

ON CULTURAL IDENTITY AND LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT IN EFL CLASSES

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Abstract

The article describes the close relationship between language and culture as well as the ways of discussing about cultural identity and cultural diversity at EFL classes. The author offers an analysis of researchers' views of the interaction between culture and language and suggests some practical ideas of working with cultural experiences in language classes.

Keywords: attitudes, communication, cultural awareness, cultural identity, intercultural communication.

“Of course, learning English and learning it well is absolutely essential for academic and future life success, but the assumption that one must discard one’s identity along the way needs to be challenged. There is nothing shameful in knowing a language other than English. In fact becoming bilingual can benefit individuals and our country ingeneral”
S. Nieto (1999).

Culture influences language as a means of communication. However this does not mean that language is simply a reflector of cultural reality. It is an integral part of that reality through which other parts are shaped and interpreted. M. Byram says: “It is both a symbol of the whole and a part of the whole which shapes and is in turn shaped by sociocultural actions, beliefs and values”¹. We shall try to show the impact of incorporating the cultural/intercultural components in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) syllabus within the framework of the new university course “Linguistic Culturology”, to illustrate the benefits of being aware of the learners’ linguistic and cultural background.

Cultural/intercultural components are not limited to language teaching only, but rather in almost every piece of writing as a literary or non-literary product in any community. In other words, cultural components are a defining feature that makes a piece of writing very specific to a particular community or society. In this regard, A. Benahnia says that it can be said that cultural components can be related, but not limited to a long list of components that may include: *language and communication style; food and drinks; clothing; music and dance; happiness and sorrow; health beliefs* (i.e. what people in the community believe causes disease and what should be done about it); *family relationships*, such as marriage laws and ways of celebration; *gender roles; religion; status* – e.g. what gives prestige; *politics; power* – how does one gain/lose power; *identity and pride; prejudices; shared history; geography; monuments*; and so on².

Language is a guide to social reality. Language is a perfect tool for all our social problems and progresses. As C. Kramsch affirms, “it is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of

language and that language is merely an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication and reflection”³.

Undoubtedly, language is the main means that conducts our lives but when it is used in contexts of communication and real-life situations, it is bound up with culture in diverse ways. As we all know, the words are our first experience, they express not only facts and describe different events but also reflect our attitudes and beliefs, points of view, thus language expresses cultural reality. Being members of the societies we use spoken, written, or visual medium and this creates meanings that are known and understandable to the groups we belong to. Thus, language embodies cultural reality covering verbal and non-verbal communication. The cultural value of the language is shown by the system of signs. Language speakers view their language as “the system of their cultural identity”⁴.

“The heavy stress on language as an aspect of cultural identity”, as J. Lambert says, “is of course not new at all. It is even rather common in historical and cultural research, in anthropology, history, pragmatics, literary studies, etc.”⁵. C. Hongwei believes the language is a portrait of culture: “language mirrors other parts of culture, supports them, spreads them and helps to develop others”⁶. The formation and development of all aspects of a culture are closely related to one another, and language is no exception. A careful study of the meanings of words and how these change demonstrate how material culture, institutional culture and mental culture influence the formation and development of language. Two of the most vigorous exponents of the role of culture in language were Sapir and his pupil Benjamin Lee Whorf. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis has an obligatory place in all contemporary textbooks that touch upon the subject. Sapir was convinced that language could only be interpreted within a culture: “Language has a setting... language does not exist apart from culture”⁷. Language actually determines the way the language user thinks, which would suggest, for example, that bilinguals would automatically change their view of the world as they change language. This view is considered as the strong view. Based on the weak version of the Sapir-Whorf theory, it is suggested that language has a tendency to influence thought. This version of the theory has many more supporters in anthropology and linguistics. Supporters of the weak version suggest that language is one of the factors influencing our understanding of reality, i.e. suggests, beliefs and values.

Language in this process plays a fascinating and complex double role: it is a medium for as well as shaper of culture. It is worth mentioning that language without cultural relevance is nearly useless. Yet successfully teaching the cultural element in our foreign language classes remains elusive. We applied to the collective work of R. Michael Paige and H. Jorstad “Culture Learning in Language Education”⁸ and found the conceptual model of culture learning that can be adapted to language classes. As Lustig and Koester⁹ mention,

culture-specific learning refers to the acquisition of knowledge and skills relevant to a given “target culture,” i.e., a particular culture group or community. Culture-general learning, on the other hand, refers to knowledge and skills that are more generalizable in nature and transferable across cultures. This body of knowledge includes, among other things, the concept of culture, the nature of cultural adjustment and learning, the impact of culture on communication and interaction between individuals or groups, the stress associated with intense culture and language immersions, coping strategies for dealing with stress, the role of emotions in cross-cultural, cross-linguistic interactions, and so forth. Culture-general skills include the capacity to display respect for and interest in the culture, the ability to be a self-sustaining culture learner and to draw on a variety of resources for that learning, tolerance and patience in cross-cultural situations, control of emotions and emotional resilience, and the like¹⁰. The conceptual model of culture learning includes:

- 1) *knowledge*, i.e. *culture general: intercultural phenomena* (cultural adjustment stages, culture shock, intercultural development, culture learning, cultural identity, cultural marginality); *culture specific* (“little c” target culture knowledge and “Big C” target culture knowledge, pragmatics, sociolinguistic competence);
- 2) *behaviour*, i.e. *culture general: intercultural skills* (culture learning strategies, coping and stress management strategies, intercultural communicative competence, intercultural perspective-taking skills, cultural adaptability, transcultural competence); *culture specific: target culture skills* (little “c” culture—appropriate everyday behaviour, Big “C” culture—appropriate contextual behaviour);
- 3) *attitudes*, i.e. *culture general* (positive attitude toward different cultures, positive attitude toward culture learning, ethnorelative attitude regarding cultural differences); *culture specific* (positive attitude toward target culture persons, positive attitude toward target culture).

The distinction between attitudes, behaviour and knowledge (the affective, behavioral and cognitive domains of learning) is also based on the pioneering work of such psychologists as Bloom (1964), such interculturalists as Damen (1987), for an extensive review of culture learning models, who highlighted the idea of conceptual perspective recognition of culture studies among foreign language teachers. The more research literature we read, the more we came to realize that for language and culture learning, context is an overarching concept which subsumes many other variables including: the setting; the teacher; the learner; instructional methods; instructional materials; and assessment approaches.

Language and culture have an inextricable and interdependent relationship. R. Mitchell and F. Myles argue that “language and culture are not separate, but are acquired together, with each providing support for the development of the other”¹¹. This relationship can be reflected in terms such as

lingua culture (Friedrich, 1989), *lingua culture* (Risager, 2005), *language-and-culture* (Liddicoat *et alii*, 2003) or *culture language* (Papademetre *et alii*, 2006). It is also shown in cultural denotations and connotations in semantics (Byram, 1990), cultural norms in communication and the mediatory role of language in the social construction of culture (Kramersch, 1998). Liddicoat *et alii* (2003) also claim that language and culture interacts with each other in a way that culture connects to all levels of language use and structures; i.e. there is no level of language which is independent of culture.

Merriam Webster Learner's Dictionary defines "identity" as follows: *the qualities, beliefs, etc., that make a particular person or group different from others.* As we grow, we establish our own identities. Identity is also often associated with *personality*. People who seem to lack individual identity might tend to not have a strong feeling about exactly the kind of people they are.

As our world becomes more and more culturally diverse, we, language teachers, should make some changes in the educational curriculum aiming at teaching a foreign language with a strong focus on speaking. Introducing in university course such theoretical aspects as culture and cultural contacts, culture and its influence on communication, elements of culture, cultural barriers in relation to the language, cultural diversity: ethnic minorities and ethnic majority etc., we fill our practical lessons with *tasks for developing intercultural awareness and perception* (describing and commenting on visual and auditive impressions; personal impression and interpretation of pictures), *tasks for developing communicative competence in intercultural situations* (analysing the effect of speech acts and their linguistic realisations, analysing socio-cultural features of certain text types, cultural interplay, adopting roles in a discussion).

We would like to share our ideas how to explore the concept of cultural identity in language classes.

Lesson *objectives* are:

- to help clarify the definition of culture and let students relate the concept to their own lives.
- to provide a creative way for students to begin defining their own cultural identity.
- to encourage students to recognize about the differences and similarities of the people.

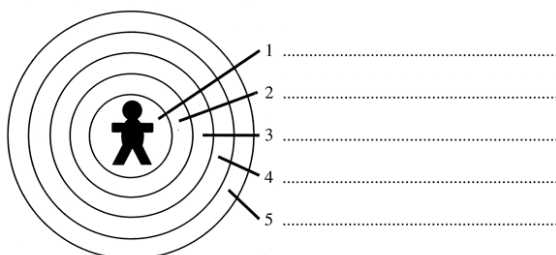
Activities/Procedures

Warm-up/conversation starters:

Write the word "identity" on the board and ask students to brainstorm its meanings. Keep track of students' responses with a concept or mind map. Students will most likely begin to call out answers that fall into the following categories, among others:

- | | |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • possessions or material objects • interests • people/family • community • character traits | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • personality • goals • ethnicity • religion • geography |
|--|--|

A question teachers might ask is whether identity is just another word for asking, "Who am I on the inside? Who am I on the outside?" tell the students that they are going to read and discuss oral stories where identity plays an important part in people's views of and interactions with the world.

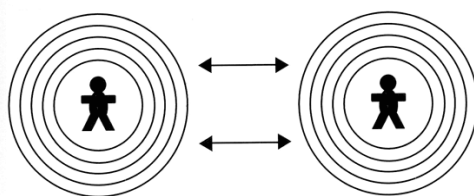


As a variation of ideas suggested above, the following are taken from "Educational Pack", 1995, Council of Europe, Strasbourg. The teacher can ask students: *What are the most important things which make up your identity? Write them next to the numbers 1-5, with number 1 being the most important to you.*

Some of these will be related to:

- the roles the person plays in life: a daughter, a friend, a school student, a baker, a banker;
- the parts of person's identity he may be able to choose: fan of a certain type of music, member of a political party, style of clothes;
- where the person was born, where he lives now;
- belonging to a minority group or not;
- religion;
- what the person does not want to be.

Identity is not only a question of how we perceive ourselves:



The authors of "Education Pack" suggest another pictogram for the students. They try to organize oral debates on discussing personal identity:

- Continuing the vegetable analogy, what happens if one onion calls another a tulip bulb?
- Labelling some people as a "minority group" may be done by others. Who are we? And who are they?
- Our social identity has to do with values and symbols. We divide students into groups because there seems to be a need to be different from others. We need to give values to our group (class, family, friends) which give us a positive value of ourselves. The danger lies

in putting negative values on those who are not part of our group. Putting people in boxes denies them the possibility of being anything else (group activity).

Practicing the ideas described above during our classes, we enriched learners' experience with creative research activities - "What's in a name?" Students had to think about the *origin* of their names. The issues that they expressed at their presentations were the following:

- Thoughts and feelings you have about your own name;
- You like it or not, you think it suits you or not;
- Your name has/has not an influence on the way you regard yourself;
- Your name's signification.

We would like to share some passages from their answers.

"...I was named Natalia thanks to my father. He has three sisters. They are: Natalia, Tatiana and Elena. He told my mother that she should choose one of these names. My mother had chosen the name of "Natalia". People with this name have a deep inner desire to create and express themselves, often in public speaking, acting, writing or singing. They also tend to have beauty around them in their home and work environment. People with this name tend to be a powerful force to all whose lives they touch. They are capable, charismatic leaders who often undertake large endeavors with great success. They value truth, justice and discipline and may be quick tempered with those who do not. If they fail to develop their potential, they may become impractical and rigid..."

"...I have always been interested in the origin of my name and what the meaning of my name is. To my mind, this research helped me to find the answers on my questions. Let me begin by pointing out that many scientists believe that my name is a Russian, Catholic, Slavonic and Orthodox name and besides I rather know that my name is a Polish one. My name has several version of the origin. On the one hand, my name comes from male name *Yoann*, which arrives from the ancient Hebrew name and which means: "God is gracious". I think this is a primary meaning of my name. On the other hand, it is a Slavonic name, which comes from a Slavonic word. This word means a river which was called "Yana"...

"...My name is *Corina*. Have you got any idea where this name comes from? Now I'm going to tell you what kind of secret my name keeps. It came from Greece. Goddess Persephone was called "Kore", which means "Maiden". By the aid of suffix "inna", "Kore" was modified into "Corina", which means "little girl". My name sounds the same both in official documents and everyday life. I hate diminutives like: *Corincic*, *Corinuța*, *Corinica*, *Corinel*. It sounds stupid and childish. My friends know this and do not even try to call me like that, but I have found an attractive variant *Karina* in the Russian language. Before I was born my parents knew what name I'll have. They simply liked it, it was in fashion then and keeps being. My name suits my character, for sure. The people named "Corina" have a noble attitude and always think before to say something. They're shy and have great imagination. So am I..."

Identity and diversity issues: Movie watching and discussion

Life is often about understanding, negotiating and coming together with others. Where do we see compromise occur? We suggest watching “My Big Fat Greek Wedding” not only for pleasure, but also for rising socio-cultural competences and an outstanding experience; to see the two cultures clash and get a better insight into Greek culture. “My Big Fat Greek Wedding” is a romantic comedy; about a 30-year-old single woman living in Chicago named Toula Portokalos. As a Greek descendant girl, being raised by a very traditional family, she faces the deep questions of priorities in life. Ranging from the role of family in a contemporary society, to the pressures placed upon her by her cultural norms. “My Big Fat Greek Wedding” (2002) shows views of the world of traditional Greek culture, the food, the loudness, and the strong family values. The movie shows the key sociological concepts of accommodation because it portrays the need to overcome ethnic differences without diminishing the beauty of ethnic traditions.

As *pre-watching activities* we suggest:

(1) vocabulary practice:

“The other girls were blond and *delicate*, and I was a *swarthy* six year old with *sideburns*” (If a girl is “delicate,” she is pleasing to look at. A person who is “swarthy” has dark colored skin or complexion, like people from the Mediterranean. “Sideburns” refer to hair that grows down the face, in front of the ears).

“It’s *moussaka*. Mous-ca-ca!” (“Moussaka” is a well-known Greek dish made from meat and eggplant).

“Our house was modeled after *the Parthenon*, complete with Corinthian columns and guarded by statues of the Gods” (If a building is “modeled after” another one, it is made to look similar to it. The “Parthenon” is a famous structure that was built in Ancient Greece, in Athens. “Corinthian columns” refer to thick white posts that were used to make buildings in Corinthian society, which was part of ancient Greece).

As *post-watching activities* we suggest the following:

(1) *multiple-choice quiz*:

What does Portokalos (Toula's last name) mean in Greek in “My Big Fat Greek Wedding”?

- orange (the colour);
- orange (the fruit).

What is for good luck and keeps the devil away in “My Big Fat Greek Wedding”?

- lighting Incense;
- praying;
- spitting on people’s head;
- dancing a spiritual dance.

Questions for group discussion:

1. This movie seems to be about Greek-American culture. In fact, is it really about all kinds of ethnic Americans?
2. If you were Ian, would you have agreed to join another church in order to marry Toula?
3. How can your family be compared to Toula's? What about comparing it to Ian's?
4. Has the United States largely succeeded in creating a great "melting pot" (in which people from all cultures have blended together), or is it more like a "salad bowl" (in which people from different cultures stick to their own groups)?
5. What did Toula's father mean when he said, "My daughter is marrying into a family that is dry -- like toast."?
6. What did Toula and Ian like about each other? What did they like about each other's families? What did they misunderstand about each other's families?
7. What did Toula's brother Nick mean when he said (quoting Dear Abby), "Don't let your past dictate who you are, but let it be part of who you will become?" Tell why you agree or disagree with the statement.

Written practice:

Language teachers are often exposed to issues related to identity, especially when it comes to academic writing. For instance, the writing activity "Losing Identity".

Complete the following text, using the suggested words:

native | communicate | immigrants | countries | speak | generation | language
| identity | America | English |

Language is a way to ... with each other. We started to learn ... when we were born. However, people are used to speaking their ... language, because ... are having many problems between the first ... and the second ... , because they don't have the same ... language. Also, the second ... is losing their Especially in ..., there are many ... that came from different ... to succeed in the States. They suffer in lots of areas such as getting a job and trying to ... English; they want their children to speak ..., not only at school, but also at home in order to be more successful.

Questions for class discussion:

- When people from other countries think about your culture, what do they usually think of?
- If you could change one thing about your culture, what would it be?
- What is considered rude in your culture?

- If you could choose three aspects of your culture to put in a "time box" for the future, what would you put in it?

An important aspect of foreign language learning consists of acquiring the formal elements of the target language. The link between language and culture in the process of learning a foreign language is reflected in the meaning and usage of the elements of the target language. It is essential to find meaningful ways to incorporate the richness of students' cultural backgrounds into the curriculum. Recognizing and validating multiple cultural identities in the classroom community and developing positive student-teacher relationships strengthen individuals' sense of worth and, ultimately, their academic performance.

Notes

¹Byram, 1990, p. 18.

²Benahnia, 1992, p. 34.

³Kramersch, 1998, p. 85.

⁴*ibidem*, p. 13.

⁵Lambert, 2000, p. 166.

⁶Hongwei, 1999, p. 121.

⁷Lambert, 2000, p. 172.

⁸Paige *et alii*.

⁹*apud* Damen, 1987.

¹⁰cf. Lustig *et alii*, 1996, *apud* Damen, 1987; Myers *et alii*, 1995, *apud* Damen, 1987.

¹¹Mitchell *et alii*, 2004, p. 235.

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