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CULTURE IN LANGUAGE LEARNING AND TEACHING

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Abstract

This study was conducted with the participation of the students of the ELT department of Çukurova University in Turkey. We have tried to find out what students think about the effects of the culture class they attended in the fall semester of 2003-2004 academic year. As a result of the study, a significant similarity between the students' views and the theoretical benefits of a culture class as argued by some experts in the field was observed. Regarding the benefits of learning about culture, attending the culture class has raised cultural awareness in ELT students concerning both native and target societies. This study illustrates how arguments of language teaching experts in favour of a culture class in language learning and teaching are justified by some sound evidence provided by the participants of this study.

Introduction

The dialectical connection between language and culture has always been a concern of L2 teachers and educators. Whether culture of the target language is to be incorporated into L2 teaching has been a subject of rapid change throughout language teaching history. In the course of time, the pendulum of ELT practitioners' opinion has swung against or for teaching culture in context of language teaching. For example, during the first decades of the 20th century researchers discussed the *importance* and *possibilities* of including cultural components into L2 curriculum (Sysoyev & Donelson, 2002); the advent of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in the late 70s marks a critical shift for teaching culture, for the paradigm shift from an approach based largely on form and structure to a plurality of approaches causing an unintended side effect: the negligence of culture (Pulverness, 2003).

Recent studies focus on the seamless relationship between L2 teaching and target culture teaching, especially over the last decade with the writings of scholars such as Byram (1989; 1994a; 1994b; 1997a; 1997b) and Kramsch (1988; 1993; 1996; 2001). People involved in language teaching have again begun to understand the intertwined relation between culture and language (Pulverness, 2003). It has been emphasized that without the study of culture, teaching L2 is inaccurate and incomplete. For L2 students, language study seems senseless if they know nothing about the people who speak the target language or the country in which the target language is spoken. Acquiring a new language means a lot more than the manipulation of syntax and lexicon. According to Bada (2000: 101), "the need for cultural literacy in ELT arises mainly from the fact that most language learners, not exposed to cultural elements of the society in question, seem to encounter significant hardship in communicating meaning to native speakers." In addition, nowadays the L2 culture is presented as an interdisciplinary core in many L2 curricula designs and textbooks (Sysoyev & Donelson, 2002).

There is no such a thing as human nature independent of culture; studying an L2, in a sense, is trying to figure out the nature of another people (McDevitt, 2004). If as McDevitt

holds human nature is seamlessly related to the culture, then studying L2 involves the study of L2 culture. Actually, the conditionality of the previous sentence could be proved inappropriate. The mutual relation between language and culture, i.e. the interaction of language and culture has long been a settled issue thanks to the writings of 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). These are the names first to come to mind when the issue is the relation between language and culture. Yet, the most striking linguists dealing with the issue 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 core of their theory is that a) we perceive the world in terms of categories and distinctions found in our native language and b) what is found in one language may not be found in another language due to cultural differences.

Although the ground of discussion on language and culture has been cleared for ages, it is not until the 80s that the need of teaching culture in language classes is indicated, reaching its climax in the 90s thanks to the efforts of Byram and Kramersch as mentioned previously. For instance in the case of ELT, Pulverness (2003) asserts that due to the undeniable growth of English as an international language cultural content as anything other than contextual background was began to be included in language teaching programs.

Although by mid 80s, various advantages of teaching culture in L2 classes were virtually universally accepted, and culture was widely taught in language classes, there were still problems about what should be taught and how culture could be taught most beneficially. These questions were faced more and more 1990s (Kitao, 2000).

If we turn to the relationship between culture and language, we see some remarkable comments; for example, Sapir (1921) argued that ‘language, race, and culture are not necessarily correlated’, adding the remark ‘language and our thought-grooves are inextricably interrelated, are, in a sense, one and the same’. Yet this single remark does not supply a satisfactory reply to the question of why culture teaching should be involved in language teaching. Kitao (2000) giving reference to several authors lists some of the benefits of teaching culture as follows:

- Studying culture gives students a reason to study the target language as well as rendering the study of L2 meaningful (Stainer, 1971).
- From the perspective of learners, one of the major problems in language teaching is to conceive of the native speakers of target language as real person. Although grammar books gives so called genuine examples from real life, without background knowledge those real situations may be considered fictive by the 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).
- The affect of motivation in the study of L2 has been proved by experts like Gardner and Lambert (1959, 1965, 1972). In achieving high motivation, culture classes does have a great role because learners like culturally based activities such as singing, dancing, role playing, doing research on countries and peoples, etc. The study of culture increases learners’ not only curiosity about and interest in target countries but also their motivation. 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 Kramsch (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).

- 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).

McKay (2003) contends that culture influences language teaching in two ways: linguistic and pedagogical. Linguistically, it affects the semantic, pragmatic, and discourse levels of the language. Pedagogically, it influences the choice of the language materials because cultural content of the language materials and the cultural basis of the teaching methodology are to be taken into consideration while deciding upon the language materials. For example, while some textbooks provide examples from the target culture, some others use source culture materials.

Previously, we argued that ethnocentricity limits the self, hence individuals have to look at themselves from a different perspective to surmount such limitation; thus, culture classes are vital in enabling individuals to see themselves from a different point of view. Similarly, 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 monocultural perspective and reaching the realm of different perspective could be facilitated by studying another culture.

To sum up, culture classes have a humanizing and a motivating effect on the language learner and the learning process. They help learners observe similarities and differences among various cultural groups. Today, most of L2 students around the world live in a monolingual and monocultural 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). Besides, we are reminded of the fact that English language is the most studied language all over the world, whereby the language has gained a lingua franca status (Alptekin, 2002; Smith, 1976). Alptekin (2002) in his article, favoring an intercultural communicative

competence rather than a native-like competence, asserts that since English is used by much of the world for instrumental reasons such as professional contacts, academic studies, and commercial pursuits, the conventions of the British politeness or American informality proves irrelevant. Quite in the same manner, Smith (1976) highlighting the international status of English language lists why culture is not needed in teaching of English language:

- there is no necessity for L2 speakers to internalize the cultural norms of native speakers of that language
- an international language becomes de-nationalized
- the purpose of teaching an international language is to facilitate the communication of learners' ideas and culture in an English medium (qtd. in McKay, 2003).

The Study

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.

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 in this study were 38 students (28 females and 10 males ranging between 21-25 years of age); third year Turkish student-teachers of English studying at the English Language Teaching Department of Çukurova University. They are graduates of either private or state secondary schools from all over Turkey. Therefore, they share common cultural characteristics. Most of them plan to 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

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

Table 2

Item No.	Item	Responses	Frequency	%	Chi-Square
2	To which skill did the course contribute most?	Reading	10	26.3	0.015
		Writing	2	5.3	
		Listening	10	26.3	
		Speaking	16	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 raising of the target culture as well as theirs.

Table 3

Item No.	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.

Table 4

Item No.	Item	Responses	Frequency	%	Chi-Square
4	Did your attitude towards target culture change at the end of this course?	Yes	28	73.7	0.004
		No	10	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.

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.

Point 1: Teaching language is also teaching culture

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

After the introduction of the Direct Method into the English Language teaching, cultural elements began to be considered as an important aspect of learning the language, and in our age, cultural background knowledge is accepted as a must in teaching language. 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." 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

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

- *I will be able to teach grammar more efficiently.*
- *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 can not 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

- *My communicative competence has improved.*
- *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.¹ 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

- *Cultural knowledge will play a facilitator role in my teaching and learning new lexical items.*
- *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. Most of the cultural issues being concrete in nature will be the pegs with which the new vocabulary is associated. Using the peg technique (Thompson, 2003), learners associate a newly encountered word with an already acquired one leading to minimization of fossilization of potential misusage of such a new word.

Point 6: Providing information prior to a visit to the UK or the USA

- *In case I visit Britain or the USA, I will not have a culture shock.*
- *If I take some of the courses from a university in the UK attending the Socrates/Erasmus program, I will adapt to the differences in Britain or the USA more easily.*

One of the motives for studying an L2 is that people sometimes have to go abroad, especially due to business, and meet people from different nationalities. It is not practical and economical to communicate with others through a simultaneous translator.

With the introduction of the SOCRATES/ERASMUS Student Exchange Program² it has become much easier for a student to visit an EU country. If students did not know what a *DIY* (Do-it-Yourself) shop sells they would be left to their devices to discover what DIY shops are for. Providing information about such stores may greatly ease the life of such students. If they did not know what leisure the English have, they may feel perplexed to observe people engaged in activities quite different to theirs. We believe that such students have the right to access information about the target society prior to such visits, and one major way of acquiring such information is through the language.

CONCLUSION

The classes in language and culture aim at improving one's understanding of the language and the people who speak it. Trained to be prospective teachers of English, for students of ELT, studying English culture is not an arbitrary but a necessary activity.

The findings of the study suggest that a culture class is significantly beneficial in terms of language skills, raising cultural awareness, changing attitudes towards native and target societies, and contribution to the teaching profession. The participants in this study emphasized some kind of transformation in their thinking and listed six points as potential contribution of a culture class they received.

This study has implications for a culture class in the curriculum of language teaching departments. Incorporated in the curriculum, a culture class would prove to be a vital component of language learning and teaching, since as this study illustrates, it has a great deal to offer to the development of communicative competence as well as other skills in the instruction of any language.

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¹ Refer to Corder, S. P. (1981). *Error analyses and Interlanguage*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

² SOCRATES/ERASMUS student exchange program is organized by the EU and it concerns undergraduate and graduate students of all disciplines. The receiving university does not charge tuition fee to the exchange students. One can study abroad within this exchange program for 3-12 months.