

Culture in ELT

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Özet

Dil ve kültür toplumu yansıtan, birbirinden ayrılmaz olgulardır. Dil öğretimi kültürel değerler ve toplum özelliklerinden ayrı tutulabilir mi? Evet, tutulabilir. Ama, bireyin, dilini öğrendiği toplumun özellikleri hakkında bilgi edinimi de engellenmiş olur. Bireyin bir toplumun kültürel değerleri ya da toplumsal özellikleri açısından bilinçlendirilmesi, onun bu değerlere ve özelliklere sorgusuzca sarılması anlamına gelmez. Aksine, bunlar, kişiliği, dar kalıplı çerçevesinden çıkarıp onun daha evrensel bir yapı kazanmasını sağlar.

1997-1998 Güz döneminde Çukurova Üniversitesi, İngiliz Dili Eğitimi Bölümü öğrencilerinde kültürel bilinçlenme aşamasını hızlandırmayı amaçlayan bir ders verilmiştir. Bu dersin sonunda, çoğu yoruma dayalı, açık uçlu sorulardan oluşan bir sormaca verilmiş ve bu sorularla ilgili öğrencilerin yorumları istenmiştir.

Veri çözümlemesinden iki ana bulgu ortaya çıkmıştır: (1) öğrencilerin İngilizce okuma ve konuşma becerilerinde önemli derecede gelişmenin kaydedilmesi ve (2) kendi kültürleri ve öğrendikleri dilin kültürü arasında karşılaştırma yapabilme yeteneklerinin geliştirilmiş olması.

Abstract

Language and Culture are two inseparable phenomena which mirror a society. Can language teaching be isolated from cultural properties and societal characteristics? Yes, it can, yet leading to an incomplete process of teaching, and deprivation of the rightful information for the subject. Awareness of cultural values and societal characteristics do not necessarily invite the learner to conform to them. They are there to refine the self so that it can take a more universal and less egoistic form.

During the Autumn term of 1997-1998 academic year, a course aiming to raise cultural awareness of ELT students at the ELT Department of the University of Çukurova was given to students throughout the term. At the end of the course, students made an assessment of the course, responding to a questionnaire, mostly with open-ended items. Two significant results emerged from this assessment: (1) students made progress in their reading and/or speaking skills, and (2) they developed a better sense of comparison between their own and the target language society.

Introduction

Language is the reflection of a society with its all cultural values, norms and many other characteristics. It is here that we see how speakers view and perceive the world in which they live and share with other societies. This is what makes societies each unique in their own way and calls for efficient channels of communication that bridge differences; enable each to understand and sympathise with each other, and value and respect the existence of each as a unique entity, and yet one of the many beautiful patterns of a carpet woven on the same loom. Achieving this requires cultural literacy, or as some would call, cultural awareness.

Cultural literacy, or awareness, must be given room in any language teaching syllabus not only for its broad contribution to bridging gaps between cultural differences and building an atmosphere of tolerance and confidence among societies, but also for its significance in communicating simple needs and expressing meaning in ideas between individuals. What befalls language teaching strategists thus is making their most effort in assuring the provision of cultural elements that would mirror the society best in a language teaching curriculum.

The need for cultural literacy in ELT arises mainly from the fact that most language learners not exposed to cultural elements of the society in question seem to encounter significant hardship in communicating meaning to native speakers. Whether they are aware of such hardship or not is another matter. However, the reaction they face is clear enough to raise awareness about the severity of the problem. Here, the learner feels that there is, probably, something ‘missing’ about the language instruction he/she has been receiving for quite a long time. Learners in such situations have two options: either go for it, and work hard to see what is missing, or ignore it all until it recurs in a different situation. Not all learners opt for the former, since the effort may prove useless due to the potential difficulty in reaching the right source of help.

Below, we would like to cite some authentic examples from both speaking and writing situations where in each there is a cultural element or elements that may attract reaction leading to a communication breakdown between interlocutors.

Example 1:

Two colleagues (a Turkish and an American) from the ELT Department, University of Çukurova, are out for a walk. They meet one of their students in the street.

Colleagues: Hi, Osman.

Osman: Where are you going?

The American, before responding, hesitates for a while, though, immediately, realises that Osman means no intrusion to privacy, and the question is simply posed with no intention but paving the path for a healthy channel of communication.

Example 2: (Citation in the first draft of the English teaching syllabus for 17-19 year-old High School students: p. 19)

A man and a woman are probably in the kitchen preparing a meal.

*What's happened darling?
I've cut my finger.
What were you doing then?
I was making mushroom salad.
Why didn't you tell me to do?
I told you thousands of times.*

From the dialogue, we cannot really tell whether it is a male or a female who had the accident. It is clear though that the focus is on the grammatical structure, rather than meaning. Considered from a grammatical point of view, the text has some flaws, as in ‘*Why didn't you tell me to do?*’ After all, salad is *made* in English and not *done*. Both *make* and *do* in this grammatical structure cannot be left alone; they must rather be followed by an object, be it a noun or an object pronoun. From a cultural perspective, no matter whoever had the accident, some may interpret the content of this dialogue as an amalgamation of accusation, protectionism, patronising, demeaning, and/or “reductionism” in Krauthammer’s (1998) sense. Few will challenge the idea that the Turkish society is rather protectionist. This is something that can even be observed in most state institutions. The Turkish people, in general, understand this and try to ensure the existence of such a characteristic inherent in their culture through generations. However, carrying this over to a language teaching syllabus may muddle the mind of a Non-Turkish native speaker, and may even lead to the emergence of so called “inappropriate” utterances in Corder’s (1981) sense. After all, the same cultural element can perfectly be expressed in the native language, with no need for a foreign language to do so.

Example 3: (Citation in the first draft of the English teaching syllabus for 17-19 year-old High School students: p. 44)

If you do that again, I won't talk to you any more.

Frequently employed among Turkish youth, yet almost never put into action is the utterance ‘*Bir daha yaparsan seninle bir daha konuşmayacağım*’. This statement which expresses warning, may not sound immature when uttered by 17-19 year-old Turkish boys and girls; however, it does for counterparts in British or American societies, where the age group producing such an utterance would normally be early teens or below. It can clearly be observed that it is linguistic *competence* and not *performance*, in Chomsky’s (1965) sense, that has been dealt with here. The cultural aspect, though, is totally ignored. As Lado (1957) states, lack of cultural competence in the target language is bound to give way to transfer from the native language to the target language. We can clearly see that such a statement, indeed, holds true for four of the examples cited here.

Example 4: (Citation in the first draft of the English teaching syllabus for 17-19 year-old High School students: p. 50)

An excerpt from a reading passage

A Japanese architect has already designed the city of the future. This is a tower city. 3000 people will live in it. They will be able to go on a holiday in this tower city, children will find green places in it as well. They will have to travel by only an interesting lift.

Until the very next to the last word, this paragraph has nothing wrong with it. However, the word *interesting* seems to spoil the whole things. The sentence in which the word is used is both grammatically correct and, analysed independently of the text, semantically appropriate. However, sentences do not exist as isolated entities, on the contrary, their lexical and grammatical units have anaphoric and cataphoric coreferences, which knit sentences together rather firmly. Viewed from this perspective, we see that the word *interesting* is in fact inappropriate in this context, since it has a positive connotation in English, and what is intended to be expressed in the excerpt, is something with a negative connotation. The word *unusual* would probably fit well.

One would wonder what drove the author to employ this word in the text. The simplest explanation would stem from reliance on a pattern of thinking different from that of the native speaker of English. What *interesting* brings to the mind of an English speaker is not the same as what it does to a Turkish speaker, since in the case of former, connotatively, the concept is positive, and in the latter, negative. Therefore, it is not surprising to see such a distinct type of perception carried over into an English text, sounding rather idiosyncratic.

Example 5: (Citation in the first draft of the English teaching syllabus for 17-19 year-old High School students: p. 64)

*I am too fat to wear jeans.
Why don't you go to a fitness centre?
I hate myself because I am fat.
Since I am fat I'm ugly.*

We cannot exactly tell whether the speaker in this excerpt is a male or a female. This text is, however, full of anarchism. It is a reflection of an artificially promoted culture pervading every corner of the globe, preaching the benefits of thinness, and degrading the overweight. Analysed at a surface level, most should normally tell that *jeans* for almost all sizes do exist, and that *fatness* does not entail *ugliness*, the perception of which changes from one individual to another. Including such a dialogue in any syllabus, leave aside an ELT one, may prove hazardous for the psyche of the child, and thus, in turn, profoundly endangers the joy to be received from learning.

Here, we have seen that cultural literacy/awareness is of extreme significance in enabling our verbal and non-verbal behaviour to be meaningful for our interlocutors.

Based on this premise, some significant studies were conducted in this field (Seelye, 1984; Valdes, 1986; Damen, 1987; Singer, 1987; Robinson, 1988; Ebsworth and Eisenstein, 1993; Maley, 1993; Stempleski, 1993; Tomalin and Stempleski, 1993; Bessmertnyi, 1994; Tavares and Cavalcanti, 1996). Although not written for EFL learners in particular, Abercrombie, Warde, et al.'s (1995) study, in which they present a broad picture of the British society, may prove greatly beneficial as a reference work for both instructors and learners.

Data Collection

The data for this study was collected at the end of a course aiming to raise cultural awareness of ELT students at the ELT Department of the University of Çukurova. During the Autumn term of 1997-1998 academic year, students received instruction totalling 48 hours, during which lecture-type sessions, as well as research project presentations were held; video films shown; maps, pamphlets, sample newspapers, and other material reflecting target culture were introduced to students, who were also assigned research projects including topics such as Education, Politics, Economics, Health, Ethnicity, Governmental Systems, etc. in all three, Turkish, British and American societies. Having assumed full responsibility for their projects, students performed presentations of these projects to their class-mates. At the end of the course, students made an assessment of the course, responding to a seven-item questionnaire.

Questionnaire

The seven-item questionnaire assesses three main components: (1) language skill (Items 1,2,3), (2) cultural and societal characteristics (Items 4 and 5), and (3) attitude developed towards the English language at the end of the 48-hour instruction (Items 6 and 7).

With Item 1, students were asked to indicate if the course in general has provided any kind of contribution to any of their language skills, such as reading, writing, etc. With Item 2, they were asked to rate their language skills which they believe have received most contribution. The rating is 1, for the most; 2, for less than 1; 3, for less than 2; and 4, for the least contribution. The last item of the skill component is Item 3, which is an open-ended type one, and investigates the way(s) the observed contribution, if there is any, manifested itself. Students gave individual responses to this item, which were classified into four common categories.

Item 4, being in the culture and society component, asks whether the course has led to awareness of cultural and/or societal characteristics of any kind? Expressing their positive or negative options here, students, with Item 5, defined how they could be sure of such an awareness. Verbatim responses were classified into common categories.

With Item 6, students were asked to indicate if their term projects has in any way enabled them to detect similarities and/or differences of any kind between their own and the target language societies, and with Item 7, how such detection affected their attitude towards the English language. Individual responses received for Item 7 were classified into three categories.

Participants

The participants in this study are all second-year students at the ELT Department, Faculty of Education, University of Çukurova. The students, being 16 male and 35 female, ranged between 21-25 years of age. In a pre-study information gathering process, it was found that the majority of them had gone through a preparatory instruction program at the same department, and are assumed to be at a relatively similar English proficiency level. Among the courses they have received are basic-skill type (such as Listening, Speaking, Writing, etc.), Research Methods, Phonology & Morphology, Literature, Introduction to Linguistics, Mythology, etc.

Data Analysis

The data, concerning the three components mentioned above, and elicited from fifty-one ELT students was analysed through the SPSS statistical package, observing frequencies of values and their chi-square dependence significance. The emerging results and their interpretation will be presented pertaining each component included in the questionnaire.

Component 1: *Language skill*

As can be seen in Table I below, there are three items in this component. A great majority of the participants expressed their views suggesting that their basic language skills were in fact improved by this course, despite the fact that this was not one of the major objectives of the course. The chi-square analysis emphasises such tendency of the participants.

No.	Items	Responses	%	Chi-square
1	Has this course contributed to any of your language skills?	Yes	94.0	0,0000
		No	6.0	
2	If it has, to what skill(s) has it contributed most?	Reading	64.0	0,0000
		Writing	2.0	0,0000
		Listening	17.0	0,0786
		Speaking	17.0	0,2228
3	How can you notice such a contribution?	I began to feel much more confident in both reading and speaking	52.3	0,0001
		I feel satisfied	4.5	
		I feel confident and satisfied	18.2	
		My vocabulary has expanded	25.0	

Regarding the skill improved most, participants, by 64.0 %, expressed views suggesting that their reading skill was greatly affected. Other skills such as listening and speaking came next by 17.0 % each, and writing, by a mere 2.0 %, was marked to be least improved.

Since the course was mainly a project based, seminar type one, quite naturally, it demanded a great deal of reading activity outside class, and discussions were frequently held in the classes. Following each receptive activity such as watching a video tape, students were encouraged to comment on what they watched, comparing target language societal features in the video with those of theirs. Such activities certainly added to their both receptive and productive skills.

As to how they felt the existence of such a contribution to their language skills, participants produced language output that was classified into four common categories: (1) *confidence in both reading and speaking*, (2) *deep satisfaction*, (3) *confidence and satisfaction*, and (4) *vocabulary expansion*. Here are some verbatim excerpts from the responses received:

- ◆ I began to speak fluently.

- ◆ My interest in reading is higher now. And my pronunciation is better.
- ◆ I learned new words.
- ◆ I can notice that listening and vocabulary get better.
- ◆ I can read magazines, novels, daily newspapers easily and of course I can understand them.
- ◆ After this course, not only my reading comprehension and also my world knowledge improved a lot. I have learned many new words.

Despite the fact that the course did not have improving basic skills as a main objective, we still see that learners, some how, individualised instruction, each benefiting from it in their own way. Such a language behaviour of EFL students suggests that no matter how we, instructors, try to confine courses into their predefined frameworks, students will eventually produce individual interpretation of instruction, associating it with their own priorities in language learning.

Component 2: *Cultural and societal characteristics*

One of the main objectives of the course was to raise awareness of language learners about the target language cultural and societal characteristics. In order to achieve this goal, a great deal of inside and outside class activities were conducted. Students were introduced to prominent newspapers and magazines, were shown video tapes of both American and British wedding ceremonies, home-recorded video tapes featuring garden activities, transport, shopping centres, high-street vendors, beggars and youth, car-boot sales, open-air markets, conferences, political speeches, news broadcasts, weather broadcast, a typical broadcast day on a British TV channel, British homes, British and American roads, House of Commons/Lords, House of Representatives in the US, minorities in both the UK and the USA, short sketches representing different walks of life in the UK, documentaries and films on some outstanding events in both the UK and the USA, etc. In addition to visual aids, students did a great deal of reading, both inside and outside class. The reading topics consisted mainly of what was indicated in the syllabus. However, extensive reading was also encouraged. In the class sessions, students would compare features of the native and target societies, each student, contributing with his/her individual observations. A genuine interactive process would lead to enlightenment about similarities and contrasts in both native and the target societies. Finally, they all would form awareness groups discussing the benefits of their observations in mastering other courses as well as in the process of target language improvement.

In order to see whether all these inside and outside class activities were successful in enabling students to develop some kind of awareness about native and target societal characteristics, Items 4 and 5, shown in Table II below, were included in the questionnaire.

No.	Items	Responses	%	Chi-square
4	Do you think this course was helpful in raising awareness regarding societal characteristics and cultural values?	Yes	93.9	0,0000
		No	6.1	
5	If it was, how could you observe that?	I became more aware of my own societal characteristics	27.8	0,0077
		My knowledge about the target society and culture has expanded	72.2	

Responses given to Item 4, suggest that the activities, by 93.9 %, were successful in helping students gain some kind of societal awareness. As to how students could observe such a contribution, students' responses to Item 5 were analysed in two categories: (1) bringing into consciousness native society characteristics, and (2) expansion of knowledge about target society and culture.

An integral part of this course are also topics concerning the Turkish society. Food and drinks, family visits, addressing styles, kissing and hugging, ethics in politics, governmental systems, leisure, ethnicity, etc. were among the many topics students compared and contrasted between native and target societies. Therefore, it is quite natural that during this process some, by 27.8 %, were able to observe the contribution manifest itself in awareness of the native culture. However, the majority, by 72.2 %, stated that the contribution could be observed most in expansion of their knowledge concerning the target societies. This is probably due to the fact that the material presented included proportional content for all three, Turkish, British and American societies. Here are some verbatim excerpts from the participants' responses:

- ◆ Before I took this course I had been ignorant about different cultures. I was able to learn something about these cultures.
- ◆ This course gave us a chance to make a comparison between Turkey, UK and US. It gave us the information about those countries, and broaded our minds. I use most of the things I learned in this course in daily life. By means of this course, I started to interest in policy in a more conscious way.
- ◆ We feel the differences in a better way now.

- ◆ This course raised awareness. I have learned a lot about my own society by studying others.

Component III: Attitude towards the English language

Since objectivity is of utmost importance, considerable effort was made in order to produce material free from biases and stereotypes for this course. Various resources, such as scientific publications, newspapers (presenting different political spectrums), TV documentaries supported by written material, films based on historical sagas, etc. were all given special care in the selection process so that they would not lead to false conceptions of the societies in question.

Project assignment was a significant part of the outside-class activities. Since learning takes place in different situations and different forms, we asked students if they were able to detect similarities and/or contrasts between native and target societies. The responses received to Item 6, shown in Table III below, suggest that 87.5 % of the participants were able to do so, while those who did not, remained at 12.5 %.

No.	Items	Responses	%	Chi-square
6	While working on your projects, were you able to observe similarities and differences between the society you live in and the British and American societies?	Yes	87.5	0,0000
		No	12.5	
7	If you were, how such an observation affected your attitude towards the English language?	Positively	83.3	0,0003
		Negatively	0.0	
		Neutral	16.7	

As to how such observations affected the participants' attitude towards the English language in general, 83.3 percent produced responses that were categorised as positive, and 16.7 % as neutral. No negative responses were received. Below are presented some verbatim excerpts from participants' responses:

- ◆ In my opinion it's more entertaining to speak a language that you know much about it's country. So I like it more now.
- ◆ Now I now why I need an accent; British or American.
- ◆ When I speak English I can think like them
- ◆ I think I must give more importance to it and I must listen too much English.

Conclusion

Cultural awareness does not only contribute to developing a sense of cross-cultural understanding, but also builds in individuals confidence and faith in their own deeds. By learning about a particular society other than ours, we also bring into consciousness some characteristics inherent in our own society and culture. To many, this may not seem to be directly conducive to a language learning process; however, it is indeed, the society in which we see the language being used with all its styles and forms reflecting particular patterns of thinking. Unaware of this, the language learning process will be far from complete. With high linguistic competence, perhaps, individuals may communicate most of their needs, express ideas, and deliver messages, yet if cultural competence is not gained, there will always be something fundamental missing in communication. After all, if Esperanto disappeared, one of the main reasons was probably the fact that it was isolated from a particular culture, no matter how simple and easy to learn it was, linguistically.

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