

*Full Length Research Paper*

# **Culture knowledge and its availability in language teaching and learning in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts**

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It is a platitude that language teaching is nothing but teaching culture. This study is also another evidence for this saying. In other words, the aim of this study is, in fact, to highlight the role of teaching foreign language culture in language learning and teaching. To achieve this aim, two questionnaires were distributed among the students and teachers who participated in the study in Shiraz, Iran. The purpose of using the two questionnaires was to find out first, to what extent teachers and students are aware of the role of foreign culture in language learning and teaching; second, to what extent are teachers aware of the strategies and techniques of teaching foreign language culture and how do students benefit from it? The study revealed that first, both students and teachers do believe that culture and language are inseparable; second, teachers are able to utilize the strategies and techniques for teaching foreign language culture in teaching language in classes. The study also provided a few implications regarding culture and language teaching.

**Key words:** Culture teaching, English as a foreign language (EFL) learners, EFL teachers.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Teaching culture has been considered important in foreign language instruction for almost a century. We all know that understanding a language involves not only knowledge of grammar, phonology, and lexis, but also certain features and characteristics of the culture. Some authors mention different aspects of teaching and learning culture as a basis of learning language and they should be taken into consideration when they are teaching foreign language in order to motivate their students. Besides, culture associations that are part of language, as well as the socio-cultural background of the participants in teaching and learning environment, ultimately affect how and how well the language is learnt. This is due to the fact that a part of foreign language learning is rooted in culturally-influenced use of language

and sociolinguistic rules that underlie it, Albertini (1993, p. 60) suggests that an examination of assumption is especially important for teachers of students from non-dominant culture (that is student from non-Eurocentric, non-English background) because their school achievement typically falls below that of dominant culture students. Therefore, here we can have some opinions towards the importance of teaching foreign language culture along with teaching structures.

However, there are some problems in teaching foreign language culture, especially in the way it should be taught. One of them is how to provide the cultural information needed. Many Iranian teachers, (through no fault of their own) are simply not equipped to teach culture. The other groups of teachers do not know the

value of teaching foreign language culture in the classroom and they think, just concentrating on form and the syllabus of the course is enough. Another major problem is how to device ways of presenting culture in such a manner that the students can comprehend and relate to the information. The third problem is that of finding time in the class period to include culture. Therefore, many of the described techniques take relatively little class time and some take more time than the teacher might desire.

Generally speaking, there are some valid reasons why some Iranian teachers' lack of knowledge for teaching foreign language culture should be discussed. First, it is necessary to explore foreign language culture in general and compare it with the Iranian teachers' tendency on teaching foreign language culture. Moreover, it is beneficial to prepare Iranian teachers with regards to teaching foreign culture and provide them with some techniques and strategies, which are useful and effective in class environment. Thirdly, it is useful to motivate students by exposing some cultures relating to the subject, which is been taught at that time. Therefore, a study on some shortcomings which exist in teaching target culture and by clarifying some of them in order to improve them has practical value and may help to overcome some difficulties which relate to misunderstanding of the native speakers' message. In this study, the following research questions were treated:

1. Do students need to be familiar with the culture of the second language they are learning?
2. Do teachers teach their students about culture and how much do they emphasize it?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

So far a lot of studies have been conducted to show the effect of teaching FL culture in the classroom and it was discovered that some strategies and techniques are useful in the class environment. It is extremely difficult to define what culture is. "Culture" is believed to be one of the most complicated words in English language and giving a precise definition of it is time-consuming. Chastain (1988, p. 302) says that culture may mean different things to different people. He states that in the anthropology sense, culture is defined as the way people live. He also argues that, this definition encompasses the types of information that would seem to be of most interest and importance to the typical student enrolled in a language class. Another definition, which Chastain (1988: 303) declares, focuses on the major products and contributions of a society in general or of outstanding individuals in that society.

Brook (1975: 20) has proclaimed several meanings of culture, two of them are of major importance for us: culture as everything in human life and culture as the

best in human life. Then, base on this definition, culture can play the main role in every aspects of human life and that can be the best. In another definition, Seelye (1984: 26) defines culture as a broad concept that embraces all aspects of human life, "from folktales to carved whales". Byram (1989: 15) refers to culture as: "the whole way of life of a foreign country but not limited to its production in arts, philosophy and "high culture" in general. According to this definition, we can conclude that culture has a wide range of meaning and it is not constrained to just theories.

Other authors emphasize dynamic, on-going nature of culture: culture is not given, but constituted in the everyday practice of groups and individuals (Robert et al., 2001: 30 cited by Bateman, 2002: 319). From this perspective, it is hard to imagine "teaching culture." Tomlinson and Masuhara (2004) believe: "teaching culture" has to be "teaching cultural awareness". As Tseng (2002: 13) puts it, "understanding culture is a process rather than external knowledge to be acquired." Then, both teachers and students of FL need to understand culture differences, to recognize openly that everyone in the world is not "just like me", that is, people are not all the same beneath the skin (Cakir, 2006). There is another author who discusses language and culture in the aspect of teaching method and material.

Hardly (2004: 22) also claim that when teaching an international language such as English, teachers must consider the characteristics of such a language and language teaching in specific. The role language plays in the cultural expressions will determine the role of teaching materials and methods. These materials and methods as McKay (2003) cited in Hardly (2004: 22) makes it clear have differing and important impacts on language acquisition. The other author (Halverson, 1985 cited in Moran, 2001) discusses the great achievement of people as reflected in their history, social institution, works of art, music and literature, which is commonly referred to as 'big C' culture. He says culture is also viewed as the customs, traditions or practices that people carry out as part of their everyday lives, which is referred to as 'small C'. On the other side, linguistic competence is not enough for learners of a language to be competent in that language (Krasner, 1999). Language learners need to be aware of the culturally appreciated ways for addressing people, greeting, expressing needs and how to agree or disagree with someone. In some points of view, some authors believe that there are real differences between groups and cultures (Brown, 1994: 167).

Therefore, language teachers cannot avoid conveying impressions of another culture whether they realize it or not (Rivers, 1981, p. 315). So, by considering these utterances, one can conclude that the language cannot be completely separated from the culture in which it is deeply embedded.

Kitao (2000) giving reference to several authors, lists some of the benefits of teaching culture. For example, as

Chastain (1971) remarks; from the perspective of learners, one of the major problems in language teaching is to conceive of the native speakers of target language as real person. Although grammar books give so called genuine example from real life, without background knowledge those real situations may be considered fictive by the learners. In addition providing access into cultural aspect of language, learning culture would help learners relate the abstract sounds and forms of a language to real people and places. In another development, the effect of motivation in the study of L2 has been proven by experts like Gardner and Lambert (1959, 1965, 1972). In achieving high motivation, culture classes do have a great role because learners like culturally based activities such as singing, dancing, role playing, doing research on countries and people, etc.

From a broad study, there are some other authors who focus on teaching culture in childhood. Teaching is a mode of cultural transmission that varies across cultures (Stevenson and Stigler, 1992; Stigler and Hiebert, 1999 cited in Ashley, 2004: 517) and activity settings (Cole and Cole, 2001; Greenfield, 1984), and that develops in childhood (Maynard, 2002; Strauss et al., 2002; Wood et al., 1995 cited in Ashley, 2004). Learning how to teach occurs in activity settings that are situated in cultural places. There is variation in the activity settings of teaching across cultures and sometimes across practices within the same culture (Ashley, 2004: 517).

Another aspect of teaching that should be considered in teaching culture is cultural awareness. In this field, there are some authors and writers who have a very clear introduction to their concept of cultural awareness. Tavares and Cavalcanti (1996: 19) emphasize on teaching target culture in the class and stress that the aim of teaching culture is to increase students awareness and to develop their curiosity towards the target culture and their own, helping them to make a comparison between cultures. Subsequently, by focusing on teaching FL culture, student can have a great knowledge in the target culture. Some of these authors tried to make distinction between cultural awareness and cultural knowledge (Tomlinson and Masuhara, 2004). Broady (2004: 68) states that cultural knowledge (that is, information about the target culture, its typical patterns of behavior and its attitudes) is likely to be external, static, stereotypical and reduced; that is, it tends to be knowledge that is passed on to a learner from someone else, rather than arising from the learner's own experience; it reflects broad generalizations often based on a narrow selection of evidence and while such knowledge can give us pointers to differences in behaviors and values, it can also be misleading.

There are a handful of studies of how people acquire second culture. These studies refer to the mid 1980's which can be found in the literature of applied language and culture studies in that decade. During the past decade, several recent European studies have been

particularly helpful in developing methods and theory for clarifying processes in second culture learning (Berwick and Whalley, 2000). The seminal study in this area is Byram et al. (1991) cited in Berwick and Whalley (2000), an extensive description of the culture learning of secondary students in French-as-a-foreign-language class. The focus of this study was to understand the process and sequence of changing perceptions of French culture among British secondary students.

## METHOD

### Participants

The participants of this study were 62 teachers and students selected randomly from Atlas English Language Institute and MA students of English Department of Shiraz University. Out of this, 20 were teachers and 42 students. The teachers who participated were male (8) and female (12) aged between 25 and 40 and were all M.A students of Shiraz University, working as teachers in Atlas Language Institute, Shiraz, Iran. As for the students, 42 students aged from 15 to 25, male (28) and female (14) both studying English in the same institute, took part in the study. It should be mentioned that these students were at an advanced level of proficiency.

### Instrument

In order to conduct the study, two likert questionnaires were utilized. The first questionnaire consisted of two sections (developed by an international team supported by the Council of Europe's European Center for Modern Language in Graz, the British Council and Minister of Education) in which the author used section A of this questionnaire for administration. This section included 53 items. Each item contained 5 choices. The second questionnaire contained two sections; the first section included 6 questions (The purpose of the first was to find answers to this question, that how often did teachers include activities based on these topics in their English lesson) and the second section contained 7 questions (The purpose of this section was to evaluate how much emphasis teachers placed on teaching culture in second language classroom), which was adapted from the work of Gardner and Symthe (1974) and Snow (1985). As for the reliability and validity of the instruments, Cronbach Alpha was used for the reliability and it turned out to be almost 0.85 and 0.75 respectively; and for the validity, they were both looked into by some professors of Shiraz University and were confirmed to be apposite for the study purpose.

### Data collection

First, the questionnaire associated with teachers who participated in the study was administered and then the questionnaire pertaining to the learner participants of the study were distributed. The purpose of these questionnaires were to determine the teachers and students' cultural awareness and the level of emphasis, the teachers placed on teaching culture in the class and how much students were familiar with the target culture and how much that caused students to improve their motivation in learning second language. It should be pointed out that before administering the questionnaires, the significance of the work and their responses were explained and they were asked to read the items carefully and

**Table 1.** Case processing summary.

Item	Cases					
	Valid		Missing		Total	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
Questions * opinions	2226	100	0	0	2226	100

**Table 2.** Chi-square tests.

Item	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-square	1.839E3 <sup>a</sup>	208	0.000
Likelihood ratio	1.764E3	208	0.000
Linear-by-linear association	0.253	1	0.615

**Table 3.** Case processing summary.

Item	Cases					
	Valid		Missing		Total	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
Question * Opinion	120	100	0	0	120	100

then respond to items. Besides, they were apprised that they would be given enough time to respond the items.

#### Data analysis

The responses of the participants were analyzed through the SPSS statistical package version 16 in general and observing frequencies of values and their chi-square dependent significance in particular. It should be mentioned that for each questionnaire a Chi-square was run separately. The result obtained after running the SPSS program are explained and interpreted in the result section.

#### RESULTS

Having carried out the study and data analysis, an interesting finding resulted. First, the results obtained from the questionnaire of the students are represented. Table 1 reveals the summary of the case processing information. It is obvious that all of the participants responded to all the items of the questionnaire and there is no item missing. It should be pointed that N in Table 1 shows the number of all responses and not the participants.

The other table gained was a question-opinion cross tabulation, but due to the large size, was not included in the paper, it is just described. It contains 53 items, 5 opinions for each item. It indicates how many of the participants selected *disagree a lot*, *disagree a little*, *don't know*, *agree a little*, and *agree a lot* (*Disalot* = disagree a lot; *Disalittle* = disagree a little; *Dontknow* = don't know; *Agalittle* = agree a little; *Agalot* = agree a lot). In this

table, the total number of each choice has been provided. In addition, for each item there are 42 perspectives. As it was illustrated in Table 1, the total number of these perspectives is 2226 from which the number of *disagree a lot* opinions are 277, *disagree a little* 234, *don't know* 232, *agree a little* 584, and *agree a lot* 899.

The last and the most important table in this analysis is Chi-square test table, Table 2, showing the result of Chi-square test. The table reveals that most of students who participated in this study are familiar with the role of culture in learning second language ( $p < 0.05$ ).

The second questionnaire was related to teachers' awareness towards the importance of culture teaching. This questionnaire contained two different sections. The purpose of the first section was to answer the question on how often the teachers include activities based on these topics in their English lesson. After running Chi-square, three tables were again obtained. Table 3 involves the summary of case processing; it indicates that all participants answered all questions.

The other table incorporated question opinion cross tabulation and like the previous case due to its big space; it has been omitted from the manuscript. It contains 6 items; for each item there are four choices. It presents the information about how many of participants selected never, rarely, sometimes and often choices (N = never; R = rarely; S = sometimes; O = often). It also presents the total number of each choice.

Table 4 represents the main findings of Chi-square test. It revealed that teachers' awareness toward the role of culture teaching is significant ( $P < 0.05$ ). As with the second

**Table 4.** Chi-square tests.

Item	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-square	59.133 <sup>a</sup>	15	0.01
Likelihood Ratio	72.589	15	0.01

**Table 5.** Case processing summary.

Item	Cases					
	Valid		Missing		Total	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
Questions * Opinion	140	100	0	0	140	100

**Table 7.** Chi-square tests.

Item	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-square	40.900 <sup>a</sup>	12	0.000
Likelihood ratio	46.559	12	0.000

part of the second questionnaire, like the previous section, three tables were obtained. The first table, that is Table 5, showed the summary of the case processing. It obviously shows 100% participation in this survey.

Table 6 represents the cross tabulation table that indicates the number of questions, the total number of each choice, and the total number of each opinion and like the previous case due to its big space; it has been omitted from the manuscript. The items included three choices. The choices in comparison with the previous section, limited to never, sometimes, and always ( $N = \text{never}$ ;  $S = \text{sometimes}$ ;  $A = \text{always}$ ).

And finally, Table 7 represents the main findings of Chi-square test. Like the two previous cases, the table shows a significant difference; meaning that teachers emphasize adequately the culture aspect of foreign language ( $P < 0.05$ ).

## DISCUSSION

On the whole, in this survey, based on the results which were gained, it was understood that first, the majority of the students were significantly aware of the important role of culture in language teaching and learning. In other words, student participants of the study preferred learning culture during their study of foreign language and had motivation in doing some activities in relation to the foreign culture and consequently, understanding the foreign language culture. This finding is in accordance with the theoretical studies previously done on the same issue. As an example, Özyaka (2001) argues that cultural familiarization of language activates learners' relevant schemata and they can employ suitable strategies to

ameliorate the effectiveness of language learning process. Garner et al. (1989), Schank (1979), Brown (2007) and Alexander and Jetton (2000) also emphasize that learners and teachers of a second or foreign language need to understand cultural aspects of the specific language. Consequently, obtaining cultural knowledge caused students' motivation to improve. Brown (1980) also states that both learners and teachers of a second or foreign language need to understand cultural information and cultural differences.

Secondly, the study results showed that most of the teachers are aware of the inevitable and un-ignorable role of culture activities in teaching the foreign language. Some of them believed that teaching these activities would make the students more motivated to learn the language. They further state that these activities make them to be familiar with culture of the target language and the inseparable connection between language and culture. The study also revealed that the majority of teachers are familiar with the target culture and therefore they always try to introduce students to the target culture using different techniques like telling them the real fact of the target culture, putting the students in the real situations, using different foreign culture tools and materials including clothes, poems, etc. As shown with related studies on the same issue, numerous authors (Kramsch, 1993; Byram, 1989) have highlighted the impossibility of teaching a language without teaching its receptive culture. Savignon and Sysoyev (2002) also emphasizing the necessity of teaching culture to EFL learners proposed that if it were not English but any other language in the world, then it would be possible to teach the culture with the language; but that is not the same for English as it is a global language. Whether culture is

consciously or unconsciously part of teachers' pedagogic aims, the transmission of culture is unavoidable. The content of what we teach will always be in some way linked to culture, as Tseng (2002) pointed out "every lesson is about something and that something is culture" (p. 20).

## Conclusion

It has been highlighted several times that the study of grammar and structure is not enough for learning a foreign or second language. Furthermore, it should be pointed out that understanding the cultural context of day to day conversational conventions such as greeting, farewells, thanking and making requests and so on means much more than just being able to produce the grammatical sentences. Rather, students need to be informed about both linguistic and non-linguistic aspects of the intended language. Amid non-linguistic aspects cultural knowledge plays an important role. In other words, it is important for students to know that studying English culture is not arbitrary but a necessary activity. Of course, the idea of culture is nothing new to second language teachers. Most of the time, teaching culture has meant focusing a few lessons on holidays, customary clothing, folk songs, and food.

As a result of this study, the teachers should consider the needs of students in relation to the target culture. There are a lot of techniques and strategies which teachers can rely on when conducting the class. Students believe that if they are provided with more situations related to the target culture they can get it better. Teachers are responsible for making students to be familiar with the target culture. Teachers should also be up-to-date, because they are expected to inform students on some attractive and important aspects of target culture and they are also expected to compare them with the first culture. They should be sensitive about comments they make that relate to cultural values that might run counter to the values held by students.

As with the implications drawn from the study, First, Culture and language are inexorably linked and as such cannot be separated. Numerous authors (Kramsch, 1993; Byram, 1989) have highlighted the impossibility of teaching a language without teaching its receptive culture. Savignon and Sysoyev (2002) emphasizing the necessity of teaching culture to EFL learners proposed that if it were not English but any other language in the world, then it would be possible to teach the culture with the language; but that is not the same for English as it is a global language. Besides, in the light of this research, teachers may be recommended to activate learners' schemata before any activity. Another and probably the most important finding of the study is that teaching cultural materials and texts helps students achieve better comprehension and provides them with more motivation in order to perform better.

Finally, the following topics can be suggested for those who are interested in conducting research in the area of reading and listening comprehension.

1. To investigate the probable impact of the level of proficiency, another research can be undertaken with participation of learners from three different levels of proficiency, that is, at beginning, intermediate and advanced.
2. The effect of culturally-oriented materials on productive and receptive skills of learners, namely, speaking, writing, listening, and reading can be explored in another study.

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