

Culture and Language Teaching Through Media

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Abstract

The topic of teaching and learning culture has been a matter of considerable interest to language educators and much has been written about the role of culture in foreign language instruction over the past two decades. ESL students whose success in a new environment is conditioned not only by their mastery of the new language, but also, and especially, by their ability to negotiate the new culture. Media sources significantly affect students' attitudes and dispositions towards themselves, other people and society especially in English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. Building on the argument that learning a second language cannot be separated from the acquisition of the culture that it embodies, this paper argues that the design and adaptation of written media should reflect multiple perspectives and avoid prejudices in order to engage students in a process of uncovering and confronting cultural biases and facilitate cultural learning. The paper presents prejudices and other cultural biases learners have about target culture and discusses the positive effects of media on students. The paper suggests that media sources should be integrated into ESL curriculum in order to avoid prejudices, to enhance students' critical thinking and language skills and cultural biases, and to have a better understanding of new culture.

Key Words: Culture and Language Teaching, Media Sources, Developing Language Skills, Critical Thinking Skills

Introduction

Culture is often neglected in English as a Foreign Language (EFL), and ESL teaching/learning, or introduced as no more than supplementary diversion to language instruction. Yet changes in linguistic and learning theory suggest that culture should be

highlighted as an important element in language classrooms. Efforts linking culture and language learning are impelled by ideas originating in sociolinguistic theory. From a sociolinguistic perspective, competence in language use is determined not only by the ability to use language with grammatical accuracy, but also to use language appropriate to particular contexts (Tsenk, 2002). Thus, successful language learning requires language users to know the culture that underlies language.

The National Center for Cultural Competence defines culture as an “integrated pattern of human behaviour that includes thoughts, communications, languages, practices, beliefs, values, customs, courtesies, rituals, manners of interacting and roles, relationships and expected behaviours of a racial, ethnic, religious or social group; and the ability to transmit the above to succeeding generations” (Goode et al., 2000). This means that language is not only how we define culture, it also reflects culture. Thus, the culture associated with a language cannot be learned in a few lessons about celebrations, folk songs, or costumes of the area in which the language is spoken. Culture is a much broader concept that is inherently tied to many of the linguistic concepts taught in second language classes.

The topic of teaching and learning culture has been a matter of considerable interest to language educators and much has been written about the role of culture in foreign language instruction over the past four decades. Linguists 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. Various scholars in the field of foreign language education (Kramsch, 1988, 1995, 1998; Galloway, 1999) have explained how important the teaching of culture is to the foreign language learner. Besides, various professional associations have made significant efforts to establish culture learning standards (Standards, 1996; AATF, 1995).

All of these indicate that linguistic competence alone is not enough for learners of a language to be competent in that language (Krasner, 1999). In fact, students cannot truly master the language until they have also mastered the cultural contexts in which the language occurs.

A glance at most textbooks, on the other hand, is ample to show what educators must first combat and eradicate: stereotypes. As (Byram&Morgan et al. 1994: 41) observe “textbook writers intuitively avoid bringing learners’ existing hetero-stereotypes into the open and hope that [their] negative overtones will be counteracted by presenting positive images of the foreign country”. As a matter of fact, stereotypes are extremely tenacious, in so far as people from different cultures have their own schemata through which they conceptualise and understand the world, and to step into another culture is ‘to deny something within their own being’ (ibid.: 43).

Students are generally predisposed to negative attitudes towards both the target culture and the language they will be attempting to learn. Valette (1986) faults foreign language teachers and curriculum for this phenomenon, pin-pointing specific areas of cultural dearth in the language classroom:

1. Culture is often a polarized comparison of the native and culture targets in an ‘us and them’ format, where one appears better or higher than the other.
2. Teachers are usually uncertain of specifically what their goals are as concerns culture and may not have fully refined their own view of the target culture.
3. Few teachers test to ensure that students are reaching cultural goals, and, even if they do, tests are apt to be poorly designed (testing only concrete facts and discrete information with multiple choice or true/false questions).
4. Culture in the foreign language classroom is likely to be sketchy and shallow – in other words, not enough of it is taught, and the wrong type of information is taught.

Students are generally exposed to only superficial cultural information like geography, food, art, music, and history, which are simply not enough to teach them to understand, appreciate, and respect the target culture.

This last problem area, the superficiality of culture taught, is further explained by the iceberg conception of the nature of culture, where such details as dress, music, and fine arts appear above the surface while below the surface remains hidden 'deep culture' – the nine-tenths of culture, including values, ideals, conceptions, and communicative norms, that are much more important for understanding what people say and how they act (Ratiu & Rodgers, 1984). It is this 'hidden' culture that is not being fully (if at all) addressed in our foreign language classrooms. Instead, foreign language teachers reduce culture to what Kramsch (1991) calls "the four Fs" – "foods, fairs, folklore, and statistical facts", which is why most students remain monocultural and ethnocentric even after years of foreign language study, failing "to develop intercultural understanding" (Lantolf, 2000:29). Students retain their negative attitudes because they are not taught differently. In order to provide a different perspective on "the foreign culture," teachers should use comparison, with a view to identifying common ground or even lacunae within or between cultures (Byram, Morgan et al., 1994: 43). Teaching culture raises understanding of and reduces prejudice towards other cultures and peoples. By emphasizing the cultural content teachers can help students to accept the legitimacy of cultural differences among peoples. Thus, Byram (1991:156) concluded that "cultural knowledge or information should have a beneficial effect on attitudes and understanding in the longer term and, in the short term, also helps to make lessons more attractive and interesting". Integration of the study of language with the study of culture serves the purpose in foreign language learning of developing communicative competence, cultural awareness, and reinforcing tolerance, a deeper understanding of and appreciation for the richness of diverse cultures. In other

words, the increase of communicative competence, cultural awareness, and tolerance towards the other cultures is a natural process that, arguably, is the product of an efficient foreign language course.

The media provides an excellent source for discovering a “new” place and making our students more culturally competent. The press, TV news broadcasts, and talk shows can provide the linguistic and cultural authenticity that our students need in order to become culturally competent. These authentic texts provide valuable opportunities for students to gain insights into the target culture. In a study done by Lee (1999) for using online newspapers and chats, she found that using newspapers in foreign language instruction not only helps students advance their knowledge of current lexical items and idiomatic expressions but increases their ability to interpret, analyze, synthesize, and evaluate cultural texts beyond the comprehension of simple facts. According to Lee (1999), different sections of the newspaper such as “Sports,” “Economics,” “Arts,” and “Entertainment” provide challenging opportunities to compare and contrast the native and target cultures. Facts in newspapers or in TV news broadcasts are “food for thought”, which can be used to help students generate cultural hypotheses.

Seelye (1993) maintains that the mass media is a good source for current data. It offers real interaction with the target language and culture, and is a valuable instructional resource. They are superior to the simplified language in edited texts, and contribute to the learning of coping skills. Newspapers also offer “snapshots” of the segments of the target culture, making them a logical medium. Teachers must be aware that newspapers and magazines are commercial enterprises aimed at a particular target readership; and as such they may reflect the values, interests and biases of the readership; as well as those of the owners, editorial staff, and the political milieu. Understanding audience needs helps producers decide on the content and delivery of messages (Blatchford, 86). Writing articles

for newspapers and magazines also requires a sense of who the readers will be. For example, the headlines and first paragraph of a news article have to contain information about the what, when, where, who, and how of an event to provide the gist of a story for busy readers.

One can conclude that teacher roles involve many responsibilities, after taking into consideration all the expectations of them. Without significant experience or time spent abroad teachers find themselves in a difficult position. For this reason, Hughes (in Valdes, 1992) suggests a course in culture teaching. The arguments he lists are familiar to all foreign language teachers. Training and exchange programs need to be organized since only adequate training can provide us with the necessary additional instruction on how to teach language through culture. Moreover, teachers keep a balance and a neutral attitude without emphasizing positive or negative cultural particularities. They should not express their own opinions but rather allow students to draw their own conclusions. Damen (1987) points out that language teachers should serve as mediators to direct students to making transitions from one culture (their own) to another (a foreign language culture).

Study

Based on the conclusions in related literature a 14-week-course was designed at Kocaeli University, ELT department. The course aimed at creating a new context through which prospective teachers of English could not only practice their English, but also develop their ability to think critically, improve their awareness and a deeper understanding of and appreciation for the target culture by evaluating newspapers. For limitations, among all English Speaking countries, England and English culture were chosen for the study.

The reasons for utilizing newspapers in this study based on related literature are as follows:

1. Writing articles for newspapers and magazines requires a sense of who the readers will be. Newspapers are commercial enterprises aimed at a particular target readership; and as such they may reflect the values, interests and biases of the readership; that's why they can draw conclusions about target culture and language on their own without being imposed by the teachers.
2. Authentic texts such as newspapers increase the ability of students to interpret, analyze, synthesize, and evaluate cultural texts beyond the comprehension of simple facts.
3. The media provides an excellent source for discovering a “new” place and making our students more culturally competent.
4. Culture is not seen as homogenous or static. Since newspapers have a wide spectrum of social or ethnic class, gender, age, occupation etc., they may be regarded as a significant tool for evaluating values, perspectives and understanding of the people living in a foreign country. Besides, newspapers cover current issues which help learners to get an accurate idea about target culture.

Since they are not specially designed for language learners but their own readers, they reflect an accurate knowledge of the society and the people live in it. Besides, it is cheap and easy to access newspapers; for example via internet.

The participants of the study were 52 under-graduate students who were attending their third grade at university setting.

The material used in this study was mainly newspapers published in England. Newspapers were classified as tabloid ones (e.g. Sun, Mirror, Daily Express, Daily Mail)

and Broadsheets (eg Independent, Times, Guardian) (retrieved from http://www.mediaed.org.uk/posted_documents/newsp.html; 09.04.2007) in order to cover broader sense and vision of target culture and to avoid stereotypes because each newspaper has different audience in terms of social status, interest or values, or perspectives. Students were asked to read three newspapers for each week during an 8-week's-period. Students were encouraged to work in groups of three since they shared and contributed to each other's ideas. A guide for evaluating/comparing newspapers was handed out to the students in order to ease their studies (see in Appendix).

Following, there is a detailed description of the course. At the beginning of the term, in the first week of the course, students were asked to fill in a form including three questions: What are the first three things which come into your mind when you hear the word?

- a. England?
- b. the English?
- c. English culture?

The results were recorded from the most repeated ones to the least repeated ones. The most three repeated ones are as follows:

1. England:
 - a) Colonialism/imperialism,
 - b) Rainy or foggy weather,
 - c) The war in Iraq

2. The English:
 - a) Blonde,
 - b) Cold/Self-centred/ Do not care the others,
 - c) Serious

3. English culture:
 - a) English tea,
 - b) Football/ Hooliganism,
 - c) The Royal family (the Queen)

After that evaluation a brainstorming activity was applied to the students in the classroom in order to understand how they got those ideas written above. The results show that they have the notion of target culture mostly from literature, media sources and English course books. One is given as an example:

“England is colonialist/ imperialist”.

They got that notion from Mass media (Turkish channels, Turkish newspapers or magazines), literature figures in the books they read, their history teachers, historical books written by foreign and native historians, historical films and series on TV. Besides, more than half of the students also declared that they had never read a newspaper published in England.

Following four weeks (weeks 2-5) focused mainly on evaluating written forms of newspapers, in other words, “letter to the editor” part, articles and so on. The role of the teacher was to guide and encourage students to focus their attention on the reader’s point of view and avoid making generalizations of the people living in both countries. Each week, students were encouraged to discuss their findings and share them with the members of their groups and the other students who read the same type of newspapers. Next four weeks (weeks 6-9) focused mainly on evaluating visual forms of newspapers such as advertisements, caricatures, and pictures. The next four (weeks 10-13) weeks depended heavily on students’ works: they prepared and carried out a workshop in groups, applying the conclusions they draw about who the readers are in order to get a global idea about England, the English and English culture. In the workshop, students were invited to write a

pair of news whose subject was given by the researcher, and prepare an advertisement for an imaginary bank. The aim of the workshop is to further reinforce what students had learnt through the course both in orally and in written mode. Students performed their written assignments individually, then peer-checked each other's work orally, and submitted their revised reviews. They discussed whether their assignments meet the possible standards of the news and advertisements they covered in the newspapers.

Some of the conclusions based on discussion sessions and in the workshop that all the students shared are as follows:

1. In England, football still seems dominant; they also like tennis, cricket, polo, horse racing and some other sports. In other words, they admire individual sports as well as team sports. They easily access sport facilities, that's why sports/doing sports is a part of regular habits of the people living in England. Shortly, they are not only watchers but also doers.

2. English people generally like reading; visual images do not necessarily prompt them to read (it is not exactly the same for the readers of the Sun). Most of the newspapers have additional parts for best sellers or newly published books.

3. The fact that almost all newspapers apart from Tabloid ones have International Affairs part English people are interested in what is happening around the world; not only in Europe but also in some Asian countries such as Iraq and Iran, and also the conflict between Palestine and Israel, and affairs in South American countries.

Conclusion

In order to evaluate the course, two open-ended questions were conducted to the students in the last week of the course (week 14):

1. To what extent has the course helped you to improve your understanding of your culture and the target culture?

2. To what extent has the course helped you to improve your language skills?

3. To what extent has the course improved your critical thinking skills?

The results were analyzed in three categories that seemed to emerge from the data. The points below indicate common responses raised by students.

1. Understanding of the target culture

Students declare that they learnt new things about English people, English culture and England. After they learnt about the social, historical and religious background of the target language, some prejudices have been turned out to be irrelevant. They realized the biases they had about target culture did not reflect the truth. Since they have learnt about the social, political and educational background of the language and culture they are learning, some prejudices have been turned out to be irrelevant. After the course they have realized what “think in English” means.

2. Language skills

Writing news and preparing advertisement workshop provided them with a motivating context through which they could practice their English by reading and writing. They had to read a lot of newspapers in English in order to prepare their workshop, which improved their reading skills, and helped them to learn some new vocabulary. The most significant contribution of the course and the workshop is to improve their vocabulary, especially thematic vocabulary, knowledge. During the workshop itself they had a variety of opportunities to discuss perspectives of different people living in the same society and the language they use, which helped them to realize different usages of words, conjunctions and phrasal verbs.

3. Critical thinking skills

When the most common responses raised by students are evaluated one can conclude that their critical thinking skills also improved although it is not one of the purposes of the study. All of the students state that they have become more conscious readers and started to see things from different perspectives. They have started to understand underlying meanings beneath the existing words. Since they know the reasons behind issues they feel self confident. They started to think critically and do not believe anything without questioning any more.

At the end of the term students were asked again to fill in a form including three questions:

What are the first three things which come into your mind when you hear the word

- a. England?
- b. the English?
- c. English culture?

The results were recorded from the most repeated ones to the least repeated ones. The most three repeated ones are as follows:

1. England:

- a) Industrialized,
- b) Social security system works well,
- c) The Guardian

2. The English:

- a) Holiday-lovers,
- b) Some of the English people care what is happening around the world,
- c) They care global issues rather than local ones

3. English culture:

- a) English tea,
- b) Cricket, horse racing, polo, tennis, football
- c) They like reading

After that activity students were asked how they got that notion supporting their ideas. One is given as an example. The notion, “English people like holidays” is based on the numbers of advertisement, comments and Travel Guide parts they read in the newspapers. Besides, they declared the advertisements in Broadsheet newspapers are generally ecological holidays on tropical islands and mountains, or Safaris. On the other hand, advertisements about holidays in Tabloid ones are generally in Seaside resorts in hot Mediterranean countries.

As it can be concluded that, students have changed their ideas about the English, England and English culture based on reliable sources, in other words newspapers published for English people. Some of the negative attitudes about target culture such as “they don’t care the others” turned into “Some of the English people care what is happening around the world”. Moreover, the fact that they addressed English people as “they” at the beginning of the term turned into “English people” shows that they have started to develop positive attitudes to the target language and the people use it.

Newspapers can be a valuable tool for promoting critical thinking skills, enhancing students' writing and reading skills, and developing their vocabulary knowledge. Newspapers can help students to think along various dimensions, and thus gain control over media texts instead of simply accepting them superficially. They can also open doors to various disciplines, e.g. cultural studies and media studies, which can bring diversity into language classrooms. An important point to keep in mind, however, is that newspapers

should be viewed as subject matter in their own right, and be used with a principled approach aiming at improving students' abilities not just in language but also in critical and creative thinking, and their attitudes to target culture.

Learning a second language cannot be separated from the acquisition of the culture that it embodies. That's why, the design and adaptation of written media should reflect multiple perspectives and avoid prejudices in order to engage students in a process of uncovering and confronting cultural biases and facilitate cultural learning. Since the media reflects the society and it is easy and cheap to access them, utilizing media sources in ELT curriculum in a separate course or integrated with the other courses will help the learners to have a real understanding of the other societies and, will motivate learners to learn a language. By doing so, they can develop their abilities to draw conclusion what they read or see.

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Appendix: Key points for Evaluating/Comparing newspapers

Comparing Newspapers

Purpose	
Number of subjects or themes	Primary and secondary parts (art, sports, entertainment, politics, education etc.)
Page numbers	
Binding/Front page	
Number of articles	
Photos & illustrations	
Frequency of publication	
Advertisements	
Audience	
Headlines	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Are the headlines in all capital letters (upper case), or a mixture of upper and lower case? 2. Apart from size, what else makes the headline stand out?
Columnists	
Dear Abby/Dear Ann	
Letters to Editor	
Language	
General	a. The masthead (the block which tells you the name of the paper)

	b The main news story c The second news story d Plugs (information about what's inside the paper, or promotions)
Conclusions you draw	

Adapted from

http://cobcmmedia.homestead.com/files/AS_Coursework/Comparing_newspapers.doc