The rejection that students and teachers face in a classroom based on cultural and language imperialism

Aurora Dharanee Aguilar Martínez[i]

Abstract

Teaching a new language can come in many forms, from grammar-based to communicative base. However, all the methods we can use today have in common the need for teaching culture. It is a shared experience among teachers to have students reject the concept of learning a new culture. Although this can be a cause for stress among professionals, the reality of the rejection is not always as simple as it may seem. This article looks forward to pointing the reader in the direction of possible reasons as to why students may reject the language as different options to help the teacher close the gap between students and culture. It is imperative for culture to be a part of the language without coming off as an imposition, whether from the teacher or from the school.

Keywords: *cultural aversion*

El rechazo que enfrentan los estudiantes y los profesores en el salón de clases debido al imperialismo cultural y lingüístico

Resumen

La enseñanza de una nueva lengua se presenta de muchas formas, desde el método de gramática hasta el método comunicativo. Sin embargo, todos los métodos que utilizamos hoy en día tienen en común la necesidad de enseñar cultura. Es una experiencia compartida entre profesores que los estudiantes rechacen la idea de aprender una nueva cultura. Aunque esto puede ser motivo de estrés entre los profesionales, la realidad del rechazo no siempre es tan sencilla como puede parecer. Este artículo busca señalar al lector las posibles razones por las que los estudiantes pueden rechazar el idioma, así como diferentes opciones para ayudar al maestro a cerrar la brecha entre los estudiantes y la cultura. Es importante que la cultura sea parte del idioma sin que quede como una imposición, ya sea del maestro o de la escuela.

Palabras clave: *enseñanza de lengua, cultura, rechazo a la lengua,*

Introduction

Studying a second language can be used as a form to look forward to a brighter future. Often, parents and people look forward to studying English as a second language (ESL) to have a better opportunity in the labor market or the academic field. Although we tend to face students who have a big desire and motivation to learn, we can come across problems that stop students from showing their full potential. From time to time these obstacles involve a lack of knowledge in the field of language studies, which may be due to their age or background. Others can come across students that are being forced to learn the second language despite them not being willing to do so. For us, one problem that can be seen in many students, both in the classroom and outside, is an aversion to the language or the culture. Most teachers have had a student that has little to no interest in the culture within the English language, and sometimes it's simply because their interest in the language lies in the academic realm. A question, we pose is what about the students who have an aversion to the culture? Or even the language?

Students can come from a multitude of cultures and backgrounds, and even though as teachers we can try to minimize the blow, we don't always have the means or resources to make the classroom a little more comfortable for those students. In this research, we look forward to finding answers, alternatives, and solutions to the problem that is the cultural rejection faced in English as a foreign language (EFL) or English as a second language (ESL) classroom.

Problem of study

Learners chose to study English for a variety of reasons, from academic purposes to a willingness to travel and get to know new cultures. However, as it happens with everything in life, several students have problems with the language. Occasionally the struggle comes from their perception of the language, others from how the teacher implements the role of culture and language as the only one acceptable (Modiano, 2001). These two situations often come hand in hand, having students feel a rejection toward the language and culture based on previous experiences (Lindsay, 1977) in the EFL classroom, to other situations that may have occurred in the outside world.

For students who are faced with being 'forced' into learning the language, they will place a wall between them and the knowledge available. Occasionally this wall can be based on discrimination within the institute, making the student feel as if their culture and native language are inferior to English or the American culture. Other times, it comes from forced assimilation, a term coined by Berry (1992) that refers to the process that occurs when individuals adopt the cultural norms of a dominant or host culture, over their original culture, and imposition of said language in their day-to-

day life. Regardless of students' position, it is the teachers' duty to close the gap between the student, the language, and the culture. There are many ways a teacher can attempt to solve these situations, all of them involving the target language and a new perspective in culture, whether that be for the students or the teachers, it all depends on how they are seen.

Research questions

For this research, we will be focusing on three questions. The questions at hand have been considered after reading more on the topics mentioned above.

● What influences can lead students to develop a cultural aversion within a language classroom setting?

● What are some of the challenges teachers face when teaching culture and in their professional development as educators?

● How can teachers facilitate their students' acceptance, learning, or integration of both the language and culture into their lives?

Literature review

When we think about culture and language, we often find them to be linked together. Depending on where we are teaching, we may find the culture refers to a country we do not belong to, while language can be what we are teaching. Most teachers believe that language and culture are to be taught together to help students cope better for the future use of the language. However, sometimes we have difficulties with students willing to learn about one or the other; or teachers having the proper training and material required to be able to teach language and culture in foreign countries in such a way that is meaningful and useful to students. In this article, we will be exploring some of the problems with the teaching of culture, a few of the reasons behind the rejection of one or both, culture, and language, by students, and the different solutions proposed by researchers.

Culture

We will start by talking about cultural awareness and what it is and can be. The article titled from cultural awareness to intercultural awareness: culture in ELT by Will Baker states that "however, with the English language now used as a global lingua franca in a huge range of different cultural contexts, a correlation between the English language and a particular culture and nation is problematic" (Baker, 2011 p. 1). The author here refers to how today's English cannot be depicted as synonyms with one or two cultures, especially not when it is considered the global language. The culture that

at one point was exclusive to English is no longer true; different countries have adopted English as a second or foreign language, opening the world to a new sense of "intercultural awareness" (Baker, 2011, p. 1) one where the "fluid communicative practices of English is used as a global lingua franca. In its place, intercultural awareness (ICA) is proposed as a more relevant concept for these dynamic contexts of English use" (Baker, 2011, p. 1). As the author states, English has gone from being a part of a singular culture to an intercultural affair.

For this reason, the importance of teaching language and culture is something that plenty of authors have looked at. Remembering that "English is such a diverse range of global settings. It calls into question our understanding of the ownership and forms of the English language" (2011, p. 1), Baker states as he recalls Kachru's idea of how many countries are now considering English as either L1 or L2 official language within themselves; But the outdated idea that English belongs to one culture alone is falling behind, even if several teachers continue to profess it.

However, the main thing students may wish to achieve can be communication, Baker also notes that "knowledge of the lexis, grammar, and phonology of one particular 'linguistic code' is not adequate for successful intercultural communication through English" (2011, p. 2). Students might be able to verbally communicate and learn how to excel in the academic area of the foreign language, however, their social abilities are tied down to how they can handle the culture of the place they visit. Baker considered that bringing awareness to the students regarding multicultural settings is as important as it is for teachers to remember that English is now a lingua Franca. Numerous countries and people use this language to communicate and meet other people. As such, the lack of cultures seen within the classroom proves itself to be detrimental, many students who learn English look forward to communicating with others, and yet, when in the classrooms, they are often exposed to a singular culture, rather than the diversity that lives within the realm of cultures that apply English as a communication tool.

The rejection of language and culture can vary depending on the local context. In this section, we will look at two different situations that can lead to said rejection. First, we will talk about students that live in non-English speaking countries and form a rejection based on a lack of functionality in their own context. Then, we will look at an article that explores the cultural rejection that is performed by immigrant students learning English in North America, Britain, Australia (NABA countries).

The first article in this section is the teaching of English in Morocco: the place of culture by Martin Hyde (1994). He points us in the direction of local Moroccan students who learn English as part of their school curriculum. He brings forward the issue of teaching the language as a means of advertising a lifestyle rather than a utility. By doing this, he says that "the implication that the local

language as well as culture, are inferior can cause people to feel pressured into learning and partaking in a culture that is not their own" (1994, p. 2). This is something that is felt as a form of disregard towards their native culture. On TV, and the internet, it isn't rare to come across advertisements that promise a better life, better future, and opportunities if you sign up to learn English. Although that is not the real issue, knowing English can be of great help, the author notes that "language is used as a symbol for status and power, and therefore influences and shapes people's responses and values. One may well feel that ELT in Morocco is accompanied by arguably undesirable perlocutionary effects (1994, p. 5)". This, when combined with the perspective that ESL is often dressed as an 'innocent' act or tool, we find students feeling threatened or disregarded if they do not adapt or adopt the foreign culture, dismissing their own in the process.

Another important aspect the author looks at is how useful the English language would really be for the students. He questions: "why use English, at great cost, to replace the functions of French or Arabic? Both are international languages, [...] used effectively by many Moroccans to describe their own reality" (Baker, 1995, p. 5) something the author considers important to notice. One of the main reasons students, from other countries or contexts, aim to learn English is the communicative aspect that it offers. However, as the author points out, why would the Moroccan students go through the process willingly if they have two languages that are well known and widely spoken? Adding to this, we must consider the dismissal students could face in the classroom regarding their own culture or the lack of equivalents in English for vocabulary that stems from the local religious beliefs. Lastly, French and Arabic are the languages that better describe their own reality compared to English, which would require the extra steps needed to find, as mentioned above, equivalents to the religion-tied phrases often used by them.

Resistance to learning EFL

Now that we have talked about the experience of learners in their own context, we will look at learners who leave their country to venture into a NABA country. Lindsay (1977) discusses the language and cultural rejection in his article Resistance to learning EFL. As he notes, students often have the motivation and willpower to learn a new language. However, sometimes they may have an unconscious bias against the culture. Other times, the immigrant learner may start to feel a rejection towards the language, and the integration to the local culture. About this Lindsay mentions that "the problems of the adult immigrant learner can be extremely difficult and fraught with resistance for so much depends on the learner's relationship with native speakers" (1977, p. 5). We can consider this as a way for the learners to try and keep their integrity and identity from changing too much in an environment where they may feel forced to change.

As teachers, the idea of being able to help integrate students into the local culture is always appealing, but sometimes it is better if the story is taken a little slower, giving the learners time to start processing the new surrounding before wanting to enforce the culture: "he is forced to give up a vital part of himself and may unconsciously cling to it" (Lindsay, 1977, p. 5) making the process more difficult. Other times, they may feel as if they are trying to be 'assimilated' into a culture that is still predominantly foreign and uncaring for them.

A great alternative for this situation comes in the form of using their language and culture to make the process easier and smoother. Lindsay thinks that "the teacher must allow the student to teach them about India or Pakistan to lessen the feeling that his home background is unacceptable" (1977, p. 6). Although this process is overseen, the importance and impact it can have on students are abysmal. The students who feel as if their culture matters within the walls of the language classroom, allow themselves to take in the local culture with open arms, no longer feeling threatened. Lindsay notes that having the students talk about their culture, their language, and worldview in English is a good option. Having the opportunity to talk about their values makes them feel that their culture is valuable, as well, as it opens the conversation to talk about multicultural classrooms. In the context of immigrant learners, we have an abundance of backgrounds, cultures, and contexts which all should be shared to show how valuable their own identity is within the classroom, this also helps reduce the resistance the teacher may see with their class.

The problems

The following article reviewed was the one by Prodromou (1992) titled "What culture? Which culture? Cross-cultural factors in language learning". It brings forward one of the main problems teachers face with nonsense material. He walks us through the experience that students and teachers must endure when teaching the language and the lack of culture material. Based on statements made by other researchers, he put together a survey and applied it to English as a second language (ESL) learner. In this survey, he asked students questions regarding topics related to the process of learning the English language as well as American culture, and how they perceived both. Prodromou (1992) looks at the context that is applied to material for class, how students have been learning through nonsense material in the name of learning a grammatical structure: "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" (1992, p. 1). As appointed by him, the method has received plenty of criticism, but it is hardly the only one. Plenty of other methods have also seen themselves involved in similar situations. He does look at how the advances have allowed the material to grow and move forward, but notes that when it comes

to culturally important material, we still have different aspects to modify and learn how to use in our classrooms.

However, not to say that the only problem that is visible when teaching culture and language is the material, Liu (1998) explores the reality of TESOL teacher formation and how the lack of acknowledgment of the differences presents in teaching English in an English-speaking country versus teaching it in non-English speaking countries can cause harm to the learner. The problem with this comes as no surprise, as we have seen in the last section, when teachers ignore the local culture and imply a superiority of the English-speaking culture, students might form a sense of rejection to the new culture. Liu's work "Ethnocentrism in TESOL: Teacher education and the neglected needs of international TESOL, students" (1998) look at the idea that there is a difference between teaching English to learners in English-speaking countries and non-speaking countries. Liu's work is more explicit in the difference in experience that teachers should have. He says that "In spite of their different backgrounds and needs, these students are usually given the same training as their native-speaker peers. This often results in a gap between what they learn while abroad and [...] their teaching back home" (1998, p.1). The experience of learning how to teach in a full English context does not translate well when applying it to countries that most likely have fewer native speakers, as well as less context in which the language can be used, given that such methods in teaching are very different. However, as Liu notes, ethnocentrism is leaving aside "the special needs of international TESOL students, seeming to have escaped the attention of TESOL teacher educators'' (1998, p.1). This comes down to how the preference among teachers is often reflected in the methods that educators apply on the preparation of future teachers. It is hard to imagine teaching students in Asian countries how to speak English that requires a full immersion in the language when it is recorded that not many people speak the language fluently.

Solutions

Yueh-Hung Tseng (2002) in his article titled "A lesson in culture" considers that the proper building of the language can only come when we are able to understand the culture from which the language is coming. He continues telling us how we can modify our tools and activities to make them more culturally aware as well as functional for the students, allowing them to learn and embrace the new language and culture. "A curriculum which views culture as a process rather than as a body of facts can be illustrated" (Tseng, 2002 p. 5). With this in mind, we must consider the different types of cultures: individual culture (IC), social culture (SC), and target culture (TC). For us, as teachers, to be able to develop exercises to help students engage in the target culture, we must look at it from an exchange point rather than a form of assimilation.

The author points us in the direction of a few exercises that can be implemented in the classroom to help students with the cultural exchange or transaction. Some of which are the following:

Activity 2: Family Stories. This activity is one of our favorites. Here, students will be asked to bring pictures of their families and share stories. They can write down descriptions of their family members as well as memories that they have or share with them. Once the stories and descriptions are written or noted, they are placed into groups, where all of them will share amongst each other what they have written. The author notes that this activity is great to help students show their social culture (SC) as well as to create a cultural transaction among them.

Activity 5: Culture as Eating. Students are presented with videos and/or reading materials that talk or show the different traditions when it comes to food. It can be anything from table manners to how the food culture of the target one is done. With this, students can see what traditions they have in common or discover new ones. Once the video or reading material has been seen, they will be asked to reflect and write down notes about what they have observed. Lastly, students can share what they have learned and compare it to their own culture and each other's.

These two activities help bring forward the differences each student has in their own culture, but it also shows how despite them being different, a lot of them still maintain a sense of equality. Each student can share a bit of their culture, and in exchange, they learn from their classmates' or teacher's culture, creating an ambiance of tolerance and community.

The author led us in the direction of implementing new ways of learning language and culture. He says that "the traditional views on the role of culture in foreign or second language learning and teaching will be discussed and contrasted to a new interpretation of culture" (Tseng, 2002, p. 1). Along with this change in perception, we were able to learn about activities that can help us build a more culturally aware classroom and students. Implementing the teaching of language and culture using activities like the ones presented is a great way to help construct cultural awareness in our students. However, as educators, it's important for us to take a step back and look into ourselves. Are we culturally aware?

Porto talks in her article titled "Culturally responsive L2 education: an awareness-raising proposal" (2009) about the responsibility we, as language teachers, have regarding the need to be mindful of the implications that can come with teaching the language and culture. When we think about culture, at times, our own biases influence our teaching. The authors lead us in the direction of looking at how to teach culture according to our surroundings, to help students become aware of what it means to be culturally aware. She wants us to look at ourselves as teachers first before looking towards the students as culturally aware people, and as other authors have stated before, the teacher

must be the person to take the first step into culturalizing themselves before being able to help the students. In this sense, Professor Porto explains in her paper that having culturally aware teachers is important; but becoming culturally aware is a necessity, teachers are being asked to engage in cultural responsiveness - an attempt to be as much at ease with each other's languages, cultures, and individualities. The idea is to find out what unites us as human beings, with a focus on commonalities and bonds (2009, p. 8). Making a teacher that is willing to learn the local language and culture able to transmit their own culture and language in a more mindful and less aggressive way, for their students.

Conclusion

Culture and language are deeply intertwined with each other. As teachers, we often see this relationship play out in front of us without taking a moment to question it, it comes easy to us. However, for students, the process of learning the culture and language can have different shades of significance. The reason they learn the language will have a big influence on how hard or easy it will be to teach them culture. Those who choose to learn it for the purpose of communication will have a better disposition to learn about the target culture, compared to those who feel forced into learning the language.

As educators, the ability to teach both language and culture is visible the more experience we acquire. It is, however, a crucial fact that we can help students to accept and learn about the target culture, as well as foreign cultures, creating a sense of multiculturalism to help them adapt into the new culture and language.

References

Baker, W. (2011, April 28). From cultural awareness to intercultural awareness: culture in ELT. *ELT Journal*, *66*(1), 62-70. https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccr017

Berry, J.W. (1992), Acculturation and adaptation in a new society. International Migration, 30: 69-85. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2435.1992.tb00776.x

Hyde, M. (1994). The teaching of English in Morocco: the place of culture. *ELT Journal*, *48* (4), 295-305. https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/48.4.295

Lindsay, P. (1977). Resistances to learning EFL. *ELT Journal*, *31* (3), 184-190. https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/XXXI.3.184

Liu, D. (1998). Ethnocentrism in TESOL: Teacher education and the neglected needs of international TESOL students. *ELT Journal*, *52* (1), 3-10. https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/52.1.3

Modiano, M. (2001). Linguistic imperialism, cultural integrity, and EIL. *ELT Journal*, *55* (4), 339-347. https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/55.4.339

Porto, M. (2009). Culturally responsive L2 education: an awareness-raising proposal. *ELT Journal*, *64* (1), 45-53. https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccp021

Prodromou, L. (1992). What culture? Which culture? Cross-cultural factors in language learning. *ELT Journal*, *46* (1), 39-50. https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/46.1.39

Tseng, Y.-H. (2002). A lesson in culture. *ELT Journal*, *56* (1), 11-21. https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/56.1.11

---

[i] Is a LIDILE graduate who works in a small elementary school Luis Donaldo Colosio Murrieta and the state program JALISCO BILINGÜE. Her goal is helping students open their vision of the world and how they interact in it through language learning and appreciation. Email: aurora.aguilar6328@alumnos.udg.mx