



Volumen 19, número 1, 2023

Cultural Aspects of the Target Language
in the Foreign Language ClassroomLourdes Abigail García Hernándezⁱ

Abstract

The teaching of culture in the classroom is an aspect that is scarcely considered in a foreign language teaching context. This is due to many reasons and one of them is because students are not interested in learning cultural aspects of the target language. Due to this lack of interest; this study explores the literature and the reasons why cultural aspects should be addressed in the language classroom, given the fact that the classroom is where language learners have their first contact with culture from another country. This article focuses on how the curriculum is linked to the material that the language teacher uses in their classes, and how this causes students not to feel connected with the topics and material of the target language. Three questions are taken into consideration: 1) How is the curriculum affecting the teaching materials concerning culture? 2) How is the material affecting students' perspectives on other cultures? 3) What strategies can the teacher apply in order to include culture in their teaching practice? The purpose of this research synthesis is to accentuate the importance of implementing methodologies, materials, and teaching practices oriented to enrich the teaching practices with a cultural perspective of language so that way students can recognize its importance instead of focusing on learning structural aspects of language only.

Keywords: *cultural blind spot, critical approach, culture, language hybridity, language imperialism*

Aspectos culturales de la lengua meta en el aula de lengua extranjera

Resumen

La enseñanza de cultura en el aula de idiomas es un aspecto que es poco considerado en el salón de lenguas extranjeras. Esto se debe a muchas razones, y una de ellas es porque los estudiantes no están interesados en la cultura de la lengua meta. Este estudio examina por qué los aspectos culturales deben abordarse en el aula de idiomas, ya que es en este dónde los estudiantes tienen el primer encuentro con otra cultura. Se centra en cómo el currículum se vincula con el material que el profesor de idiomas utiliza en sus clases, y cómo esto hace que los estudiantes no se sientan conectados con la cultura meta, ya que no tiene relación con su propia cultura. Se toman en consideración tres preguntas: ¿Cómo afecta el currículum los materiales didácticos en materia de cultura?, ¿Cómo afecta el material la perspectiva que los estudiantes tienen sobre otras culturas? y ¿Qué puede aplicar el docente para incluir la cultura en su práctica docente? El propósito específico de este artículo de investigación es mencionar la importancia que tiene el incorporar diferentes metodologías y prácticas orientadas a complementar el material didáctico desde una perspectiva cultural sobre el lenguaje, para que los estudiantes puedan reconocer su importancia en lugar de centrarse en solamente en aprender los aspectos estructurales del lenguaje.

Palabras clave: *Punto ciego cultural; estrategia crítica; cultura; lenguaje híbrido; imperialismo*

Introduction

As pointed out by Yuen (2011) the teaching of a language goes hand in hand with its culture since it influences the way people speak, behave and perceive the world. In this sense, as part of the language teaching practice and experience, language professors are able to identify that some cultural aspects of the language are not fully addressed in the foreign language teaching classroom, such as the appropriate use of titles of address form, social norms, behaviors, traditions, etc. This situation makes us reflect upon. There are several reasons behind it, which will be unfolded in this paper. Gladstone (1969) states that "language and culture are inexorably intertwined. Language is at once an outcome or a result of the culture as a whole and also a vehicle by which the other facets of the culture are shaped and communicated" (p. 114). This idea reinforces the fact that teachers have to include culture in their classes since it is a fundamental part of learning a language.

The purpose of this research synthesis is to give an insight into how materials and the curriculum are linked to the problems of teaching culture in the language classroom. As part of the researcher professor's experience as a language teacher, it has been noticed that some students are not interested in looking at cultural aspects within the classroom. For cultural aspects, the following points stated by Prodromou (1992) are considered; they have to develop awareness of and more knowledge of the target culture, to acquire a certain command of the etiquette of the target culture, to understand those differences between the target culture and the students', apart from the ones included in the textbooks; such as art, music, food, etc. These topics should be addressed in textbook material resources because different cultures have different perspectives on them. One reason why students are not interested in learning more about the culture is because they are only learning English to get a job promotion, study abroad, or for business purposes. This was observed by the researcher in a language group of adult students who mentioned that learning culture was not relevant to them.

Since this lack of interest has been perceived, the research on the topic of language and culture has been carried out to look for strategies that can help teachers to overcome the lack of cultural content included in textbooks. As stated before, there are different angles from which this situation can be addressed. However, the focus of this synthesis will be on the material that teachers usually work with, and the strategies they can implement to address students' needs when including culture into their practice.

The questions that will be addressed are the following:

- 1) How is the curriculum affecting the teaching materials concerning culture?
- 2) How is the material content affecting students' perspectives on other cultures?
- 3) What strategies can teachers apply in order to include culture in their teaching practice?

These research questions were raised with the intention of addressing a teaching situation in a context in which young adult learners of English from a private language course program, enrolled in a high-intermediate level of English, showing a lack of interest in learning the cultural aspects of the target language. It was noticed that their only interest relied on the learning of structural rules of the language. In fact, each language group depicted a different perspective or philosophy of what culture meant. For instance, most of younger students showed a preference for learning aspects related to clothing, food, and music from other English-speaking countries. Nonetheless, topics that were aimed at learning how to interact with people from an English-speaking country, such as social etiquette, titles of address form, language expressions to show politeness, initiate small talk or among others, were not very appealing for students.

On the other hand, the perception of adults about learning culture is different; they like to go deeper and express their opinions on topics related to how culture affects the way people speak, behave and interact with others. As language teachers, we need to be careful, and think of how this is useful and relevant to students; if everything that we include in our practice needs to have a purpose. For instance, cultural aspects of language can also be connected to the teaching of a new language structure so that professors can invite students to reflect on a hypothetical situation in which a speaker is dealing with a situation in which the lack of cultural awareness may result in a communication breakdown or in an interactional conflict. These communication misfires can be prevented if students are exposed to language forms with a more communicative and sensitive orientation towards culture.

Furthermore, it is important to ask students if they feel comfortable talking about certain topics in the class, and which activities they find fruitful. This is essential since it is not okay to overload students with cultural topics in all the classes. They also need to practice other aspects of language.

To support this statement, a research synthesis is stated. It starts by defining culture. In this section, three different definitions of culture are given. It is important to be clear about

this concept since it might have different meanings, depending on what the author considers relevant in the teaching context. Once the concept of culture is explained, it will be explained why culture is a fundamental part when learning a language. In this section, the students' concept of culture is important, given the fact that if the language professor does not have a clear notion, students will struggle to identify the four aspects which are described next.

Moreover, the role of curriculum on culture will also be discussed. This is the backbone of the topic for this research synthesis. It will explain how the school curriculum is mainly influenced by structural views of language that may affect students' perceptions or opinions of language goals, towards language learning. Adding to this, it states the role that learning material has in teaching culture, and what teachers can do to overcome this difficulty when students feel no connection with the material they are using.

In conclusion, this research synthesis will focus on the reason that inspired the research professor of this study to go beyond the topic of language and culture, and why it is considered that every language teacher should include cultural aspects in their classes to help students to improve.

Research synthesis

What is Culture?

Culture can have several definitions since it depends on the perspective that each individual has. Sowden (2007) and Trivedi (1978) agree that culture is the behavior that a certain group of people has, whether it is the way they dress, the language they use, their traditions, and so on. Furthermore, this is what makes culture a complex concept to define, given the fact that it has a great variety of factors that relate to it. Moreover, Yuen (2011) presents a categorization of culture based on what was stated in *The Standards for Foreign Language Learning: Preparing for the 21st Century*, National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project in 1996. It was categorized into two : Big C and little c. Big C was defined as “the formal institutions (social, political, and economic), the great figures of history, and those products of literature, fine arts, and the sciences that were traditionally assigned to the category of elite culture” (p. 458). Whereas little c referred to the “daily living studied by the sociologist and the anthropologist: housing, clothing, food, tools, transportation, and all the patterns of behavior that members of the culture regard as necessary and appropriate” (p. 458).

Why is Culture a Fundamental Part When Teaching a Language?

Multiple factors have different implications when including them in teaching a language; first, we must address culture as something that already forms part of students' lives, and find a way in which it can be included in our students' first language, and it is not something that is looked at as if it were separated (Sybing, 2011)

It is highly important that in the language classroom, cultural factors are not ignored, because teachers can encounter (or will encounter) multiple cultures. As mentioned by Trivedi (1978), "foreign-language learning will mean, therefore, changing the learner's behavior and injecting a new way of life and new values of life into his already settled behavior pattern" (p. 92). It is essential to consider this situation since when acquiring a second language, learners have a perception of the world according to their native language culture, which might be contested.

This being stated, teachers must differentiate their culture from their students'. What is meant by student culture? As previously said, one definition of culture is that each individual has a way of perceiving life, according to the language they speak. Language is a culture window. Therefore, teachers need to be sensitive to how the native culture can be used as a bridge for the new one. Prodromou (1992) stated that in the classroom cultural-related goals could be "developing a greater awareness of and a broader knowledge about the target culture; acquiring a command of the etiquette of the target culture; understanding differences between the target culture and the students' culture; and understanding the values of the target culture" (p. 41). The author has explained these four aspects that are the core of a language classroom. Teachers need to know their students' culture to bring the target culture into their lives in a non-threatening way. It is important to consider this given the fact that each culture is different, and addressing a topic that has no relevance for students can lead to a deadlock.

Nevertheless, bringing a foreign culture can be a double-edged sword. It has been mentioned that language and culture go together: culture cannot exist without language and vice-versa. However, some aspects can be perceived as inappropriate, or that have no meaning at all for students. This is what Gladstone (1969) described as a "cultural blind spot". A cultural blind spot is when a custom from a different culture than ours has no relevance in our life. Accordingly, Gladstone (1969) states: "our culture rewards us for producing certain behavior patterns and for ignoring others. This training develops in us a cultural perspective by which we

judge all acts: a cultural sieve through which we pour all we perceive" (p. 115). For this reason, English teachers have the obligation of being informed of their students' culture, so as not to bring offensive or meaningless information into the classroom.

The research by Jiang (2000) exemplifies Chinese students learning English as a second language. It is mentioned that there are words in English that have a completely different meanings in Chinese. For example, In China a dog is seen just as an animal that attacks when defending its property, whereas, in English a dog is perceived as a loyal companion. With this in mind, we can conclude that even each signifier can have a different meaning from culture to culture.

This example serves to connect it with the next aspect, seeing our students as individuals is fundamental to integrate culture. As mentioned by Porto (2009) identity plays an essential part; each one of us has a different perspective in life, different values, character, likes/dislikes, etc. This, in turn, makes it even more challenging to bring culture into the class. However, this cannot be seen as an excuse for teachers not to do so.

The Role of Discourse on Culture

Now that culture and the importance it has on learning a language have been stated, it is essential to mention how policies affect culture. For Pennycook (1994), discourse plays an important role in terms of how culture is perceived. He mentions that "it is the discourses themselves, whose power is related to but not determined by economic forces that exert domination over people" (p. 173). This domination derives from Orientalism (policies in favor of local languages for both the colonized and the colonizers) and Anglicism views towards language (policies in favor of education of English).

These two definitions are equally discriminatory since they come from colonial domination. "Where Anglicism imposed English, Orientalism promoting local languages for the vast majority, effectively barred access to all but the privileges" (Pennycook, 1994). To illustrate this, an example is given of Malaysian education, a school inspector said that if a Malay knew how to read instructions in English, he or she would have gotten a better understanding of the world, and gained access to new ideas. This was not the government's intention.

Why is discourse a fundamental part? Pennycook (1994) mentions that “it is the teachers’ job to get rid of these cultural politics, and include a discourse in which no one feels threatened”. For example, political topics can cause a division in the class, given the fact that they hold several negative connotations.

Adding to what Pennycook mentioned regarding discourse, Canagarajah (1999) mentions that students disconnect from the discourse that they encounter in their textbooks since they do not feel a connection whatsoever with them since ‘they symbolize the counter-discourses the students use to detach themselves from the ideologies of the textbook’ (p. 330). Later, I will mention how this affects the material teachers work with.

Furthermore, Canajaragah (1999) mentions linguistic hybridity (LH), which is defined as the way languages, cultures, and identities mixed without being affected from one language to another. Also, he mentions linguistic imperialism (LI), which is always looking for making a language democratic. This means that linguistic imperialism is not interested in bringing another language into a culture, since it is believed that their language is the only one that matters. This causes culture to be overlooked by teachers and students.

Moreover, it is stated that “While LI is activist in struggling against hegemonic discourses to reconstruct a more democratic order, LH leads to apathy (as languages are seen as deconstructing themselves, transcending domination) or even playfulness (as the provision of new meanings to these constructs is treated as subverting the status quo)” (Canajaragah, 1999, p. 207).

However, linguistic hybridity puts order in things and shows that a language is always changing, as people and the world around us evolve. It would be naive to think that a language follows the same rules and people perceive it in the same way from one culture to another.

Linguistic imperialism can be overcome by the teacher. As mentioned by Rivers (2010) it is the language institution that is in charge of the contents that are being taught to students. Nevertheless, this sometimes can be disadvantageous for language teachers and students, given the fact that there is the possibility for the content to be meaningless for the learner, which causes that the educator needs to look for alternatives that can enrich the lack of content and connection with students’ culture.

As stated by Rivers (2010), it is the teacher who must adequate what is in these language policies to fit their learners’ needs. Furthermore, in this article, an example is given of how these

language policies affect the perception students have of English as a second language. In his research, Rivers looks at Japanese culture, and how they perceive English, it mentions that the policy is not to speak Japanese during the English class. If students do so, they will be punished. By doing this, the learners feel no interest in English, which causes them to not have any connection with it.

How is this related to culture? As previously mentioned, culture and language go together. When learners approach the learning of a second language negatively, they are going to feel indifference in its culture. For this reason, the language teacher plays a fundamental part in reflecting these policies that damage culture, so that students find their own meaning in learning about other cultures.

Opposing these views, Phillipson (2010, revised by Waters, 2013) says that "rather than being viewed as operating largely as a value-free 'lingua Franca, it is argued that English in this role should instead be seen to function variously as a lingua economica, lingua academica, lingua cultura, and so on, in other words, as a conduit for a range of hegemonic influences, to the detriment of local languages, patterns of thinking, and values" (p. 127).

Based on this view, is the solution for cultural inclusion in the language classroom the creation of a lingua cultura?

The Role of Teaching Material in Learning Culture

So far, the importance of culture when teaching English as a second language has been addressed, as well as the linguistic, and cultural policies that hinder it. Now, how do these linguistic policies affect the material in terms of culture? Yuen (2011) states that "since English is used as an international language, the cultural content of ELT materials should not be limited to native English-speaking cultures and that when teaching English is viewed as teaching an international language, the culture should become the world itself" (p. 458).

This view is relevant because as mentioned by Yuen (2011) "learning a language involves learning different aspects of the culture in which the language is used and sometimes also how other cultures are represented in that particular culture because language depicts the culture of its own and other cultures too" (p. 459). For this reason, teachers must consider teaching

cultural aspects outside the ones from the book. It is common to encounter aspects like food, transportation, rather than discrimination and important icons.

Despite this, it can be difficult to create an atmosphere that separates the realities of English. As mentioned by Sybing (2011) "much of the standing that English enjoys in the world is owed to the potential for status that is accompanied by attaining English fluency, as well as the pervasive nature of English-speaking culture in the popular media" (p. 467). It is well known that nowadays, English is required by academic and professional institutions. For this reason, most of the students are not interested in knowing about cultural aspects but to get an English certification.

What can language teachers do in this situation? As Sybing (2011) concluded that "the paradigm in foreign language education must therefore evolve from one of treating any foreign language culture as separate from the lives of language learners into one that recognizes that multiple cultures are already present in the local contexts of the students" (p. 468). Even though each learner has different purposes for learning English, teachers must not forget that students will encounter different cultures, and situations that require this competence.

This aspect is reflected in books. For example, Prodromou (1992) addresses this condition when he says that "in spite of surface differences, the concept of culture implicit or explicit in most ELT methods and materials until recently, has been predominantly monocultural and ethnocentric; the content of such materials has been criticized for not engaging the student's personality" (p. 39). This point of view supports what Yuen mentioned: English textbooks should teach the culture of the world itself.

What can Teachers do to overcome poor material?

There are different opinions regarding what the teacher can do when facing this situation; when including culture into our teaching practice, we look for our students to become more analytical about the world, to make them aware of the different perspectives that exist from their own culture and others. As well as Pennycook (1994), Cots (2014) believes that "discourse is the key to introducing culture to students, since discourse is a practical, social, and cultural phenomenon, and it looks at how people behave between them and with others, and why they behave in a certain way in different contexts" (p. 338).

By the same token, methods such as grammar-translation have played a fundamental part in making cultural aspects get lost. As mentioned by Prodromou (1992) "the grammar-translation approach was an easy target for criticisms of cultural triviality, given its obsession, in the early stages of learning, with made-up sentences designed to illustrate the parts of speech to the detriment of syntax or meaning" (p. 39). By doing this, teachers were negating the access to natural language use, which in turn jinxed the knowledge of culture for students.

The importance of bringing methods, and analyzing the discourse that is included in the material that is being used; is a fundamental part if language teachers want to include culture into their classes, learning a language is not only memorizing grammar rules, but also knowing that there are different ways of thinking and perceiving the world. Material is the first encounter students have with a different culture most of the time.

The idea of raising cultural awareness in the language classroom is an aspect that should be taken into consideration by all language teachers since cultural aspects tend to be left out in most foreign language teaching contexts. Adult students, especially the ones who study a language to get a promotion or work-related opportunities, are likely to believe that learning a language only implies the revision of grammatical rules, vocabulary, and reading texts, but they do not visualize that there are other factors that constitute acquiring one, being culture one of those. The first question we have is why are they not interested in it? A possible cause is that they might not be connected with the culture that is being looked at. For this reason, teachers need to develop strategies that can guide students to connect language with culture; these actions will enhance students with the opportunity to perceive the world through different eyes and pay attention to things they had not noticed in the past.

Another question that arises is what can we, as language teachers, do to overcome this bridge? It all starts with the material we work with. Books play an important role, as well as the curriculum of the institution we collaborate with. More often than not, the topics that are in the books are: going shopping, asking for a favor, ordering in a restaurant, and so on. Does this have to do with culture? Yes, but it depends on the way language teachers handle it.

How can teachers combine culture with the textbook? First of all, they need to know their students interests, so that they have a clearer perspective of where they can start. They can do so by carrying out a needs analysis, to learn about the students reasons to learn English. Then, teachers can include in their lessons cultural aspects such as etiquette rules and how to

address people from other cultures of English-speaking in an appropriate and polite way. The more real-life like the topics are, the more relevant they will be for students.

After revising the literature on the use of materials in the language classroom, and how the rejection students have towards culture, and after comparing it to my own experience, it can be concluded that students have this rejection because they are used to only looking at structural aspects of language such as grammar and vocabulary without paying attention to the cultural dimension of language. One factor that influences this lack of cultural integration in the language practice is because of the type of curriculum and textbook selection that is mostly structurally based. For this reason, language teachers need to be aware of their learners' needs and interests in order to complement the teaching material with cultural content.

Adding to this, one approach that can help is the Critical Approach which was proposed by Cots (2014). In this approach, the author suggests that it is important to be aware of our own values before we work with external factors. This is what happens in the classroom; language teachers need to know their students' values in order to connect their culture with the one from the target language. By not doing this, students might lose interest in looking at different cultural aspects, since learners learning a language practice consists mainly of the memorization of grammatical structures or the development of declarative knowledge that will allow them to obtain a language certificate. It is important to look at methods and approaches that complement the teaching material in order to help students to be introduced to other cultures so that they can broaden their perception of the world.

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