

Culture as a Language Skill in FLT Case-study Master Students at Department of English at Chlef University

تدريس الثقافة كملكة لغوية في اكتساب اللغة الأجنبية
طلبة الماستر بقسم اللغة الانجليزية بجامعة الشلف- أنموذجا

CHAAL Houaria¹ *
Chlef University, Algeria
houariadz@yahoo.fr

Laboratory of information and communication technologies in the teaching of
foreign language and translation (TICELET)

Received 16/02/2024 Accepted 01/05/2024 Published. 01/06/2024

Abstract:

Culture and language are highly related. Language is the primary vehicle of culture since it conveys its beliefs, values and traditions. Therefore, learning a foreign language necessitates learning its culture. Accordingly, the status of culture in language teaching has always been a challenging issue for both teachers and learners. The cultural content taught in language classes may also be impacted by the extent of differences between the native and the target cultures. Generally, language teaching is based on the four skills acquisition. However, language teachers often refer to culture as a fifth skill. Hence, culture has always been present in the FLT class. But what does this skill imply and how should it be included into the teaching–learning process? What are the teaching materials designed for the cultural elements teaching? In this regard, this paper seeks to examine the status of teaching culture in ELT in the Department of English, at Chlef University. To conduct this study, the researcher chose Master students, depending on the class observation and discussion, in order to discuss some of the recommendations stated in the literature courses since literature is usually viewed as a cultural portrait of nations and communities. It reflects on what the ideal content of a course related to the teaching of this skill should be.

Keywords: culture, ELT, language, learners, literature.

ملخص:

ترتبط الثقافة باللغة برباط وثيق. إذ تعد اللغة الوسيلة الجوهرية في نقل الثقافة بمعتقداتها وقيمتها ومعاييرها. فتعلم لغة أجنبية يعني بالضرورة تعلم ثقافتها. ولذلك، كثيرا ما وقفت الثقافة كعائق في تدريس اللغة لكل من الأساتذة والمتعلمين. على اعتبار أن المحتوى الثقافي الذي يدرس في أقسام اللغة يتأثر بمدى الاختلافات بين الثقافة الأم والثقافة الأجنبية. وبصفة عامة، أثناء تدريس اللغة، غالبا ما يتم التركيز على تطوير المهارات الأساسية الأربع. ومع ذلك، كثيرا ما يشير معلمو اللغة إلى الثقافة باعتبارها مهارة

* Corresponding Author CHAAL Houaria

خامسة. ومن ثم ، كانت الثقافة دائمًا حاضرة في عملية اكتساب لغة أجنبية. ولكن ماذا تعني هذه المهارة وكيف يجب تضمينها في عملية التعليم والتعلم؟ ما هي المواد التعليمية المصممة لتدريس عناصر الثقافة؟ بناء على ذلك ، تسعى هذه الورقة إلى دراسة وضع تدريس الثقافة في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية بجامعة الشلف. باعتماد منهجية الملاحظة ، اختارت الباحثة طلبة الماستر لمناقشة بعض التوصيات الواردة في حصص تدريس الأدب الذي يعتبر صورة ثقافية للأمم ومرآة عاكسة للمجتمعات ، قصد التفكير مليا في ماهية المحتوى المثالي الذي يقوم عليه تدريس هذه المهارة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الثقافة، تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية، اللغة، الطلبة، الأدب.

1. Introduction

It is certainly claimed that the language is a way of communication that reflects the culture. It mirrors various social and cultural aspects of peoples' lives. Therefore, language teaching is culture teaching since those two variables can never be separated. In a way or another, teachers are interacting with their learners, introducing them new knowledge in a foreign language. Accordingly, the status of culture in language teaching has always been a challenging issue for both teachers and learners; especially, in this globalized village where it is more imperative for EFL teachers to equip students with high level of intercultural communicative ability. In this vein, Krasner (1999) stated that teaching language in isolation cannot make a learner competent in that language. So, it is obviously required to learn the language and to be exposed to the cultural contexts in which the language occurs.

Commonly, teaching a language stands on four separate skills: listening, reading, writing, and speaking. However, language teachers often refer to culture as a fifth skill since learners should learn the language in its use in order to assure an effective communication. Hence, culture has always been present in the FLT process.

In this regard, as teachers and educators how should we include culture into the teaching-learning process? What are the teaching materials designed for culture teaching? Do teachers of English at HBU expose their students on real cultural contexts when delivering their courses? How?

For that, this paper aims at examining the status of teaching culture in the Department of English at Chlef University. In order to conduct this study, based on the class observation, the researcher chose Master students who are supposed to study literature, which is regarded as a cultural portrait of societies. Literature courses, in fact, would be the most efficient scene where learners can discover the other's culture.

2. Culture within EFL Classroom

First, Culture, as a broad concept, is a very complex phenomenon that mainly touches in a direct way humans' lives and more significantly their attitudes, behaviours, and norms.

Many linguists and scholars concluded that one can never learn a foreign language without being exposed to its culture (Kramsch,1989 ;Tang,1999 ;Kuang,2007 ; and others).

Culture and language are closely related to each other. In this aspect, Brown in 2007 stated, « *that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture. The acquisition of a second language, except for specialized, instrumental acquisition, ... is also the acquisition of a second culture* » (p.189-190). Absolutely, after linguists' efforts to make the teaching of language and culture one body, it is prior to seek which methods and ways are suitable for such teaching of both variables.

In 1988, Lafayette turns interest to how teachers were neglecting culture in EFL classrooms. They were spending all their time and efforts in teaching grammatical patterns and lexical components of language, pushing aside culture. Recently, Moore in 2006 concluded that 80 percent of teachers were teaching culture more than half of their time.

However, the matter is how to teach culture within the language taking into account that culture is a complex conception that embodies many parts and aspect. Till now, linguists and anthropologists could not agree upon one clear definition of this concept (Tang, 2006, p.77). It is a challenge for educators to include such complex anthropological phenomenon in classroom. Simply, it is considered that it can never be taught in a separated way. Whilst, it should be taught as one body; otherwise, learners would lose the right meaning of certain cultural aspects that should be studied within the whole culture just like a fish, which cannot get out of water. Thus, teachers should be conscious of the sensitivity and fragility of culture and should take a great care of the method they use to deliver it to their students without losing the contextual meaning, and significantly delivered within language.

Many teachers are teaching culture as a separated subject out of the teaching process of language. According to The Standards for Foreign Language Learning (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 1999); « *the true content of the foreign language course is not the grammar and the vocabulary of the language, but the culture expressed through that language.* » (p.43)

Teaching a foreign language means teaching the meaning of its patterns too. A foreign language learner is not only required to spell or write in the target language; however, he needs to discover new thoughts, understand them, and mainly think in a new way in the target language. Many researches attempt to give teaching a foreign language a new shape and a new meaning over the ancient one which is pinned down to teach language in a linguistic interest ignoring the cultural interest. Van Lier (2000) and Stoller (2006) confirmed that classroom activities and linguistic tasks are useless in foreign language classrooms if they are not in a direct connection with real life events and in touch with social groups which use that foreign language. Thus, this type of activities does not allow students to acquire the target language accurately in its conceptualized mold.

Consequently, teaching culture as a fifth skill should be considered within EFL classroom in addition to other skills. The acquisition of culture competence may help learners to interact easily with the native speakers in diverse social contexts; it allows them to learn about, understand and appreciate the values, ways of doing things of other cultures. Learning culture, also, will teach the students to accept differences and to be flexible to tolerate ways of doing things that are obviously different in their culture. (Tomalin, 2008)

For instance, mastery of culture would more develop the other learners' skills. During the learning process, students may face some linguistic obstacles that are about understanding

idioms, colloquial, proverbs, religious practices,...So, how could they surmount such kind of difficulties?

2.1. Teaching Culture Strategies

To teach culture seems to be a hard task for both teachers and learners. It requires suitable methods and developed tools and materials to succeed in accomplishing that task.

Though many scholars sought efficient methods to teach culture, there are still gaps in foreign language classrooms. It is prior then to seek again both how to teach and what to teach. An efficient method guarantees a successful cultural interaction and a brilliant understanding of communities' standards. The next method is one of the successful ways to deliver culture in its right dish.

a. *Products, Practices, and Perspectives (the 3Ps)*

As it has been mentioned, the learner needs to know certain knowledge about the culture and the social group that uses the target language to acquire this language in both sides linguistically and culturally. The 3Ps method guidelines have been taken from The Standards for Foreign Language Learning. Among the established aims, there are five important ones for an efficient language acquisition; Communication, Culture, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities. Thus, the authors of that national document have agreed that the culture , as a complex concept, « *includes the philosophical perspectives, the behavioural practices, and the products both tangible and intangible of a society* » (1999, p.47). Furthermore, that method made multiple connections between the three variables practice, product and perspective. The practices are the acts and behaviours performed by a social group, the products are what culture is depicted through such as; a dance, a literary text, or a song,..., the perspectives are the shared attitudes. This method allows teacher to draw a relationship between those three Ps and direct them to plan their courses to give students the right fruitful learning process.

Moreover, the three Ps. approach permits to consult different documents and sources, like mass media, literature, for an efficient cultural learning (Lange, 1999, p.60). By presenting the cultural perspective to learners, beliefs, attitudes and cultural practices become more understood, and ensure that culture is taught in the right contextual environment. Consequently, ethnocentric attitudes of learners are reduced, and cultural relativism witnesses more spread in the foreign language classroom. By the end, the teacher can succeed to remove his students smoothly from their mother cultural sphere to a new target one without rebellious feelings toward certain cultural aspect. And so by the Three Ps approach, the foreign language acquisition reaches its highest success.

To provide a tangible instance of this context, it may be helpful to look at some of the most influential literary texts that affected the construction of the English Language. Shakespearian literature, for example, may prove to be an excellent window to regard the transition of the language from Middle English to Modern English. It may also draw an implicit rationalization of the spelling of a considerable number of words if regarded from a linguistic prism. Along the same vein, the remarkable works of James Joyce address the

flexibility of the English language, which may be utilized by the FL teacher to explain the existence of some of the increasingly popular diction used by natives on social media and otherwise. Another example can be the gender neutrality of the English Language, which can be noticed to be slightly problematic to the Arab learner in particular. This topic can easily be explained through teaching such non-fiction literary texts as Virginia Wool's "A Room of One's Own," for instance. In short, teaching literature can, in the context of FLT, be used not as an end in itself but as a means to transmit the foreign culture to the learner with the intention of facilitating the learning processes. It is important to mention, though, that literature is but an example of a culturally rich medium; others can be cinema, art, or even music. However, since, literature is especially interested in language and the human factor, it can be found more convenient than the others.

b. New Technologies Tools Integration

Technology is the best developed material used in foreign language classrooms to motivate learning and involve students in it. Due to technology's «*accessibility, flexibility, connectivity speed and independence of methodological approach*» (Gonzalez, 2009, p.62); teachers used it as a perfect material to enhance student's acquisition of foreign languages. It provides both teachers and learners with an effective teaching not only of the language, but the target culture too. Simply, we have to adapt learning process with our youth's trend and stream as they are a digitalized generation born.

Learners are no longer interested in printed documents; however, they become obsessed with using different developed technological devices. By integrating the use of those devices, teaching / learning process becomes less stressful and the negative anthropological aspects that occur in classroom are pushed away. Technology creates an «*open-ending*» learning, (Hellebrandt, 1996, p. 263) that gives unbounded positive results. Moreover, learners become more motivated and continue the learning process even outside their classrooms. Thus, Levy proposes in 2009 that «*simply accessing a Web site can expose learners to numerous aspect of the target culture*» (p.776). Using Websites to deliver the new culture facilitates the task to teachers; instead of thinking how to present it, teachers only think how to explain it to reduce the culture shock to students since the content is presented by a technological machine and not one member of his community who shares with him the same societal standards.

Furthermore, results were showing the opposite, students are not interested in learning culture as much as they are obsessed to use the net for pleasure. Lee in 2009 and Kukulska Hulme in 2010 agreed upon a list of activities which has been raised recently between 2005- 2010 and used in classroom. These activities have had a social mold such as ; Facebook, Twitter, Mobile Internet Access, use of multiple media to watch movies and listen to audio books,...ect, (Hulme,2010 ,p.8). Those tools and activities can be exercised even out of class and raised the cultural awareness rather than depending on teachers in classrooms and their methods to deliver new cultural aspects.

To give learners a total liberty to learn culture the way they preferred and out of their school walls may be a clear danger to their mother culture. Learning new culture is a very sensitive operation that should be done by practitioners and pedagogues in a great care. It is right that learners should have cultural awareness, but simultaneously, teachers should be aware of the over cultural awareness' effects. Not safe for a learner to be exposed by himself

to new social standards in the vast net world, he may love a particular aspect and attempt to practise it and which is very wrong in his community. That is why this operation should be done in a healthy chosen atmosphere that guarantees equilibrium in cultural awareness and protects the source culture from being influenced by the target one. For instance a wrong use of Websites to learn the target culture can easily lead to a religious assimilation or more dangerous than that to a crime that causes punishment. A learner may imitate a certain act being unconscious of the results and the act of being assimilated to the new culture; for example, gay marriage is a commonplace aspect in the United States of America that is practiced in public, but for an Algerian student it is not legalized and totally wrong and cause partial religious assimilation. Abortion is another example of cultural aspects, having sex, and other aspects that are considered crimes by the Algerian law and lead to sever punishments. Consequently, culture is individual's social identity and his belonging, and should be protected and kept as an original source he builds his behaviours and attitudes upon. And more significantly, universal cultural interactions are built upon one's cultural heritage and social background. That is why we should not learn cultures at random; instead we have to systematize our learning process and materials used to reach the right effective learning. In the same context, Globalization imposes itself as a crucial factor that necessitates culture learning since '*We are all internationalists now*'. We are always receiving foreigners in our home, going abroad more, dealing at a distance with foreigners through outsourcing or email, phone and video-conferencing. In addition, kids and youth are interchanging experience and information through travel, and networks like Facebook, instgram, WhatsApp and the other social media. Since language shapes our thought as it is maintained by Benjamin Lee Whorf, « *Language shapes the way we think, and determines what we can think about* », this is the time to develop the intercultural skills that will serve them in adult life.

3. Teaching Culture in EFL Classroom through Literature

Since literature is the mirror of nations, it is regarded as the most important material for teaching and exploring the cultural aspects. Therefore, for many EFL teachers, implementing literature within the students' curriculum is indispensable because it exposes them to meaningful contexts that reflect and represent some social and cultural aspects and values in their origin. Literature course introduces a profound range of vocabulary, dialogues, and prose. In addition to developing students' English language skills, teaching literature also appeals to their imagination, develops cultural awareness, and encourages critical thinking about plots, themes, and characters. Most importantly, the activities that one can apply with literature lessons easily conform to the student-centered and interactive tenets of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT).

Since studying literature is highly established on literary analysis and critics, many theories exist on how to evaluate and teach literature. There have been six essential approaches, among: New Criticism, Structuralism, Stylistics, Reader-Response, Language-Based, and Critical Literacy.

In this regard, to examine the status of teaching culture through the literary content, the study chose master one student (Lit & Civ. Option) of English language at Chlef University. Based

on class observation method, the researcher attended some sessions with two teachers of literature.

The research has concluded that teachers used different approaches for teaching the literary content which varied between poems and novels passages. It was about New Criticism and Reader –Response as both of them based on the literary analysis.

The selected texts reflected some historical, social, political and cultural aspects related to a given period of either the American literature or the British one.

It was so clear that the students could not understand some colloquial expressions included in the text. Moreover, teachers had difficulties to explain the cultural elements since their equivalents did not exist in the students' environment.

In some cases, the teacher attempted to omit or ignore the cultural aspect intentionally when analysing the content to avoid the cultural shock.

Some students were not interested in what they were learning. They did not interact. This proves that the absence of cultural awareness results in a lack of interest. At a Master's level, students are expected to have acquired at least an intermediate level of cultural knowledge of their target language.

The class observation confirmed that EL teachers at this university do not give a great importance to culture as a fifth skill that should be installed and mastered. It also shows that culture-targeted material has been neglected throughout their university course.

Therefore, teachers are requested to promote awareness of the divergences between peoples and provide the students with appropriate information about cross-cultural differences. By achieving this, the students will be more successful in using the language within its culture.

Moreover, as a recommendation, teachers at this university should integrate more technology tools for more interaction and beneficial teaching. For instance, instead of reading and analysing some literary passages, it is better to show them in a movie since our youth like all what is action, image, sound, character...This will create real scenes and attractive contexts that may motivate them to like literature.

4. Conclusion

The present paper attempted to highlight the importance of teaching culture as a language skill. It has been concluded that one can never learn a foreign language without being exposed to its culture. It is about an intertwined relation between culture and language.

Based on this perspective, the foreign language learners need to acquire the culture competence to avoid any communicative obstacles when integrating or interacting with native speakers.

Learning culture, also, will teach the students to accept differences and to be flexible to tolerate and understand ways of doing things that are obviously different in their culture.

Literature would be the perfect material for teaching the cultural elements. Through its various genres, it brings the other's culture into students' class.

To sum up, teaching literature can, in the context of FLT, be used not as an end in itself but as a means to transmit the foreign culture to the learner with the intention of facilitating the learning processes. It is important to mention, though, that literature is but an example of a culturally rich medium; others can be cinema, art, or even music. However, since, literature is

especially interested in language and the human factor, it can be found more convenient than the others.

It would be better to integrate the use of new technologies with their rich applications and tools for an efficient learning of the foreign language and its culture.

List of references

1. A. J. Liddicoat, L. Papademetre, A. Scarino, and M. Kohler, *Report on intercultural language learning* (Canberra ACT: Commonwealth of Australia, 2003).
2. BROWN, Douglas , *Principles of language learning and teaching*, New York: Longman. (2000).
3. B. Kachru, *The other tongue: English across cultures* (USA: University of Illinois Press, 1992).
4. Carter, R., and M. N. Long. *Teaching literature*. Harlow, UK: Longman. 1991
5. C. Kramsch, *Language and culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).
6. E. Hinkel, *Culture in second language teaching and learning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
7. FARNIA, Maryam; RAJA, Suleiman ,“ Contrastive Pragmatic Study and Teaching Culture in English Language Classroom”, *Proceeding from Solls. Intec. 09. International Conference*, (2009). pp. 242-257. See [http://www.ukm.my/solls09/Proceeding/PDF/maryam,%20raja %20rozina %20et%20al.pdf](http://www.ukm.my/solls09/Proceeding/PDF/maryam,%20raja%20rozina%20et%20al.pdf)
8. H. H. Brown, *Principles and language learning and teaching*, 4th ed. (White Plains, NY: Addison Wesley Longman, 2000).
9. HONG, Sungok ,“The Role of Heritage students in incorporating culture into language Teaching”, *South Asia*, (2008).
10. Krasner, The role of culture in language teaching, *Dialog on Language Instruction*, 13(1-2), 1999, 79-88.
11. K-Y. Lee, *Treating culture: What 11 high school EFL conversation textbooks in South Korea Do*, *English Teaching: Practice And Critique*, 8, 2009, 76-96.
12. M. Byram, *Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence*. (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 1997).
13. Moore, Z, Culture: How do teachers teach it? In Z. Moore (Ed.), *Foreign language teacher education: Multiple perspectives*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, (1996). (pp. 269-288).
14. Murshed Haider Choudhury (2013), Teaching Culture in EFL: Implications, Challenges and Strategies, *IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)* Volume 13, Issue 1
15. RAPPEL, Linda ,“An analysis and Interpretation of Intercultural Approaches to English Language Teaching”, *Journal of Integrated Studies*, Vol.1, (2011). pp. 1-7.

16. REGMI, Mabindra , ‘‘The Role of Local Culture and Context in English Language Teaching’’, *Nelta Choutari*. (2011). See <http://neltachoutari.wordpress.com/2011/04/01/the-role-of-local-culture-and-context-in-english-language-teaching/>
17. TOMALIN, Barry , ‘‘Culture the fifth language skill’’, *British Council*. See <https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/culture-fifth-language-skill>, (2008).
18. TOMALIN, Barry and HURN, Brian (2013). *Cross-Cultural Communication*, London: Palgrave McMillan
19. VERNIER, Silvia; BARBUZZA, Silvia; GIUSTI, D. Sandra; MORAL, D. Gabriel (2008). ‘‘The five language skills in the EFL classroom’’, *Nueva Revista de Lenguas Extranjeras*, pp. 263-291. See http://bdigital.uncu.edu.ar/objetos_digitales/2647/vernieriytrosfivelanguageskills.pdf
20. WANG, Xuan (2008). *Which language? Which culture? Which pedagogy? A study of Mandarin Chinese teachers’ perceptions of their professional self in a British school context*, Unpublished Master’s Thesis, London: University of London Institute of Education.