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The Cultural Component in Teaching English as a Foreign Language in Ukraine

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Abstract: The article discusses the inseparability of culture and language teaching, explores some problems that teachers of English as a foreign language in Ukraine face, and wgues in favor of the inclusion of students' own culture in English language teaching. The **data** that the author has collected by conducting surveys, analyzing textbooks and doing observations are presented. Ideas on how to infuse cultural goals into language teaching are offered. Examples of cultural techniques, such as culture capsules, intercultural connections, and critical incidents, designed by the author, are given in the article.

Key words: A Cultural Component, A Scheme, Local Culture, Techniques

1. Introduction

Most teachers of English as a foreign language would agree that their job is not just to teach language skills, but also to teach culture. Many language educators support the inclusion of a cultural component in the teaching of English. They give the following arguments for having a cultural component: it promotes international understanding, deepens an understanding of one's native culture, and motivates learners to do better in English. M. Byram (1999) describes the language teacher's role as "a professional mediator between a student and foreign languages and cultures" (p. 58).

Research publications on the problem of teaching for cultural understanding have been written by many Ukrainian, Turkish, Russian, British, American, and other educators. The reasons for their interest might be the following:

Firstly, language educators and teachers realize that language and culture are intertwined. As D. Brown (2000) said, "whenever we teach a language, we also teach a complex system of cultural customs, values, and ways of thinking, feeling, and acting" (p. 64).

Secondly, educators realize that the mere learning of linguistic system is no guarantee of successful cross-cultural communication.

And, thirdly, both teachers and students have come to recognize the importance of valuing other cultures in the world beyond their own.

2. Background

I have been interested in the problem of teaching for cultural understanding for many years and I have devoted several of my publications to this issue. The more I research, the more I realize the importance of developing cultural competence when teaching and learning a foreign language, especially now when we all are part of the Global Village.

The objective of this article is threefold, aiming to

■ outline some problems that educators in Ukraine face while teaching for cultural understanding

■ argue in favor of the role of students' own culture in English language teaching and

- offer ideas on how to infuse cultural goals into a proficiency oriented curriculum.

To illustrate and elucidate the issues raised, I will be using my own research findings as well as the data I have collected by conducting surveys and doing observations in English language classrooms.

My article ***Problems in the Teaching of Culture*** which I wrote more than eight years ago, mentions several reasons why language courses will not include a systematic study of culture. These reasons are as follows:

- Some teachers are not trained in the teaching of culture

- Good quality authentic materials are lacking

- The definition of culture can be a source of difficulty

- Teachers lack significant first-hand knowledge of the country they teach about

- The study of culture involves extra time that many school teachers and university instructors cannot spare

- Cultural materials receive uneven treatment in the textbooks

- Teachers often think that students will be exposed to cultural material later. But "later" never comes for most students

When I read my article again in 2012, I came to the conclusion that the first three issues were not very critical any longer. Nowadays, teachers of foreign languages are trained in the teaching of culture and therefore they are aware of different approaches to teaching for cultural understanding. Next, good quality authentic textbooks are available in abundance in our book stores and as most teachers have access to the internet, they can select and download authentic texts and materials. Lastly, the definition of culture no longer seems to

be a source of difficulty in designing the instruction process because numerous

publications, seminars and conference sessions deal with this issue.

On the other hand, some new problems have arisen. Probably both "old" and "new" problems can partially explain why some teachers are reluctant to integrate culture into their language teaching thus making culture a weak component of our curricula. But what is the Ukrainian students' reaction? The surveys I have conducted among university students,

mostly young adults, clearly indicate that they want their language courses to emphasize cultural awareness as well as linguistic concerns. The surveys I gave to secondary school Students demonstrated that the primary reasons for their learning English were an interest in the culture, literature and arts of English-speaking countries and a general interest in the way of life in these countries. Nearly 86% of students wrote that they realize the benefits torn learning about another culture. All of these students understand that the study of culture is a very important aspect of language learning but at the same time they mention that cultural teaching is insubstantial and sometimes sporadic in English language classrooms. Why is this so? Two possible reasons for that are given below.

3. Problems of culture teaching

The first problem is that some teachers still use the "facts-only" approach to culture. Many foreign language professionals and scholars maintain that the teachers' role is not to impart facts, but to help students attain the skills that are necessary to make sense out of the facts Hadley themselves discover in the study of the target culture (V. Galloway, N. Seelye, and A. Hadley). Educators stress that, the objectives to be achieved in cross-cultural understanding involve processes rather than facts. In Seeley's (1984) view, facts are cheap and "meaningless until interpreted within a problem-solving context" (p. 3). A. Hadley (1993) notes that the "facts-only" approach to culture for which the only goal is to collect bits of information is "destined to be ineffective" (p. 358). A focus on "facts" has been criticized by various scholars. From my own experience I know that a "collection" of facts might establish stereotypes, and even worse, it leaves students unprepared when they encounter cultural situations they did not study.

A solution to the problem could be this: teachers of English as a foreign language need to equip students with tools for processing new culture in a way that will facilitate their understanding. Teachers also need to develop and use tasks associated with training students to be careful people-watchers and observers of culturally appropriate interactional routines and expressions. These common routines and expressions can serve as a basis for productive and effective activities and techniques that will be motivating, interesting and enjoyable for students.

Secondly, we still do not have a viable framework for organizing instruction around cultural themes. Many English language teachers in Ukraine accept the challenges of leaching for cross-cultural understanding, but they struggle when it comes to determining goal statements and deciding what aspects of culture to teach. They realize they need a scheme that would help them select appropriate cultural material and serve as a useful resource for planning cultural instruction and designing their own cultural activities. For educational purposes we have modified the scheme which was suggested by R. Lafayette. The modified scheme consists of the following groups.

Croup 1. Factual objectives: students will be able to demonstrate knowledge of formal or "high" culture, and knowledge of everyday or "popular" culture. Students will be able to explain major historical events, major institutions, and major artistic accomplishments, they will also recognize everyday cultural patterns.

Group 2. Affective objectives: students will be able to value different peoples and societies.

Group 3. Process objectives: students will be able to locate and organize information about both foreign and native culture, and evaluate the validity of statements about culture.

Group 4. Pragmatic objectives: students will be able to notice/pay careful attention to politeness routines, expressions, and phrases that are employed by speakers or hearers, and then identify the cultural reasons for the use of these language devices. They will learn to act appropriately in common everyday situations, and use appropriate gestures.

The proposed scheme can be helpful in clarifying themes and topics that need to be integrated into classroom instruction and materials. It can also give teachers some ideas about what strategies and techniques to use in a way that truly integrates culture with language study.

4. The role of local culture

Many scholars assert that cultural content of EFL courses should include opportunities to learn about one's own culture in relation to other cultures. The scholars also stress that through studies of one's own culture in a foreign language, students may be more aware of it, and thus keep their cultural identity in cross-cultural communication. Among the scholars who uphold this view are R. Gorshkova (Ukraine), I. Cakir (Turkey), S. McKay, L. Smith (the USA), Yun Wei (China).

More than thirty years ago the American language educator L. Smith (1976) had said the following: the fact that English became an international language suggests that English no longer needs to be linked to the culture of those who speak it as a first language. Rather, the "purpose of an international language is to describe one's own culture and concerns to others" (p. 41). I treat this opinion as very right wing. I believe that English speaking cultures and local culture should be viewed in comparison and contrast to one another. Students need to learn and expect differences as well as to understand and appreciate their logic.

I have analyzed about twenty textbooks adopted in Ukraine as course books in both secondary and high school. Among these course books are: Enterprise, Opportunities, Cutting Edge, Headways, Upstream, and others. The majority of characters in these books are Western characters originating in Great Britain, the USA, Canada, and Australia. The other characters are from France, Germany, India, Nigeria, Philippines, and Netherlands. Thus the cultural content in teaching English as a foreign language is limited to several countries where English is the primary language or has a special status or is the second language. It is interesting to note that a Ukrainian English textbook recommended by the Ukrainian Ministry of Education, uses only English-speaking names such as Amanda, Chris, Terry, Melinda, Charlie, Daniel, Steve, etc., though the setting in most cases is Ukrainian or neutral, for example, a grammar explanation.

In a survey that I conducted among secondary school pupils more than 73 % of them answered "no" when asked if they could give a short talk in English about Ukrainian culture in general or on any aspect of it. The percentage of those who said "no" among

third year university students was 54%. In a survey among second and third year university students, 85% of them said that one of the purposes of learning English was the ability to communicate their own culture to other people through the medium of English. Nearly 89% of the students said they were sure that cross-cultural awareness of both native and foreign cultures would allow them to achieve their professional, social and personal goals.

5. Examples of cultural techniques

The purpose of this final section is to offer several ideas on how to infuse cultural goals into a proficiency-oriented curriculum. Firstly, we shall look at the technique called culture I capsules. The technique was developed by D. Taylor in 1970s, but unfortunately I have never seen it in use, as well as other techniques described below, in any English language textbooks that are being used in Ukraine. A culture capsule is a short description of one minimal difference between a Ukrainian and a target-culture's custom, accompanied by pictures, photos, slides, or objects. In the classroom, students can perform role-plays based on various capsules.

Culture Capsule 1: Giving Gifts

Do you know when people in the United States give gifts? Most people wait for special occasions like birthdays, wedding anniversaries, Mother's Day, Father's Day, Bridal Shower, Baby Shower, and Christmas. Then they give big, expensive presents. Many I people, especially teenagers and college students, also like to give inexpensive, funny, "just because" gifts to their friends, ("just because I like you" or" just because I think you'll like s").

Adults usually bring a small gift - like flowers or a box of sweets when they go to someone's house for dinner. And, of course, everyone brings back souvenirs when they leave I to another country.

Croup work. Ask and answer the questions.

When do people in Ukraine usually give gifts? Are there any special occasions for giving I giving in Ukraine? Is it a local custom to give a gift "just because"? What gifts did you give year? Who did you give gifts to? What gifts did you get this year? What was your favorite gift? Who gave it to you?

Culture Capsule 2: Greetings

In China, a popular greeting is "Have you eaten already?" There are also other expressions for saying "hello" in Chinese. Such greetings as "Where are you going?", "Are you busy?", "What are you doing?", "Are you going to work?" and others also mean "hello". A Chinese person asking these questions does not really want to know where his friend is going or •hat he is doing. The Chinese person just wants to demonstrate a friendly attitude to other person.

Group work. Ask and answer the questions.

Are there similar greetings in other languages? How do Ukrainians greet each other in everyday life? Americans usually say "hi", "hello", "how are you doing?" What kinds of answers/responses do Americans give? Why do Americans ask you "How are you?" and then do not listen to the answer?

Secondly, we shall look at intercultural connections. Intercultural connections are very short situations that describe the cultural content of a target-language country. Students work in pairs or in small groups. They discuss the situation, create and present conversations based on the situation.

Intercultural connection 1: In a supermarket

In American supermarkets it is very common for cashiers to say to customers "How are you? Did you find everything you need? When the transaction is complete, the cashier will say "Have a good/great day and come again." Cashiers communicate with the customer in order to build a relationship.

People in the USA also strike up conversations with strangers in the streets.

Group work. Ask and answer the questions.

Would this happen in Ukraine? Do people in the USA respond to a cashier? Do strangers often strike up conversations in Ukraine? If they do, what things might they say? Give some examples.

Intercultural connection 2: Birthday Party

In the USA, if friends or family members inform the restaurant that it's someone's birthday, a birthday cake with candles will be brought to the table and the waiters and waitresses will sing Happy Birthday.

Group work. Ask and answer the questions.

Is this a custom in your country, too? What other things are done to celebrate someone's birthday in public places and at home? How did you celebrate your last birthday?

Thirdly, we shall look at critical incidents. A critical incident includes a story about a cross-cultural miscommunication with a subsequent set of questions. Having read the story, students will be asked to choose the best interpretation of the characters' actions based on their knowledge of the characters' cultures. As in real life situations there might be more than one explanation that can be considered appropriate or correct. Students then discuss their options in small groups. Critical incidents can be also defined as case studies or culture mini-dramas. They should be based on real-life experiences.

Critical incident 1: A Misunderstanding over a Cup of Tea

A Kenyan man, who went to the USA to study at University, married an American girl. Six years later he came back to Kenya with his wife. When his Kenyan friends visited him, he was very happy to see them. While he and his American wife were entertaining their guests, he offered them some tea and biscuits. His friends said they would like some tea. The Kenyan man went to the kitchen to make the tea and his wife remained with the guests to become better acquainted with them. Suddenly the friends looked offended, excused themselves and left the house before the tea came.

Croup work. Ask and answer the questions.

Does a man prepare tea or food for guests in your country? In the USA, when a man makes tea for his guests, it is a way to express love and respect for his wife. What about your country? The Kenyan man had learnt the American way. Did he use it at the right time? Why do you think his guests refused to take tea with him and his wife? Would this happen in your country? The friends were offended because the man (not his wife) was going to serve them tea. In Kenya men do not prepare tea or food. Do you know people in your country who consider it offensive for men to prepare tea or food?

Critical incident 2: Hand-kissing.

University instructors from Selcuk university in Konya, Turkey, came to Ukraine to attend a conference which was held at a big University. Their Ukrainian colleagues did their best to welcome the guests and they organized for them meetings with the faculty, department chairs, deans, and, of course, students. A meeting with the dean of the department of education was

very interesting and informative. When the dean was saying his good byes, he kissed the Turkish female instructors' hands.

Later, the Turkish ladies told a Ukrainian colleague that they were very surprised that the dean had kissed their hands.

Group work. Ask and answer the questions.

Do men kiss ladies' hands in your country? Why do you think the Turkish ladies were surprised? Hand kissing is a very important and traditional gesture in Turkish culture. It is a may of greeting a person significantly older than you are. But in everyday life hand-kissing в very rare. Is it the same in your country? On Turkish religious holidays children kiss the hands of their grandparents, expressing their respect for them. How do Ukrainian children show respect for their grandparents?

6. Conclusions

Incorporating culture into language teaching can contribute significantly to developing Hudents' practical English skills, building their awareness, and facilitating cross-cultural communication. Though a long time researched issue, culture is still a weak component in most curricula in Ukraine. Teachers of English do face problems when they try to include culture elements in their language teaching. I have suggested a framework for organizing instruction around cultural themes, which consists of four groups. The framework can serve as a useful resource for teachers as they plan cultural instruction and design cultural activities/materials of their own. I have argued that local culture should be taught together with the target one. I have suggested ways of how cultural goals can be infused into a proficiency oriented curriculum. The suggested techniques truly integrate culture with language study and are interesting and enjoyable for students. They teach culture together with speaking, listening and reading, thus representing the connections between language and culture.

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