



The necessity of teaching culture in English as a foreign language course: Iranian perspective

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APA Citation:

Solgi, F, & Tafazoli, D. (2018). The necessity of teaching culture in English as a foreign language course: Iranian perspective. *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 14(3), 01-11.

Submission Date:21/06/2017

Acceptance Date:02/07/2018

Abstract

The connection between language and culture has always been a concern of L2 teachers and educators. Whether culture of the target language is to be incorporated into L2 teaching has been a hotly debated issue. Mostly it has been emphasized that without the study of culture, teaching L2 is inaccurate and incomplete. This study was conducted to find out what students think about the effects of the culture class they attended. As a result of the study, a significant similarity between the students' views and the theoretical benefits of a culture class as argued by some experts in the field was observed.

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Keywords: Language teaching; culture; English as a Foreign Language (EFL); language education

1. Introduction

Currently, English is the most widely spoken language in the world. People all around the world continue to learn English to reach their different aims. An understanding of the relationship between language and culture is important for language learners, users, and for all those involved in language education. For language teachers and learners in general, an appreciation for the differences in opinion regarding the relationship between language and culture can help to illuminate the diversity of views held toward the use of language. The critical question is that whether to teach 'culture' along with English or not.

There are four views regarding the issue. The first one states that 'target language culture' should be taught along with English to acculturate language learners into the cultures of English speaking countries (Byram, 1997; Byram & Flemming, 1998). The second view states that there should not be any teaching of the 'target language culture' together with English in the countries where English is an institutionalized variety (Kachru, 1985, 1986; Kachru & Nelson, 1996). Other two views also reject the idea of teaching 'target language culture' along with English. However, while one of the views supports the teaching of 'local culture' in English language teaching (Kramsch & Sullivan, 1996; McKay, 2003), the other view holds the position that English has become a lingua franca and it should be taught in a culture-free context (Alptekin, 2002; Jenkins, 1996, 2000, 2002, 2005; Seidlhofer, 2001).

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Now we introduce the concepts of culture and its relationship with language.

2. Review of literature

2.1. Culture

Culture is the characteristics of a particular group of people, defined by everything from language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music and arts. Cultures are what make countries unique. Each country has different cultural activities and cultural rituals. Culture is also the beliefs and values of the people in that society. Culture also includes the way people think about and understand the world and their own lives. Culture can also vary within a region, society or sub group. A workplace may have a specific culture that sets it apart from similar workplaces. A region of a country may have a different culture than the rest of the country. Goodenough (1957, p. 167, as cited in Wardhaugh, 2002, p. 219) explains culture in terms of the participatory responsibilities of its members. He states that a society's culture is made up of whatever one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members, and to do so in any role that they accept for any one of themselves.

Malinowski (Stern, 2009) views culture through a somewhat more interactive design, stating that it is a response to need, and believes that what constitutes a culture is its response to three sets of needs: the basic needs of the individual, the instrumental needs of the society, and the symbolic and integrative needs of both the individual and the society. For both Goodenough and Malinowski, culture is defined by benevolence and expectation. While each person holds their own individual roles and subsequent needs as part of a culture, the various needs of the culture must also be kept in balance. Consequently, in composing a definition for culture, we can see that the concept is often better understood in the context of how the members of a culture operate, both individually and as a group. It is therefore clear how important it is for members of any society to understand the actual power of their words and actions when they interact.

2.2. Connection between language and culture

There is no such a thing as human nature independent of culture; studying an L2, in a sense, is trying to figure out the nature of another people (McDevitt, 2004). If as McDevitt holds human nature is seamlessly related to the culture, then studying L2 involves the study of L2 culture. Actually, the conditionality of the previous sentence could be proved inappropriate. The mutual relation between language and culture, i.e. the interaction of language and culture has long been a settled issue thanks to the writings of prominent philosophers such as Wittgenstein (1980; 1999), de Saussure (1966), Foucault (1994), Dilthey (1989), Adorno (1993), Hahn (1999), Quine (1980) and Chomsky (2006). These are the names first to come to mind when the issue is the relation between language and culture. Yet, the most striking linguists dealing with the issue of language and culture are Sapir (1962) and Whorf (1956). They are the scholars whose names are often used synonymously with the term "Linguistic Relativity" (Richards et al, 1992). The core of their theory is that a) we perceive the world in terms of categories and distinctions found in our native language and b) what is found in one language may not be found in another language due to cultural differences.

According to Jenkins (2005), language has a dual character: both as a means of communication and a carrier of culture (p. 56). Language without culture is unthinkable, so is human culture without language. A particular language is a mirror of a particular culture. Adorno (1993) describes the relation between language and culture as follows: "A language is a part of a culture and a culture is a part of a language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the

significance of either language or culture" (p. 165). In a word, culture and language are inseparable (cited in Seidlhofer, 2001, p. 140). When it comes to the realm of teaching and learning, as McKay (2003) presents it, the interdependence of language learning and cultural learning is so evident that one can conclude that language learning is culture learning and consequently, language teaching is cultural teaching (p. 59). Gao further states that foreign language teachers should be aware of the place of cultural studies in foreign language classroom and attempt to enhance students' cultural awareness and improve their communication competence. Stern (2009), likewise, asserts "foreign language teaching is foreign culture teaching, and foreign language teachers are foreign culture teachers". According to Jenkins (2005), the international role of the English language and globalization are the two main reasons to teach culture as a fifth language skill, in addition to listening, speaking, reading and writing.

"What the fifth language skill teaches you is the mindset and technique to adapt your use of English to learn about, understand and appreciate the values, ways of doing things and unique qualities of other cultures. It involves understanding how to use language to accept differences, to be flexible and tolerant of ways of doing things which might be different to yours. It is an attitudinal change that is expressed through the use of language."; Jenkins (2005) further argues that teaching of culture in ELT should include cultural knowledge (knowledge of culture's institution, the big C), cultural values (the "psyche" of the country, what people think is important), cultural behavior (knowledge of daily routines and behavior, the little c), and cultural skills (the development of intercultural sensitivity and awareness, using English language as the medium of interaction.)

Some experts, however, approach the issue of teaching culture with some kind of reservation. Bada (2000) reminds us that awareness of cultural values and social characteristics does not necessarily invite the learner to conform to such values, since they are there to "refine the self so that it can take a more universal and less egoistic form" (p. 100). Besides, we are reminded of the fact that English language is the most studied language all over the world, whereby the language has gained a lingua franca status (Alptekin, 2002; Smith, 1976). Alptekin (2002) in his article, favoring an intercultural communicative competence rather than a native-like competence, asserts that since English is used by much of the world for instrumental reasons such as professional contacts, academic studies, and commercial pursuits, the conventions of the British politeness or American informality proves irrelevant. Quite in the same manner, Smith (1976) highlighting the international status of English language lists why culture is not needed in teaching of English language:

- There is no necessity for L2 speakers to internalize the cultural norms of native speakers of that language!
- An international language becomes de-nationalized!
- The purpose of teaching an international language is to facilitate the communication of learners' ideas and culture in an English medium (McKay, 2003).

To sum up, culture classes have a humanizing and a motivating effect on the language learner and the learning process. They help learners observe similarities and differences among various cultural groups. Today, most of L2 students around the world live in a monolingual and monocultural environment. Consequently, they become culture-bound individuals who tend to make premature and inappropriate value judgments about their as well as others' cultural characteristics. This can lead them to consider others whose language they may be trying to learn as very peculiar and even ill-mannered, which, in turn, plays a demotivating role in their language learning process.

Due to the fact that earlier researches do not provide us with conclusive evidence on the learners' attitude about culture after passing culture class, in this research it is tried to investigate this issue. In fact, this study purported to answer the following question: What is the relationship between the students' views and the theoretical benefits of a culture class.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The participants of this study were 32 female undergraduate students of computer major in one of the universities in Iran. They were ranging in age from 18-24. They were graduates of either private or state secondary schools from all over Tehran. Therefore, they share common cultural characteristics.

3.2. Instruments

The first instrument was 10 hours of lecture-type sessions, as well as research project presentations, which were held during the culture course. In addition, the second instrument was the five-item questionnaire adapted from Bada (2000), utilized in this study aimed to assess these themes: (1) *language skill* (Items 1, 2), (2) *cultural awareness (of both native and target culture)*; Item 3), (3) *attitude towards the target culture* (Item 4), and (4) *contribution to the prospective teaching profession* (Item 5).

3.3. Procedure

The participants of this study had passed general English course with the researcher of this study. A culture course was provided to them, which included 10 hours of lecture-type sessions, as well as research project presentations. Students taking this class made an assessment of the course, responding to a five-item questionnaire adapted from Bada (2000).

In the first two items, we asked the participants whether the culture course provided any kind of contribution to any of their language skill(s), and if so, which particular skill(s) was/were improved compared to others. The second theme of the questionnaire aimed to investigate if the participants of this study became more aware of their own and the target culture's characteristics. The third theme was concerned with the attitude change in the participants towards the target culture.

The last theme assesses the contribution of a culture class to the participants' prospective teaching profession. This theme aimed to collect as much information as possible regarding the nature of any potential contribution of learning about culture to the teaching profession.

4. Results

The responses of the participants were analyzed through the SPSS statistical package, observing frequencies of values and their chi-square dependence significance. Results and their interpretations will be presented in tabular form, referring to each item included in the questionnaire. In the analyses a value smaller than $p \geq 0.05$ will be considered statistically significant.

4.1. Theme 1: Language skill

We began the questionnaire with the item asking whether the culture course contributed to any of the language skills of the participants. All of the 32 (100%) participants gave affirmative answers to this item, which suggested that although developing language skills was not the major objective of the course, it influenced these skills positively. Table 1 below clearly illustrates the results received for this item.

Table 1. Language skill

Item No.	Item	Responses	%	Chi-Square
1	Did this course contribute to any of your language skills?	Yes	100	0.000
		No	0	

Item No.	Item	Responses	Frequency	%	Chi-Square
2	To which skill did the course contribute most?	Listening	9	28.1	0.014
		Speaking	13	40.6	
		Reading	7	21.8	
		Writing	3	9.3	

Regarding the skill improved most, the participants, by 40.6% expressed views suggesting that their speaking skill was significantly improved. Listening and reading skills came next by 28.1 and 21.8% respectively, and writing by a small 9.3%.

Since the course was mainly presentation based, the participants spent a lot of time conducting seminars and presentation projects. Therefore, both the presenters and the rest of the class practiced speaking since they discussed cultural topics in the target language.

4.2. Theme 2: Cultural awareness

One of the main objectives of the culture class was to raise awareness of language learners about the target language culture. This objective was also mentioned as a benefit of learning culture in the introduction. In Table 3 below, the participants expressed views regarding awareness raising of the target culture as well as theirs.

Table 2. Cultural awareness

Item No.	Item	Responses	Frequency	%	Chi-Square
3	Did this course help you raise awareness about both your own target and cultures?	Yes	22	68.75	0.024
		No	10	31.25	

The chi-square result for this item suggests that the course achieved one of its goals to a great extent. Nearly 70% of the students felt such an awareness.

4.3. Theme 3: Attitude towards the target culture

Education is sometimes compared with evolution; it is essentially an evolutionary process at the end of which the individual transforms greatly. Such transformation, mostly intellectual, could be observed in the change of the individuals' attitudes towards life in general. Culture classes could be considered as one means to transform the language learner. The fourth item of the questionnaire investigated if the participants were able to observe such a transformation in their attitudes towards British and American Societies.

Table 3. Attitude towards the target culture

Item No.	Item	Responses	Frequency	%	Chi-Square
4	Did your attitude towards target culture change at the end of this course?	Yes	24	75	0.009
		No	8	25	

Having a look at Table 3 above, we can see that more than 70% of the participants expressed positive thoughts regarding item. The culture course seems to have succeeded in accomplishing a task with some humanizing effect.

4.4. Theme 4: Contribution to prospective teaching profession

The last item of the questionnaire is the only open ended one. When asked if and how the culture class would contribute to the participants' prospective teaching career almost all of them had to say something. The responses can be grouped in six points. Below, we will deal with these points, citing some of the participants' verbatim remarks at the introduction of each point.

Point 1: Teaching language is also teaching culture

- *I will be able to teach not only the language but also the culture.*
- *Could you think of any language without culture?*

After the introduction of the Direct Method into the English Language teaching, cultural elements began to be considered as an important aspect of learning the language, and in our age, cultural background knowledge is accepted as a must in teaching language. As Thanasoulas (2001) points, it should be reiterated that language teaching is culture teaching, and someone involved in teaching language is also involved in teaching culture at the same time. Language does not exist in a vacuum, so language learners should be aware of the context in which the target language is used i.e., they should also learn about the target culture. In this respect, Crystal (1997) well supports this statement: "Language has no independent existence: it exists only in the brains and mouths and ears and hands and eyes of its user." The participants in this study, aware of the inevitability of teaching culture in a language course, believe that they would be well equipped to teach a language course due to the culture class they attended.

Point 2: Familiarization with the target society

- *I will be able to answer the questions of my prospective students about English/American societies.*
- *I will be able to answer the questions of my prospective students about cultural topics.*

As a second benefit of the culture class, we also mentioned that however course books provide real life situations, learners, lacking insights about the target culture, have difficulty in associating these situations with real people (Kitao, 1991). Therefore, learners may think that they are studying the language of some fictive people. However, learners learn concrete facts more easily than abstract ones; if they know that they are dealing with a genuine and not virtual reality, that they are studying a language spoken by real people, then studying the language will become much easier. ELT students attending culture classes will easily provide background information for their prospective students thereby rendering the grammar or other language related classes more enjoyable, interesting, and attractive. Moreover, when learners' needs and curiosity in their field are satisfied by the teacher, learners will thus respect the authority and the competence of the teacher, which can be viewed as rather conducive to their language learning.

Point 3: Assistance in teaching grammar

- *I will be able to teach grammar more efficiently.*
- *While teaching grammar I will be able to provide genuine examples from the lives of English and American people.*

Some participants believe that besides other benefits, a culture class would help them in teaching grammar. That while teaching grammatical structures and other grammatical items they would provide their prospective students with examples taken from real life. Teaching grammar, as well known, may sometimes become problematic because one cannot make a one-to-one translation of one language into another. Furthermore, Sapir-Whorf hypothesis implies that there are certain thoughts of an individual in one language that cannot be understood by those who use another language (Chandler, 1994). Therefore, dealing with grammar problems, teachers' ability to explain the new grammatical items referring to life of the target language society will help them have students overcome comprehension problems regarding grammatical structures.

Point 4: Enhancing communicative competence in L2

- *My communicative competence has improved.*
- *I had the opportunity to use the L2 a lot; thus, I feel more confident in speaking English.*

While discussing the language proficiency, linguists often make a distinction between linguistic competence and linguistic performance. Chomsky (2006) defines linguistic competence as what one knows about the language while linguistic performance is one's actual language use. Communicative competence, on the other hand, is a concept introduced by Hymes (1972), and discussed widely in the field of language learning and teaching. According to Hymes (1972) the speakers of a language need more than grammatical competence in order to be able to communicate effectively in a language. They also need to know how language is used by members of a speech community to accomplish their purposes.

Communicative competence has mainly two aspects: linguistic and pragmatic. Cultural competence falls in the category of pragmatic aspect of communicative competence. It could be described as the ability to understand behavior from the perspective of the members of a culture, and thus behave in a way that would be understood by members of the culture in the intended way. It, therefore, involves understanding of all aspects of a culture, but particularly the social structure, the values and beliefs of the people, and the way things are assumed to be done. Lado (1957) argued that lack of cultural competence in the target language would surely lead to transfer from the native language to the target language. Consequently, L2 students would express idiosyncratic utterances leading to inappropriate utterances even though the grammatical structures may be appropriate. The participants here were well aware of the fact that by attending culture classes their communicative competence would be improved and that they would become not only efficient readers and listeners but also efficient speakers and writers.

Point 5: Expanding vocabulary

- *Cultural knowledge will play a facilitator role in my teaching and learning new lexical items.*
- *My vocabulary was expanded significantly due to the culture class.*

Vocabulary learning has often been one of the major issues in the study of L2. No matter how well learners learn grammar, no matter how successfully sounds of L2 are mastered, without words, expressing a wide range of meanings during communication in an L2 cannot take place in any meaningful way. Therefore, L2 learners need to know as much vocabulary as possible and be able to use it appropriately. Culture classes do not only help learners enrich vocabulary repertoire but also aid them in using the newly acquired words. Studying culture, a learner becomes familiarized with specific

words used in a given context. Without paying due attention to English politics, for instance, comprehending terms such as The House of Commons, The House of Lords, The Civil Service, and The Ombudsman may be rather difficult. Furthermore, one of the techniques in teaching and learning is to make use of the mnemonics. Most of the cultural issues being concrete in nature will be the pegs with which the new vocabulary is associated. Using the peg technique (Schmitt, 1997), learners associate a newly encountered word with an already acquired one leading to minimization of fossilization of potential misuse of such a new word.

Point 6: Providing information prior to a visit to the UK or the USA

- *In case I visit Britain or the USA, I will not have a culture shock.*
- *If I take some of the courses from a university in the UK attending the Socrates/Erasmus program, I will adapt to the differences in Britain or the USA more easily.*

One of the motives for studying an L2 is that people sometimes have to go abroad, especially due to business, and meet people from different nationalities. It is not practical and economical to communicate with others through a simultaneous translator.

With the introduction of the SOCRATES/ERASMUS Student Exchange Program it has become much easier for a student to visit an EU country. If students did not know what a DIY (Do-it-Yourself) shop sells they would be left to their devices to discover what DIY shops are for. Providing information about such stores may greatly ease the life of such students. If they did not know what leisure the English have, they may feel perplexed to observe people engaged in activities quite different to theirs. We believe that such students have the right to access information about the target society prior to such visits, and one major way of acquiring such information is through the language.

5. Conclusion

It is very clear from the above discussion that culture and language are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture. If any one of them is separated the other remains incomplete. In EFL or ESL class room the students should be taught English with the culture associated with it so that the students can acquire the target language with cultural background and correspond in real life situations. It is observed that many students, who have excellent academic performance in English subject, sometimes, find it very difficult to correspond with native speakers or in real life situations. This might be the result of learning English without proper awareness of its culture. Therefore, the role that culture plays in teaching and learning of English as a foreign/ second language cannot be avoided while designing course for EFL/ ESL students and in the classroom situations. The teachers should keep in mind the importance of culture and must have a prior knowledge of the cultural knowledge of the chapter or lesson he is going to teach the students.

To sum up, the findings of the study suggest that a culture class is significantly beneficial in terms of language skills, raising cultural awareness, changing attitudes towards native and target societies, and contribution to the teaching profession. The participants in this study emphasized some kind of transformation in their thinking and listed six points as potential contribution of a culture class they received.

This study has implications for a culture class in the curriculum of language teaching departments. Incorporated in the curriculum, a culture class would prove to be a vital component of language learning and teaching, since as this study illustrates, it has a great deal to offer to the development of communicative competence as well as other skills in the instruction of any language.

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İngilizceyi yabancı dil olarak öğretiminde kültür öğretiminin gerekliliği: İran perspektifi

Öz

Dil ve kültür arasındaki bağlantı her zaman yabancı dil öğretmenleri ve eğitimcileri için endişe kaynağı olmuştur. Hedef dilin kültürünün yabancı dil öğretimine dahil edilip edilmeyeceği tartışmalı bir konu olmuştur. Çoğunlukla kültür çalışması yapılmadan yabancı dil öğretiminin yanlış ve eksik olduğu vurgulanmıştır. Bu çalışma, öğrencilerin katıldığı kültür sınıfının etkileri hakkında ne düşündüklerini bulmak için yapılmıştır. Araştırma sonucunda, öğrencilerin görüşleri ve kültür dersinin, alandaki bazı uzmanlar tarafından tartışıldığı gibi, teorik yararları arasında anlamlı bir benzerlik gözlemlenmiştir.

Anahtar sözcükler: Dil Öğretimi; kültür; Yabancı Dil Olarak İngilizce (EFL); dil eğitimi anahtar sözcükler1; anahtar sözcükler2; anahtar sözcükler3

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