The Influence of Target Culture on Language Learners

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Abstract

This study was aimed at investigating the types of cultural activities students at Çankaya University wanted to have during their study of the target language and the level at which students preferred to see those cultural components in language classrooms. A questionnaire was used by the researcher for the purpose of collecting data. The questionnaire that was adapted for the study included 13 multiple choice questions. Each question had the option of "other" to enable further comments on the part of the students. The first part of the questionnaire elicited demographic information of the students. The data-gathering instrument was implemented on 95 preparatory school intermediate students and the results were analyzed statistically in terms of frequency, percentage and average. The findings of the research clearly showed the types of cultural activities students would enjoy in language classrooms, at which level they would like to do them, their attitudes towards the target culture, the level of importance students attach to the target culture and their understanding of "culture". From the results it can be seen that most of the students who took part in the study had positive attitudes towards the inclusion of cultural components during their study of the English language. The study revealed very important data for the language teachers as well. The outcomes of the study are important not only for teachers but also for textbook publishers. This study presents them with valuable suggestions.

Key Words: Culture in the FLE/SLE, Learning target culture, Cultural activities

Özet

Bu çalışma Çankaya Üniversitesi Hazırlık sınıfı öğrencilerinin dil öğrenme sürecinde ne tür kültürel aktiviteler görmek istediklerini ve bu aktiviteleri hangi seviyede görmek istediklerini araştırmıştır. Veri toplamak için çoktan seçmeli sorulardan oluşan bir anket uygulanmıştır. Bu anket 13 sorudan oluşmuştur. Her sorunun sonunda "Diğer" seçeneği de eklenerek öğrencilere iletmek istedikleri farklı fikir olma ihtimaline karşı seçenek bırakılmıştır. Anketin ilk bölümü öğrenciler hakkında demografik bilgiler vermiştir. Anket 95 öğrenci üzerinde uygulanmıştır ve sonuçlar betimsel istatistik olarak sıklık, yüzde ve ortalama kullanılarak yorumlanmıştır. Bu çalışma öğrencilerin hangi kültürel aktiviteleri görmek istediklerini, hangi seviyede bunu istedikleri, hedef kültüre karşı tutumlarını ve hedef kültüre verdikleri önemin derecesini açıkça ortaya koymuştur. Sonuçlar öğrencilerin hedef kültür öğrenimine karşı olumlu bir tutum içerisinde olduğunu ortaya koymuştur. Bu çalışma yabancı dil öğretmenleri için de çok önemli bilgiler sunmuştur. Bu çalışma yabancı dil kitap yazarları için de önemli tavsiyeler içermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Dil sınıflarında kültür, Hedef Kültürü Öğrenme, Kültürel aktiviteler

1. Introduction

People who study a foreign language can see the importance of foreign culture or the target culture. Fries (1945) wrote a paper on "contextual orientation" and since then it has become popular to say that the meanings of a language are to be discovered in the shared life experiences of its native users, and dictionaries and books show only part of what a language means. The literature on culture learning implies a variety of theoretical perspectives on how culture is learned or acquired. Culture traditionally was understood as high and low culture. High culture referred to literature, music and philosophy and low culture referred to the clothes people wore, lifestyles, etc. In the past, around the 1940s, the main purpose of learning a language was to study the high culture. For some classical methodologies, culture was seen as an automatic outcome of all language instruction. As for the fashionable methodologies, culture is regarded as cognitive facts to be learned and stored. The notion of culture as knowledge, culture as skill, or culture as both may lead to notions of culture static products of forms that may be objectified (Robinson et al., 1996). Culture then is seen as a process, that is, as a way of perceiving, interpreting, feeling, being in the world, wanting to smile, wanting to scream, loving, hating and relating to where one is and who one meets. In the 20th century, culture showed up as a vital concept

to Anthropology, including all human phenomena that are not purely the results of human genetics. The term "culture" in American anthropology has two meanings:

- the evolved human capacity to classify and represent experiences with symbols and to act imaginatively and creatively the distinct ways that people living in different parts of the world classified and represented their experiences and acted creatively.

Following World War II, the term "culture" became important acquiring different meanings in other disciplines such as Sociology, Cultural Studies, Organizational Psychology and Management Studies. Most social scientists today view culture as consisting primarily of the symbolic and intangible aspects of human behavior. The essence of culture is not its artifacts, tools, or other tangible cultural elements, but how the members of the group interpret, use, and perceive them. It is the values, symbols, interpretations and perspectives that distinguish one people from another in modern societies. It will be remarkable to give definitions done by social scientists today. According to Damen, culture is the learned and shared human patterns or models for living that is the day- to- day living patterns. These patterns and models pervade all aspects of human social interaction. Culture is mankind's primary adaptive mechanisms (Damen, 1987: 367). Hofstede views culture as collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one category of people from another (Hofstede, 2001: 51). When culture is so central, it will not be logical to separate it from language. It is within the language or, it is reflected via language. Some educators state that communicative competence, with its standardized native speakers' norms is as idealized as the notion of the idealized native speaker-listener. Hence, it becomes necessary to integrate language with a small 'c' concept of culture that refers to the daily customs, ways of life, ways of thinking and behaving. According to Alptekin, the conventional model of communicative competence, with its strict adherence to native speaker norms within the target language culture would appear to be invalid in accounting for learning and using an international language in cross-cultural settings. A new pedagogical model is urgently needed to accommodate the case of English as a means of instructional and intercultural communication (Alptekin, 2002:63). This model should take into account the following criteria:

1. Successful bilinguals with intercultural insights and knowledge should serve as pedagogic models in English as an International Language (EIL) rather than the monolingual native speaker.

2. Intercultural communicative competence should be developed among language learners by equipping them with linguistic and cultural behavior which will enable them to communicate effectively with others.

3. Instructional materials and activities should involve local and international contexts that are familiar and relevant to language learners' lives.

The pedagogical separation of language from culture is justified in the sense that language can stand alone. It can be taught without referring to the culture. It does so obviously in literature, and the long association of language and literature teaching has some explanation for the separation. On the other hand, the tendency to treat language quite independently of culture to which it constantly refers cannot be justified; it disregards the nature of language teaching. There is no doubt that all language teaching contains some explicit reference to the cultural whole from which the particular language is taken. Language teaching depends, for help and guidance in the teaching of syntax and phonology, on linguistics and in the increasing concern with functions of language, on pragmatics and sociolinguistics. That is, in so far, as language teachers tended to give learners more than grammatical competence, considering Hymes (1974) and others' explanation of 'communicative competence' language teachers found themselves depending on analyses of how native speakers use the particular language for social intercourse. Such sociolinguistic analysis introduces culture-specific pragmatic uses of language and begins to uncover some of the values and norms of the language teacher (Riley, 1984). In addition to the cultural meanings carried by the functions of language, it also embodies the artifacts of a culture through referential meaning. To teach these linguistic meanings, the language teacher has to analyze these artifacts. In the light of all the information above, this study aimed to explore the following questions.

1. What kind of cultural activities do language learners want to have during their study of language?

2. At which level do language learners want to be exposed to the target culture?

3. Are students positive or negative towards learning the target culture?

2. Method

2.1 Subjects

The data was collected from 95 intermediate students at Çankaya University. The students for the study were randomly chosen. After the study was conducted, it was found out that 51 students were female and 44 male. Most of the students were aged between 19 and 20. Many of the students had received English language education prior to entering the Preparatory School. This may show that they had experienced cultural elements in their language learning previously. 6 of the students had been to England and 4 had been to the USA. As Çankaya University is a private university, the students selecting this university generally belong to families from higher socio-economic strata.

2.2 The Instrument

The instrument was a questionnaire including 13 multiple choice questions. The instrument was developed by the researcher. After some changes the instrument was show to two experts at the department and one statistical expert at the university. Later on the instrument was translated into Turkish and the translation was checked by three Turkish language teachers working at High School in Ankara. The reason for translation was to prevent any misunderstandings on the part of the students.

2.3 Data Analysis

In the first part of the instrument, demographic inventory, information about the participants was gathered. The second part of the instrument was divided into 2 sections as 2-A and 2-B. In 2-A, there were a number of questions examining students' thoughts on the inclusion of cultural elements in the language classrooms in detail. These questions provided more than two options leaving many choices to the students. For the sake of evaluation, in most of the questions in this part, students were to choose from one, two, or three options.

The quantitative data were analyzed through Statistical Package of Social Sciences (SPSS for Windows 15.0). The qualitative data were analyzed using content analysis. In order to present the analysis of the data obtained from the demographic inventory part of the instrument, frequency distribution tables and histograms are given. The data gathered from the Likert scale items were analyzed through descriptive statistics in the SPSS. After

the analysis of each item, the total frequency and percentage rates of the responses are shown in the form of tables and figures.

3. Findings

This study explores students' tendencies towards learning cultural information in their language classrooms. The instrument adapted for the study was designed in three parts and administered to 100 intermediate students at Çankaya University in 2009 in Ankara. There were 8 different types of High Schools from which students in the study had graduated. The schools were generally private schools, State Anatolian High Schools and Super High School. Only seven students had been abroad. 45,3% of the students were graduated from Vocational High Schools and 21,1% of them were graduated from Science High Schools. 27% of the students born in 1990 and 19% of the students born in 1989 wanted to learn about English or American culture in the language classroom .From the female students 36% of them wanted to learn culture in class. As for male students 27% wanted to have cultural issues during their language learning. 28 % of the students who graduated from State Anatolian High School and 12 % of the students who graduated from Super Hgh School were positive towards learning American or British culture in language classroom. 17 % of the studenst who graduated from State Anatolian High School and 9 % of the students who graduated from Super High School were negative towards learning cultural issues in language classrooms. The study clearly reveals the positive attitudes of students towards learning cultural elements in the language learning process.

Culture learning is perceived as less feasible if confined to the classroom than language learning. It needs to be experiential with experience of the difference having to be at the center of learners' and teachers' attention. Unsurprisingly, new communication technologies are promoted as a means of overcoming distance and giving learners experience of interacting with native speakers. Email contacts, electronic conferencing and the Internet as a source of information are representative of this trend. Gudykunst and Kim (1992) argue that in intercultural interactions, two types of context come into play: external context and internal context. The former refers to the settings or locations where the interaction takes place and the meanings society attaches to them, whereas the latter, internal context is the culture the interactions bring to encounter. In intercultural communication, misunderstanding is much more likely to occur because the culture students were exposed may have an effect on the situations. Thus, it is essential for

language learners to be effective in culture learning (Cited in Byram, M. and Feng, A, 2004:149-168). Language teachers should help their learners discover the potential meanings through exploration of contextual clues to make learning more meaningful.

Too much cultural information in the class may be boring for the students. Thus, the planning part is very crucial for a successful class both for the teacher and for the students. Students want to learn the target culture and instead of course books, they want to learn cultural information with realias, in pictures and videos. 74,7% (71) of the students thought that culture was the characteristics of home life, nature of family and interpersonal relations in a community. 21% of students stated that they think cultural information should include communicative aspects such as body language, idioms, daily lifestyles, food and clothes.13% of the students thought that regional and general differences in America and British English should be included in cultural information. 11% of the students stated that customs and traditions should be included in cultural information. This suggests that learning culture can be enjoyable for learners if the teacher chooses the correct technique and choose the right content to teach it in the classroom. 27,4% of students thought that Upper-Intermedite level is the approprite level to be provided with cultural information. 24% stated that Intermediate is a suitable level to learn about cultural information. However, the research suggests that culture learning should be in every level of language learning. Thus, the teacher may include cultural information from the beginning level to create a positive attitude on the part of students. This will motivate students more towards learning culture. There is a kernel of truth that, the more students are exposed to English, the more knowledgeable they will be about the target culture. Thus, to a certain extent, students may be introduced to the target culture from the beginning.

4.   Discussion and Conclusion

Foreign language study expands the area of experience by affording interesting linguistic comparisons. It also offers insight into another culture and as such is concerned with the human and social area of experience. Throughout a language learning course, students should be encouraged to view the familiar from a different angle, not least in terms of people's behavior, thereby widening horizons and breaking down feelings of insularity (Carte des Langues Vivantes, 1980: 313). Here, there is the sense of evident unease about the potential separation of two facts of language teaching: the instilling of a useful skill and the encouragement of an open understanding of target culture. While

learning a language, students find themselves in a world of close knit internationalism and increasing mobility. They meet people of other cultures and origins in their environment. Thus, they encounter otherness. So, it becomes very necessary to include in the aims of foreign language teaching arising the knowledge of the target culture and development of intercultural competence. Byram (2008) argues that 'language teaching with an intercultural competence dimension presupposes that teachers themselves will have acquired intercultural communicative competence to a reasonable level. It is tempting to argue that the level needs to be very advanced, since the learners will not advance to complex levels of competence themselves' (p.83). This temptation will be stronger if the teacher is responsible for other subjects such as incorporating culture into his/her syllabus.

Attitudes and values about a language may be related to the social structure, notions such as what constitutes 'speaking well' and members of different occupations or social classes. Educators go on claiming that shared knowledge is essential to explain the shared presuppositions and judgments of truth value which are the essential undergirding of language structures as well as of contextually appropriate usage and interpretation. Of course, much of this knowledge is culture specific. Among these are humor and interpreting literature.

This study investigated the attitudes of students at the preparatory school towards learning the target culture and the types of cultural activities they would like to be exposed to. The results shed light on the attitudes of students towards the target culture and present the importance of including cultural information in the language learning process. Effective methods and techniques can be developed by teachers on the results of the study. The following conclusion can be driven from this study.

To begin with, students should see themselves responsible for learning the target culture since it is already embedded in what they learn and do in the classroom. It makes sense to believe that whoever is learning the foreign language is also learning the cultural knowledge and skills required to be a competent L2/FL speaker denies the complexity of culture, language learning, and communication. The second reason for teaching culture in the foreign language classroom is to enable students to take control of their own learning as well as to achieve autonomy by evaluating and questioning the wider context within which the learning of the target language is embedded. Tomalin & Stempleski (1993: 7-

8), adapting Seelye's (1988) 'seven goals of cultural instruction', may provide an answer pertinent to the question posed. According to them, the teaching of culture has the following goals and is of and in itself a means of accomplishing them:

1. to help students to develop an understanding of the fact that all people exhibit culturally-conditioned behaviors;

2. to help students to develop an understanding that social variables such as age, sex, social class, and place of residence influence the ways in which people speak and behave;

3. to help students to become more aware of conventional behavior in common situations in the target culture;

4. to help students to increase their awareness of the cultural connotations of words and phrases in the target language.;

5. to help students to develop the ability to evaluate and refine generalizations about the target culture, in terms of supporting evidence;

6. to help students to develop the necessary skills to locate and organize information about the target culture; and

7. to stimulate students' intellectual curiosity about the target culture, and to encourage them.

When all the reasons above are considered, the importance of learning a target culture for students becomes more apparent. Thus, this study is aimed at finding the attitudes of students towards the target culture and in so doing can offer valuable insights for language teachers as to whether or not they may incorporate culture in their teaching. At the end of the study, it will be suggested that the teaching of culture should become an integral part of foreign language instruction. 'Culture should be our message to students and language should be our medium' (Peck, 1998). In short, culture learning will allow learners to increase their knowledge of the target culture in terms of people's way of life, values, attitudes, and beliefs, and how these manifest themselves or are couched in linguistic categories and forms. More specifically, the learning of culture will make learners aware of speech acts, connotations, etiquette, that is, appropriate or inappropriate behavior, as well as provide them with the opportunity to act out being a member of the target culture.

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