

The Significance of Culture in Foreign Language Teaching and Learning: Learners' Perspectives

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Abstract

This paper is a report on the results of action research undertaken in university EFL classrooms. While the necessity of „learner centering“ and the inclusion of culture in foreign language education have been recognized in theory, the research reveals that these considerations have not been effectively brought into practice. I became aware of this when I studied Spanish as a foreign language, and was again confronted with the problem when I began to teach EFL. The lack of intercultural involvement in language education disturbed me to the point that I designed an introductory EFL course specifically for the learners I was working with and focusing on culture. I then employed this course as the „medium“ of classroom-based research to learn about the participants“ perceptions of the experience. The results of this research offer extraordinary insights into learners“ assessments of the significance of learning about culture when learning a foreign language.

1 Introduction

This paper deals with what I learned about adult learners“ perceptions of explicit teaching about culture in the English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom in a research project I undertook in university classrooms in Mexico. The ideas for the research originated in my dissatisfaction when, as an adult, I returned to the classroom to learn Spanish as a foreign language (SFL). I did not know word of the language when I entered the classroom, and was sure that a mistake had been made when the professor spoke only the language I was there to learn, and worse yet, expected me to respond in kind. What we were learning was never discussed, but since I was in Texas, a state in the US that borders Mexico, I had taken it for granted that I would be learning Mexican Spanish. I began to notice that Mexico was never mentioned, and the only references made to culture were sporadic snippets of oblique allusions dealing mainly with travel and restaurants in an undefined and therefore confusing variety of Spanish-speaking cultures. It was only incidentally that I finally realized that what was being taught was Castilian Spanish. The discrepancy was never discussed, and all other topics, including grammar, were equally unexplained, unrelated and dissociated. While no suggestions were offered for language learning, I made good grades because I became adept at filling in blanks and selecting multiple-choice answers. However, I never established a feeling of the language or its learning, and decided that

if I wanted to learn the language I would have to move to a Spanish-speaking country. Because I was interested in learning Mexican Spanish, I went to Mexico.

When I arrived in the country I began to teach EFL in classes for adults, and was discouraged to find that the required materials and teaching methods were styled identically with those I had suffered through, even to the administrative demand of „target language only“ in the classrooms. However, I mentioned earlier that as a Spanish language learner I had appreciated the instructions in the texts being in English, but in the EFL teaching texts *everything* was in English, which I knew was a detriment for the Spanish-speaking learners. I began to rebel against conventional teaching practice, which I felt both as a teacher and a learner was inappropriate for adult foreign language education. I identified issues that discomforted me (the primary of which was the avoidance of culture), considered how they might be addressed, and designed an introductory EFL course specifically for the learners I was working with. I then presented the course as the „medium“ for research in the classroom in order to learn about the learners“ perceptions of the experience.

2 About the research

The fundamental issue of the EFL course that served as the „medium“ for the research was to offer a *beginning* for adults learning a foreign language, and fundamental to this was to focus on culture. No one has come up with a succinct description of culture, and rather than becoming embroiled in the issue I would explain that the view taken in the research involves the concepts that culture is “all that is symbolic: the learned, ideational aspects of human society.” (Jenks 1993: 8), the shared patterns of beliefs, customs and values that are historically, ideologically constituted (Crawford and MacLaren 1996:133), and includes, in my opinion, the effects of environment. Furthermore, the outlook in the research was that “culture is not a power [...] it is a context” (Geertz 1973: 14), a framework which gives the individual [...] the criterion of perception” (Samovar and Porter 2000:10) for making sense of the world and interacting with others. Culture is seen to offer what an individual needs to know in order to be part of a social group, and is “the product of self and other perceptions” (Kramsch 1998: 133).

I cannot delve deeply into the details of the research here (they can be found in Brooks-Lewis 2007), but I will explain that 256 monolingual Spanish speakers aged 19 to 72 participated. The research methodology was qualitative, and the data were collected in the form

of learner-participants" questionnaires, learning diaries, and essays. The concept of learning diaries had been explained to the learners at the beginning of the course, and they were urged to keep one, and at the end of the course they were asked to write an essay based on their diaries. This was not only a manner of data collection but a learning reinforcement exercise with the review and assessment of what the participants had learned and experienced. Permission was requested and unanimously granted by the participants to make copies of these documents. From these data I have selected commentaries that I found to be especially striking of learner-participants" perceptions of explicit teaching and learning about culture in the EFL classroom.

I must also forego a complete description of the course, and will briefly outline its content with respect to the cultural aspects. (once again, a full description of the course can be found in Brooks-Lewis 2007). Essential to the course was the inclusion of the learners" language and culture, and it therefore began entirely in Spanish and progressed slowly into English, and all discussions about the target language and culture included comparison with the learners" own. The learners were asked to think about what culture is, how it affects our lives, and how we think about other cultures, especially with regard to stereotypical thinking. The course was designed for adults in Mexico, and it was explained that the type of English we would be dealing with would be American English and the particular culture we would look into would be that in the United States.

Class discussions began with a look into English as today"s international language, which led into a concise recounting of a (hi)story of the English language and its development. In this, the involvement of Latin was emphasized, helping the learners to become aware of and notice the similarities in English and Spanish. This in turn led into a brief interpretation of the history of the United States of America, introducing discussions of its culture. It was stressed that there is no „one" culture anywhere, and that this was particularly true in the United States, as the nation has always been multicultural, and that we would talk about „core concepts" of the culture. We began with those such as the comparison of how time and space are regarded in the learners" and the target cultures, and the great importance of individuality and independence in the US. A „day in the life" of someone with „regular" work hours (9-5) was then portrayed. The communicative aspect of body language was discussed at some length, for one because its employment is so different in the two cultures, for another to promote the skill of noticing, and for yet another to introduce the understanding and non-prejudicial acceptance of difference. The custom of naming

was reviewed, as this is different in the two cultures and frequently causes confusion, and then titles, salutations and demonstrations of courtesy in American culture were discussed and compared with those in Mexico. This was followed by a sketch of the educational system in the US and by an overall explanation of the tax system and currency, with samples of each denomination being handed around.

3 Learners' perceptions

I will now present and discuss selected citations from the data that I found particularly interesting with reference to learners' perceptions of the significance of culture in language learning. I have noted the type of data, questionnaire (Q), learning diary (D), or essay (E), along with the data number for each citation. As all of the citations come from Brooks-Lewis 2007, I thought it would make easier reading if I omitted this repetition.

I will begin with commentaries about how learners considered learning about culture to be significant in language learning. The most direct of these was: "Without culture any language is senseless" (E104). Another participant expressed the opinion that learning about culture helped to relate the language being learned to real life and people, saying: "I have been able to see that knowing about other people, their customs and traditions, that with all their successes and mistakes they are not from another planet. This gives me confidence for learning the language" (Q61); and yet another wrote that "I have learned more about equality, justice and other cultural values in general than I could have imagined" (Q151).

Not all of the participants understood the explanation of the process and content of the course, and some were a bit put off because it was so different than anything they had experienced before. One of these people wrote:

In the beginning I did not like the English class because I thought we were wasting our time with all these things, but after the first class I loved it because before all these explications about English I really hated it and I was studying it only because I needed it. However, now I have started to like English because now I understand a little more about its origins and its culture... Now I know the "why" of many things in English. (E118)

The notion of coming to feel that the language is your own is a point of view of language learning that has long been cited as the ultimate goal. I was surprised to see this sentiment clearly expressed in the data. An example of this are the following remarks: "I think that not just studying the language but also its culture helps to learn it better and feel it is your own" (Q165),

and “I can understand the language better after knowing about the culture and it makes me feel that English is part of me” (E120).

One last commentary about the experience of learning about culture in the EFL classroom and its importance I found quite distinctively put:

Specifically to start the course talking about American culture was excellent. I admit it was a little strange, because we did not use books. I think it is important to know what there is behind the language we are studying. [...] Also, all this knowledge gives us another way of understanding American English. [...] Most of the time students think that going to good schools or reading a lot of English books is enough for learning the language, but we end up being theoretical students with a square criterion of English. (E31)

This participant brought up another point that stood out in the data: that this was definitely something new in the adult language learners’ EFL classroom experience. Some of the most arresting comments about this novelty were: “It is agreeable to work with cultural aspects because they give meaning to the language. These aspects were never taken into account in my other English courses” (Q154); “Teachers almost never think that it is important that when you are learning another language [...] to go beyond learning vocabulary, memorizing expressions, grammar rules, verbs, etc.” (E117); “I am very excited about this course. I believe that knowing about the culture of the language gives you quite a different point of view and more tools to work with.” (E39); and finally,

[t]his focus of learning about the culture, the history, the customs of the language is something definitely new. Analyzing and evaluating the activities of this week I can see that I have learned a lot, and from a different focus that I did not know. To have the culture, ideology and way of life of the Americans as a starting point was a distinct panorama that was interesting and innovative in teaching and learning a foreign language. (D55)

I mentioned earlier that one of the first steps in the course was to get the learners thinking about culture. I was surprised at the novelty that some of the adult learners felt with the process, but was gratified by the sense that it had been internalized. This was apparent in the quotation above, and also in the following remark: “It is important to know that other cultures have their own identity, customs and traditions” (Q166). One might think that an adult would know that, but this research demonstrates that a teacher must never assume what a learner knows, as do these remarks: “To know about a different way of life other than my own is moving because one lives tied to one’s own interests and thinks that everyone else is and thinks the same” (D124), and

[w]e only have to learn the most important thing, that no language is better than any other, there are simply differences that we are not accustomed to. We must give ourselves the task of getting it into our heads that our way of seeing life is not the same for everyone, and to accept differences and get to know them. (D87)

One of the reasons for not teaching about culture that I have encountered is the fear that teaching or learning about another culture will somehow make the learner turn from his or her own culture. With all that has been written about the „English language conspiracy“ and the threat of „Anglophone culture“ cannibalizing all others, it was fascinating to read about actual learners“ takes on the subject. An example of this is the following:

The most important lesson that I learned at this time was that when we learn other languages we must not lose our identity or change it for other customs or traditions. We must appreciate our culture, our country, our traditions, our family more and the other things that we have and make us different and special. (E118)

The manner in which culture is taught, of course, has a direct affect on the process, and expressly discussing such fears brought one learner to write that:

Sometimes people are scared of different cultures because they do not understand them, limiting themselves and forgetting to become sensitive to different cultures. I think that this sometimes not only applies to cultures, it applies to everything. Like [the teacher] commented, “[s]ometimes give people the benefit of the doubt.” I liked that, because I think nowadays we do not give people a chance in many aspects, not only in school situations but in life itself. (E12)

Including and comparing the learners“ culture with that being discussed was another factor of the culture teaching methodology in the research, and this was always thoughtfully done. I think the following comments show that the process promoted a sense of respect for other cultures and an appreciation of and tolerance for difference: “I think talking about the English-speaking cultures helped us open our minds to other customs and other ways of thinking and learning about them. [...] Also, comparing them with Mexican culture permitted us an enriching appreciation of our own culture” (Q126); “The comparing of cultures helped to make us tolerant and sensitive for accepting the diverse ways of thinking, speaking and living that exist in the world” (Q129); and “I have learned many things not only about other countries but also about here where I have lived these 20 years, and I now see that we are a small world and that while we all act and think according to our ideas it would be very boring if we were all the same” (E114).

The impression of introspection having been undertaken and perspectives changed was remarkable in the data. Remembering that the course was taught in Mexico and the target culture was that of the US, it is important to understand that the history between the two countries has been, and still is, fraught with bitter animosities and problems. Mexico has traditionally come out the loser in such confrontations, and the feeling of resentment towards its northern neighbor is strong. It was therefore extraordinary to read how learning about culture had been effective in promoting thinking about and understanding of the need for respect in intercultural situations. These are two perspectives that I found outstanding:

I can now see that it was not how I thought about the way of being and acting of the people that live in the United States of America. I can now see that every society and culture has its peculiarities and similarities with others, and it is clear that none is better or worse, they are only different. (D86)

Today we had an interesting talk about American culture. I learned that the culture of the Americans is different but is as valid as any other culture. Maybe it is difficult for us as Mexicans to accept all those ideas because on many occasions they have taken advantage of our people, but the teacher is right in that if someone wants to be respected, first they have to respect. (D108)

Changing perspectives is fundamental to learning, and in dealing with other people and cultures, stereotyping is a subject that must be addressed. Learner-participants' notations about how their experience of learning about culture had affected their ways of thinking, prejudices and stereotypes are intriguing. The following citations refer to changes in learners' personal perspectives: "I have revised my ideas about Americans a little, although I continue to think that they are racists, the majority —before I thought they all were. I was anti-gringo and now I see that they are not all the same and more than anything, they are human beings" (Q67). Two others were:

I identified a lot with the talk of today, because I really had, and maybe still have, a bad concept of the culture of the U.S.A. but I think it is true that we must not judge and generalize something without knowing it. I also think that if we really want to learn the language we also have to learn to respect its culture. (D107)

The situation is not easy because we have social resentments against the "North American" culture. These are based on prejudice, partial knowledge and historical facts, and as emotions are part of the culture, they also structure subjectivities. However, we must somehow put aside these grievances and work with these contradictions if we really want to learn English. (D79)

Another learner appeared to have not only enjoyed the innovative course, but was able to universalize the understanding about intercultural communication gained: “I have loved this way of starting. I thought we were just going to memorize and nothing more. Now my panorama is different and my mind is open to discover and understand other forms of culture, and not to judge before knowing” (D97). Yet somebody else portrayed an even deeper comprehension, writing that

[b]ilingual people have the moral obligation to be the bridge between cultures, and learning as much as we can about each other’s culture prepares us to develop better relationships and to get rid of misconceptions and stereotypes created by the lack of realistic information about each other. (E29)

Some time after I first read what this learner had written, I felt a shock of recognition when in my continuing literature research I read the following: “The intercultural learner ultimately serves as a mediator between different social groups that use different languages and language varieties” (Corbett 2003: 2). Although Corbett did not go as far as the participant in this research did to say that the intercultural learner had the „moral obligation“ to be a mediator, I was surprised at the similarity of the ideas.

In closing I offer what I feel is one of the most outstanding recommendations for teaching about culture: “I think every country, every city, every town, has their own culture, their own traditions, and we have to respect them. If we learn (*sic.*) to respect other cultures different from ours, we would not have wars” (E146). This seems to be evidence for Corbett’s theory that “[i]t would be facile to suggest that intercultural language education alone can make people kinder, more tolerant and open. However, if adopted more widely, it may offer a modest contribution to that process” (2003: 212).

It is my hope that the implications of these learners’ perceptions of teaching and learning about a particular target culture along with the target language and the inclusion of the learners’ language and culture will contribute to understanding and progress in the practice of foreign language teaching when working with adults.

Works Cited

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