

THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHING CULTURE IN EFL CLASSROOMS

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The growing awareness of the intertwined nature of culture-language has led to academic studies and articles encouraging educators to place significantly more emphasis on teaching about the target culture. Authors, such as Byram (1989), H. D. Brown (2007), Peck (1998), Atkinson (1999), Moran (2001), and Mishan (2005) have discussed culture as an important and necessary component in an effective language curriculum. In this context, Byram has written that his main goal is to develop “an integrated discipline of teaching language and culture” [1; 23]. Moran subsequently added that cultural awareness helps students discover and explore their personal perspectives, not only on the target culture but the world as a whole [5; 75]. Whatever the motivation and reasons, learning a foreign language is always “culture- bounded” [8; 112]. The flip side of the coin is that the features of a target culture cannot be deeply taught without integrating instruction in the target culture’s language.

Using authentic sources from the target language community - newspapers, films, photos, news broadcasts, and television shows - makes language learning more realistic, comprehensive, and often enjoyable. According to Nunan and Miller, authentic materials “are not created or edited expressly for language learners”. Authentic materials are designed for target culture speakers in their native language.

Students “feel, touch, smell, and see the foreign peoples and not just hear their language” [6]. Authenticity enables students to better perceive social and cultural aspects of the target culture.

Authentic materials open the door to the study of the target language’s culture. Moran notes that “culture is the evolving way of life of a group of persons, consisting of a shared set of practices associated with a shared set of products, based upon a shared set of perspectives on the world, and set within specific social context” [5; 24]. While discovering the practices and products of the target culture, students inevitably compare the target culture to their own culture and others as well. In the process, the learners develop personal perspectives toward cultures. Along with a better understanding and respect for the diversity of cultures, students also gain a level of appreciation for their own native culture [5; 78].

A teacher must consider a student’s age, gender, and language proficiency when selecting materials in order to design relevant, authentic and appropriate tasks that are interesting and engaging. For example, a teacher can incorporate authentic materials such as videos with varying amounts of translation, Venn Diagrams, outlines, or charts [2; 78].

Textbooks are not enough for teaching a foreign language. Gilmore notes that “real life is not as simple and straightforward as textbooks” [3; 366]. Authentic language learning prepares a student for real life situations and teaches appropriate ways to use conversational language.

Several researchers believe that learning about the target culture further develops intercultural competence. When a student discusses topics such as history, economics, politics, and society he/she is able to participate in more meaningful interactions with native-speakers of the target culture. Moreover, he/she is able to comprehend specific areas of the culture much more accurately [5; 109]. These approaches to teaching culture in EFL classrooms provide opportunities for genuine and essential cultural awareness. Each approach facilitates one or more of the following: enhanced communication competence, reduced stereotypes, and the development of cultural sensitivity.

Through exposure to authentic products, utilization of genuine language, and culturally specific topics, students are able to avoid stereotypes and gain an appreciation for different facets of the target culture. Students develop empathy and cultural sensitivity toward both the target culture and their native culture, and a healthy respect for the differences in the cultures. Authentic materials help students perceive the target language and culture from a more realistic

perspective. This imparts a level of comfort and ease with the unique cultural idiosyncrasies of the target culture. Learning the meanings of behaviors and specific communication styles for different situations, students are better able to communicate appropriately in different situations and avoid cultural misunderstandings. This increased level of proficiency improves motivation and promotes the desire to continue to improve [6; 37].

One of the five prongs of the *Standards for Foreign Language Learning: Preparing for the 21st Century* centers on “communication.” To communicate competently is to “communicate with each other across linguistic and cultural boundaries”; Bachman has proclaimed that communicative competence should be the core component in teaching and learning a second/foreign language. As Peterson and Coltrane assert, “Language use must be associated with other culturally appropriate behavior” to make communication truly comprehensive and fully successful. Otherwise, students will learn only “survival and routine transactions” [1; 40-41].

Linguistic competence defines a student’s lexical, phonological, morphological, and syntactic knowledge of a language. It is the ability to construct words from morphemes, phrases and sentences from words, and appropriate utterances from sentences. It is important to note that, linguistic competence plays a lesser role in teaching foreign languages in many countries, in contrast to other types of communicative competence [3; 24-27].

Pragmalinguistic competence refers to a student’s ability to understand and communicate appropriately using phrases or colloquialisms typically used by target culture speakers. In general, they are used when responding to speech acts such as requests, refusals, compliments, or apologies.

Contextualization is an important aspect of pragmalinguistics as it helps the learner know when and how to use the target language [3; 28-32]. Sociopragmatic competence is the ability to discern what is socially or culturally appropriate in the target culture. It entails an understanding of social conventions and taboos unique to the target culture, “what is appropriate to say to whom, and in what situations”. Strategic competence refers to a student’s ability to use verbal and nonverbal communication, such as gestures, movements, facial expressions, and paraphrases in situations when a breakdown occurs between interlocutors’ communications in order to reduce and avoid cultural misunderstanding. The use and development of strategic competence will allow students to build confidence in their target language skills and will help keep them engaged. Additionally, when students commit errors in L2 speech this communicative strategy will help them work through and negotiate the meaning instead of giving up on the conversation completely [3; 40-44].

Finally, discourse competence refers to students’ ability to create cohesive discourse in different genres of spoken or written speech such as in personal letters, narratives, gossip, or jokes. When speaking, the student’s ability to produce coherent and cohesive discourse depends on a number of factors such as determining when it is his/her turn to speak, staying on topic, making appropriate transitions to new topics, providing short responses to the speaker, and how the end the conversation [3; 44-46].

Teaching culture in EFL classrooms helps students to observe culture not only from a familiar perspective - often with a corresponding stereotypical perception - but from new perspectives as well.

The exploration of cultural differences is an effective technique for teaching the complex issues of the target culture and developing an appreciation of the differences across cultures. In addition, it contributes to greater sensitivity and empathy for differences between the native and target culture. It also fosters positive attitudes toward the target culture as well as the language learning process [1; 89].

References

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