Culture in English Language Teaching: A Comprehensive Review of Current Research

Siavash Rokhsari

Trinity Language Centre, (Affiliated to Trinity Western University) BC, Canada.

Email: Srokhsari@twu-tlc.ca

ABSTRACT

As a second or foreign language cannot be learned without knowledge of the cultural context in which it is used, it is generally accepted that language learners must also become cultural learners. Culture acquisition is as universal and natural as language learning. The ability of the individual to accept and learn new ways of doing and saying things determines how easy or difficult it will be for them to integrate into the new culture and language in EFL/ESL situations. The most readily apparent and accessible manifestation of a culture is its language, which serves as a medium for communication among its members. A person's worldview, sense of self, ways of acting, feeling, and communicating can all be affected negatively by a culture shock. Similar to how one must be able to think in a language in order to speak it well, mind is a very potent tool. Language is the lifeblood of the nation and its citizens. Since language and culture are closely interwoven, we should instead consider the pros and cons of intentional vs accidental exposure to culture rather than whether it should be taught as a subject in the foreign language curricula. In a word, culture is a way of life.

KEYWORDS: Culture; EFL; ESL; Language skills

INTRODUCTION

People speak of cultural adjustment, but the fact is that it is not to culture that we adjust but to behavior. Culture, a system of beliefs and values shared by a particular group of people, is an abstraction which can be appreciated intellectually, but it is behavior, the principal manifestation and most significant consequence of culture, that we actually experience (Storti, 1988, cited in Gebhard, 2009).

Kim and Vorobel (2018) suggest that "Collaborative projects that involve learners from different cultures can provide opportunities for meaningful interactions, exchange of ideas, and the development of cultural competence" (p. 82). In this so-called global village, in order to communicate internationally, as well as successfully, we need to be aware of and equipped with cultural norms and differences among people of different nationalities and of variety of origins; cultural differences such as greetings, offers, apologies, eating habits and so on. In 1904, in his book "How to Teach a Foreign Language", Jespersen (cited in Rivers, 1983) stated that " the highest purpose in the teaching of languages may perhaps be said to be access to the best thoughts and institutions of a foreign nation, its literature, culture-in short, the spirit of the nation in the widest sense of the word." Considering the points already mentioned and as Tang (1999) believes language is culture and culture is language; meaning that language and culture are inseparable, in other words, they are interwoven and so, inextricably linked.

Cultural awareness and the learning of a target culture can lead to the attainment of second language proficiency. Kramsch (1993) believes second and foreign language learners necessarily become learners of the second culture because a language cannot be learned without an understanding of the cultural context in which it is used. Leaning culture is as universal and natural as learning language. In EFL/ESL situations, the ease or difficulty of entering into the new culture and new language depends on the individual's capacity for accepting and learning new ways of doing and saying things.

Enculturation: it is the process of learning one's native culture and is essentially complete for those normal individuals who are able to participate in the environment in which they were reared.

Acculturation: it is the process of learning a second culture and is probably never complete for individuals who are not native to the culture (Chastain, 1988).

McKay (2003) contends that culture influences language teaching in two ways: linguistic and pedagogical. Linguistically, it affects the semantic, pragmatic, and discourse levels of the language. Pedagogically, it influences the choice of the language materials because cultural content of the language materials and the cultural basis of the teaching methodology are to be taken into consideration while deciding upon the language materials. For example, while some textbooks provide examples from the target culture, some others use source culture materials.

Darasawang and Reinders (2010) argue that "Teachers need ongoing professional development to enhance their cultural competence, including opportunities to explore their own cultural assumptions and biases and develop strategies for integrating culture into language teaching" (p. 267). Kitao (1991) giving reference to several authors lists some of the benefits of teaching culture as follows:

Studying culture gives students a reason to study the target language as well as rendering the study of L2 meaningful. From the perspective of learners, one of the major problems in language teaching is to conceive of the native speakers of target language as real person. Although grammar books give so called genuine examples from real life, without background knowledge those real situations may be considered fictive by the learners. In addition, providing access into cultural aspect of language, learning culture would help learners relate the abstract sounds and forms of a language to real people and places (Chastain, 1971).

The effect of motivation in the study of L2 has been proved by experts like Gardner and Lambert (1959, 1965, 1972). In achieving high motivation, culture classes have a great role because learners like culturally based activities such as singing, dancing, role playing, doing research on countries and peoples, etc. The study of culture increases learners' not only curiosity about and interest in target countries but also their motivation. For example, when some professors introduced the cultures of the L2s they taught, the learners' interests in those classes increased a lot and the classes based on culture became to be preferred more highly than traditional classes. In an age of post-modernism, in an age of tolerance towards different ideologies, religions, sub-cultures, we need to understand not only the other culture but also our own culture. Most people espouse ethnocentric views due to being culture bound, which leads to major problems when they confront a different culture. Being culture bound, they just try to reject or ignore the new culture. As if it is possible to make a hierarchy of cultures they begin to

talk about the supremacy of their culture. This is because they have difficulty understanding or accepting people with points of view based on other views of the world. This point is also highlighted by Kramsch (2001).

People who identify themselves as members of a social group (family, neighborhood, professional or ethnic affiliation, and nation) acquire common ways of viewing the world through their interactions with other members of the same group. These views are reinforced through institutions like the family, the school, the workplace, the church, the government, and other sites of socialization through their lives. Common attitudes, beliefs and values are reflected in the way members of the group use language-for example, what they choose to say or not to say and how they say it. Besides these benefits, studying culture gives learners a liking for the native speakers of the target language. Studying culture also plays a useful role in general education; studying culture, we could also learn about the geography, history, etc. of the target culture (Cooke, 1970).

CULTURE

To some extent, scholars of the fields associated with culture, define culture differently since culture is not a unidimensional phenomenon. What culture covers is the commonly held traditions, values and ways of behaving of a particular community. It includes what we used to call 'British and American life and institutions', 'daily life' and also cultural artifacts, such as the arts or sports. This is all interesting and sometimes useful knowledge and it is often included in textbooks (Tomalin, 2008). Chastain (1988) defines culture as the way people live. He also believes that culture is "...an all-inclusive system which incorporates the biological and technical behavior of human beings with their verbal and non-verbal systems of expressive behavior starting from birth, and this "all-inclusive system" is acquired as the native culture. This process, which can be referred to as "socialization", prepares the individual for the linguistically and non-linguistically accepted patterns of the society in which he lives. Brown (1994) points out that culture is deeply ingrained part of the very fiber of our being, but language - the means for communication among members of a culture- is the most visible and available expression of that culture. And so, a person's world view, self-identity, and systems of thinking, acting, feeling, and communicating can be disrupted by a change from one culture to another. Similarly, Tang (1999) asserts that to speak a language well, one has to be able to think in that language, and thought is extremely powerful. Language is the soul of the country and people who speak it. Language and culture are inextricably linked, and as such we might think about moving away from questions about the inclusion or exclusion of culture in foreign language curriculum, to issues of deliberate immersion versus non-deliberate exposure to it. In a word, culture is a way of life (Brown, 1994). It is the context within which we exist, think, feel and relate others. It is the "glue" that binds a group of people together. It can be defined as a blueprint that guides the behavior of people in community and is incubated in family life. It governs our behavior in groups, makes us sensitive to matters of status, and helps us to know what others expect of us and what will happen if we do not live up to their expectations.

Considering culture, at least two issues need to be kept in mind if it is to have any meaning for educators who want to understand how it is related to learning. First, culture needs to be thought of in an unsentimental way. Otherwise, it is sometimes little more than a yearning for a past that never existed, or an idealized, sanitized version of what exists in reality. The second consideration to be kept in mind is that the sociopolitical context of

culture needs to be acknowledged. That is, cultures do not exist in a vacuum, but rather are situated in particular historical, social, political, and economic conditions, and therefore they are influenced by issues of power (Nieto, 2010).

CHARACTERISTICS OF CULTURE

Nieto (2010) tries to shed some light on the characteristics of culture as follows:

" Culture is Dynamic

Culture does not exist outside of human beings. This means that cultures are not

static relics, stagnant behaviors, or sterile value.

" Culture is Multifaceted

Closely related to the dynamic nature of culture is that cultural identifications are multiple, eclectic, mixed, and heterogeneous. This means, for one thing, that culture cannot be conflated with just ethnicity or race.

" Culture is Embedded in Context

To say that culture is embedded in context is to say that it invariably is influenced

by the environment in which it exists.

" Culture is Influenced by Social, Economic, and Political Factors

As is evident, intimately related to the fact that culture is bound to a particular context, is that it is greatly influenced by the political, historical, and economic conditions in which it is found. It exists not in isolation but through concrete relationships characterized by differential access to power.

" Culture is Created and Socially Constructed

As discussed previously, culture often is thought of as a product-in-place, and as

something handed down that must be kept the way it is. Not only does this result

in a static view of culture, but it also implies that culture is already finished.

" Culture is Learned

Closely related to the fact that culture is created and socially constructed is the

fact that it is learned. That is, culture is not handed down through our genes, nor is it inherited.

" Culture is Dialectical

Culture often is thought of as a seamless web of interrelated and mutually supportive

values and behaviors, yet nothing could be further from the truth. Because they are complex systems that are created by people and influenced by social, economic, and political factors, cultures are also dialectical, conflicted, and full of inherent tensions.

ATTITUDES TOWARD OTHER CULTURES

One of the major hurdles to the successful implementation of culture goals in language classes revolve around attitudes. Before students can learn about culture, they must be receptive to the concept of learning about cultures other than their own (Chastain, 1988).

SOCIETY

The students' environment exerts a tremendous influence on their receptivity to the learning of cultural concepts. If the students are from a society that is cosmopolitan and they are familiar with cultural diversity, they will be more ready to study and benefit from cultural content.

TEACHERS

The teachers' attitude is of crucial importance in determining the extent to which cultural objectives are attained. The teacher's task is to make students aware of cultural differences, not pass value judgments on those differences. He/ she is to acquaint, not indoctrinate.

STUDENTS

Ethnocentrism has often been painted in negative terms, but such a reaction is not entirely justified. Each individual must make choices as to the desirable behaviour patterns by which his/ her life is most comfortable and most productive. To exist as a sociocultural entity all cultures must, by definition, conform to some system of shared beliefs and behavior patterns. Exposure to a second culture in the classroom can be a disquieting experience for some students. The teacher should be sensitive to students' feelings and be prepared to take steps to ameliorate any negative reactions.

CULTURE - THE FIFTH LANGUAGE SKILL

Tomalin, (2008) poses this question that why should culture be considered as the fifth language skill, besides listening, speaking, reading and writing?

One is the international role of the English language: many people now argue that the role of the English language in the curriculum is a life skill and should be taught as a core curriculum subject like math, and the mother tongue. The reason for this is globalization and the fact that to operate internationally people will need to be able to use a lingua franca.

The other is globalization itself: you could say, 'We are all internationalists now'. We are or will be dealing with foreigners in our community, going abroad more, dealing at a distance with foreigners through outsourcing or email, phone and video-conferencing; and this isn't just for adults. Kids are interchanging experience and information through travel, and networks like Facebook. This is the time to develop the intercultural skills that will serve them in adult life (Tomalin, 2008). Attaching the same value to culture as to each of the four language skills is no surprise because of its importance in the development of global awareness and international understanding, in being able to function in the second-language society, and stimulating and maintaining students' interest and motivation (Chastain, 1988).

CULTURE ACQUISITION

Considering culture acquisition, there are four successive stages as follows (Brown, 2007):

Stage 1: it is a period of excitement and euphoria over the newness of the surroundings.

Stage 2: culture shock- refers to phenomena ranging from mild irritability to deep psychological panic and crisis; it is associated with feelings of estrangement, anger, hostility, frustration, unhappiness, sadness, loneliness, homesickness, and physical illness.

Stage 3: it is one of gradual, and at first tentative and vacillating, recovery.

Stage 4: it is a period of near or full recovery, either assimilation or adaptation.

LANGUAGE TEACHING METHODS AND CULTURE

Grammar Translation Method: this method of language teaching views culture as consisting of literature and fine arts of the target language.

Direct method: it considers culture as the history of the people who speak target language, daily lives, and geography.

Audio-lingual Method: this method regards culture as the everyday behavior and life style of the target language speaker.

Silent way: it suggests culture as inseparable part of language.

Desuggestopedia: this method states that culture is a combination of fine arts and everyday life style.

Community Language learning: it views culture as an integral part of language learning.

Total Physical Response: this method considers culture as life style of people who speak target language natively.

Communicative Language Teaching: it regards culture as everyday life style of people who speak target language.

ADJUSTING TO ANOTHER CULTURE

Although adjusting to another culture can be an arduous experience, there are benefits that make the effort worthwhile; these benefits are as follows (Gebhard, 2009):

" A fuller sense of security

" The possibility of greater success in the workplace

" The possibility of establish meaningful relationships with people from the culture

" The possibility of gaining fluency in the language of the host country

" A deeper understanding of one's own culture

" A deeper understanding of oneself

Strategies to Make Adjustment Process Easier (Gebhard, 2009):

" Give yourself time.

" Identify, accept, and treat symptoms of culture shock.

" Learn as much as possible about the host culture.

" Talk with others who have successfully adjusted.

" Get involved with people in the host culture.

" Study the language of the host culture.

COMMON TECHNIQUES TO PRESENT CULTURAL INFORMATION IN THE CLASSROOM

Joiner (1974) has prepared descriptions of various methods teachers have used to present cultural information in language classes which are as follows :

" **Culture aside:** it is an unplanned brief culture comment; taking advantage of relevant topics as they arise to give students cultural information.

" **a slice of life technique:** choosing a small segment of life from the second culture that is presented to the students at the beginning or end of the class time.

" **a culture capsule:** it is a brief description of one aspect of the second culture followed by a discussion of the contrasts between cultures of the first and second languages.

" **Culture cluster:** in this approach, the teacher incorporates a small number of separate, ten minute culture capsules into the class format.

" **Minidramas (mini skits):** in this approach, students incorporate the culture being learned into their actions as they perform in selected situations.

" **Audio-motor unit:** in this technique, students act out commands given by the teacher.

" **Social-psychological contrasts:** it deals with differences between students' culture and that of the target culture.

" **Critical incident:** it copes with some problems occurring in the interactional patterns of people from different cultures.

" **self-awareness technique:** it serves to raise to consciousness those basic beliefs that govern students' values, attitudes, and actions and to enable them to begin to understand the role of culture in society and in their lives.

Students can get familiar with culture of the target language out of the classroom through:

" Informant interviewing

" Special programs and events

" Community resources

" Pen pals and tape exchanges

" Area-specific study

" Summer camps

" Travelogue films

" Students exchange and travel/study abroad

" Regional and state language festivals

POINTS TO BE CONSIDERED IN CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT AND AWARENESS

It is argued that the teaching of culture in ELT should include these things (Tomalin, 2008):

" **Cultural values**

The 'psyche' of the country, what people think is important, it includes things like family, hospitality, patriotism, fairness etc.

" **Cultural knowledge**

The knowledge of the culture's institutions.

" **Cultural behaviour**

The knowledge of daily routines and behaviour.

" **Cultural skills**

The development of intercultural sensitivity and awareness, using the English language as the medium of interaction.

DANGERS OF TEACHING CULTURE

As language teachers, we have to face the fact that teaching culture has its own pros and cons; specially:

" When the teacher does not have enough knowledge about target culture.

" When the teacher does not know how to teach culture.

" When the teacher has to deal with time limit.

" When it would be considered as a threat to the native values and beliefs.

CHALLENGES OF INCORPORATING CULTURE INTO ELT

Incorporating culture into ELT is not without its challenges. One of the main challenges is the lack of cultural competence among ELT teachers. As stated by Byram and Wagner (2018), "teachers need to be aware of their own cultural identity and biases and be able to recognize and respect the cultural identity of their learners" (p. 140). Without this awareness, teachers may unintentionally perpetuate stereotypes and biases in the classroom. Another challenge is the lack of culturally relevant materials and resources. Many ELT textbooks and materials are designed for a global audience and may not be culturally relevant to learners from different cultural backgrounds. As stated by Holliday (2018), "ELT materials need to reflect the diversity of learners and provide opportunities for learners to engage with their own culture and the culture of the target language" (p. 9).

LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

Understanding the nature of the relationship between language and culture is central to the process of learning another language. In actual language use, it is not the case that it is only the forms of language that convey meaning. It is language in its cultural context that creates meaning: creating and interpreting meaning is done within a cultural framework (Nazaralieva & Kasimova, 2022). In language learning classrooms, learners need to engage with the ways in which context affects what is communicated and how. Both the learner's culture and the culture in which meaning is created or communicated have an influence on the ways in which possible meanings are understood. This context is not a single culture as both the target language and culture and the learner's own language and culture are simultaneously present and can be simultaneously engaged. Learning to communicate in an additional language involves developing an awareness of the ways in which culture interrelates with language whenever it is used (Golshan & Ranjbar, 2017).

TEACHING CULTURE THROUGH LANGUAGE

Cakir (2006) states that in EFL classrooms, as we teach the language, we would automatically teach culture. The forms of address, greetings, formulas, and other utterances found in the dialogues or models our students hear and the allusions to aspects of culture found in the reading represent cultural knowledge. Gestures, body movements, and distances maintained by speakers should foster cultural insights. Students' intellectual curiosity is aroused and satisfied when they learn that there exists another mode of expression to talk about feelings, wants, needs and when they read the literature of the foreign country. For depth of cultural understanding it is necessary to see how

such patterns function in relation to each other and to appreciate their place within the cultural system. If language learners are to communicate at a personal level with individuals from other cultural backgrounds, they will need not only to understand the cultural influences at work in the behaviour of others, but also to recognize the profound influence patterns of their own culture exert over their thoughts, their activities, and their forms of linguistic expression.

IMPLICATIONS FOR LANGUAGE TEACHING

Teachers must instruct their students on the cultural background of language usage. If one teaches language without teaching about the culture in which it operates, the students are learning empty or meaningless symbols or they may attach the incorrect meaning to what is being taught. The students, when using the learnt language, may use the language inappropriately or within the wrong cultural context, thus defeating the purpose of learning a language (Tang, 1999). Because language is so closely entwined with culture, language teachers entering a different culture must respect their cultural values. As Englebert and Dong (2004) describe: "…to teach a foreign language is also to teach a foreign culture, and it is important to be sensitive to the fact that our students, our colleges, our administrators, and, if we live abroad, our neighbors, do not share all of our cultural paradigms" (p. 38). Language teachers must realize that their understanding of something is prone to interpretation. The meaning is bound in cultural context. One must not only explain the meaning of the language used, but the cultural context in which it is placed as well. Often meanings are lost because of cultural boundaries which do not allow such ideas to persist. As Porter (1987) argues, misunderstandings between language educators often evolve because of such differing cultural roots, ideologies, and cultural boundaries which limit expression.

FINAL REMARKS

To put it in a nut shell, although there had been some kinds of disagreements and controversies considering the relationship between culture and language in the past, modern language scholars have come to the conclusion that there is no such a thing as human nature independent of culture and recent studies have cleared the ground of discussion on language and culture. In parallel with new findings in the field of English language teaching, it is believed that language and culture are inseparable and as Tang (1999) points out, language is culture and culture is language; in this regard, all ELT teachers need to incorporate culture in the curriculum and make aware their students of culture and its paramount help in the process of learning a new language. As a result, students would be more motivated and interested in learning a foreign culture for it leads to improving their understanding of the language and the people who speak it. Moreover, incorporating culture into ELT can promote diversity, inclusivity, and intercultural competence in the classroom. As stated by Byram and Wagner (2018), "the aim of language teaching is to enable people to communicate effectively across linguistic and cultural boundaries" (p. 148). By incorporating culture into ELT, we can help learners achieve this aim.

REFERENCES

Brown, H. D. (1994). *Principles of language learning and teaching*. New York: Longman.

Brown, H. D. (2007). *Principles of language learning and teaching*. New York: Pearson Longman.

Byram, M., & Wagner, M. (2018). Language teaching for intercultural and international dialogue *Foreign Language Annuals*, *51*(1), 140-151.

Cakir, I. (2006). Developing cultural awareness in foreign language teaching. *Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education*, *7*(3), 154-161.

Chastain, K. (1971). *The development of modern language skills: Theory to practice*. Philadelphia, Penn.: Curriculum Development Center.

Chastain, K. (1988). *Developing second language skills*: Theory and practice (3rd ed.). Florida: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Cooke, M. A. (1970). Suggestions for developing more positive attitude toward native speakers of Spanish. In H. N. Seelye (Ed,), *Perspectives for teachers of Latin American culture*. Springfield, IL: State Department of Public Instruction.

Darasawang, P., & Reinders, H. (2010). Encouraging autonomy with an online language support system. *CALL-EJ Online*, *11*(2), 11-2.

Englebert, M., & Dong, S. B. (2004). Character or culture? Implications for the culturally diverse classroom. *The Asian EFL Journal*, *24*(2), 37-41.

Gardner, R. C., & Lambert, W. E. (1959). Motivational variables in second-language acquisition. *Canadian Journal of Psychology/Revue canadienne de psychologie*, *13*(4), 266.

Gardner, R. C., & Lambert, W. E. (1965). Language aptitude, intelligence, and second-language achievement. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, *56*(4), 191-203.

Gardner, R. C., & Lambert, W. E. (1972). *Attitudes and Motivation in Second Language Learning*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House Publishers.

Gebhard, J. G. (2009). *Teaching English as a foreign or second language: A teacher self-development and methodology guide*. University of Michigan Press.

Golshan, M., & Ranjbar, T. (2017). The Impact of culture in teaching and learning of English as a foreign language. *Journal of Applied Linguistics and Language Research*, *4*(8), 59-67.

Jespersen, O. (1909). *A Modern English Grammar: On Historical Principles. I-VII*. Einar Munksgaard.

Joiner, E. G. (1974). Evaluating the cultural content of foreign-language texts. *The modern language journal*, *58*(5/6), 242-244.

Kim, D., Vorobel, O., & King, B. (2018). Students' use of second life in learning Spanish as a foreign language. *Journal of Second Language Teaching & Research*, *6*(1), 109-142.

Kitao, K. (1991). Teaching culture in foreign language instruction in the United States. *Doshisha Studies in English*, *52*(53), 285-306.

Kramsch, C. (2001). *Language and culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kramsch, C. (1993). *Context and culture in language teaching*. Oxford university press.

Leveridge, A. N. (2008). The relationship between language & culture and the implications for language teaching. *Retrieved on October*, *14*, 2013.

McKay, S.L. (2003). The cultural basis of teaching English as an international language. *TESOL Matters*, *13* (4), 1-6.

Nazaralieva, M., & Kasimova, K. (2022). Language and Cultural Issues in English Classes and the Prosses of Reading-Writing Skills. *Eurasian Journal of Learning and Academic Teaching*, *15*, 112-117.

Nieto, C. (2010). Cultural competence: Its influence on the teaching and learning of international students. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, *14*(4), 406-425.

Porter, E. (1987). Foreign involvement in China's colleges and universities: A historical perspective. *International journal of intercultural relations*, *11*(4), 369-385.

Rivers, W. (1983). Psychology " Linguistic and Language Teaching". *A Forum Anthology,* 3-11.

Tang, R. (1999). The place of "culture" in the foreign language classroom: A reflection. *The internet TESL journal*, *5*(8), 1-2.

Tomalin, B. (2008). Culture-the fifth language skill. *Teaching English*, *48*(1), 130-141.