

The Integration of Culture in Foreign Language Learning At an Advanced Level

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Abstract

Contemporary language learning theories have given great attention to the integration of cultural components in language classroom. The traditional perspective that used to categorize culture in terms of formality and foreign language learning in terms of priority has affected both foreign language teaching and learning in terms of objectives, priorities and outcomes. This article attempts to consolidate the integration of language and culture in language classrooms from a pedagogical perspective that discusses both linguistic, cultural objectives, expected knowledge outcomes and skills that are projected in English language learning at an advanced level context.

Key words: *Foreign language, culture, objectives, integration*

Résumé

Les Théories contemporaines d'apprentissage d'une deuxième langue insistent sur l'intégration des éléments culturels en classe. La perspective traditionnelle qui catégorisait la culture en terme de formalité et l'apprentissage de langue étrangère en terme de priorité a influencé l'enseignement et l'apprentissage en termes d'objectifs, de priorités et de résultats. Le présent article tente de consolider l'intégration de la langue et la culture dans le contexte enseignement et apprentissage à travers une perspective pédagogique ou les objectifs linguistiques et culturels, les connaissances et compétences projetés dans l'apprentissage de l'Anglais comme langue étrangère doivent être reconsidérés dans le contexte universitaire.

Mots Clés: *Langue étrangère, culture, objectifs, intégration*

Introductory Orientation

When we apply to learning English as a foreign language as a course, we may be attracted by the possibility of continuing with the language which we have studied at school. The course should teach us acquiring rudimentary knowledge of the language. We may be motivated to study in more depths. Our aim should be to reach a high level of proficiency in the spoken and in the written channels, while also being acknowledgeable about the cultural environment in which the language is used. (Hantrais. 1989.7)

Reasons for learning English as a Foreign Language

Different people attempt to learn foreign languages for different reasons. Gill James (2003) summarized reasons for learning a foreign language in the following: learning language for the company where someone works – people may have contracts abroad where such a language is spoken or used – adding an extra qualification – people may learn a foreign language for holidays aims or to live abroad – and mostly we may want to continue with the language we studied at school and target a higher degree of proficiency in such domain.

Language learning objectives

While teaching EFL, teachers should consider and target different objectives that are key to foster learner's skills to attain proficiency and mastery of the language being learnt. The list of objectives is endless, but it could be summarized in the following:

- Assisting learners to acquire the skills that will be useful in the subject areas of life, such as: to memorize, to put into words, to formulate accurately and give a representation etc.
- Promoting the acquisition of the learning skills that will be useful for learning other foreign languages
- Assisting learners to acquire a level of proficiency in the foreign language that will allow them to read literary works in the foreign language.

- Promoting the acquisition of a level of proficiency in the foreign language that will allow the learners to use the language for particular purposes.

Learning English at an Advanced Level

Students come to university with ideas of what it will be like and with aims of various stages of development. Through interactions with others and experience at university and in the course they develop a study strategy, tentative at first, which is consistent with their aims and identity. Once again at such a level, teachers have to consider learning effectively by insisting on the essential study skills consistent with such an advanced level.

According to Tom Burns (2008), for instance; considering the process of learning, realizing the active nature of learning, exploring aspects of academic study, gaining an understanding of analytical and critical thinking, and gaining an understanding of learning styles and how to make work for anyone. These are essentially what teachers should cater for.

This organization of attitudes and study patterns soon affects educational outcomes in the form of essay marks, but also in knowledge gained. This provides the student with objective and subjective feedback on the effectiveness of their strategies and allows them to introspect and perhaps redesign the study contract by changing strategy and perhaps aims in order to be consistent once more (Gibbs, 1992:82).

Language learning objectives at an advanced level

Formerly, the aims of language degree courses were described as learning to read a language with full appreciation of style and content and being able to write correctly using as wide range as possible of expression and tone.

In the case of linguistics, the objective was to investigate language for its own scientific and human interest. Students were advised to read widely including the foreign language press, but with the warning that

the modernisms found in journalese should not creep into their writing. In general objectives, however those of higher education are shifting towards language proficiency in both oral and written forms. Emphasis is placed increasingly on the application of language studies to real life situations and in the analysis of the characteristics features of language with its many contexts.

Normally, the language helps the learners to prepare for a career so emphasis should be devoted to the intellectual character training through practical skills ;knowledge and expertise (Hantrais.1989.17) The reference is to be made for the importance of learning how to be analytical , to work to deadlines, to absorb information quickly, to be acceptable, flexible, open-minded, self-disciplined, self sufficient, self-motivated, self-confident and independently take initiative.

Any EFL course would lead to critical thinking -- an ability to work independently, an ability to apply knowledge and skills, written and spoken communication, self confidence, understanding other people, cooperating with others, having a sense of responsibility and a political awareness.

Language learning experience at Algerian universities

Learning English as a foreign language in Algerian universities is gaining more and more ground. Thousands of students are registered yearly in the departments of English all over the country. The common aim of learning English in all these departments is so obvious; gaining a fluency and aptitude in communication in the foreign language.

For decades, university students did share relatively common courses nationwide where mostly the same distribution of programmes, content of courses, time allotted for each course, and the pedagogies implemented remained static for generations.

Within the wave of higher education reforms an emergency for updating programmes, instructions, distribution, learning responsibilities rather than teaching responsibilities, challenges to cope with the shrinking labour market , and modes of evaluation and

assessment, imposed on all stake holders and agents in higher education institutions to innovate and meet the requirement of the new reforms.

Moreover, learning English as a foreign language should not be limited to a mastery of the conventional learning skills and fluency in the target language, but providing opportunities for learners to develop their critical attitudes; ranging from critical and analytical thinking to reasoning and not to absorb linguistic information blindly or limiting one's learning to understanding grammatical mechanisms of the language.

The new experience of teaching English for advanced students tends to be learner-centered where the teacher's image as the sole source of information and decision has to fade gradually and prompts students towards autonomy though socially and culturally speaking it is highly challenging. Autonomy is seen as one trait of free societies where individuals are trained to be self-reliant, divergent learners, autonomy seekers, and partners in decision making. Still, there's a lot to go through before this culture to be founded in societies like ours. Modes of handling knowledge have always undergone other changes.

The imbalance in terms of time and content in the subjects has to be revisited and modes of learning have to be updated. One way lecturing is to fade gradually and other modes of learning have to be implemented, ranging from interactive learning, cooperative learning to tutoring have to be integrated in the classrooms. The new challenges impose on all curriculum designers to think of promoting academic writing abilities, methodological knowledge and epistemological content to enable students attain better scores and achievements in the target language by the end of the first cycle in the reformed curriculum.

Language and Culture

Language and culture are closely interlinked. Language is not only included in the definition of culture, but it also influences culture through multiple levels of complexity. Language is a multifaceted premise of culture formation and development, culture in turn enables language development (Phan. 2008.26). According to experts in foreign

language learning and teaching, language is considered to be the only means to decode all forms and arts associated with culture since language is an act of thinking.

Despite dozens of definitions of language and the same number of definitions given to culture, they all agree on the systematic quality of both language and culture. Thanks to this quality that language and culture have been able to maintain the stability of a particular society and community.

Most language programs include some study of foreign societies, their institutions, structures and cultures. The place of these background studies and their scope were shown to vary from one course to another.

As recently as the 1960's , while considering that language is not produced in a vacuum , commentators argued that the main point of looking at a country's history or geography , its institutions, structures and fine arts was to gain a better understanding .

These studies programs with a historical overview of economic, political institutions and structure culminate in the final year with analysis of contemporary events. In some cases, the focus in a reflective study of particular aspects of social life often approached thematically. Most programs cover socio-cultural political and economic systems, giving varied attention to theoretical and practical aspects. There is normally a mix between the broad brush approach and the opportunity for in depth- study a specific option.

Integration of Learning Foreign language and Foreign Culture

Foreign language study expands the linguistic area of experience by affecting language comparisons. It also offers insights into another culture and as such it is concerned with the human social area of experience.

In the language teaching and learning, 'culture' is usually defined pragmatically. It is the culture associated with a language being learnt (Byram .1989). Therefore, language will be regarded as a mechanism of cultural transmission promoting the values against those of the

regions to which it is exported; consequently countries adopting EFL will make these countries perceptual consumers of the knowledge and value systems in it (Philipson . 1992).

Throughout the course, the learners can be encouraged to view the familiar from a different angle, not least in terms of people's behaviour, and thereby widen horizons and breakdown feelings of insularity. Teaching culture and cultural studies might follow the following pattern: a descriptive analysis of culture associated with language of study and as a series of statements about culture phenomenon exemplified in the home and foreign cultures.

The ultimate guidance objective of cultural studies in foreign language teaching makes a substantial contribution to learner's personal development and general education. If such guidance is not present, cultural studies will never rise above listing and learning of «typical differences» and haphazard of daily life and simplistic geography and history. (Byram. 1989)

However, language advisors suggest that strong awareness of the dangers of cultural contamination implicit in the learning of a dominant international language, thus they have reacted into different ways according to age and objectives of the learners.

- The first response to contextualize the target language in the student's own region and culture. The implicit argument is that a culture does not exist in the core of language, but in its movable background and can be changed like scenery of a play. (Philipson. 1992.52)

- The second is to perceive scientific, financial or technological knowledge as a value free because the majority of advanced language learners are supposed to join the world of teaching.

Buttjes (1982) identifies three basic elements related to civilizations and culture studies.

a- Pragmatic communicative oriented -- teaching about the culture which is intended to alleviate problems of communication in the language, when the learner visits the foreign country.

b- To give the learners a critical understanding of the foreign people, of their own view and their values. (ideological understanding)

c- Critical understanding: encouraging learners to go beyond more acceptances of particular historical development and present social situations as inevitable and unalterable, to respond critically, analytically and as a consequence, to analyse their own social environment with critical understanding. (Political action – oriented).

Culture Learning Objectives

- Promoting learners' familiarity with the culture and civilizations of the country where the language which they are learning is spoken.
- Promoting acquisition of an open-minded and a positive disposition towards unfamiliar culture
- Assisting learners to develop a better understanding of their own identity and culture.

Course content and analysis

Modern content designers propose a model that caters not only for the content to be taught but also the implication of learners' awareness. Any culture teaching should consider not only the spheres of activity and consciousness of the learners to verbal and non verbal interaction, but also the explicit information about the country or the countries where the foreign language is spoken. The context gained much attention from experts in culture learning and teaching, and they propose a seven criteria model that largely deals with treatment of the context.

- Factual accuracy and contemporarity of information in culture studies.
- The avoidance or at least relativisation of stereotypes by making learners conscious of them.

- The presentation of a realistic picture not one which implies the foreign society in a problem free.
- Freedom from or at least the questioning of ideological tendencies in the material.
- The presentation of the historical material; its relevance to understanding contemporary society should be explicit, and it should be made clear that they are the product of the age.

Possible culture teaching objectives

Teaching the culture or about the foreign culture associated to the language being learnt covers different dimensions that are integral in a language classroom. A course would be of high expectancy if it considers not only knowledge, but also skills and attitudes that should be enhanced.

- Knowledge dimensions:

a-Provide information about the history, geography and political conditions of the

language culture. (Culture / culture)

b- Provide information about daily life and routines. (Culture)

c- Provide information about shared values and beliefs. (Culture/ culture)

d- Provide experiences with a rich variety of cultural expressions (literature, theatre...)

- Attitudinal dimension

Develop attitudes of openness and tolerance towards other people and cultures.

- Skills dimension

a - Promote reflections on cultural differences.

b- Promote increased understanding of students' culture.

The effect culture teaching has on students and the way they are affected by the process 'culture' cannot only be read, it has to be seen, heard and experienced — stimulation .

Updating

Information about remote events tend to create a feeling of disgust among learners, so learners should be put in touch with the novelties and hot events for these current events tend to initiate and stimulate good discussions.

Culture learning Implications at Algerian universities

Since any language is the vehicle of transmission of the culture associated to it and it is its mode of description and analysis, culture cannot be excluded from any course design of any foreign language teaching and learning. Any learner, especially at an advanced level should have enough knowledge about the milieu where the language he/ she is learning has evolved.

A new debate has always haunted educators about what to integrate as foreign cultural elements in their classrooms and what objectives to set behind such integration. In our departments, the question that has always been raised is should we teach foreign culture associated with the foreign language or teach foreign civilization that the foreign language describes?

Since the aims behind such courses is to learn contextualized language, the influence of culture on the language being learnt , the particular aspects that differentiate the learner's society from his or her, culture learning should be regarded very fundamental by any learner and should be considered as a content that promotes reflective study and analytical understanding of foreign societies.

In our departments, two modules are attributed to teaching the culture associated to English language; American Culture/civilization and British culture/ civilization, where there's much focus on historical development of both societies. They are approached thematically through broad brush approach or depth-study option.

The nowadays challenges are how to make good selections of both resources, how to help students make benefits from these courses to develop an outstanding fluency of the language used within the content, how to develop attitudes towards these courses content and go beyond the conventional pouring of historical events, dates and personalities help students synthesize all they have gone through, reason and analyze the elements that are interwoven to make those societies fairly different of theirs.

Such aims are so challenging to attain, but they deserve huge efforts to select and update the content of themes and topics in a socially and pedagogically motivating learning atmosphere in order to promote reflections and critical understanding.

Conclusion

Obviously, foreign language programmes the importance of the language-culture connection, but sometimes we fall short of recognizing the necessity to inject culture in our language classroom forgetting that other levels of study; discourse, sociolinguistics, and strategic competence incorporate facets of culture, and the development of these competences is intertwined with the development of cultural awareness. The connection between culture and language can only be realized by those who possess knowledge of both and they will be able to enhance learners use develop linguistic competences in the language of study and maximize their potential in cultural knowledge, awareness and outcomes.

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