

Teaching Culture in EFL Classrooms and the LMD System: Analysis of Some Teachers' Practices in Higher Education

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Abstract :

The present study deals with teaching culture in general and its importance in foreign language teaching and learning after the adoption of the LMD system in particular. Language as a means of communication is a crucial medium through which cultures are transmitted. Hence, the initial goal of foreign language teaching (ELT) is to make foreign learners ready to use skilfully the foreign language (English) to communicate in any given situation, under any given circumstances. For this reason, cultural aspects should be taught and implemented in the FL classrooms. A general re-thinking suggests new ways of looking at the teaching of language and culture. Different scholars argue that in ELT, culture and language have a complementary relation; therefore, when a foreign language is taught, culture is taught implicitly. Teaching culture cannot be done randomly; it requires specific techniques, ranging from the use of videos, proverbs, literary texts (literature), and inviting native speakers from the target society as well as allowing learners to travel abroad. This investigation is carried out at the department of English, Bejaia University, while the questionnaire is addressed to teachers to analyse their practices as far as culture and ELT are concerned. The findings indicate that the use of literary texts is the technique which is mostly resorted to by the EFL teacher participants.

Keywords: culture, EFL classrooms, teachers' practices, teaching techniques.

1. INTRODUCTION

The initial goal of Foreign Language Teaching (ELT) is to make foreign learners ready to use the foreign language skilfully to communicate in any given situation and under any given circumstances. For this reason, cultural aspects should be taught and implemented in the Foreign Language (FL) classrooms.

This present article deals with teaching culture in EFL classrooms in Higher Education where the LMD system is adopted. It aims at pointing out the role that culture plays in teaching English as a foreign language through the investigation and the analysis of some teachers' practices in the department of English at Bejaia University.

In this present research, the following questions are raised:

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- Do the teachers of the department of English perceive culture as an integral part of ELT?
- Do they integrate it in their teaching practices in their own classrooms? If yes, how?
- Are they supplied with appropriate means for the integration of culture in their teaching?

To carry out the investigation, the following hypothesis is advanced:

- If the teachers of the department of English at Bejaia University perceived culture as an integral part of ELT, they would implement it in their classrooms.

Teaching culture in foreign language classrooms has been the concern of many teachers and scholars. It has sparked considerable controversy and has witnessed different changes of interest from the past to nowadays. In the past decades, scholars and linguists have treated culture as being a supplemental and incidental element in ELT. They have restricted their interest to the study of the formal side of the language which consists of structural and grammatical aspects. They have viewed language as being an autonomous system which is independent from any social context. As a result of neglecting the cultural aspects in ELT, teachers faced many problems and obstacles, for instance, the forming of “Fluent fools”, a fluent fool is someone who uses a foreign language well, but who does not understand the social and philosophical content of this language (Bennett, 1993, cited in Onalan 2005).

Step by step, the role of culture in ELT noticed a shift of focus. With the development of anthropology and the emergence of sociolinguistics as an independent science, language is no longer isolated from its context (environment) but it is related to the study of culture and society in which it operates. Thus, these two above-mentioned disciplines foster the links between language and culture study.

A general re-thinking suggests new ways of looking at the teaching of language and culture. Different scholars, who base their interests on the field of teaching culture in relation to language, argue that, in ELT, culture and language have a complementary relationship, as Kramsch (1993) claims: “it is a truism to say that teaching language is teaching culture” (p.177). Hence, when a foreign language is taught, culture is taught implicitly. Moreover, foreign language teachers should not transmit only its words and its superficial structure, but they are required to transmit knowledge of how people actually use that language to express their particular way of thinking and living. In this concern, Simone.V (1987) asserts: “language is culture, when one teaches a language, one does not simply teach words, the names of things, and how they strung together; one teaches a way of thinking, a way of ordering the universe and finding one’s way in it” (p. 37-8). Therefore, language does not exist in a vacuum; it cannot function separately from its social environment. Thus, learning and teaching a language requires culture.

The concept of “culture” has been defined differently by different scholars; from artistic, anthropological and sociological points of view; but it is convenient to provide it a specific definition in order to allow the reader to understand the way this

concept is perceived and referred to in my work. In this context, Duranti (1997) defines “culture” as “a common view of culture is that of something learned, transmitted, passed down from one generation to the next, through human actions, often in the form of face-to-face interaction, and of course, through linguistic communication” (p.24).

In the light of what has been said previously, it is slightly obvious that culture plays a pivotal role in FL classrooms because of its numerous advantages. The aim of teaching a foreign language to foreign learners is to enable them to have access to another language which is different from theirs and have the capacity to use this language successfully. However, it happens that when they interact with the native speakers of this foreign language, they face difficulties in communication that is due to some problems of identifying meanings available in that target speech community. Hence, Linguistic mastery of a foreign language is not enough, even if it is necessary in the communicative process, as Byram (2000) argues that when using a foreign language to communicate with someone of different cultural origins and different identities, linguistic competence is not enough. It is necessary but not sufficient. One also needs intercultural competence. It should be pointed out that the foreign language teacher should be interculturally competent in order to develop on his learners what Byram calls the learner’s *intercultural communicative competence*. This term refers to the knowledge of values, beliefs and behaviours of the target society for successful communication. To sustain the idea, Byram states, “the concept of intercultural communicative competence is defined as (...) the knowledge, skills and abilities to participate in activities where the target language is the primary communicative code” (p.109).

Consequently, integrating culture into ELT permits to the foreign learner to become culturally aware of the social conventions and behaviours of the people whose language is being studied. As Byram (1988) also suggests that to acquire and use a foreign language is to enter another way of life, another way of thinking, and another way of behaving. However, according to Bolt. R (2003), teaching culture develops the learners’ *intercultural awareness and skills*. These skills consist of culture reception which refers to the ability to understand the cultural features and themes of the home and the target society as well. Then, the learners express what they have observed skilfully. At the final step, they investigate them in order to extract cultural information and organize them (p.05). For Byram (2000), all these skills foster the learners’ spirit of *critical cultural awareness* which is “the ability to evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit criteria, particular perspectives” (p.98). That is to say, foreign learners should be aware of the foreign perspectives in order to develop these foreign values on their own.

In addition to what is already mentioned, the aim of teaching culture in FL classrooms is to increase students’ awareness and curiosity towards the target culture as well as their own. This helps them to make a comparison between the native and the target cultures and deduce the differences together with the similarities that lie

between them. Foreign learners may also consider that integrating cultural features in ELT represents a threat towards their own cultures and their identities; hence, they fear cultural assimilation that will make them abandon their own cultures and adopt that of the foreigners. This fear gives birth to a feeling of, Byram (1989) named, *cultural egocentricity* (p.50) by considering their cultures as being superior and the foreign ones are underestimated. In this case, teaching culture minimizes these preconceived ideas and cultural stereotypes as it enables the foreign learners to consider the foreign cultures as contributors rather than a threat on their native cultures. Kramsch (1993) reinforces this idea by proposing the *third place* that places the foreign learner in the third position in which he observes his native and the target culture then mediates the two in order to understand the target culture in relation to his own. She argues that this “third place (...) grows in the interstices between the cultures the learner grew up with and the new cultures he or she is being introduced to” and she defines “the learner’s place as a place where he or she creates meaning” (p.236).

2. Methods

Since culture is a pivotal element of ELT, therefore; it should be implemented in FL classroom. This process cannot be done randomly, it requires specific techniques. These are numerous; therefore, some are selected; namely, the use of videos, literary texts, inviting English native speakers from the target society as well as allowing learners to travel to the English speaking countries. In the present research, I rely on these techniques in order to reveal the teachers’ practices in their FL classrooms.

The most widespread data collection tools are questionnaires and interviews. A questionnaire is used in this research with the intention of eliciting and accumulating as accurate information as possible. Wallace J.M in *Action Research for Language Teachers* (1998) explains that “these techniques are usually classified as introspective since they involve respondents reporting on themselves, their views, their beliefs, their interactions, and so on” (p.130).

The questionnaire, the unique tool used in this research, is characterized by its written form. Its aim is to collect a larger amount of data from a great number of respondents in a short time. In this context Wallace. M.J asserts: “The greater the number of informants, the more economical of time it is to use the questionnaire” (p.130).

Through this instrument, both quantitative and qualitative data are obtained, thus making the present study a mixed methods research. The questionnaire is addressed to a sample of teachers at the department of English at Bejaia University. It embodies a bunch of questions, organized in three (03) sections.

The first section is entitled Teachers’ Perception of the Concept of “Culture” and its Place in ELT. The second section is named Materials and Techniques Used for Teaching Culture and the LMD System while last section bears the title Teachers’

Use of some well-known Techniques. It includes a few important questions that investigate the teachers' use of these techniques in the integration of culture in their teaching.

This research is conducted in the department of English at Bejaia University in which English is taught as a foreign language. The target group consists of twenty (20) teachers, who are engaged in teaching different modules, have received questionnaires.

3. Results and Discussion

Before discussing the gathered results, it is worth reminding the reader of the objective of this present research which lies on the hypothesis advanced at the onset of this work:

- If the teachers of the department of English at Bejaia University perceived culture as an integral part of ELT, they would implement it in their classrooms.

I. Teachers' Perception of the Concept of "Culture" and its Place in ELT

I.1. Teachers' Views of the Concept of Culture

While addressing this question to the teachers, most of them, in one way or in another, point out the difficulty of giving one concrete definition to the concept "culture". However, most of the participants tend to define it as being a set of values, customs, traditions, beliefs, way of living and behaving –life style- economics, politics, language and religion shared by a specific group of people. One of the respondents claims that "culture may be defined as a complete system which includes language, way of thinking, practices and behaviours which are specific to a given society". This view is sustained by Hudson (1996) who says that the term culture "always refers to some characteristics shared by a community, especially those which might distinguish it from other communities" (p.70).

I.2. Teachers' Perception of Culture's Place in ELT

The findings indicate that, the majority (78.57%) of teachers conceive culture as being an integral and pivotal part of ELT. This shows their awareness of its importance and the place that culture holds in English Language Teaching.

The teachers mentioned various advantages of integration culture into their teaching. Language as a means of communication cannot be separated from its culture. In other words, the teachers cannot teach English without providing their students with insights into the English culture and society. They assert that when teaching civilization and literature, they automatically refer to the English culture "we cannot teach literature or civilization without making reference to culture. A foreign language I guess, should not be dissociated from its culture" as one teacher affirms.

Accordingly, the aim of integrating culture in ELT is extending and deepening the students' knowledge and their general understanding of the English culture and

society. Moreover, it develops the analytical and intercultural competence in the students as well as their language skills. One of the informants declares: “it is getting more experience, getting more knowledge about the way of behaving in that culture”. This point of view can be sustained by Bloomfield (1993) who argues: “Every language serves as the bearer of a culture. If you speak a language you take part in the way of living represented by that language” (p.40).

Most of the teacher respondents argue that students should be aware of how the culture of the target language functions. Thus, incorporating cultural features into the ELT curriculum permits to the foreign students to acquire skills of understanding the meanings hinted and encoding messages when using the target language within the appropriate contexts. In this concern, one of the teachers suggests: “when you want to teach any language for the sake of acquiring this communicative competency, you should deal with language within its context (...) reality as it is, and reality cannot be disassociated from society and society is culture”. In fact, students cannot master language until they have also mastered the cultural contexts in which the language occurs”. Thus, according to the majority of the teachers, to be communicatively competent does not mean that the students should use fluently the target language, but they should be culturally competent too.

I.3.The Teachers’ Integration of Culture in ELT

The results reached from this investigation show that the majority of the teachers (85.71%) indicate that they integrate cultural features of the target society into their teaching practices. In addition to this, they are aware of the importance that culture holds in ELT and have positive attitudes towards integrating it into their teaching practices. Furthermore, they claim that even their programs offer the students opportunities to fulfil their needs of knowledge about the target culture since they include cultural aspects of the target language. Therefore; the hypothesis is confirmed.

Though I have no attention to question their assertion, I find it necessary to investigate and reveal their actual practices in teaching culture. The emphasis is put on the means and techniques provided to them in the department of English at Bejaia University.

II. The Analysis of Teachers’ Practices when Teaching Culture in their FL Classrooms

For a successful integration of culture in ELT, the teachers need to be supplied with essential means in their department. When asking the teachers about these means and materials, the majority of them (57.14%) claims that the department of English lacks such means, one of the participants complains: “the means of integrating culture in ELT! I don’t think there are any means here”. Nonetheless, few informants suggest the contrary i.e. they have the means, but the problem lies in how to use this kind of material. “In this department, yes, we have the multimedia labs, TV sets and so on.

The problem is how to use them, whether teachers are able to use this kind of material, new technological means” as one teacher states.

A question germane to the discussion is what do the teachers of English actually do to integrate culture into their practices, even though a satisfactory number of them have already mentioned that they have faced many obstacles such as the lack of means?

II.2. Materials and Techniques Used for Teaching Culture

This part tries to analyse in details the teachers' practices when they teach culture in their classrooms relying on the techniques proposed for them. The aim is to deduce from their answers the extent to which they utilize these techniques and how effective their teaching is.

II.2.a. The Use of Videos

Videos are used in classrooms as a medium through which cultural features are exposed and transmitted to the foreign students. As Stoller. L (1995) asserts: “This notion of cultural incorporation is particularly relevant in non-English locals; films and videos provide exposure to a wide variety of native speakers of English and an opportunity to study both language and cultural features in context” (p.62).

From the quotation above, one deduces that integrating videos when teaching culture is necessary. (82.14%) of the teachers do not utilize this kind of material in their classrooms. They provide many reasons such as: Audio-visual means like TV sets, films and documentaries are not available in their department even though the LMD system needs them , as one teacher affirms: “Our department does not possess enough audio-visual means to provide us with”. Even though, the department of English possesses the labs and media room, but they are used only for listening and speaking modules, denying the fact that other modules require this material. It has to be remarked that using videos is a technique restricted to teach oral expression at the department and it would be advantageous to extend it to other modules as literature and civilization.

II.2.b. The Use of Literary Texts

Literary texts are of a paramount importance in transmitting aspects of the culture of the target language in general, more precisely the English language. Elizabeth Peterson and Bronwyn Coltrane (2003) argue: “Literary texts (...) that are carefully selected for a given group of students and with specific goals in mind can be very helpful in allowing students to acquire insight into a culture” (p.03). Brooks adds: “The best way to find out how other people live and think is through literature. A piece of literature is condensed life” (cited in Ibsen. E.B, p.144).

According to the results obtained, nearly the majority of the teachers (60.72%) analyse literary texts in their classrooms for the fact of being part of the syllabus. One teacher assets: “It is part of the requirements of the module”.

In addition, (67.86%) of the teachers find this technique useful for teaching culture since literary texts reveal the historical and cultural contexts in which they are written. They represent a vehicle that carries both the language and the culture of the target society. Therefore, the majority of the teachers (67.86%) find this technique useful for teaching culture.

II.2.c. Inviting English Native Speakers into the FL Classroom

It is an effective technique which permits to the teachers of English to make students share those guests their way of perceiving their life since they are the native users of the English language and they represent the English culture as a whole.

The findings indicate that the teachers appreciate this cultural activity and wish to be able to use it. Unfortunately, all of them say that they are not given the opportunity. It is so difficult for the teachers to find those native speakers around for the sake of inviting them to their classrooms. This is the main reason that hinders them to fulfil this goal. One teacher argues: “Unfortunately, it is rather hard to meet native speakers. I wish I could invite American teachers or historians to my classroom”.

II.2.d. Taking Learners on a Trip to the Target Society

Helping students of English to go on a trip to the English speaking countries in order to experience and live their cultures without any intermediary is advantageous. Dubson (1974) affirms: “field trips are not only fine ways to get students to practice their English; they also tend to increase the motivation to learn English because they take the language outside the classroom and into the world at large where it is spoken” (p.106). Even if this activity is of great importance for teaching culture, all the teachers do not do it because of the lack of means. One informant declares: “I have never been there, let apart taking my students to visit a foreign country. I would like to, but I cannot, a problem of MEANS”.

There is a minority of teachers who does not wait to be yielded with means for teaching culture. In addition to the techniques that I have proposed, some teachers provide themselves with other techniques as comparison between the students’ native culture and the target one since it sheds light on the similarities and the differences that exist between the two cultures. Therefore, according to them, this technique may enable the foreign students to have more knowledge of how others’ cultures function and how others perceive their lives. Moreover, it may also influence the students’ consciousness of their native culture. In this context one of the respondents claims: “there are many possible techniques. I want to set an example (...) is to compare life between the two societies; the native and the target/ foreign societies (...) what are the differences between the two? It may represent riches to your culture at the same time danger. These are some ways of dealing with culture”.

To sum up, the findings indicate the extent to which the teachers use these techniques that are proposed for teaching culture such as literary texts whereas other techniques are less used. Because of the lack of necessary material, videos are used to teach mainly listening and speaking modules even though modules like literature and

civilization require such material according to the teachers. The two last techniques; inviting English native speakers into EFL classrooms and taking learners on a trip to the target society are not applied by the teachers of English at all because of the lack of opportunities.

4. Conclusion

Achieving effective teaching depends on both the practice of different techniques used for teaching culture and the teaching programs of the LMD system. The latter, as we assume, should take into consideration the students' particular needs in terms of culture and language learning.

The teachers' answers and suggestions show that in their teaching process, they use some available techniques such as literary texts and some types of videos. The teachers who use these techniques affirm that they are effective and useful for teaching culture. Hence, their teaching becomes effective and useful. Furthermore, the teachers are highly conscious of the usefulness of inviting native speakers into their classrooms and taking their learners on a trip to the target society if they are supplied with the necessary means to apply them in the field.

Throughout this present research attempted to reach specific goals and objectives concerning the integration of culture in the EFL classrooms. The department of English at Bejaia University is chosen as a place of investigation and a sample of teachers of English as a target group. This investigation has led me to check the hypothesis and to reach the conclusion that the teachers are aware and conscious of the necessity of including culture in LMD programs as far as foreign language teaching and learning are concerned. Unfortunately, they are not yielded with sufficient means to reach this goal.

This is not exhaustive; it is just an attempt to shed light on the role that culture plays in ELT and to analyse some teachers' practices in teaching culture with the target language in Higher education and the LMD system. Nevertheless, I hope that other researchers will be motivated to conduct research in this subject matter.

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