

CULTURE AND LANGUAGE IN THE CLASSROOM

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Abstract. *The need to integrate culture and its teaching into foreign language education is not a new debate, and has long been highlighted in countless studies. Yet, it seems to be common practice that foreign language textbooks and classrooms frequently overlook the conclusions drawn in such studies and neglect the essential information about the target language culture that would help students reach a cultural understanding to accompany their linguistic knowledge. In this paper is drawn attention to this ignorance by using and argue that there will always be something missing in language learners’ foreign language proficiency and use, if culture is left out in their language learning. Thus, language teachers are offered specific ways of integrating culture into their classrooms and supplementing their textbooks with cultural elements.*

Keywords: *Culture, cultural environment, foreign language, language teaching, EFL, textbooks*

This is a great topic for discussion because although all of us teachers are busy teaching our students English, we cannot forget that teaching a language is as much a cultural exchange as it is anything else.

Within every learning environment there is a prevailing culture that influences all the other components. In most learning environments, culture is often taken for granted or may be even beyond the consciousness of learners or even teachers. I will try to show why faculty, instructors and teachers should pay special attention to cultural factors, so that they can make conscious decisions about how the different components of a learning environment are implemented.

The main argument the authors attempt to articulate is clear by now that teaching culture should be integrated into the foreign language textbooks and classroom practices. Although language teaching materials may not include the target language culture and its teaching, it is the language teachers’ responsibility to find practical solutions to this problem to integrate culture into their teaching in one way or another, and it would not be reasonable to assume that language learners will later be exposed to cultural material after they reach mastery of the linguistic features of the language.

The foremost and most important prerequisite for language teachers to incorporate cultural material into their teaching is to make them familiar with the culture of the language they are teaching. Often times, as disclosed earlier, teachers lack the necessary knowledge of the target language culture and training in how to teach it, resulting in a state of insecurity to even approach culture. However, one should have the basic backdrop to be able to effectively help students accomplish the essential skills in language learning to rationalize and identify with the target language culture. This, unlike the widespread misconception, is not the denial of one’s own culture or one’s absorbing and accepting a foreign culture as ideal. On the contrary, this awareness serves as a safeguard against potential negative attitudes students may encounter when they learn about a new set of norms at odds with the ones of their own, and helps language

learners to recognize and appreciate the differences between the two cultures for the benefit of successfully combining form and meaning in language learning.

In our increasingly diverse and multicultural society, it’s more important than ever for teachers to incorporate culturally responsive instruction in the classroom -- whether teaching elementary school, middle school or high school students. And the increase of diversity doesn’t only relate to race and ethnicity; it can include students of different religion, economic status, sexual orientation, gender identity, and language background.

Every student is unique. In order to properly understand and promote cultural awareness, teachers need to understand all the different types of diversity they may encounter in their classrooms including:

Race - A person’s skin color can have a great impact on their experience in society. It can also impact how they view themselves and others when engaging in classroom activities.

Ethnicity - Ethnicity relates to a person’s culture and nationality. Ethnicity is sometimes confused with race, but it is important to recognize that while some people may have the same skin color, they may come from different places and have vastly different cultural beliefs and views of the world.

Religion - It is important to understand that people have different religious belief or no religious beliefs, and it may impact their participation in the classroom. Students may react differently to lessons based on their religion or may not be able to be present on certain religious holidays.

Language - While English is commonly used in classrooms, for some students, it is not the language they speak at home. Accommodations should be made to help students for whom English is a second or foreign language.

Socioeconomic Status - A student’s socioeconomic status can affect their ability to participate in the classroom without some type of accommodation. For instance, access to a computer at home or reliable internet access is not a given for some children. Teachers should be aware of this and the stress it may cause students who may struggle due to a lack of resources.

Sexual Orientation - A student’s sexual orientation can have a great impact on how they are experiencing the world. Teachers should understand the struggles that exist and ensure that the lessons taught in their classroom are inclusive.

Gender Identity - Similar to sexual orientation, it is important to understand each student’s gender identity and how they would prefer to be recognized. Teachers should respect their student’s identity and use preferred pronouns when interacting with their students.

“Languages have strong, inseparable, and complex ties to culture” (Jenkins, 2010) and learning a language essentially opens a window into the culture and customs of a people. Though English teachers all over the world are focused on making sure their students acquire the linguistic skills needed to advance their nations, L1 language and culture also play an important role in the language classroom. In my opinion, incorporating L1 language and culture has two primary benefits; it builds rapport which eases apprehension and breaks down barriers, and it potentially saves precious class time. In my experience, I have found that students really appreciate when their teacher exhibits interest in their customs and cultural practices. For students, it signifies that not only is the teacher concerned with teaching English, but he/she is also considerate of and interested in learning about the host country’s way of life. For example, in Saudi Arabia going out on family outings and frequently visiting family members makes up a major part of the fabric of society. Thus, whenever there is an opportunity to try to connect

lesson content with the students’ lives, I do my best to incorporate things that I know are important to them as well as things that they are very familiar with. In a lesson on cultural perspectives on “time”, for example, I might use family gatherings as an example of determining appropriate protocol in relation to time when Saudi families get together. Linking lesson content to students’ lives and culture goes a long way in building rapport as they grow to appreciate you taking an interest in learning about their culture, it breaks down cultural barriers, and it helps students stay motivated to learn.

There are many ways to incorporate culture in the classroom. The “process framework” is a seven-stage tool for lesson plan development that can help integrate culture into lessons. The first four stages- presentation of new material, practice, grammar exploration and transposition or use, are fairly common in language education. The next three stages sociolinguistic exploration, culture exploration, and intercultural exploration- bring cultural elements to the lesson. Sociolinguistic exploration helps students understand how language changes in different context and with different people and different topics. In culture exploration, the cultural contexts of interactions are examined, and students learn how speakers interact and behave during various functions. In the last stage, intercultural exploration, the systems of interaction used in the target language and in English are compared and contrasted

Culture is a critical component of any learning environment. It is important to be aware of the influence of culture within any particular learning context, and to try and shape that culture as much as possible towards supporting the kind of learning environment that you believe will be most effective. However, changing a pre-existing, dominant culture is very difficult. Nevertheless, new technologies enable new learning environments to be developed, and thus provide an opportunity to develop the kind of culture within that learning environment that will best serve your learners.

Article has demonstrated the undeniable link between language and culture and the importance of it being taught- not just as an additional or peripheral activity, but as an important element of a course. When students get to know the way people in a given culture think and interact, they become better equipped to use the language in actual settings and improve their cultural understanding. Cultural activities have also been proven to improve students’ speaking and overall foreign language learning. With this knowledge, a next step for foreign language instructors would be further exploration on methods for including culture as a central topic in their lessons.

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