

# Exploring Cultural Sensitivity in the Teaching/Learning of Esl – An Experimental Study At The Undergraduate Level

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**Abstract**---In the context of teaching/learning English as a foreign language (ESL) the most challenging question for teachers is, “How to incorporate cultural knowledge and understanding within the context of English Language Classes?” Understanding a language involves not only knowledge of grammar, phonology and lexis but also the features and characteristics of the culture. Cultural awareness has become an important focus of modern language education, a shift that reflects a greater awareness of the inseparability of language, culture and gender along with the need to prepare students for intercultural communication. Most often ESL educators are required to teach a diverse group of students in today's classroom. Therefore, the study critically analyses the underlying assumptions and influences gendered phenomena in language teaching / learning with special focus on the textbooks and teacher - student perceptions.

**Keywords**----(*cultural awareness, gender, teacher-student, perceptions*)

## I. INTRODUCTION

IT is increasingly important for ESL teachers to be cultural informants as well as language experts. Teachers' professional development plans should include active, ongoing familiarization with the cultures associated with English speakers through individual research and collaboration with peers. [1]As Stern (1992) reiterates, “One of the most important aims of culture teaching is to help the learner gain an understanding of the native speaker's perspective” (p. 216) It is a matter of the L2 learner “becoming sensitive to the state of mind of individuals and groups within the target language community” (p. 217). The study primarily addresses the linguistic and behavioural perspectives of both the target and the native cultures of learners in a classroom context. Most often teaching/ learning the target culture is considered as a threat to the native values, and hence the importance of linguistically relevant information is neglected. In the context of teaching/learning

ESL it was observed that students to a great extent know the rules of language, but are not always able to use the language adequately as it requires knowledge about the target culture.

If language is described as a mode of human behaviour and culture as “patterned behaviour”, it is evident that language is a vital constituent of culture which helps us to understand gender identity. As mentioned earlier, each culture has a unique pattern and the behaviour of an individual, linguistic or otherwise, manifested through that is also unique. Foreign language will mean, therefore, changing the learner's behaviour and injecting a new way of life and new values of life into his already settled behaviour pattern [2] (Lado: 1963: 110). So, there is a close relationship between the language and culture.

## II. SIGNIFICANCE OF CULTURE

Culture may mean different things to different people. In the anthropological sense culture is defined as the way people live [3] (Chastain 1988:302). [4]Trinovitch (1980:550) defines culture as “... an all-inclusive system which incorporates the biological and technical behavior of human beings with their verbal and non-verbal systems of expressive behavior starting from birth, and this “all-inclusive system” is acquired as the native culture. This process, which can be referred to as “socialization”, prepares the individual for the linguistically and non-linguistically accepted patterns of the society in which he lives.

To communicate internationally inevitably involves communicating interculturally as well, which probably leads us to encounter factors of cultural differences. Such kind of differences exist in every language such as the place of silence, tone of voice, appropriate topic of conversation, and expressions as speech act functions (e.g. apologies, suggestions, complains, refusals, etc.). Bearing the points above it can be stated that a language is a part of culture and a culture is a part of a language. The two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture

## III. CHALLENGES IN RAISING CULTURAL AWARENESS

Most often ESL educators find themselves teaching a diverse group of students in today's classroom. Most often teaching/ learning the target culture is considered as a threat to the native values, and hence the importance of linguistically relevant information is neglected. Since having a close contact with the target culture and its speakers is a rare opportunity for all language learners in our country, learners cannot appreciate the importance of learning the cultural aspects of communication unless they visit a foreign country and experience the difficulties. However, non-verbal aspects

of target culture are sometimes picked up from TV serials, which are far from being helpful for communicative purposes or which may sometimes impart faulty conceptions. It was observed that if the learning of the cultural aspects were necessary for the learner's survival abroad, the problem could be minimized; but when the person faces problems in the comprehension, interpretation, translation and production of written and oral texts, either as a learner or as a professional, the problem gets even more serious. The paralinguistic aspects and appropriate manners of behavior are equally important factors in the communicatively competent learner's performance. The fact that culture-bound hand-signals, postures, mimics, and another ways of behaviour can also cause miscommunication is neglected.

However, there is a lack of consensus on how to introduce cultural elements into the lessons. One challenge a teacher faces is what approach to take. Many ESL teachers have had no formal training in incorporating cultural elements, and there is no universally accepted set of criteria that instructors can use as a guide [5] (Byrnes 2008). In developing cultural awareness in the classroom it is important that we help our students distinguish between the cultural norms, beliefs, or habits of the majority within the speech community and the individual or group deviations from some of these norms. Students should be enabled to discuss their native culture with their foreign-speaking friends at the same time that they are provided with a real experiential content. They can make use of their knowledge of the foreign language. There should also be presented, discussed, or merely alluded to in two parallel streams. It should also be kept in mind that language teaching, as mentioned above, is a long process in which performance is not absolute and therefore we cannot expect all learners ever to acquire perfect native like behaviour.

#### IV. CULTUREVS LANGUAGE

[6]Kramsch (1993, p.3) identifies three ways how language and culture are bound together. First, language expresses cultural reality (with words people express facts and ideas but also reflect their attitudes). Second, language embodies cultural reality (people give meanings to their experience through the means of communication). Third, language symbolizes cultural reality (people view their language as a symbol of their social identity).

[7]Tomalin and Stempleski (1993, pp.7-8) have enumerated the goals of cultural instruction. According to them, the teaching of culture should help students:

- *To develop an understanding of the fact that all people exhibit culturally-conditioned behaviors;*
- *To develop an understanding that social variables such as age, sex, social class, and place of residence influence the way in which people speak and behave;*
- *To become more aware of conventional behavior in common situations in the target culture;*
- *To increase their awareness of the cultural connotations of words and phrases in the target language;*

- *To develop the ability to evaluate and refine generalizations about the target culture, in terms of supporting evidence;*
- *To develop the necessary skills to locate and organize information about the target culture;*
- *To simulate students' intellectual curiosity about the target culture, and to encourage empathy towards its people.*
- *Along the same vein, Stern (1992) indicates that the aim of teaching culture should be:*
- *Knowledge about the target culture.*
- *Awareness of its characteristics and of differences between the target culture and the learner's own country.* □
- *A research-minded outlook.*
- *An emphasis on the understanding socio-cultural implications of language and language use*
- *Affective goals; interest, intellectual curiosity, and empathy.*

#### V. WAYS OF TEACHING CULTURE

Many researchers have put forward numerous approaches and techniques associated with the teaching of culture. However, we cannot jettison the fact that the choices we make depend on various factors, the most important ones being:

The context in which the language is being taught (EFL or ESL); Learners' age and their language competency; □The teacher. □□Stern (1992, p.223) distinguishes between three situations in which the teaching of culture can take place:

1. *Culture is taught in language courses, where students are physically and often psychologically removed from reality of the second culture. In this case, culture teaching provides background and context and helps the learners visualize the reality. This seems to be the most common situation for teaching culture in many countries where there is no access to the target language's native speakers.*

2. *Culture is taught in a situation, which prepares a student for a visit or work in a new environment. Even though the student is physically far away from the culture, he/she is psychologically better prepared and also more motivated to learn.*

3. *Culture is taught in the cultural setting (e.g., to immigrants, students studying in a target language community). In this case, students need more help to come to terms with the foreign environment to avoid cultural misunderstanding.*

#### VI. THE MOST COMMON APPROACHES IN TEACHING CULTURE

Throughout the history of language teaching and learning, different approaches to teaching culture have come into vogue and gained importance. Among these approaches some have lost popularity; some others had been and remained dominant. These approaches can be classified in different ways. [8] Saluveer (2004) has

divided them into two broad categories: 1) those which focus only (or mostly) on the culture of the country whose language is studied (the mono-cultural approach) and 2) those which are based on comparing learners' own and the other culture (the comparative approach). [9] Risager (1998, pp.243-252) describes four approaches to the teaching of culture, namely, the intercultural approach, the multicultural approach, the trans-cultural approach, and the foreign-cultural approach.

The intercultural approach draws upon the idea that culture is best learned through comparison of the target and the learners' own culture. Though the main focus is on the target culture, the intercultural approach pinpoints the relations between the learners' own culture. This approach is aimed at developing learners' understanding of intercultural and communicative competences, enabling them to act as mediators between the two cultures. However, Risager (1998, p.246) considers this approach inadequate as it is "blind to the actual multicultural character of almost all existing countries or states" and suggests that teachers should use the multicultural approach. The multicultural approach is based on the idea that in every country a number of sub-cultures exist within one culture. This approach not only includes a focus on the ethnic and linguistic diversity of the target country, but also on the learners' own culture. Similar to the intercultural approach, comparison is an important factor here. Risager (1998, p.246) stresses that a balanced and anti-racist view of cultures should be involved. This approach emphasizes the principle that cultures are not monolithic.

The third approach propounded by Risager is called the trans-cultural approach. The fundamental tenet behind this is that due to mass communication, World Wide Web, globalization, and the ensuing phenomena, the modern world cultures are intricately interwoven. Since a large number of people use the foreign languages as lingua-francas, this approach considers the foreign language as an international language, so that it is not necessary at all to link the foreign language to any specific culture. However, [10] Byram (1997, p.55) asserts that although it is possible to introduce topics which are of universal significance in all cultures, such an approach leaves learners without topics which are characteristic of a particular country, that is the ones which "characterize its uniqueness for the language learner". Foreign-cultural approach is shaped upon the concept of a single culture and focuses on the target culture. It solely focuses on the target culture and neither takes the learners' own culture into consideration nor does it compare the two cultures together. What is important here is to develop the target language's communicative competence and cultural understanding. However, this approach has been criticized on the grounds that it does not focus on the relations between the two cultures.

Stern (1992, p.223-232) presents eight approaches and techniques to teaching culture, which include:

- Creating an authentic classroom environment (techniques include, for example, displays and exhibitions of realia);

- Providing cultural information ( for example, cultural aside, culture capsule and culture cluster);
- Cultural problem solving (for example, culture assimilator);
- Behavioral and affective aspects (for example drama and mini-drama);
- Cognitive approaches (for example student research);
- The role of literature and humanities (for example, literary reading and watching films);
- Real-life exposure to the target culture (for example, visits to the class by native speakers, pen-pals and visits to other countries);
- Making use of cultural community resources (for example, when a foreign language learning takes place in the target-language community, the everyday environment can be used as a resource).

## VII. TEACHER IMPLICATIONS

Although some scholars call "culture" the fifth language skill, Kramsch (1993) goes even further by saying that:

"Culture in language learning is not an expendable fifth skill tacked on, so to speak, to the teaching of speaking, listening, reading, and writing. It is always in the background right from day one, ready to settle the good language learners when they expect it least, making evident the limitations of their hard won communicative competence, challenging the ability to make sense of the world around them." (1993, p.1)

As is mentioned, both learners and teachers of a second language need to understand cultural differences, to recognize openly that everyone in the world is not "just like me", that people are not all the same beneath the skin. There are real differences between groups and cultures [11] (Brown,1994:167). Therefore, language teachers cannot avoid conveying impressions of another culture whether they realize it or not [12] (Rivers,1981:315). Language cannot be separated completely from the culture in which it is deeply embedded. Any listening to the utterances of native speakers, any reading of original texts, any examination of pictures of native speakers engaged in natural activities will introduce cultural elements into the classroom.

## VIII. CONCLUSION

The teaching of the target culture has to serve the development of cross-cultural communication. The achievement of this goal is possible with the preparation of an organized inventory that would include both linguistic and extra linguistic aspects of the target culture. This way the language could build bridges from one cognitive system to another [13] (Seelye, 1968). The culture of people refers to all aspects of shared life in a community. A language is learned and used with a context, drawing from the culture distinctive meanings and functions which must be assimilated by language learners if they are to control the language as native speakers control it.

As mentioned above, culture (as many scholars call it "the fifth skill") should be an indispensable component of every single language curriculum. To do so, the teacher should set clear and realistic goals and consider an

appropriate approach as well as suitable techniques and activities for teaching culture. Nevertheless, the teacher must bear in mind that the ultimate goal of teaching culture is to promote intercultural communication among the students.

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