture pedagogy. He suggests "formal culture" vs. "deep culture" later developed as Capital C (Big C) vs. little c (small c). The concept of small c (little c) refers to those associated with human daily life in a society while Big C (Capital C) refers to human achievement or refinement, such as, art, literature, technology, philosophy and so forth.

(3) Nostrand's emergent model provides an inventory for analysing and categorising a culture. His model developed a comprehensive classification category for intercultural communication and understanding (Risager, 2007), as Hardly (2001,p.350) stated: "in Nostrand's model, the goals for culture learning go beyond identifying key aspects of culture to include procedural knowledge that would enable students to observe and analyze cultural elements and patterns.

From 1960s, more attention in anthropological aspects of culture has been put in FC teaching. There was a shift from Capital C to small c (Morain, 1983, Flewelling, 1994) in language teaching, as Kramersch (1993, p.224) states that famous scholars " searched for a common universal ground of basic physical and emotional needs to make the foreign culture less threatening and more accessible to the language learner." Meanwhile, the study of language began to emphasize on the context of society and its culture under the influence of Hymes's communicative competence (Driven and Putz, 1993).

### 1970s

In the seventies, there was a clear trend that culture learning in FL learning is connected with societies, both native and target societies. Cultural contents in FL/SL education are trying to be made visible, for instance, introducing cultural topics in class. An emphasis on situational context of the FL teaching was brought into FL pedagogy along with a communicative approach. The role of culture in FL education is enhanced massively.

### 1980s

In the eighties, scholars begin to delve into the dynamic of culture and its contribution to FL/SL learning (Risager, 2007). The interrelationship between language and culture was closely examined and the need of integrating linguistic and culture learning in FL education was proposed. Scholars, in the USA, such as Damen (1987), Robinson (1988), Seelye (1993) and Valdes (1986) and in the Europe, Byram's culture studies (1988, 1989a) all advocated on integrating culture into SL/FL teaching.

### 1990s

In the nineties, the challenge that FC teaching faced is the impact of globalization (Nault, 2006). FL teaching should be across national and ethnic boundaries and be looked at in a "transnational and global context (Risager, 2007, p. 1)". The role of English as a world/international language (EIL) demands three changes in culture dimension of ELT (Wandel, 2002):

(1) An intercultural approach is proposed in ELT to train FL learners to be EIL users. That is, to train learners use English as a lingua franca and develop their intercultural sensitivity and awareness. Pauwels (2000) argues that the complex setting of lingua franca settings should be emphasized in FL pedagogy. It is important to develop culture sensitivity and culture awareness in FC teaching under globalisation since it is impossible to include all aspects of culture into one curriculum. The intercultural communicative approach allows English users to use culture as a powerful tool to understand and explore the global cultures (Prodromou, 1992).

(2) ELT teaching with mainstream cultures contents, ie, North America, Britain, Australia (NABA), needs to have a rethink. It has to be noted that there are other forms and varieties of English emerging, especially in non-Western contexts (Kachru, 1992). English educators need to rethink the cultural dimension of ELT: whose culture and what culture should be in the EFL curriculum and what goals in culture teaching and how should culture-related materials be designed and chosen (Nault, 2006). It is suggested that a more diversity of culture and non-mainstream cultures in ELT instruction is included in the phenomenon of English as a global language (Nault 2006).

(3) The notion of communicative competence is being challenged through globalisation (Alptekin, 2002). People from different language and cultures background use English to communicate in various settings, travelling, academic study, or conferences. As English is being used as a lingua franca, speakers of non-native speakers are engaged in the specific intercultural context and require strategies for interpreting cultures and languages when they communicate (Crozet and Liddicoat, 2000).

It also has to be noted that the development of technologies has played a role in FL/FC learning since the eighties. The visual aspect of culture teaching was strengthened because the development of video technology in the eighties and computer and internet in the nineties influence FL learning and interaction in a great sense (Liaw and Johnson, 2001, Dłaska, 2000, Lin 1999, Tseng, 1999). For instance, email communication allows a cross-culture contact possible (Liaw and Johnson, 2001) and Dłaska (2000) suggested of

using internet and information technology in supporting autonomous language and culture learning.

## **THE INTERCULTURAL DIMENSION**

Knowledge of cultures is important for facilitating communication with people. Therefore learners of languages need to learn about and understand cultures. Understanding culture as practices with which people engage becomes centrally important. This means that in the language classroom it is not just a question of learners developing knowledge about another culture but of learners coming to understand themselves in relation to some other culture. This is why there is a contemporary emphasis on 'intercultural'. Learning to be intercultural involves much more than just knowing about another culture: it involves learning to understand how one's own culture shapes perceptions of oneself, of the world, and of our relationship with others. Learners need to become familiar with how they can personally engage with linguistic and cultural diversity.

There is another way to think about culture in language teaching: the distinction between a cultural perspective and an intercultural perspective (Liddicoat, 2005).

This 'cultural' pole implies the development of knowledge about culture which remains external to the learner and is not intended to confront or transform the learner's existing identity, practices, values, attitudes, beliefs and worldview. The 'intercultural' pole implies the transformational engagement of the learner in the act of learning.

Taking an intercultural perspective in language teaching and learning involves more than developing knowledge of other people and places. It means learning that all human beings are shaped by their cultures and that communicating across cultures involves accepting both one's own culturally conditioned nature and that of others and the ways in which these are at play in communication.

Learning another language can be like placing a mirror up to one's own culture and one's own assumptions about how communication happens, what particular messages mean and what assumptions one makes in one's daily life. Effective intercultural learning therefore occurs as the student engages in the relationships between the cultures that are at play in the language classroom. Such learning involves much more than just developing knowledge about some other culture and its language.

The intercultural framework proposed here, then, consists of three intersecting dimensions for understanding approaches to the teaching of culture in language learning:

- The nature of content: artifact -practice
- The nature of learning: fact-process
- The nature of the educational effect: cultural-intercultural.

In learning about culture in the language classroom, we need to draw on our own experiences of language and culture as they are encountered when trying to create and interpret meanings.

The ability to learn beyond the classroom is probably more important than any particular information that students may learn about another culture during their schooling. This is because it is impossible to teach *all* of any culture because cultures are variable and diverse. As language educators, we know that what we can teach in the classroom is inevitably only a partial picture of a language and culture. By acknowledging that limitation in our own teaching, we are less likely to develop stereotypical views of the cultures we are teaching about. Learning how to learn about culture means that, as people engage with new aspects of culture, they develop their knowledge and awareness and find ways of acting according to their new learning.

One way of developing intercultural capabilities is through an interconnected set of activities involving:

- noticing cultural similarities and differences as they are made evident through language
- comparing what one has noticed about another language and culture with what one already knows about other languages and cultures
- reflecting on what one's experience of linguistic and cultural diversity means for oneself:

How one reacts to diversity, how one thinks about diversity, how one feels about diversity and how one will find ways of engaging constructively with diversity

- interacting on the basis of one's learning and experiences of diversity in order to create personal meanings about one's experiences, communicate those meanings, explore those meanings and reshape them in response to others.

## **CULTURE TEACHING DEVICES**

### **Dialogues and mini-dramas**

Usually, in a conventional teacher-student situation, students feel foolish if asked to respond in a foreign way with an accurate imitation of the sounds of the language and with appropriate gestures. In this case, situations are proposed which students then act out in a culturally authentic fashion, a common method used in language teaching called dialogue or mini-drama. Each dialogue should be constructed around an experience compatible with the age and interests of the students. As students become familiar with the dialogue and act it out, they can learn through role playing how to interact with all kinds of people, as they did in their own culture. Such experience are valuable than many lines of comment and explanation. In terms of the material, some textbooks deliberately began with dialogues reflecting common and everyday experience of the students in their native culture. But acting out dialogues of this type confirms the impression of many students that the new language is the native language in a new

dress which students are very familiar with in any case. In other textbooks, one finds the dialogue are deliberately kept “culturally neutral” which will be inevitably interpreted by the students as familiar patterns of their own cultures. The two cases are, to some degree, deprive the students from being exposed to the real situation, and thus should be avoided. So authenticity of situational material is extremely valuable as the dialogue or drama reading faithfully reflects the behaviors in the target culture.

### **Role playing**

After students have learned acted-out dialogues or dramatized situations from the early stage, they are encouraged to try to use what they have learned freely and spontaneously in communications. They may also use the skills in developing their own skits. If they are encouraged to look upon much of their language learning as role playing, they are more likely to carry this over into classroom conversations with contents, gestures, and reaction to simulate a situation in the second culture. Undoubtedly, the students will be able to do this more successfully as their knowledge of the foreign culture increases.

Besides, students could invent their own situations based on their understanding of the daily life, or the imitation of a foreign film (their own version), and then discuss which presentation most authentically represents cultural viewpoints, relationships, and general behavior.

### **Experiencing culture through language use**

While trying the first method, we may encounter such a problem: Can we take time in our language class for the teaching of culture background in this way? There is another approach which doesn't take time from the essential

Work of language learning, that is, teaching for culture understanding is fully integrated with the process of assimilation of syntax and vocabulary. Since language is closely interwoven with every aspect of culture, this approach is possible, when the teachers involved are well informed and alert to cultural differences and thus, their students absorb the meaning in many small ways. This awareness should be part of every language teaching classroom where the teacher should orient the thinking of the students so that they will feel curious about such differences and become observant as they listen and read, applying what they have perceived in their active oral work.

### **TEACHING CULTURE IN EFL CLASSROOM**

Admittedly, it is not an easy task to teach culture. Teachers can show the way rather than regulate a specific way of seeing things, which has the inclination of cultural imperialism.

Making students aware of the important traits in the target culture help them realise that there are no such things as superior and inferior and there are differences among people of distinctive cultures, as well. (Wang, 2008:4). Kramsch (1993) argues that a

foreign culture and one's own culture should be placed together in order for learners to understand a foreign culture. Learners' interaction with native speakers or text will require them to construct their own meanings rather than having educators simply transfer information about people and their culture, and therefore non-native speakers should have opportunities to make their own meanings and to reflect on both the target culture and their own. Kramsch (1993) refers to this as establishing a "sphere of interculturality". Moreover, what educators should always have in mind when teaching culture is the need to raise their students' awareness of their own culture (Straub, 1999) and 'the target culture' (Wei, 2005:55), to cultivate a degree of intellectual objectivity essential in cross-cultural analyses (Straub, 1999, cited in Wang, 2008:4). Teachers and program developers are asked (Coleman, 1996; Holliday, 1994; McKay, 2002) to take the learners' sociocultural background into consideration in choosing materials and pedagogical approaches for particular contexts of teaching since ignoring the students' norms and expectations – that is, what students bring to the classroom – is denying the learners' experiences (Dogancay-Aktuna, 2005:100), and thus a lack of consideration of variations in cultures of learning can lead to frustration and subsequent failure in language classrooms (Li, 1998; Holliday, 1994). Mastering in a language requires learners' mastery of the cultural contexts in which important social acts occur because it conveys warm feelings and solidarity among interlocutors (Cohen, 1996; Eisenstein and Bodman, 1986, 1993; Intachakra, 2004) and is categorized in the 'social' use of language (Kumar, 2002:7). Language learners need to understand what native speakers mean when they use the language, even if they do not choose to replicate native speakers' behaviour (Liddicoat, 2000:51, cited in Paul, 2004).

### **TEACHING MATERIALS FOR CULTURAL AWARENESS**

Various materials can be used in teaching culture in foreign language classes. Durant lists nine sources of materials which he considers to be of great efficiency. The sources vary from interaction with members of the target culture, recorded testimony of members of the target culture, visits to the country, the country's media, data from ethnographic fieldwork, historical and political data, surveys and statistics, heuristic contrasts and oppositions to fashions and styles from the target country (Durant 1997). Literature, a very effective source of culture material, is missing here although this list is considered to be quite comprehensive. It is a common issue that materials used in language teaching convey cultural biases. It means that they implicitly express attitudes towards the target and learner's own culture. In order to encourage intercultural point of view, materials must treat culture themes from at least two contrastive perspectives, so called two-dimensions. Unfortunately, one-dimensional point of view is still more common as it is very hard for textbooks writers to avoid using culture-bound ideas.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study aimed to investigate the impact of culture in teaching and learning English as a foreign language and also it suggests some ways of how to teach culture in classroom.



The classes in language and culture aim at improving one's understanding of the language and the people who speak it. Trained to be prospective teachers of English, for students of ELT, studying English culture is not an arbitrary but a necessary activity.

EFL teaching should lead to a better understanding of and an insight into one's native culture. Students must be provided with the necessary linguistic, communicative and intercultural skills to reflect upon and portray their own society, to express themselves, and to present their own culture in the target language. Besides, discussion can be initiated for the students to compare the underlying values and beliefs in students' native culture with the target culture so that students can not only know the difference but also better appreciate both cultures.

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