

Culture: Its Manifestations in the Classrooms

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Abstract

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the role of foreign language culture in classrooms in Iranian context. The participants of this study were chosen among the English language students of Dehdasht Payam-Noor University, Iran. The author wanted to know about the insides and attitudes of the participants about the effects of culture as an essential part of language learning. The obtained results showed that there is a significant similarity between participants' attitudes and the cultural frameworks of language they were learning. Considering the advantages of cultural issues, familiarizing the students with the culture of the language, they are learning is very helpful if considered appropriately and without any bias. This study confirmed the views of many experts who believe that culture teaching is an integral part of any language teaching and learning. This study recommends that teachers and language instructors to consider cultural aspects of any language they are teaching to increase the learners' motivation and achievements in the course of language internalization processes.

Key words: Lingual culture, language learning, attitude and cultural framework.

Introduction

Policy makers, language experts and teachers have raised concerns about the mutual relationship and interrelatedness of culture and language as two interdependent entities. Should the culture of target language and the customs and traditions of target community be considered in the course of L2 learning or not has been a controversial question and challenging issue in the recent years. In the passage of time, the viewpoints of ELT have vacillated for and against of teaching culture in the process of language presentation in their classrooms. For example, at the beginning of the 20th century researchers, experts and sociolinguists have had heated and challenging discussions about the importance and possibilities of cultural elements into L2 curriculum and situations (Sysoyev & Donelson, 2002). Since the emergence of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in the late 70s, the paradigm of language teaching has shifted radically. The emphasis on linguistic structures and isolated features of language has been replaced by culture-oriented and meaning based views of language teaching. The importance of culture and its roles in the process of negotiation of meaning has been given great weight in the course of language learning (Pulverness, 2003). According to Byram (1989; 1994a; 1994b; 1997a; 1997b) and Kramsch (1988; 1993; 1996; 2001), recent studies and investigations have emphasized the vital connection between target language and its culture and argued that none of the can be separated from the other. Those involved in the process of language teaching and learning have understood the importance and vitality of relationships between culture and language (Pulverness, 2003). Without consideration of cultural issues, teaching and learning L2 seems a futile, inaccurate and incomplete job. If the L2 students do not know about the community of the target language, their rituals and their sociological issues, learning that target language seems senseless and it will result in nothing at the end. Learning a new code is more than learning some meaningless and isolated structures and vocabularies without real contexts and cultural standards.

As Bada (2000) puts it, the necessity of cultural awareness is one of the main challenges of ELT teachers(instructors) because lack of exposure to cultural elements of the target language leads to severe breakdowns in the process of communication on the part of learners when communicating meaning with native speakers. According to (Sysoyev & Donelson, 2002), cultural issues and sociolinguistic features of the target language can easily be incorporated in instructional materials and every aspect of curriculum design.

According to (McDevitt, 2004), we cannot imagine human being without cultural concerns and dependency. Studying an L2 to be familiar with another community as well as another culture and trying to understand the insides of those people who speak the new code.

If we testify the McDevitt's view that culture and human nature are interrelated, then one cannot study L2 without its culture. Many prominent philosophers such as Wittgenstein (1980; 1999), Saussure (1966), Foucault (1994), Dilthey (1989), Von Humboldt (1876), Adorno (1993), Davidson (1999), Quine (1980) and Chomsky (1968) have confirmed the mutual and interdependent relationship of culture and language and repeated that interaction between language and culture has a very long history.

The main figure who worked on the mutual relationship of language and culture are Sapir (1962) and Whorf (1956). They are the scholars whose names are often used synonymously with the term "Linguistic Relativity" (Richards et al, 1992). the major claims of their theory were as following: 1) we understand and realize the world based on concerns and characteristics of our mother tongue and 2) regarding cultural differences languages have different interpretations for different events based on their capacities and what is found in one language may not be found in another language due to cultural differences.

Although the discussion related to the mutuality of language and culture has rooted from the previous ages, the climax of this discussion refers to 80s when the need of cultural studies was emphasized and reached its apex in 90s by the works of Byram and Kramersch as mentioned previously.

Based on Pulverness (2003), due to international image of English language and its manifestations in different international affairs, incorporation of cultural features seems an undeniable fact for those who aspire to assimilate in the target community of this language.

Although in 80s there was a great emphasis on cultural issues and elements in the process of L2, but there were no accepted norm or mechanism that how the culture should be treated in L2 classrooms and which cultural issues should be more emphasized than others till 1990s (Kitao, 2000).

If we consider the connection of language and culture, we can face some interesting comments and viewpoints on the part of experts; for example as Sapir (1921) has argued that there is no necessary relationship between language, race, and culture. However this viewpoint cannot deny this fact that language and culture are interdependently related to each other and one cannot imagine a language class without taking cultural issues into account.

According to Kitao (2000), there are several benefits of teaching cultural issues in the classroom as following:

- a. Studying culture motivates the learners to pursue the target language enthusiastically and find L2 learning meaningful (Stainer, 1971).
- b. One of the challenging issues for learners especially those novice ones are to understand the native speakers of the target language as real persons. Although different books and resources give an overall and artificial image of the real situation of the target language community without background knowledge those real situations may not be perceived by 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).
- c. Nobody can deny the effect of motivation on the process of language learning, this factor has been investigated by many experts like Gardner and Lambert (1959, 1965, 1972). Cultural awareness and having enough background knowledge of the speech community of the target language help the learners greatly because learners can imagine themselves in the target language community and practice many customs and norms before facing them in real situations.

Knowing about the culture of the target language is a motivating factor to study the target language and its speakers deeply. 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 Kramersch (2001) People who identify themselves as members of a social group (family, neighborhood, professional or ethnic affiliation, 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 (p.6).

- d. 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). According to McKay (2003), culture can influence language manifestation in two ways: linguistic and pedagogical. As far as linguistic aspect of culture is concerned, it increases the learners' knowledge of semantic, syntactic, pragmatic and discourse levels of the language. Pedagogically, the kind of materials to be taught as well as the methods of language teaching must be consistent with cultural norms of the language. Pulverness (2004) stresses this point by stating that just as literature ostracizes the familiar object to the self –e.g. Russian literary critic Viktor Shklovsky explained how Tolstoy ostracized the familiar object- culture class ostracizes the learner to him, which helps him to see himself from a different perspective. As argued above, most people are so ethnocentric that when they begin to study another language their restrictedness in their own culture prevents them from seeing the world via different ways of looking. Overcoming the limits of mono-cultural perspective and reaching the realm of different perspective could be facilitated by studying another culture.

To put it in a nutshell, those classes in which cultural issues are taken into consideration are motivating and humanizing and make the process of language learning and assimilation fascinating. They (culture based classes) give learners new prospects and insights about different customs, norms and similarities as well as differences of different social and ethnic groups. Today, most of L2 students around the world live in a monolingual and mono-cultural environment. Consequently, they become culture-bound individuals who tend to make premature and inappropriate value judgments about their as well as others' cultural characteristics. This can lead them to consider others whose language they may be trying to learn as very peculiar and even ill-mannered, which, in turn, plays a demotivating role in their language learning process.

Some experts, however, approach the issue of teaching culture with some kind of reservation. Bada (2000) reminds us that awareness of cultural values and societal characteristics does not necessarily invite the learner to conform to such values, since they are there to “refine the self so that it can take a more universal and less egoistic form” (p.100).

In addition to this fact, English is now considered an international language and has a very high status in international affairs and relations so that many people around the world are trying to learn it a lingua franca to be able to meet their needs in different situations and fields (Alptekin, 2002; Smith, 1976). In his article, Alptekin (2002) argues that as far as culture is concerned, familiarity with intercultural and social competence of language is more important than native-like ability in different aspects of language such grammar, vocabulary or even pronunciation. He continues English language is used for many instrumental and professional reasons all over the world such as business, academic purposes, trade and political issues and believes that using either American accent or British one is not much important than mutual understanding of the participant in the courses of a conversation. In accordance with this view, Smith (1976) emphasizes the international image of English language and highlights the role of culture in comprehension and facilitation of negotiation process.

- a. Although cultural awareness is a must for L2 learners, there is no need to internalize those cultural issues as exactly as native speakers of that language.
- b. There are radical differences between the national and international language (lingua franca) regarding socio-affective and cultural concerns.
- c. According to Communicative Approach the main concern in language teaching and learning is comprehension and effective communication on the part of participants according to mutual understanding of cultural issues of both native and target language. As a result, cultural issues act as medium and facilitators among different people and nations (McKay, 2003).

Data Collection

The data for this study was collected three months following the completion of the 28-hour culture course taken during the fall term of 2003-2004 academic year. During this course lecture-type sessions, as well as research project presentations were held. Students taking this class made an assessment of the course, responding to a five-item questionnaire.

Adapted from Bada (2000), the five-item questionnaire utilized in this study aimed to assess these themes: (1) *language skill* (Items 1, 2), (2) *cultural awareness (of both native and target culture)*; Item 3), (3) *attitude towards the target culture* (Item 4), and (4) *contribution to the prospective teaching profession* (Item 5). In the first two items we asked the participants whether the culture course provided any kind of contribution to any of their language skill(s), and if so, which particular skill(s) was/were improved compared to others. The second theme of the questionnaire aimed to investigate if the participants of this study became more aware of their own and the target culture's characteristics. The third theme was concerned with the attitude change in the participants towards the target culture. The last theme assesses the contribution of a culture class to the participants' prospective teaching profession. This theme aimed to collect as much information as possible regarding the nature of any potential contribution of learning about culture to the teaching profession.

Participants

The participants of this study were chosen among the English language students of Dehdasht Payam-Noor University in Iran. They were 38 students (28 females and 10 males ranging between 21-25 years of age); third year. They were graduates of either private or state secondary schools from all over Iran. Since all of them were from once region, they share common cultural backgrounds. Most of them are supposed to be employed by ministry of education be teachers of English following their graduation.

Data Analysis

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

Theme 1: Language Skill

We began the questionnaire with the item asking whether the culture course contributed to any of the language skills of the participants. All of the 38 (100%) participants gave affirmative answers to this item, which suggested that although developing language skills was not the major objective of the course, it influenced these skills positively. Table 1 below clearly illustrates the results received for this item.

Table 1*Contribution to any of language skills*

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

Table 2*Skill that the course contributes most*

Item No.	Item	Responses	Frequency	%	Chi-Square
2	To which skill did the course contribute most?	Reading	12	26.3	0.023
		Writing	4	5.3	
		Listening	12	26.3	
		Speaking	18	42.6	

Regarding the skill improved most, the participants, by 42.6% expressed views suggesting that their speaking skill was significantly improved. Reading and listening skills came next by 26.3% each, and writing by a small 5.3%.

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

Theme 2: Cultural Awareness

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

Table 3*Awareness about both your own target and cultures*

Item	Item	Responses	Frequency	%	Chi-Square
3	Did this course help you raise awareness about both your own target and cultures?	Yes	26	68.4	0.023
		No	12	31.6	

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

Theme 3: Attitude towards the Target Culture

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

Theme 4: Contribution to Prospective Teaching Profession

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

Table 4
Attitude towards target culture

Item No.	Item	Responses	Frequency	%	Chi-Square
4	Did your attitude towards target culture change at the end of this course?	Yes	34	73.7	0.004
		No	16	26.3	

Having a look at Table 4 above, we can see that nearly 75% of the participants expressed positive thoughts regarding item. The culture course seems to have succeeded in accomplishing a task with some humanizing effect.

Point1: Teaching language is also teaching culture

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

As we know, since the introduction of the Direct Method into the English Language teaching, there has been great attention to cultural aspects of the language and in today's world one cannot imagine learning another language without considering its cultural elements and norms. As Thanasoulas (2001) points, it should be reiterated that language teaching is culture teaching, and someone involved in

teaching language is also involved in teaching culture at the same time. Language does not exist in a vacuum, so language learners should be aware of the context in which the target language is used i.e., they should also learn about the target culture. In this respect, Crystal (1997) well supports this statement: “Language has no independent existence: it exists only in the brains and mouths and ears and hands and eyes of its user (p.112).” The participants in this study, aware of the inevitability of teaching culture in a language course, believe that they would be well equipped to teach a language course due to the culture class they attended.

Point 2: Familiarization with the target society

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

As a second benefit of the culture class, we also mentioned that however course books provide real life situations, learners, lacking insights about the target culture, have difficulty in associating these situations with real people (Kitao, 2000). Therefore, learners may think that they are studying the language of some fictive people. However, learners learn concrete facts more easily than abstract ones; if they know that they are dealing with a *genuine* and not *virtual* reality, that they are studying a language spoken by real people, then studying the language will become much easier. ELT students attending culture classes will easily provide background information for their prospective students thereby rendering the grammar or other language related classes more enjoyable, interesting, and attractive. Moreover, when learners’ needs and curiosity in their field are satisfied by the teacher, learners will thus respect the authority and the competence of the teacher, which can be viewed as rather conducive to their language learning.

Point 3: Assistance in teaching grammar

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

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

Point 4: Enhancing communicative competence in L2

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

While discussing the language proficiency, linguists often make a distinction between linguistic competence and linguistic performance. Chomsky (1965) defines linguistic competence as what one knows about the language while linguistic performance is one's actual language use. Communicative competence, on the other hand, is a concept introduced by Hymes (1972), and discussed widely in the field of language learning and teaching. According Hymes (1972), the speakers of a language need more than grammatical competence in order to be able to communicate effectively in a language. They also need to know how language is used by members of a speech community to accomplish their purposes. Communicative competence has mainly two aspects: linguistic and pragmatic. Cultural competence falls in the category of pragmatic aspect of communicative competence. It could be described as the ability to understand behavior from the perspective of the members of a culture, and thus behave in a way that would be understood by members of the culture in the intended way. It, therefore, involves understanding of all aspects of a culture, but particularly the social structure, the values and beliefs of the people, and the way things are assumed to be done. Lado (1957) argued that lack of cultural competence in the target language would surely lead to transfer from the native language to the target language. Consequently, L2 students would express idiosyncratic utterances leading to inappropriate utterances even though the grammatical structures may be appropriate. The participants here were

well aware of the fact that by attending culture classes their communicative competence would be improved and that they would become not only efficient readers and listeners but also efficient speakers and writers.

Point 5: Expanding vocabulary

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

Vocabulary learning has often been one of the major issues in the study of L2. No matter how well learners learn grammar, no matter how successfully sounds of L2 are mastered, without words, expressing a wide range of meanings during communication in an L2 cannot take place in any meaningful way. Therefore, L2 learners need to know as much vocabulary as possible and be able to use it appropriately. Culture classes do not only help learners enrich vocabulary repertoire but also aid them in using the newly acquired words. Studying culture, a learner becomes familiarized with specific words used in a given context. Without paying due attention to English politics, for instance, comprehending terms such as *The House of Commons*, *The House of Lords*, *The Civil Service*, and *The Ombudsman* may be rather difficult. Furthermore, one of the techniques in teaching and learning is to make use of the mnemonics.

Conclusion

Culture and language cannot be separated from each other. The main purpose of language learning and teaching is to know the society as well as the context in which that language is spoken. The teachers should try to familiarize their addressees to the customs, traditions, oral and written literature and social aspects of the language they are teaching. The prospect teachers are supposed to have a comprehensive and deep understanding of both cultures of native and target languages and transfer true natures of both cultures in classroom context. The findings of the present study suggest that cultural awareness, knowing about the people of target language are significantly beneficial in terms of language skills, changing attitudes towards native and target societies, and contributing to the teaching profession as well as raising motivation and cognition among language learners.. The participants in this study emphasized that cultural information, sociology and culture presentation are very important. The implications of this study can be helpful for language teachers, curriculum designers and policy makers of educational programs. Culture is an integral component of classroom management and must not be ignored by biased individuals. Cultural awareness can enlighten the

students and open new windows to see the world with different perspectives and thinking orientation. Culture can improve the ability of communicate competence as well as strategic competence and enable the students to understand and communicative in both languages effectively and efficiently.

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