Teaching Civilisation and Culture at the Algerian EFL Departments: Comments and Suggestions

Mehdaoui Ahmed
The English Department
of the University of Tiaret, Algeria

Abstract: One of the basic purposes of teaching British and American civilisation at the EFL department is to provide students the skills that help them to become critical observers of British and American culture as well as their own. This means the ability to develop the intercultural skills. Therefore, a proper method is necessary to achieve this aim. One of the methods that fulfil this aim is using the thematic approach instead of providing students with functional information in chronological ways. This paper proposes some themes which can be taken as content to teach both civilisation and culture.

Key words: Civilisation and Culture, Intercultural Understanding, Thematic Approach.

تدريس الحضارة والثقافة في قسم اللغة الانجليزية: عوائق وتحديات

ملخص: إن واحداً من الأهداف الأساسية لتدريس الحضارة البريطانية والأمريكية لطلبة اللغة الانجليزية بالجامعة هو تزويدهم بثقافات ومعارف جديدة، وكذا تنمية قدراتهم على ملاحظة الفوارق بين ثقافتهم والثقافات الأخرى، ولذلك فإن طريقة التدريس الصحيحة ضرورية لتحقيق الهدف المنشود. وإنّ إحدى هذه الطرق هي الاعتماد على الطريقة الموضعية بدلا من الاعتماد على التواريخ الزمنية. لذا يهدف هذا البحث إلى تحديد بعض العوائق في تدريس مادة الحضارة، ويبين بعض المواضيع التي يمكن استخدامها كطريقة لتدريس كلا من الحضارتين والثقافتين، البريطانية والأمريكية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: اللغة الانجليزية، الحضارة، الثقافة، التوافق والتبادل الثقافي، الطريقة الموضوعية.

1. Introduction

At present, interculturality has become a necessity to build long lasting relationships. In this vein, many countries, including Algeria, recognise the importance of teaching culture to develop learners' intercultural skills. The teaching of British and American civilisation at the Algerian EFL Departments is one of the modules that are supposed to foster the teaching of culture. However, this course tends to be taught as a history, by focusing on the Anglo-Saxon historical facts rather than exploring its main cultural aspects. This paper explains the role of the Thematic-Based Approach in teaching both civilisation and culture. It also describes how this teaching technique has the potential in developing the University EFL learners' intercultural skills.

2. Big' C' Culture and Small 'c' Culture

Culture is a very broad topic that is difficult to define. Seelye refuses to provide a definition, and calls it *'a broad concept that embraces all aspects of the life of man'* (1993: 26), and Valdes (1986) describes it as the very difficult topic to be learnt. Due to the difficulty of dealing with this topic, Kroeber & Kluckhohn (1952) reveal over one hundred and fifty definitions related to the term culture. In this paper, nevertheless, the working definition of culture that will be used is what is appropriate from the anthropological, sociological perspectives.

According to Vivelo (1978), as far as the anthropological perspectives are concerned, culture can be understood through two major ways: the totalist or materialist and the mentalist. The former regards culture as a total way of life that consists of materials productions such as customs, artifacts, art, literature, social institutions, or work of everyday life. The latter, on the other hand, regards culture as a system of behaviour or rules that is manifested through operating systems such as attitudes, beliefs, religions, and laws that are shared the same member of a given society.

Under this approach, learners have to learn, for instance, how to understand major geographical settings, historical events, institutions (administrative, economic, political, religious, social, educational), national products and so on. This definition seems more static. One justification for teaching them is that students will learn useful vocabularies relating to describing places, history and figures. However, one major problem with this approach is regarding cultural knowledge as a mere acquisition of factual knowledge or just knowing pieces of information.

In the Ssociological sense, on the other hand, culture is regarded as a social behaviour. Culture is viewed not as statistic knowledge of information. Instead it is viewed as a set of practices in which people engage in order to live their lives. Brislin (1990: 11), for instance, emphasises that:

> *Culture, refers to widely shared ideals, values,*
> *formation and uses of categories, assumptions about*

life, and goal-directed activities that become unconsciously or subconsciously accepted as right and correct by people who identify themselves as members of a society.

Therefore, in order to learn the target culture, it is necessary for learners to engage with the linguistic and non-linguistic practices of the culture and to gain insights about the way of living of the people of the target culture.

These two understandings of culture are supported by scholars such as, Brooks (1968), Chastain (1988), Stern (1992), and Tomalin and Stempleski (1993) who describe the first definition as big (C) culture, or civilisation, which focuses on the production and achievement of a society in different domains such as art, history, literature, and geography, and the second one as small (c) culture or behaviour culture, which refers to the way of life. According to them, both are of major importance in language teaching. However, it is the small one (c) that needs more attention, especially in the foreign language classroom.

3. The Use of the Thematic Approach

While culture of any particular people can be lost when it is taught through using the traditional chronological approach, the thematic approach has its own inner dynamic and can help students develop more cultural knowledge on more than one topic. Students usually feel that the civilisation course is boring because the content of this course is more historical and is taught as history. It lacks many cultural aspects; therefore, the historical part has to be reduced to allow the addition of many cultural elements (family, beliefs, scientific and artistic achievements), and finally, civilisation has to focus on nowadays issues.

This course can be easier and attractive when is taught thematically, because teaching thematically allows all students to enjoy the course. Nostrand (1974) believes that culture can be best learnt when taught in thematic ways. For example, each time students are presented to some cultural themes such as religion, education, family, ethnicity, value, and the like. Therefore, a better approach would not be to try to teach civilisation in term of history, as it is the case now, but rather to take some themes as the content, and then put the focus on using these themes to teach the elements of intercultural competence, as it is explained in Byram (1997)' book, 'Teaching and Assessing intercultural Competence'. For example, one theme would be 'Family in England or in America', and then followed by some of the ideas described by Mayes and Duffy which are described in Byram (2001)' book 'Developing Intercultural Competence in Practice'.

The crucial elements would be learning skills, learning some facts but only as examples and being able to use those skills to investigate and compare other aspects of culture in Anglo-Saxon culture.

4. Examples of Some Cultural Themes

Below are a number of some suggested themes that could be used to teach civilisation and culture. This is only a limited list of some suggested themes. Other themes are: the culture of politics, the economic system, foreign policy, media and communication, art and music, and science and technology.

Origin and Identification

The aim of this content is to provide a brief history of the origin of the native of Anglo-Saxon people with the impact of European settlers on the Native Americans and their way of life, and the impact of invaders on the British. This information gives students a background for understanding some historical conflicts. Furthermore, this theme is helpful in giving students a sense of the cultural diversity of the British and Americans.

Ethnicity

Ethnicity is associated with a feeling of closeness to others which is symbolised by sharing of some common marker. These common marker can be linguistics (language or dialect), or physical (colour of skin), or behavioural and cultural (religion, customs, values, beliefs), or environmental (geographical area, place of origin). Any marker can be used to determine ethnicity. This theme may also include the issue of immigration.

Social Organisation

Learning about social organisation means learning about how the society is arranged and organised in term of social positions and distribution of people within those positions. Students will be able to understand why it is organised in that way. Explanations from people within a particular group are not always the same or even compatible with the explanations of those from outside the group.

It should be noted that the concept of social organisation includes a number of other important concepts. Among them are class, power, authority, status and prestige. These concepts are important for understanding differences across cultural groups.

Therefore, this subject helps students to have an insight on the social structure of British and American societies. They will have the opportunity to look for inequality issues in the past and present. For example, in Britain, students can learn about worker class, women, minorities and their struggle for equality in term of job and political positions. In America, students can understand some issues about civil rights guaranteed by the constitutions, and then they can examine the experience of African-Americans from the slave ships to civil rights movement. Students can also refer to the theme of political system to understand some the individual rights guaranteed by constitutions.

Immigration

This theme is another important subject. It is related to the previous themes. This subject provides students with historical background of the people who came to England or America for different reasons: those who immigrated for better life, for religious reasons (pilgrims), unwilling immigration (slavery), and Hispanics.

Family

Families exist in all societies, in the past and the present. Like any other human institutions, they change over time. So is their beliefs and way of life. So, family is an important cultural subject to learn. When students already understand the ethnicity and different races, it may become beneficial to understand the different families exist within these societies.

Religion and Beliefs

This unit is linked to the previous themes. Understanding religion means bringing back some knowledge about the different invasions in England, colonies and immigration in America, the natives of both. Students can learn better about the religion of Anglo-Saxon people by understanding their beliefs and ways of life.

5. Implication

1) British Civilisation

The theme: Social Structure and organisation of British Society

Objective: Understanding the social organisation of any society means understanding of other important concepts (eg: class, power, authority, status and prestige). These concepts are important for understanding differences across cultural groups.

The key words: class, power and authority, status and prestige.

2) American Civilisation

The theme: Ethnicity and Race in the United States of America.

The United States of America is a multilingual society, racially and ethnically. Six ethnic groups are officially recognised: White, American Indian and Alaska Native, Asian, Black or African American, Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander. The United States is also classified as "Hispanic or Latino" and "Not Hispanic or Latino", which means that the Hispanic and Latino Americans are identified as a racially diverse *ethnicity* that composes the largest minority group in the nation.

The key words: the native, colonisation, slavery, multiculturalism, inequality.

Objectives: Students will be able to understand the historical trends influencing the ethnic demographics of the United States. This includes:

1) The native: Original settlement of the Americas by a variety of Native American peoples.

2) Colonisation: the colonisation of the Thirteen Colonies as part of British America, and the Spanish territories which influenced the later acquisitions of Florida, and some other Southwest territories.

3) The Atlantic slave trade: bringing many Africans to the new world.

4) Immigration: Historical immigration to the United States from all countries of the world and throughout the history of the country, usually for economic or political reasons.

Finally, students will develop a better understanding about the different American ethnic groups, and how they all live in coexistence.

In discussing such theme, teachers should put a heavy focus on the key words that best explain the situation. The key words in the text, for example, can be underlined to lead students for better understanding and discussions. Students may then be required to do individual researches about some issues they are curious about.

6. Conclusion

By way of conclusion, it is important for teachers to be remained that the major goal nowadays of teaching foreign language is to develop learners' intercultural understanding and communication. This, in return, entails the inclusion of language and culture. Therefore, foreign language teachers should not act as neutral in teaching culture; their role is extremely important in fostering foreign language teaching and learning goal.

Subsequently, it becomes crucial for them to provide successful learning strategies to establish an intercultural understanding in their classrooms.

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