

Integrating Cultural Materials in English language Classrooms.

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Abstract

Teaching English as a foreign language is not only a matter of mastering the basic structure of the language such as grammar, vocabulary, mechanics, syntax and so on. Communication is not fully adequate and meaningful unless the language culture is explored. Technology has revolutionised the world and made it possible to bring the foreign culture into the foreign language classroom.

Students now in Algeria or in any part of the globe are able to listen to English from its native speakers thanks to the different social media. Several audio-visual tools are used by teachers as well to make courses seem real-life situations and engage students in a native-like atmosphere. To illustrate the cultural content in a foreign language textbook, the article sheds light on the various tasks and assignments which should carry the native speakers home culture, and the digital devices such as overhead projectors and data shows, videos related to lessons which have changed the English is learned in the classroom.

الملخص

إن تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية تحتاج إلى فضاء شاسع حتى يتسنى للطلاب دراسة قواعدها و مفرداتها، بل و التطلع على ثقافة هذه اللغة التي تعتبر الوعاء الذي بدونه لا يمكن اكتساب لغة شاملة في مضمونها و معانيها.

و الجزائر كغيرها من بلدان العالم تبحث عن إدماج الطالب في وسط يمكنه من خلاله الاحتكاك بأهل اللغة و ثقافتها.

إذن ماهي الطرق و الوسائل التي يمكن اتخاذها في تدريس الثقافة رغم ضيق الزمان والمكان؟

لا شك أن التكنولوجيا بوسائلها الحديثة السمعية و البصرية هي الطريقة المثلى للوصول إلى هذا الهدف. فقد أصبح بإمكان المدرس استعمالها داخل القسم مما جعل تعلم اللغة و ثقافتها في متناول الطالب رغم بعده عن وطن اللغة التي هو بصدد تعلمها.

INTRODCTION

In classroom conditions which are limited in terms of space and time, there is a need for designing a suitable syllabus and developing useful materials. Cultural contours are not always explicit, and so teachers should react to raise awareness of cultural attributes.

A learner-centred classroom is the one that is needed to create an environment for interaction. Engaging students as active elements in the learning process require their regular practice in the different tasks and assignments performed in the classroom. Students are actively involved and take responsibility for their own learning. The students' active participation is guided and facilitated by the teacher. This strategy facilitates individual progress and personal commitment not only in the educational environment but also in case the learner is exposed to real-life situations.

New teaching strategies that provide multiple pathways to the understanding of language and content will be discussed in this article. We will examine some teaching materials that can be used to help learners gain practice in the use of language for communicative purposes. Techniques, course books, teachers as well as learners are all major factors that can foster successful language acquisition.

1- The status of English Teaching in education today

Because of its functional flexibility and spread across the world, English is particularly suitable as lingua franca. The global number of non-native speakers is now larger than its native speakers. English is the language of the internet, motion, pictures, science and sports. It is the language spoken in the corridors of trade, and the diplomatic language spoken in the corridors of power. People want to learn English because it is necessary for them to function in today's world. English is the language of international relations of all kinds: media, music, business, documents, etc. An increasingly large number of words is becoming international in the field of sports and games, surfing, bowling, science and technology, aviation, tourism, etc.

Most scientific communication takes in English. Kachru and Smith(2008:1) explained:

It is however interesting that often those who do use English are the best educated and the most influential members (the opinion makers) of their society. The spread, status, and functions of English around the world are impressive indeed. The contexts for the use of English may be academic conferences, business, commerce, diplomacy, educational institutions, manufacturing, mining, print or audio-visual media, or tourism.

English has become the quasi-official language of the world, merely because it has the prestige of the civilisation, freedom, technical progress and scientific research. It has achieved the status of an international language. It plays an important role in social interaction. Increasingly, it is also making its presence felt in popular culture.

As the users of English come from so many different backgrounds, the use of this language offers a challenge to students of English studies. In many parts of the world, foreign language educators are reassessing the foreign language curriculum to take into consideration the task of developing socialisation in the foreign languages. It is giving the knowledge of a target language an intercultural meaning. English has always been an elite language, and viewed as a prerequisite for access to the best opportunities. Behind the prestigious position of English and the enthusiasm for learning it, lie economic and political reasons. Countries all over the globe promote English in the educational system since people need scientific and technological development, as well as means of associating with the rest of the world.

The main principle of the recent course books designed for secondary school students in Algerian secondary schools is to engage them in real meaningful communication that is to develop both accuracy and fluency; essentially giving the chance to students to produce correct sentences using adequate grammar and vocabulary but also speaking easily and smoothly.

In spite of the efforts made to improve English teaching, the quest for native speakers or native-like proficiency is still high. This is basically because English in these contexts is introduced in school and is used generally in formal situations and in education related to employability.

However, it is worth remembering that today, English is not only used in restricted domains such as higher education, research publications in science and technology, international business and commerce but it is absolutely needed as a means of communication throughout the world. Therefore, how should English be taught in classrooms? How do learners acquire intercultural communication

while living in their native country, far from the country where the target is used? How should culture be implemented in English courses?

2. Culture in the language classroom

Culture teaching within foreign language teaching has become a major issue. Students need to learn the target culture in order to truly have a good command of the language. In contemporary language classrooms, teachers are expected to integrate cultural components. This communicative competence model is based on the development of cultural awareness “*The exquisite connection between the culture that is lived and the language that is spoken can only be realised by those who possess knowledge of both*”. (National standards in Foreign Language Education Project (1999:47). Cultural diversity must be a high priority in education since the students’ purpose is to learn to live in an interdependent world. Moreover, being familiar with the target culture promotes the students’ curiosity to learn the language.

Actually, teachers are fully aware of the importance of the cultural integration in classrooms. They need to help students to be conscious that it is important to recognise the influence of culture on our attitudes, emotions, beliefs and values, and the dangers of projecting our native frame of reference on that of the culture being studied. To understand another culture, the learner needs to expect differences, and eventually to appreciate their logic and meaning.

Indeed, there is an increasing awareness among foreign language teachers worldwide that as a profession, they are in a privileged position to shape a better world. They can help spread ideas which build bridges of understanding while teaching the target language. Exploring cultural variation and bridging cultural gaps is of a great importance in the world today. The language learner should be taught to respect these cultural differences which bring richness and quality to the human cultural heritage. Foreign language learners should also develop the ability to cope with culture shock situations by attempting to see things from the ‘others’ perspective’. In this manner, they would be able to find their own voices in the foreign language speech community.

To explore the target culture in teaching the language is not an easy task. In many regards, culture is taught implicitly, imbedded in the linguistic forms that students are learning. Still, how can teachers make those cultural features an explicit topic of discussion in relation to the linguistic forms being studied? Actually, there are some of the realities of the classroom which methodological theories sometimes ignore. So, it is extremely difficult to decide which approaches and methods are best or appropriate for the language teaching

situations. How to make culture presentations in the classroom and what students should learn about the target culture is a complex task. Culture encompasses such a vast range of beliefs and activities that we can't possibly teach students everything.

3. How can teachers decide what to teach students?

The trend towards culture teaching has led to the incorporation of social and cultural elements in most of language textbooks. The addition of 'cultural facts' to the text, the discussion of expected norms of behaviour and language use in particular social events, and the inclusion of characters representing various cultural backgrounds ,i.e. the focus has tended to be on the other and not on the self. Culture has become a basic factor in language teaching in the classroom.

In the past, fostering cultural awareness has been attempted by introducing the geographical environment or political development of the foreign country, its institutions, customs and its literary achievements. Cultural competence in this case comes to be viewed as a body of knowledge about the country. Although students will need to develop knowledge about the target culture, the process remains receptive and not sufficient to acquire language proficiency. Of course, teachers cannot teach students specific ways of seeing things rather than bring some elements of the target culture and emphasize those characteristics and traits that are important to the members of the target community.

4-Strategies and techniques for teaching culture

Traditional methods of teaching culture focussed on formal culture and passive learning. Today, students do need both a geographical and historical perspectives to understand contemporary behaviour patterns. Language learners who live in places where their target language is not widely spoken need to interact with native speakers. This means exposure to real language in its own community.

Even if the classroom is not a « real- life » situation, the learner is still exposed to real discourse and not the artificial language of textbooks which tend not to contain any incident examples. Authentic materials reflect the changes in language use which become very dated. This fact proves the reader that language is real and not only studied in the classroom. When bringing authentic materials into the classroom, teachers should always have a clear pedagogic goal in mind. They should think of what they want their students to learn from these materials. The reason for the use of these materials is that they foster the learner's motivation. They do not provide students with facts but rather with linguistic tools to make them feel the need to speak. Students lacking motivation

to learn a language need variety and excitement. The materials should be those that students need when travelling, studying abroad or using the language in other contexts outside the classroom. The aim, therefore, is to understand the meaning and not form.

The sources of authentic materials that can be used in the classroom are various and infinite. Among them are newspapers, magazines, TV programmes, movies, games, songs, literature, the internet, etc.

4.1 The presence of media and diverse cultural contexts

Historically teachers have always faced social and technological innovations. They are also the first to encounter the dynamically changing intercultural and media contexts, since they should adapt educational content to the needs of modern students.

It must be emphasised, then, that it is impossible to fully understand intercultural literacy without using the knowledge and skills of media literacy. The use of materials based on internet technologies, offers many innovative ways of getting students involved in the process of learning a language. The web, for instance, is a very rich source for bridging the gap in geographical distances. Furthermore, students get to know the target culture by means of interacting directly with native speakers with mail exchanges or chat rooms. Other diverse cultural contexts like newspapers and magazines have a great importance as well. They provide learners with authentic and current information that can help them understand the target culture. Nunan (2003: 248) argued: *Computer assisted language learning is popular both in and out of the classroom. Classrooms may feature a single computer, a class set or even a situation in which portable lap-top computers are issued to each learner who carries them from class to class along with, or instead of books.*

Therefore, bringing the world of the target culture into the classroom is the teachers purpose to create a more complete picture of the alien culture.

4.2-Creating real-life situations:

They often substitute face-to-face interaction with the foreign culture. Videotaped interviews and situational role-plays are a very good way to provide natural, authentic linguistic exchanges which include also paralinguistic information such as gestures, appropriate social distance, eye contact, etc. Films can be used to give the students a glimpse of what the reality is in the foreign country. Harmer (2001:228) makes the point clear when he says: *Video uniquely allows students a look at situations far beyond their classrooms. This is*

especially useful if they want to see, for example, typical British 'body language' when inviting someone, or how Americans speak to waiters. Video is also of great value in giving students a chance to see such things as what kinds of food people eat in other countries, and what they wear.

Therefore, audio-visual aids provoke creative and communicative uses of the language.

4.3- The Authentic text

Texts have been used in language classrooms for a long time. Yet, their exploitation has changed through time. Years ago, the text was written specifically to highlight a language point. With the occurrence of the communicative approach, the use of texts is dealt with to focus more on the meaning of the text as a whole. The new tendency is that students are urged not to try to understand word for word but the whole meaning of the text.

Authentic texts are selected because they represent the world where they have been written. They replete with cultural information which builds the student's background knowledge, to encounter the world where language is really used.

In reality, communicativeness is expressed by means of texts. The cultural potential of language unit is revealed mainly through the text. All these considerations accentuate the need for texts that are not written for language teaching purposes but for the target audience, i.e. native speakers. Surely, authentic texts seem exotic and exciting, so how can teachers use them to fit into the classroom?

The teacher should choose a text according to its suitability of content; the reading material should interest the students as well as be relevant to their needs. The text should also develop the students' competence as readers. A text which cannot be exploited for teaching purposes is not worth using in the classroom. Hence, the teacher should take into consideration the readability of the text, the amount of new vocabulary and new grammatical forms it presents. A reading course can be made more interesting if it is presented through the use of pictures, photographs or diagrams. This helps put the text into a context. Authenticity can, therefore, be considered to be the interaction between the reader and the text. Reading is an ongoing interaction that goes beyond the physical context of the text.

The wide variety of different types of texts means that it is not difficult to find something that will interest the learner and encourage further reading. The more the learner reads, the better he will become. He will not only improve his language level but also self- confidence.

5-Samples and techniques in the classroom

Many researchers like (Lambert, 1999; Schmidt, 2000) advocate introducing specific knowledge concerning topics like history, geography, politics and economics that help the students engage in communicating with others from the host culture. To some extent, this approach can provide students with a certain understanding of specific cultural areas such as artefacts which the culture uses. However, this aspect of culture does not greatly influence communication.

Other researchers like (Weaver 1993) suggest another approach by giving students a list of basic do's and don'ts to a particular culture that enable learners to accustom with the new cultural environment. Certainly, this approach can help students avoid behaving in an offensive way but it will never assist them in developing the necessary skills to successfully negotiate cross-cultural meanings.

Many other authors among them (Baxter, 1983; Brislin and yoshira, 1994) have suggested different kinds of activities to develop learners' cross-cultural awareness at the affective level. They claimed that intercultural interaction involves stress, adjustment, anxiety and uncertainty in participants due to unfamiliarity and cultural differences. The object of these activities is that participants become aware of the varied emotional reactions, thus they develop cultural empathy and sensitivity.

To achieve culture integration into the classroom, the teacher needs a variety of techniques in which cultural content may be presented. Some are possible at every learning level, and could be used to involve students in the learning process. Techniques are different from methods because they deal with the day-to-day issues of how teachers choose to present and work with materials. Various techniques could be used to make the lessons interesting and kill boredom in the classrooms. Some students will respond well to small group discussions; while others will remain silent and prefer to be quiet. They will work better in written works.

It is important for teachers to make variety a key component of their teaching. Of course, these tasks deal with cultural products to develop communicative strategies to avoid cultural conflicts.

5.1 Role playing

In a role play, there is an authenticity of the roles taken by the students, i.e. a natural role that they try to play; for example buying groceries or booking a hotel. Students then, play a part they do not play in real life (manager of a company, a famous actor, prime minister, etc).

Keeping in mind students' needs and interests, teachers choose role-plays that will give the students an opportunity to practise what they have learned. Role playing can be very useful in avoiding static classroom relationships and setting. The students are asked to think and speak through the characters they have become. Let us illustrate this activity through an example: Students take the roles of visitors in England. The visitor imagines he is a passenger in a taxi. He greets the taxi driver and says where he wants to go. He also asks what the price is. The other participant plays the role of the taxi driver. So, he is supposed to answer his friend's questions. Before playing the scenario, the teacher tries to elicit the predictable vocabulary from his students. This way of introducing new items makes the student more confident acting out the role. If we come back to the above example, the passenger should have relevant information about how to greet English people; he should also know different places since he is a visitor in England. Once the role play is finished, the students feel satisfied, they feel that they have used their knowledge for something concrete and useful.

5.2-Audio visual aids

Teachers can adapt their use of authentic materials to suit the level and language proficiency of their students. For example, students watch and listen to video clips taken from a TV show in the target or from web-based sources. These audio-visual aids focus on cultural conventions such as greetings, introducing someone, etc. The teacher can provide students with some information about the topic before watching the video. A pre-listening task is designed to raise the learner's interest in topics clarify difficult vocabulary and provide any necessary cultural background to facilitate comprehension. For instance, some questions related to the topic will be asked and students' views will be written on the board before they see the film or video extract. After the class has viewed the relevant film, the teacher can engage the students in discussion of the cultural norms and their significance as cultural values.

The discussion may include non-verbal behaviours like the physical distance between speakers, eye contact or gestures, etc. Tomalin and Stempleski (1993:102) cited the following video sequence of a cocktail party:

- *“Do people wait to be introduced to each other, or do they introduce themselves?”*
- *What kinds of clothes are the people wearing?*
- *How close, to each other do the people stand when they are talking?*
- *Do people wait for the host to pour them a drink, or do they help themselves?*

- *What things do people talk about?*”

At first, students watch the film closely. Then, they make notes about the questions while watching. At the last step, after viewing the sequence students discuss in pairs or groups the questions and present their different answers to the whole class. Other cultural points could be introduced and discussed. The sequence could be played again if necessary.

5.3- Music

Language learning through the arts extends the learner’s understanding of the target culture and country. It also guides them to develop their range of self-expression. Music defines and transmits culture, dissolving barriers of religion, race, geography and class. Music takes the students on a journey of different sounds and rhythms, telling a story of cultural events, and perspectives that shaped the cultural products. Indeed through the lyrics, students learn about other cultures. Using music in the classroom provides the culturally authentic material necessary for engagement of the learner. It is the learner’s response to this music that demonstrates evidence of understanding the real world behind it. Surely, these songs represent cultural aspects. What ideas does the song transmit? What would the moral be? What message or story does the song convey? Thus, the students deepen inquiry into cultural practices. Songs and rhymes are both means and content of foreign language acquisition. There is no gap between the language used in lessons and that used in real-life situations.

5.4- Projects

The idea of the project is based on intercultural contents which have gained importance in international teaching. Learners should be enabled to work and live as well as learn in international contexts.

Due to the change in working- life settings, the strong influence of the media and the possibilities of computer-mediated communication will have to change too. Students, therefore, have to be trained to take part in the intercultural dialogue. They will also learn how to work in intercultural surroundings. Students’ research is one of the most powerful tools that we can use with students because it combines their interest with the classroom. For example, after class, the teacher asks students to search the internet or library and find information on any aspect of the target culture that interests them. In the following class, students explain to their group what they have learned and answer any question about it. This technique is used to allow participants to form their own questions and gather their own information. It is a technique that demands little guidance on the part of the teacher. It is good to promote student interaction and

creativity. Students could carry projects in groups, which would serve as basis for class reporting and discussion. The projects might include preparations of interviews, maps, documents, menus, posters, pictures and other materials pertaining to diverse aspects of the social life in the target society.

The aim of the project is achieving linguistic competence, intercultural awareness and learner autonomy. At the heart of the project is the centrality and importance of school learning and the language classroom.

This is not an exhaustive list of the techniques which can be employed in the classroom to help students to encounter and understand the target language culture, analyse, acquire and expand cultural features shared by the members of the target society. It is teachers' responsibility to exploit every possible source he has access to, for the purpose of making the teaching process develop in a more intercultural direction and to teach culture in an appropriate and up-to-date manner

6. The role of the teacher

In his description of the teacher, Harmer says: *Teachers use many metaphors to describe what they do. Sometimes they say they are like actors because 'we are always on the stage'. Others think they are like orchestral conductors 'because I direct conversation and set the pace and tone'. Yet others feel like gardeners, 'because we plant the seeds and then watch them grow'. (2001: 56).*

It seems that what the teacher does in the classroom has a great influence on students as well as on the classroom atmosphere. The teacher covers various task dimensions, and defines tasks that should be relevant and specific, challenging but achievable. The teacher/student relationship should be based on mutual trust and respect to attract the students and engage them in the learning process. A pleasant and supportive atmosphere motivates the students, increases their abilities and efforts.

However, the language teachers' task in countries where the foreign language is not spoken is not easy. Learners encounter new lifestyles, ways of thinking, behaviour, and types of interaction represented by the language. So teachers are responsible for explaining cultural behaviour as well as language skills, the reason why native speakers use this or that phrase at a certain time and how. The links between language, communication and interaction should be taken into consideration to lead learners into this new land. To get students familiar with the English culture, and to accommodate their confusion in understanding the target culture, the teacher himself should have a wide range of knowledge about the foreign culture.

To use learners' mother tongue to clarify meanings should be avoided because translation sometimes creates vagueness and misunderstandings. Furthermore, the teacher should avoid prejudicial or negative remarks towards the foreign culture. His attitude should be neutral, flexible and sensitive toward all and any cultures that come into discussion in the classroom. The fact that learners build up positive attitudes toward the new culture, reinforces their motivation to learn the language that is the key to discover a new worldview. Hence, students become more aware of the diversity of ideas and practices across cultures in general.

As regards the application of learning strategies, the teacher should first change his concept of "teaching" oral English. Oral English is a matter of practice not a matter of teaching, i.e. the use of language is more important and appropriate than knowing about the usage of language. When the teacher realises this reality, he will make oral English classes activity-oriented and student-centred. The focus will be on how to encourage the students to speak English more often and more fluently.

To manage the absorption of materials and strategies dealt with in the classroom, the teacher should know when to adopt and when to adapt techniques to succeed in presenting the various activities and achieving students' autonomous learning. His students' levels, interests, motivation as well as the materials available are the first elements to be checked. Since the teacher's intervention is crucial, he needs to be aware of varying his roles in his teaching behaviour, not only as authority figure but as an assessor, or an organiser, or a participant. As an organiser, the teacher should organise all kinds of class activities to create an authentic communicative environment to motivate students' desire for communication. The teacher should work as a coordinator too. He should take different measures in different contexts so as to ensure the entire teaching process smoothly. To play his role well as a participant, the teacher should not always stand back and intervene later to correct mistakes. He needs, sometimes, to join in the activities. It is generally more enjoyable for a teacher to act and take part in discussions than to act as a resource. Obviously, he should avoid dominating the activity; his skill and great sensitivity limit his role as participant. In addition to all these functions, the teacher is necessarily a source of background information. He should provide knowledge of culture and language to broaden students' horizons and to enrich their knowledge structures. When a teacher acts as a resource, he should always think about his students so as not to be over-reliant on him.

There are times when it is inappropriate for a teacher to play any of the roles suggested so far. Students need prompt assessment on students' language proficiency; to know whether or not their English is improving. Actually, when teachers correct or grade their students, they should expect various reactions and so the judgments should be fair. The teacher's goal is his students' performance.

7. The role of the learner

Teachers are no longer responsible for students' learning; they rather act as facilitators to help and shorten the distance between students and the outside world. It is the learners' own capacities that can successfully engage them into real communication in the target culture. They should be highly motivated to acquire the pragmatic competence, the capacity to incorporate cultural knowledge into language use. In other words, learners need a great understanding for the "other". For that, they should be ready to change their role from classroom students to members of a new community.

Language students should be the kind of students who always try to do their best and contribute in the different activities dealt with in the classroom. They should benefit from the situations presented in their classrooms. They had better not to be shy or afraid of making errors. They should speak in pair or group discussions. Positive attitude is something individual before all, and it plays a major role in foreign language learning.

As a matter of fact, students are required to be prepared before class. They should develop their skills needed to locate and organize information about the target culture from the library and the media. Personal observation and the desire to master the target language are a solid foundation for the students' further studies. The things that are spontaneously discovered by the students themselves are absorbed more effectively than things that are taught.

One powerful reason for encouraging language students to discover things for themselves is the complex nature of language itself. While there may be an argument at lower levels for reducing its complexity into manageable pieces, students who encounter real language outside the classroom will find that it is considerably "messier" than it may appear in a language lesson. Their response to this may well depend on how prepared they are to observe this messy language and work out, for themselves, how it is put together, Harmer (2001: 75- 76).

It is very important that learners seize the opportunity to notice differences between the new input and their own culture. Thus, they think and talk about what they notice, either in their native language, or if their proficiency is

adequate enough to speak the target. Noticing differences is more important than teaching differences because noticing creates a kind of a curiosity to explore the new world, therefore, how to respond to the new situation is needed. Because of different cultural backgrounds, life experience, profession, sex, education, age and character may have different modes of interaction. People learn to think, feel, behave and strive for what their culture considers proper. This means that in real communication, any message received by the hearer might not be the same as what is intended by the speaker. Complete understanding is only relative. If students are aware of this, they can have better communication with people from the outside world.

It is an indisputable fact that language students only have limited time and chance to speak the foreign language in classrooms. In that case, they shouldn't rely on the few hours of English they study per week. Learning is no longer restrained in time and space; rather, through the internet, learners are offered opportunities to communicate and learn with other learners worldwide. They can participate in more interactions by writing and replying e-mails to their key pals, or joining online chat rooms anytime they are free.

Conclusion

Learning has become a 24 hour process. This recent way of learning implements students in authentic social interactions. It exposes them to the real world where they practise what they have learnt in the classroom. They will surely excel in their study when they see immediate application for the skills they learn. Ultimately, as a result of their ability to communicate in other languages, students realise the interdependence of people throughout the world. They should show evidence of becoming lifelong learners by using language for personal enjoyment and enrichment.

On the whole, language teachers can make use of their potential and influence playing different roles to encourage students and to show them how to take ownership in learning. They can help them to identify and decide for themselves the relevant learning goals and provide continuous support. This aim can be achieved on condition that learners show eagerness and appreciation toward the target language.

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