

## Making Culture Happen in the English Language Classroom

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### Abstract

The issue of introducing the target culture into language classroom practice has long been an object of debates as well as the opinions of the learners towards it. Eventually, modern practitioners found a way of having the language learners acquainted with the target culture and introducing culture through culture-based textbook activities. However, the issue of additional culturally-oriented activities in improving students learning habits is questionable today. The purpose of this paper is to examine their effect and to investigate the attitudes of students towards language teaching and learning through culture-based activities (games, role plays, dialogues, video clips, discussions and comparisons of local and target cultures). The paper presents the results of the study conducted in one of the top universities of Kazakhstan throughout the spring semester of the 2012 academic year. Eighty students of different cultural backgrounds took part in the study. The activities for the experimental groups were modified according to the tasks in each unit of one of the contemporary textbooks used in General English lessons. These activities varied from warm-ups to homework tasks in the units accordingly. The results suggest that practice of the various culture-based tasks and exercises helped the students to improve their communicative and linguistic competences in English. The results obtained from this study also offer insights into how culture-based activities can be used to develop and enhance not only students' language skills but also their awareness of various culture-sensitive issues.

**Keywords:** culture-based activities, foreign language teaching, attitudes, communicative and linguistic competences

### 1. Introduction

The issue of introducing the target culture into language classroom practice has long been an object of debates. It has been argued for a long time that foreign language teaching through a lingua-cultural approach should be given the importance it deserves. Therefore, many scholars have paid attention to the development of the notion of '*intercultural communicative competence*' and contributed ideas of implementing culture-based activities in the process of foreign language teaching. With the work and investigations of contemporary practitioners and scholars language teaching professionals began to understand the relation between culture and language. It is emphasized that without the insights into the target culture foreign language teaching is inaccurate and incomplete. Acquiring a foreign language means a lot more than studying grammatical structure and vocabulary in isolation. Bada (2000) stated: 'The need for cultural literacy in ELT arises mainly from the fact that most language learners, not exposed to the cultural elements of the society in question, seem to encounter significant hardship in communicating meaning to native speakers'.

Studying culture also nurtures tolerance of the language learners towards the native speakers and the target language. 'Studying culture, we could also learn about the geography, history, etc. of the target culture' proposed Cooke (1970). Developing the idea, McKay (2003) argued that the culture influences language teaching in two ways: linguistic and pedagogical. Linguistically, it affects semantic, pragmatic, and discourse levels of the language. Pedagogically, it has an impact on the choice of materials because the teacher has to take into consideration the content of the language and the cultural basis of the teaching methodology. (Cited from Izadpanah, 2011)

The main problem in foreign language education is that the L2 students are not able to use target language effectively and appropriately for intercultural communication. The cultural content existing in language teaching

has been widely discussed. However, as far as we see these cultural content or culture-based activities have not been designed in course books efficiently enough to be able to put target culture issues into practice fully. The main purpose of this study is to find out the attitudes of students to using culture-based activities and tasks in the classroom and also the way application of the culture-based activities influences the result of foreign language learning.

Byram's (1997b) and Kramsch's (1993) stated that implementing the culture-based activities reinforces acquisition of a foreign language. Place and importance of motivation in language teaching and learning is very widely and well-known and it was proved by ELT experts as Gardner and Lambert (1972). In achieving high motivation, culture classes do have a role because learners like culture-based activities. Similarly, Peterson and Coltrane (2003) mention that:

Through the study of other languages, students gain knowledge and understanding of the cultures that use that language; in fact, students cannot truly master the language until they have also mastered the cultural contexts in which the language occurs

## 2. Materials and Methods

This study took place in the spring term of the 2012 academic year with university level adult students. 80 students participated in the study – 32 male, 48 female, whose age ranged from 17 to 21, and who were enrolled in four different groups, 2 control and 2 experimental. The Experimental groups consisted of 18 and 22 students and control groups had 20 students in each. Almost all the participants were multi-lingual; thirty of the students were Kazakhs speaking Kazakh as their native language, Russian as a second. Sixteen of them were Russian speaking Russian as a native language. Twenty-six were from Turkey speaking Turkish as a native language. The rest of the students were from Kazakhstan having various ethnical backgrounds such as local Turkish, Uygur, Tatar, etc. speaking their mother tongues. Some of them were also speaking Kazakh or Russian as a second language. All of the participants spoke English as a foreign language.

The research site was a Preparatory Course of the Language School of Suleyman Demirel University. The emphasis on the subjects in Prep Course is on developing the four integrated language skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking). Teachers develop students' accuracy, oral fluency and language use appropriateness by practicing the language in real-life contexts. Therefore, the *General English* subject was chosen for being suitable to make students acquire a foreign language by using various activities through target culture and for having the course books as a useful source material efficiently designed. The lessons in each group were delivered by different teachers. All the groups used the same course book for General English lessons. They have taken the same amount of classroom instruction hours and also a similar number of exercises, activities and tasks depending on the contents of the course book for each unit. The students in the control groups did not have a range activities related to culture, only the tasks in the course book were applied and implemented. As for the experimental groups, various modified and adapted culture-based activities and exercises in the structure, topic and order of the tasks in each unit were applied.

The data were collected by giving questionnaires and pre- and post-tests to the students in the control and the experimental groups. The study took place in three stages: pre-experimental test and survey consisting of 8 *YES/NO* questions, the main procedure of applying the additional culture-based activities to the classroom instruction of the experimental groups and post-experimental test, a survey consisting of 3 open-ended questions and 3 semi-structured individual interviews. *YES/NO* questions were aimed to find out how open the students were to the target culture and to understand whether the students had any doubts concerning the effect of the foreign language teaching through culture-based activities. The second part was aimed at more detailed data on the effectiveness of using culture and its implications in teaching a foreign language. The pre-experimental test determined the students' general level, mid-mark and average grades. The post-experimental test was aimed at determining the progress of both experimental and control groups and to compare their achievement levels. Also several lessons in each of the groups were observed and some students were invited for detailed interviews.

The study was carried out throughout two and half months. The communicative activities would include certain cultural aspects put into practice in the form of warm ups, discussions, speeches, dialogues, role plays, etc.

## 3. Results

### 3.1 Pre-Experiment Survey and Test Results

The students were asked to fill out a short survey consisting of 8 *YES/NO* questions. As the results of the pre-experiment survey show, the students understand the importance and the place of culture-based activities in language learning. They are aware of how to find a way in different life situations and behave properly using

their prior knowledge when in the target culture. As one of the students said on the interview ‘*we should know [sic] is it acceptable or unacceptable, appropriate or not in [sic] stopping the bus on our way in order not to cause misunderstandings between two cultures*’. She was comparing the local habit of stopping the bus not on the bus stop, but anywhere on the route of the bus. Besides, only a little number of the students had doubts concerning the target language teaching in the curriculum, saying they feared of assimilation or somewhat of cultural imperialism. The results of the pre-experimental survey are demonstrated in the Table 1 below.

Table 1. Opinions of the students of the culture-based activities in the classroom

	Ans.	Num. of Ss	%
Do you enjoy working with other students in groups?	YES	70	87.5
Are you anxious or stressed when collaborating with your peers?	NO	72	90
Do culture-based activities help you to overcome your anxiety or stress?	YES	69	86.3
Do you like watching authentic extracts in the target language about your own culture?	YES	79	98
Do you like watching authentic extracts about other cultures?	YES	78	97.5
Do you like behaving like a foreigner during dialogues?	YES	70	87.5
Do you like investigating other cultures in projects?	YES	77	96.3
Do you like being involved in discussions about other cultures?	YES	71	88.7

As the table 1 shows, the interest of learners towards using culturally-oriented activities in language learning is essential and they enjoy being involved in the atmosphere of the target language and culture whether by watching videos or discussing cultures as the vast majority of them provided positive responses for each question.

In order to ascertain the similarity of the language mastery levels of the control and experimental groups the teachers were asked to conduct a test on general language knowledge embracing the topics covered previously. The results of the pre-experiment test are provided in the Table 2.

Table 2. Pre-experiment test results

	Experimental Groups		Control groups	
	1 <sup>st</sup> Group	2 <sup>nd</sup> Group	1 <sup>st</sup> Group	2 <sup>nd</sup> Group
Average Grade of exam pre-experiment test (%)	67	70	65	71
Average Grade of exam pre-experiment test (%)	68.5		68	

As the table shows, the results of the average difference in the achievement of control and experimental groups make 0.5%, which is not very significant. The results of the test proved that the level of language mastery in all the four groups is approximately similar.

### 3.2 The Post-Experiment Surveys and Test Results

The study took place during the actual lessons of the four groups – on the subject of General English. The teachers of the experimental groups were asked to provide the students with the authentic real-life-like situations, cultural coloring for the tasks, link the situations to the local culture, asking students to compare the situations described in the textbook with the same situations in the local environment, etc. For example, one of the units in the textbook was about friends and friendship. To warm up the students were asked several questions for discussion: Do we need to correct our friends’ mistakes? How do English/Kazakh/Russian and Turkish people (youngsters) make friends? How do they greet each other? To what extent do they share their achievements? Role play and dialogues were included as well. Two other tasks were to create a sample dialogue and act out it: How do English, Kazakhstani and Turkish people talk in a face-to-face conversation? On the phone? What do

English/Kazakhstani and Turkish teenagers do in their spare time? For reading the students were given a task to compare the facts in their countries to those in the textbook unit. For homework the students were given a task to interview a native speaker who was working for the university about the importance, role and functions of friendship in the USA. The control groups were not provided with such extensions to the activities – they followed the ordinary pace of the lessons. However, the teachers were not asked to ignore or skip the activities which provided certain target culture insights.

A further step in the study was a survey with open-ended questions. The survey was conducted over a series of activities mentioned above: culture-based and culturally-oriented activities and tasks in the experimental groups and textbook activities without additional exercises in the control groups. The students of all the 4 groups were asked to express their opinions concerning language learning through culture and how the activities helped them master the language. Most of them gave positive answers about the activities the teachers organized in their class. The first open-ended question was *how did the culture-based activities help to improve your English?* Great majority of the students stated that active speaking abilities developed through the activities about different nations. One of the students said *'a student usually was [sic] never active until he or she was involved in an interesting task where they face any kind of everyday life situation'*. Another student pointed out *'We must know how to greet people of different ages of [sic] different culture'*. Also majority of the students (68 people) said that the activities provided an enjoyable and comfortable atmosphere. The second question was *can you name the most interesting culture-based activity you have ever been involved?* The answers to this question showed that most of the students (74 people) were interested in finding out the family relationships and family names of Kazakh, Russian, Turkish and English nations. The majority of the students were glad to discover that Kazakh and Turkish family member names were similar and that the number of the words used to describe family structure and relations in the Turkic languages prevailed over the number of English. It was similarly interesting to find out what words Russian and English people used to speak of the family relations. The students also added that this interest made them learn and remember more words connected to family members in all the four languages. Finally, the third question to answer was: *what other tasks or activities can you suggest to develop communicative skills?* The answers provided by the students proved that foreign language learning by applying culture-based activities can be manifold and occur in different ways; not only in class but also at home watching films, preparing presentations, shooting videos, singing songs, practicing tongue twisters and so on. An interesting notion from one of the students was the following: *'if the teachers select the right activity for each task in the units of the book it will be more beneficial'*.

In order to find out if the activities applied by the teachers were efficient and helped the students improve their language learning the end-of-term which served as post-experimental test results were analyzed. The analysis displayed 9.55% of the average progress of the control and 16% of progress in the experimental groups. Table 3 presents the comparison of the pre-experimental and post-experimental tests in the experimental and control groups.

Table 3. Students' progress comparison

	Experimental Groups		Control groups	
	1 <sup>st</sup> Group	2 <sup>nd</sup> Group	1 <sup>st</sup> Group	2 <sup>nd</sup> Group
Average Grade of exam pre-experiment	67	70	65	71
Average Grade of exam pre-experiment	68.5		68	
Average Grade of exam post-experiment	78	81	72	77
Average Grade of exam post-experiment	79.5		74.5	

As the table shows, the results of the experimental groups obtained from the post-experiment test are 6.45% higher than that of the control groups. Visual representation of the progress can be seen in the figure below.

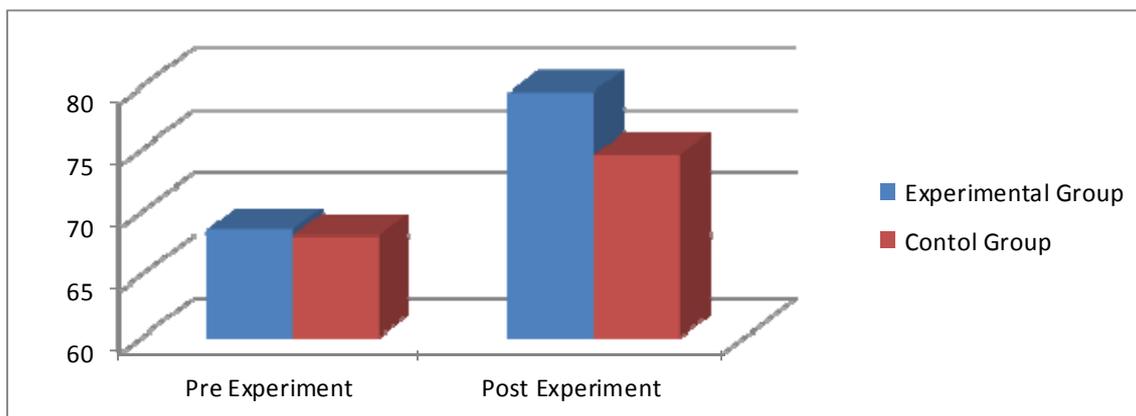


Figure 1. The comparison of progresses of control and experimental groups in General English Subject

The progress could be followed not only from the grades from the exams but from overall participation throughout the lesson and willingness to do better among the students of the experimental groups.

#### 4. Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the attitudes of students towards using culture-based tasks, activities and the impact of these in foreign language teaching and learning performance. The results of the study confirm the idea that the usage of culture in foreign language teaching or teaching of a foreign language through culture facilitates and empowers language education and acquisition. In this short experimental study, 80 students were exposed to two different classroom instructions: (a) applying and using additional culture-based activities for each unit in the course book (for experimental groups) and (b) attending the instructions to engage in activities presented only in the course books (for control groups). Providing exact equity among the groups is almost impossible. This is why in order to ascertain experiment and results reliability and validity the pre-experimental and post-experiment tests and surveys were provided. One of the possible shortcomings of the study is that the issue of the participants' diverse cultural backgrounds and prior language educational measurement and assessment could have been investigated more profoundly and in advance.

The overall results indicate the usefulness of culture matters for the language learning groups as one of the leading ways of teaching a foreign language. According to the results, the experimental groups which were engaged in a range of various culturally-oriented and culture-based activities and tasks performed 6.45% better than the control groups. Despite the small percentage of the progress of the groups we believe that in a long-term period the results will prove the effectiveness of the culturally-oriented classroom instruction. The results of the study showed that the culture-based activities have an effective influence on the development of linguistic as well as communicative competences of the learners and support the claims of Byram (1997) and Cramsh (1993). Furthermore, students make it clear that by learning some features of foreigners' behaviors it becomes easier and more engaging to be involved in the current learning process with supports the ideas of Gardner and Lambert (1972) and of Peterson and Coltrane (2003).

In order to incorporate culture successfully in the foreign language classroom, teachers should be aware of diverse individual characteristics of the participants. Furthermore, teachers should keep in mind that cultural activities should be changed as some time passes and be organized accordingly to required situations. When implementing culturally-oriented activities in the foreign language classroom educators should bear in mind the peculiarities of the local culture as well, so that the students see the differences between the target and the local cultures. When speaking about the varieties of cultures the emphasis should be distributed somewhat equally – but the local culture should always have a priority – for there exists a possibility of full assimilation of students into a culture different from their own. As it was stated by famous methodologists, effectiveness of the lessons depends not only on the thoroughly planned lesson, but on the positive atmosphere created by the teacher through the activities, in this case, culturally-oriented activities.

During the study it has been observed that culture-based exercises stimulate and improve students' interaction skills and make them use the target language more efficiently. The results indicate the general interest of the students toward target culture and its comparison with the local culture which adds some more arguments to the

debates concerning culturally-oriented classroom for benefit of proponents of the culture in the FLT.

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