

THE ROLE OF CULTURE IN LEARNING ENGLISH

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Annotation: This article aims to first discuss the role of culture in language teaching and learning process in general and then investigate specific examples from some selected coursebooks that are currently in use at primary, elementary, and secondary levels of education. Language and culture are two inseparable aspects of human life and thus the inclusion of cultural components throughout a language learning process is something indispensable.

Key words: culture, language teaching, language learning, curriculum

Language learners are also culture learners. Culture plays an important role in language education because it motivates students and facilitates communication. The teaching of culture has been intertwined with the teaching of language, at times more closely than others, but never more closely than now. If language education will be to successfully incorporate the presentation of cultural information in language classroom, it would greatly increase the benefits of language study. A critical question arises in terms of English language teaching at this point, that is, whether to teach 'culture' along with English or not. The question of teaching 'culture' along with English has been discussed by some scholars from the fields of applied linguistics and sociolinguistics for nearly two decades. There are four views regarding the issue. The first one states that 'target language culture' should be taught along with English to acculturate language learners into the cultures of English speaking countries. The second view states that there should not be any teaching of the 'target language culture' together with English in the countries where English is an institutionalized variety. Other two views also reject the idea of teaching 'target language culture' along with English. However, while one of the views supports the teaching of 'local culture' in English language teaching, the other view holds the position that English has become a lingua franca and it should be taught in a culture-free context.

Language has a dual character: both as a means of communication and a carrier of culture. Language without culture is unthinkable, so is human culture without language. A particular language is a mirror of a particular culture. We

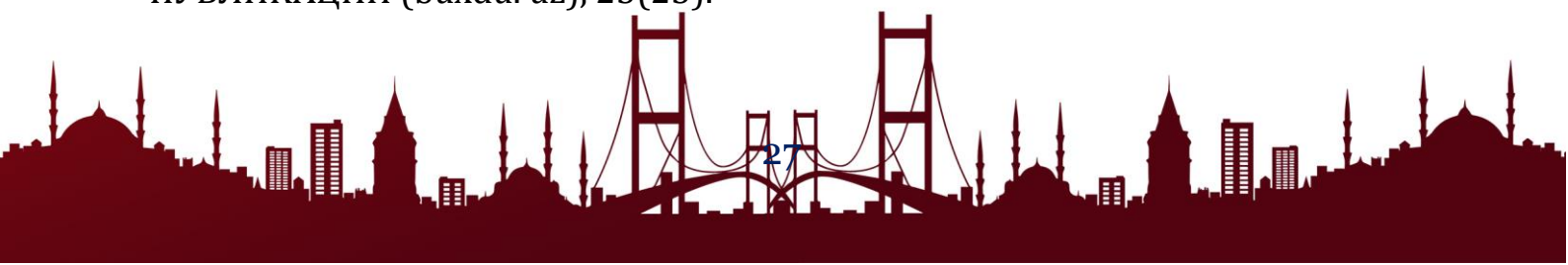
can describe the relation between language and culture as follows: 'A language is a part of a culture and a culture is a part of a language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture'. In a word, culture and language are inseparable. To understand the importance of culture we need to know to what extent cultural background knowledge influences language learning and teaching, and how we can take advantage of that influence. To account for the roles culture plays in language learning and teaching, it is necessary to demonstrate the functions it may perform in the components of language learning and teaching, such as listening, speaking, reading, and translating.

Language is the carrier of culture and vocabulary is the basic ingredient of language. The cultural difference will inevitably be exhibited on the vocabulary, and the explanation of vocabulary will also reflect the national or cultural difference. Take colour as an example. In Chinese, white, denoting a colour, often associates with "pure, noble and moral goodness", and the bride is dressed in white during the wedding in most western countries. In China the bride must wear red in the traditional wedding, definitely not white. Because red means "happiness, good luck, flourishing and prosperous" in the future and people only wear white in funerals when one's family member or relative is dead. White in China, is associated with "pale, weak and without vitality". Thus, learning a language implies not only the knowledge of its grammar rules and the denotative meanings of words but it involves much more, such as the culture phenomena, the way of life, habits and customs, history and everything that is contained of culture. In a word, culture is a comprehensive composite with abundant implication, and each factor in it may be exhibited on words. Learning vocabulary, while paying attention to cultural factors, is vital and crucial. In foreign language learning particularly in training their listening ability to understand better, learners often complain that although they spend lots of time in learning and practicing their ability of listening comprehension, their progress is not satisfactory. To achieve this end, they do everything they can. Some, for example, buy tape recorders to facilitate their learning process in an attempt to improve their listening ability, and spend several hours in it every day. But when they meet new listening materials, they still can't understand them. The reasons for this may be various, but some of them have been identified. Among them are their little vocabulary, weak grammar, and vague pronunciation. But a relatively more important reason is that they lack the necessary cultural background knowledge of the language they have learned.

Listening is closely related to the culture, politics and economy of the target language. Just like listening, the ability of speaking is not a matter only concerned with pronunciation or intonation. People need to read a lot to understand the cultural background knowledge of the target language; only in this way they can communicate successfully with the others. So in the training of oral English, teachers should emphasize the practical use of the language, and try to use the materials which come from the daily life. This can help people use proper sentences in proper context. Otherwise, even if one may have been well trained in the linguistic aspect of the language, he may make mistakes or have misunderstanding for the sake of lacking related cultural background knowledge

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