

Cross-Cultural Awareness Breaks the Bridles for EFL Literature Students

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Abstract

Language and culture have an inextricable and interdependent relationship. Reading a piece of literature and leaving culture aside will obviously lead to an ambivalent interpretation, that is splitting a soul of its own body. This separation makes an EFL student able to read literature well but does not understand the social and philosophical context, which is the soul of the reading of any passage containing figures of speech. In this era of technology, globalization, emigration and mass media, it is imperative that EFL students should be well equipped with high level of intercultural communicative competence that encompasses within in the figurative meaning of any given statement. This paper addresses some challenges faced by EFL teachers while interpreting meanings in literature. The use of color is given as an instance in this article to explain that cultural differences represent real impediments for EFL students to understand the intended meaning of either the writer bearing in mind that Algerian students have their own color interpretations, which differ to some extent from the British, or the American writers.

I observed in my teaching of literature that students' analysis is very often far from the writer's intention and then create their own imagination, which has no relation with the text. This happens mainly due to the cultural gap between the writer's cultural environment and the student's. To help themselves, the students rely on their unique source of information that is the dictionary. The latter, subsequently; does not provide them with enough information because it explains the surface meaning of a word. To interpret a text, in this article, means not only to translate orally, but to reveal the underlying meaning. This article, which concentrates on the aesthetic reading attempts to explore under what conditions

the students, would be more motivated to engage themselves in an English learning environment in literature lectures.

Key words: culture, colours symbolic meaning, intercultural communication

1.1 Introduction

It is then probably useless to prove that vocabulary is the most important part of language and without it learning a foreign language cannot be completed. To study literature, dictionary words cannot be very helpful because they do not provide students with a good and full knowledge of the intended meanings used by the writer. In literature, writers are using literal devices to give the story aesthetic success. The use of these devices is sprung from the writer's own cultural environment, which on their turn shape his thinking. Colour words, the core of this article, are freely used by the writers to describe different things, such as features of the characters faces, clothes, jewellery, make-up, cars, landscapes and seascape, pieces of art etc. It has long been admitted by anthropologists that the forms and uses of a given language mirror the cultural values of the society in which the language is spoken. Teaching language in isolation cannot make a learner of the language competent in that language (Krasner, 1999).

This survey is conducted with my students at Djilali Liabes University in Sidi Bel Abbès. We studied two novels; *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald and *The Red Badge of Courage* by Stephen Crane. The former is a good illustration of the mood of the "Jazz Age" and "the Roaring Twenties". The latter applies a lot of symbols which run through the whole novel and play an important role. This paper intends to find out symbols of the colours and analyse their symbolic meanings. The major colours in *The Great Gatsby* include green, white, red, yellow, blue and grey. When reading *The Red Badge of Courage*, it is necessary to understand the colour symbols that Stephen Crane has created throughout the whole book to convey the story of a young soldier during the Civil War. Without understanding the true intent of colour use, this book loses a meaningful interpretation that is needed to truly understand the main character, his feelings and actions.

1.2 Cross-Cultural Awareness

There may be many unanswered questions about teaching literature and the nature of literature. In his booklet about "Culture and Literature", (Robert Hanvey 1998) describes four levels of Cross-Cultural Awareness (CCA): The first level uses information about the 'other' culture to create superficial stereotypes. The

second level is based on an expanded knowledge of the 'other' culture that focuses on its differences, and the subsequent difficulties it presents. The third level accepts the 'other' culture at an intellectual level and uses it as a frame of reference for understanding. Finally, at the fourth level, empathy of the 'other' culture is achieved through direct experience.

Literature provides a valuable basis for learning because creative writers are themselves so deeply involved in language constantly reaching toward to the best word, the right phrase, the appropriate form. Literature, moreover, goes beyond technique to an imaginative vision that can alter our usual way of perceiving. In this case, literature allows for the use of personal observation, analysis and then interpretation. Cultural values may pose a crucial problem, to bridge the gap students should be well equipped by the cultural artistic bonds of the target language.

The cross-cultural awareness admits the cultures of others. It helps the students to function more effectively within the frames of cultures and to realize that each ethnic, racial, religious group makes its own contribution with its unique cultural tradition.

1.3 Communicating across Cultural Barriers

Cross-cultural communication occurs when a person from one culture sends a message to a person from another culture. Cross-cultural miscommunication occurs when the person from the second culture does not receive the sender's intended message. The greater the differences between the sender's and the receiver's cultures, the greater the chance for cross-cultural miscommunication widens.

Jawaharlal Nehru says in his book *Visit to America*, "if we seek to understand a people, we have to try to put ourselves, as far as we can, in that particular historical and cultural background. ... It is not easy for a person of one country to enter into the background of another country. So there is great irritation, because one fact that seems obvious to us is not immediately accepted by the other party or does not seem obvious to him at all".

This is the irritation the students feel whenever they are confronted with such cultural impediments issues and therefore cannot put themselves into other shoes so that they may get what the writer means.

Cross-cultural communication continually involves misunderstanding caused by misperception, misinterpretation, and misevaluation. When the sender of a message comes from one culture and the receiver from another, the chances of accurately

transmitting a message are low. For this reason, EFL students see, interpret, and evaluate things differently, and consequently act upon them differently. In approaching cross-cultural situations, one should therefore assume difference until similarity, to a certain extent, is proven.

As far as the colours are the core of this article a question maybe raised about the reason we interpret them differently? The answer lies obviously in the nature of perception. Perceptual patterns are neither innate nor absolute. They are selective, learned, culturally determined, consistent, and inaccurate.

Perception is selective. There are too many stimuli in the environment our senses whenever we see, hear, taste, or touch something, therefore, we respond accordingly. We absent-mindedly admit what is customary to our perception. This is what makes the EFL students' literary analysis and interpretations are under the control of their environmental phenomena.

Some facts are listed underneath to elucidate reasons of seeing things differently.

- Perceptual patterns are learned. We are not born seeing the world in one particular way. Our experience teaches us to perceive the world in certain ways.

- Perception tends to remain constant. Once we see something in a particular way, we continue to see it that way.

- We therefore see things that do not exist, and do not see things that do exist. Our interests, values, and culture act as filters and lead us to distort, block, and even create what we choose to see and hear. We perceive what we expect to perceive. We perceive things according to our cultural map. As a consequence, the students interpret their literary texts according to their personal views and subsequently they think they are right.

1.4 Film Clips in Teaching Literature as a Real Foreign Atmosphere

For many years, researchers had been all the time wondering whether using film clips would be realizable or not. The experiment was done with students at the University mentioned earlier and at - Mactalang- my private school of languages. The school is a suitable place for the researcher and the participants to create a native like atmosphere. It is also worth mentioning that teaching literature at

Mactalang was not different from university because Mactalang's teaching syllabus also includes short stories and parts of novels for advanced learners.

1.5 Course Description

First of all it is worth mentioning that whatever the research did to create a good and native- like atmosphere but it was quite obvious that it was not possible to invite the students into an environment that is not theirs. In other words, the dormant societal behaviour –customs, beliefs and traditions - they have acquired since their childhood, which exists in their subconscious, erupts the moment when they are confronted with an alien culture. It was revealed that even watching a film together was not possible. The reason, which made the researcher, spend hours viewing and reviewing the film many times and every time censoring the slightest possible shocking scene.

The students were given beforehand both books *The Great Gatsby* and *The Red Badge of Courage* to read to pave the way for a good understanding of the films they will watch after analysing both novellas. During the analysis the researcher asked many questions about the use of the colours in the novels and in the films. The students had the chance to watch the newly broadcasted film of *The Great Gatsby* (2013) with the protagonist Leonardo DiCaprio. The colours in the film are so vivid and striking that may not go unnoticed.

Objectives of the research are:

- Increase their ability to understand, appreciate, and discuss the use of colors of the novels *The Great Gatsby* and *The Red Badge of Courage*.
- Develop an understanding of critical analysis of *The Great Gatsby* film through careful examination of the green color that represents Gatsby's dream.
- Undertake literary discussion about the colours, which are attributed to all of the characters, themes and setting.

1.6 Colour Symbolism and Culture

Colour means many different things to different people and cultures. We all have our own favourite colours. People like different colours the same as they like different foods. Colors also

express feelings, personal identity, countries, cultures, and colour symbolism.

Following the complexity of meanings that differ from one country to another and to simplify their intended meanings in specific situations, this project offers some explanations to pave the way for students in order not to confuse their usages.

Before reading *The Great Gatsby* the researcher informed the students that Stephen Crane is using lots of colours which are very symbolic and that they serve to convey certain given meanings. As a matter of fact, one question was addressed to them: Do Americans conceive colours the same meanings in the Algerian do?

Many informants hesitated in giving a clear-cut answer others tried to give suppositions which were all negative. Before analysing the students' point view about the colours and meanings, it would be preferable to know first about the students' viewpoints about the colours. The discussion with them about the colours was about six main ones notably the red, white, black, blue, yellow and green. In the analysis only three colours are selected; green, grey and yellow.

1.6.1 Colour Green in "The Great Gatsby"

Green stands as the most prominent colour Fitzgerald employs in *The Great Gatsby* from the very beginning of the novel or the film. The flashes of the green colour is very visible to any viewer of the film. Green is significantly associated with both the green light of Daisy's dock and the "green breast of the new world," which unites the hope and promise of Gatsby's dream with that of America itself. The colour green is generally, as many students responded during the interviews, that green is associated with spring, hope, and youth. However, throughout the novel, green has many possible interpretations, but its use to explain Gatsby's character is probably the most meaningful in the story.

The green light at the end of Daisy's dock is the symbol of Gatsby's hopes and dreams. It represents everything that haunts and beckons Gatsby, in other words, mainly the physical and emotional distance between him and Daisy, the gap between the past and the present, the promises of the future, and the powerful lure of that other green stuff he lust for that it is money. In fact, the colour green is repeated ten of times in the novel "The Great Gatsby" that the reader cannot escape. As an example, Long Island sound is "green"; Gatsby spends hours contemplating the

flashes of light. George Wilson's bony tired face is also "green" in the sunlight; the witness, Michaelis, describes the car that kills Myrtle Wilson as "light green" though it is yellow i.e. the newly rich people are controlling the rules or maybe as the saying says 'when money talks the right keeps quiet.' Gatsby's perfect lawn is green; and the New World that Nick imagines Dutch explorers first stumbling upon is a "fresh, green breast." The symbolism of green throughout the novel is as variable and contradictory as the many definitions of "green" and the many uses of money—"new," "natural," "innocent," "naive," and "uncorrupted"; but also "rotten," "gullible," "nauseous," and "sickly."

One possible meaning of the color green can be envy as the Americans say green with envy. While reading *the Great Gatsby*, the reader can notice that Gatsby as an envious, jealous character. He once had the love of his life, Daisy, but now she is married to another man. He spends all of his time and effort in an attempt to win back Daisy. He is also envious of many of the wealthy people around his home. He throws huge parties and extravagant parties every Sunday in order to be well known amongst the wealthy people. This leads one to believe that Gatsby is indeed "green with envy."

Besides that it is also probable that Fitzgerald uses green to symbolize money and its power in society. Money rules the lives of the people in the story; the title of the novel says it. When naming Gatsby as the great. From the novel's covers the reader may guess to which the class the protagonist belongs. Gatsby needs money to live the life that he does. Gatsby also feels he needs the money to get back together with Daisy. Gatsby has a large green lawn and green ivy going up his house. Inside Gatsby's car, the passengers sit "in a sort of green leather conservatory." Later, Mr. Michaelis describes the car that killed Myrtle as being light green instead of yellow as mentioned above. All of these things represent the riches, as well as the importance of money in Gatsby's life.

For further explanation as stated earlier the colour green can both symbolize envy and money; however, the most reasonable meaning may be a better tomorrow meaning a better future full of good dreams to be realised, especially in Gatsby's case. The presence of the green light at the end of a landing stage to signal a romantic dream in the mind of Gatsby which similar to the green light at the end of Daisy's Buchanan's dock as mentioned on (p.22,

l 31-33), which becomes key image in "The Great Gatsby". The first appearance of the green light is quiet clear is the moment Nick sees Gatsby for the first time, standing in front of his mansion and stretching out his arms to "...a single green light, minute and far away that might have been the end of dock." The light becomes, for Gatsby, the symbol of a reunion with Daisy.

This is a fantastic and suitable symbol of Gatsby's life. Gatsby is all the time living alone in a gloomy world, now it is the opportunity for him to take advantage one small thing to bring him back happiness. He already experienced through his younger years many hardships in his life, a life full troubles and loss of self control which resulted into a melancholic life. Now, he thinks it is high time to rebuild all the dreams he had in mind and construct a beautiful life a distinguishable name. The longing in his heart is to have Daisy, but more importantly to have a new hope in his life. He has always kept the idea in his heart that he could be reunited with Daisy. Gatsby is longing to free himself from 'dark world' and enter the green light for a better future. Gatsby gets unbearably close to his dream, yet in all of his efforts, he comes up short in grasping the better life that he wanted. He hopes for the "green breast of the new world," the people's idea that tomorrow will bring a better day. This idea seems justifiable, yet it is far away from coming true.

In "The Great Gatsby", the use of colours such as gold, silver, white, blue, green and gray in the descriptions of images are important. The use of gold is repeated many times in the novel which is as a good illustrative means to distinguish the aristocratic class in gold as Gatsby pretend s to be, and the newly rich people in green. While watching the film, it can be noticed how the screenwriter extended the use of gold into a separate motif with an importance of its own. For the colour gold: Gatsby's toilet set in the bedroom was pure dull gold, (page 91); Daisy is a golden girl, (page 120); Jordan's skin is golden coloured, (page 79) (there are several references to Jordan's skin as golden); Gatsby wears a gold coloured tie to his tea with Daisy (page 84). The golden cufflinks become an important and separate element. The reader can observe them from the very the beginning, at in the middle, and even at the end of the film. They are clearly very important to the characters, as a reminder of the early love between Daisy and Gatsby. Gatsby buys his West Egg mansion with the sole intention of being across the bay from Daisy Buchanan's green light at the end of her dock, a fantasy which becomes Gatsby's personal version of the American Dream.

The vitality and beauty of F. Scott Fitzgerald's writing are perhaps nowhere more strikingly exhibited than in his handling of the colour-symbols in *The Great Gatsby*. To reinforce the idea of the importance of the use colour in this novel Schneider (3) says:

We are all familiar with "the green light" at the end of Daisy's dock—that symbol of the "orgiastic future," the limitless promise of the dream Gatsby pursues to its inevitably tragic end; familiar, too, with the ubiquitous yellow—symbol of the money, the crass materialism that corrupts the dream and ultimately destroys it. What apparently has escaped the notice of most readers, however, is both the range of the colour-symbols and their complex operation in rendering, at every stage of the action, the central conflict of the work. This article attempts to lay bare the full pattern.

(Schneider, Daniel J., 1970)

Following the symbol colours representation a questioned may be raised. How would an Algerian student interpret the text if he ignores the American colour symbols? The introduction of culture in all the subjects is then necessary to understand better a foreign language.

16.2 Gold, Yellow, and Silver in "The Great Gatsby"

The "Great Gatsby" speaks about three different social classes: "old money" (Tom and Daisy Buchanan); "new money" (Gatsby); and a class that might be called "no money" (George and Myrtle Wilson). "old money" families have fortunes dating from the 19th century or before. The "new money" is well illustrated through the lavish parties thrown every Sunday when Gatsby is inviting all the people even those he does not know. Many of his guests neither know him nor does he. The most important think is spending money to have a name in society.

Gold and yellow are colours that symbolize old wealth. The colours green and gold contrast in a significant way. In old times people used gold as a means for exchange, but as a national currency was established green money replaced the gold and gold no longer even backed the dollar. So, gold represents the old money and green represents the new. In the same way, gold symbolizes Daisy and Tom's old money and green symbolizes Gatsby's new money. One might say that Gatsby is "green." To contrast this Tom is gold. In the same way that green and gold contrast so do Gatsby and Tom.

The colour yellow shows up in many facets of the book which are:

- Yellow symbolizes corruptness and things that go bad
- In the fall, the leaves turn yellow and decay – this is similar to the corruption that happens in the world
- Gatsby's yellow car represents corruptness, dishonesty and deception
- Gold represents wealth, or the show of wealth
- Gatsby tries to win back Daisy using gold, or his wealth as a motivation

1.7 Students' Viewpoints about colours and Their Meanings

In a free class discussion neither literature nor the novels, the researcher raised a discussion about colours and asked the students what they think of the symbols of the green, grey and yellow colours and their meanings. In the table below it is clear that students did not use much effort to relate the interpretations to neither the English cultures; American or British which are considered to be a part of their thinking as long as they have been studying English for a period not less than 10 years. This shows that the students speak English but act Algerian.

Table 1.7 Students' Viewpoints about colours and Their Meanings

Green	Gray	Yellow
forest	clouds	sickness
spring	melancholy	jealousy
vegetation		
paradise		

'The students were asked to select the colours into themes and express their symbols'.

1.8 Student's Interpretation of the Colours

Later but still prior to the class discussion of the novels, the researcher listened to the various interpretations of the students about three colours used in *The Great Gatsby*: green grey and yellow. The answers were richer than in Table 1.7 and varied but none corresponded to the meaning meant by Fitzgerald. The green, for the students, is related to ecology. They expected that the novel is mainly about a great mansion of Gatsby with gardens and trees. Because they knew that the story is a kind love story so 100% of

the students related the colour yellow to jealousy between two rivals. Gray meant for the students mainly melancholy.

Table 1.8 Students' colours interpretations in *The Great Gatsby* and *The Red Badge of Courage*

Green	Gray	Yellow
ecology	sad	sickness
spring	weakness	jealousy
vegetation	clouds	hypocrisy
paradise	darkness	
comfort	hypocrisy	
environment	isolation	
	melancholy	

The table shows the students' interpretations of the colours symbols related to the novels.

To help student to guess symbols of meaning in *The Great Gatsby* they were provided with a synopsis of the novel. They were given the same colour as the case is for Table 1.8 to see how they views vary except for the red colour which is added in this table because it is important to *the Great Gatsby's* analysis. They students explored the connotations of the colours associated with the characters in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. During the discussion, they first brainstorm other words for the colours and discussed the meaning of connotation and how word meanings can change based on circumstances. They work in groups to explore the cultural connotations of a particular colour and present their findings to the class.

1.8 Yellow Colour in The Red Badge of Courage

Crane uses very distinct colors in his text to represent various elements that the main character, Henry or "the youth", is feeling along his adventure of enlisting into battle. Red, yellow and gray are the main color's Crane uses consistently in the majority of the chapters to describe Henry's inner conflicts and feelings.

The color yellow represents Henry feeling like a coward and knowing his actions were cowardly. Crane uses the color yellow more in the beginning as Henry was just learning to become a soldier.

Henry's feelings switch from confidence to cowardice as he runs away from his very first battle. When he looks back at the

battlefield with shame, he can see nothing but yellow fog. Crane intended this yellow fog to represent Henry's feelings of cowardice after running from his first opportunity of battle. The color yellow appears again in chapter nineteen, as Henry is about to face another battle. The guns that are fired are described as having a yellow flame. This image brings the reader back to the fact that Henry still has cowardice feelings about-facing this battle even though his actions may be contradicting.

1.9 Colour Yellow in Poetry

For further details about the use of the yellow colour, the researcher provided the students with a song entitled *Coward of the County* by Kenny Rogers and invited them

to listen and underline the colours in the lyrics. The use of yellow in this song is a key word that means evokes cowardice the same the same as in the *Red Badge of Courage*. The song is not difficult which makes it easier for the student to grasp the story in the song and understand that in America yellow colour symbolises cowardice which is not the case in Algeria..

To understand better the story in a form of a song and see how the word yellow is used in this stanza:

Everyone		considered		him
The	coward	of	the	county
He'd	never	stood	one	single
To	prove	the	county	wrong
His	mama	named	him	Tommy

But folks just called him "yellow"

1.10 Symbiosis between Language and Culture

Wei (2005:56) argues that language has a dual character: a means of communication as well as a carrier of culture. Language without culture is inconceivable, and vice versa. A particular language is a mirror of a particular culture. By studying a language, culture should be introduced so that may gain knowledge and understanding of the culture in which the language is embedded; in fact, students cannot truly learn the language until they have also mastered the cultural contexts in which the language occurs. The example of the yellow soldier in the *Red Badge of Courage* could never be understood if the students had not been taught that yellow colour in this context means cowardice. Without this information the students would consider him as a sick soldiers and this would obviously alter the meaning of the whole story of a

historical Civil War. Fantini (1995) stressed the symbiotic relationship between language and culture since language affects and reflects culture and vice-versa. Similarly, Brown (2000: 177) also affirms that "a language is a part of a 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." In other words, language is regarded as a means by which people communicate to and interact with others, which in turn is responsible for cultural development.

McKay (2003) affirms that culture has an impact over language teaching in two major ways: linguistically and pedagogically. Linguistically, culture is important in the linguistic dimension of the language itself, affecting the semantic, and discourse levels of the language. Pedagogically, it influences the choice of language

Culture is a necessary vehicle to convey the right meaning of any given message. Without it language would be like a barren land. It was observed during the research that most of the students would have been gone astray without being culturally guided. Kitao (2000) claims that studying culture gives students a reason to study the target language because understanding culture makes studying foreign language and literature more meaningful.

Becoming inter-culturally competent involves recognizing differences and variations within one's own culture and within other cultures. It's about occupying what is called "a third place," a principled and detached view across cultures. It means abandoning the idea that everybody sees the world in pretty much the same way. What does this mean in practical terms for the English classroom? McKay (2002) argues that cultural material in class should be used to encourage students to reflect on their own culture and establish a "sphere of inter-culturality" (Kramsch 1993). In this sense, intercultural competence is not so much about knowledge as about skills. The skills that should be developed to enhance intercultural competence include:

- Asking questions.
- Listening and seeking clarification.
- Negotiating and identifying common ground.
- Avoiding prejudging or stereotyping

1.11 Conclusion

A sailor can voyage on his boat but he will soon go astray by the wind if he does hoist the sail that guides his way. The same

goes for a student if he learns a language and neglects its culture. Culture is therefore a crucial facet of teaching English as a Foreign Language. The goal behind teaching culture in an EFL class is to help students understand better literary texts which are usually loaded with figures of speech and idioms. It has now been clear about the importance of culture, but there is good point to raise at this level. How is it possible to know about the other culture? It is worth noting that sometimes, even a teacher may misinterpret a literary text because he / she does not have enough knowledge about the other culture. One good way to be equip oneself with a foreign culture is either to visit frequently the country of the target language and get involved with various topic discussions with native. If travelling is beyond the material means reading remains the cheapest alternative. Reading widely a lot about the target language nourishes the language being learned. Stories, idioms, proverbs and sayings play the greatest part of the language because they all carry the culture within their folds and incorporate words history. The last but not the least, films, documentaries also offer direct contact with people of the other culture.

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