
Teaching Teachers: The Importance of Teaching the Target Culture to EFL Teachers

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Linguistics scholars have argued that cultural competence is an important aspect of foreign language learning (Brown, 1987; Byram & Morgan, 1994; Heusinkveld, 1997; Stern, 1983; Zaid, 1999). Understanding the culture of a language helps language learners view the world from a different perspective. In addition, it increases awareness of the diverse ideas and practices of different societies (Tseng, 2002). Although researchers have demonstrated the importance of teaching the target culture that underlies a language, few of them have addressed the need for language teachers to be knowledgeable about the target culture. Consequently, some language instructors have ignored teaching culture or have relegated it to a secondary role (Tseng, 2002).

Indeed, in spite of the appeal of the idea that one must learn the culture of the target language, familiarizing teachers with the target culture is challenging. This is particularly true in the case of EFL teachers who may not have first-hand knowledge of or experience with the culture. Additionally, language teachers' education is sometimes disconnected from the real practice of teaching (Foster, Lewis, & Onafowora, 2003) as teacher training often focuses more on theories than on gaining practical teaching experience. This results in teachers lacking an understanding of students' expectations and needs. Negative outcomes may result from EFL teachers not being trained (i.e., as sociologists or anthropologists) to teach the target culture (Sauvé, 1996). Unaware or untrained teachers are potentially a source of false information to their students. They may provide students with biases or incorrect information about the target culture.

To address the issue of lack of cultural training in EFL teacher education, first, I examine different definitions of culture and explain the relationship between language and culture. Then, I discuss the importance of teaching teachers the target culture and provide practical suggestions for doing so.

Definitions of Culture

Despite agreement about the importance of teaching culture in the language classroom, there is little consensus concerning what constitutes culture (Heusinkveld,

1997). The British-Polish anthropologist, Malinowski (1939), asserts that culture is “the most central problem of all social sciences” (p. 948). Without a proper definition of culture, however, research about teaching culture is flawed. A clear definition must not only identify what is meant by the term, but must also distinguish it from other related terms. For example, culture has sometimes been defined as the literature or civilization of a country (Brooks, 1997).

Ovando and Collier (1985) suggest that culture consists of two components: the 3Fs (facts, faces, and fiestas), and high civilization. Other scholars refer to these categories as culture with a small “c” and culture with capital “C” (e.g., see Brooks, 1997). In the first category, culture is stereotyped by replacing people with events, and concepts with terms. For instance, if a teacher asks EFL students what they know about American citizens, they may respond that Americans celebrate Thanksgiving, demonstrating familiarity with an event, but not the everyday life of the people. The second component reduces culture to knowledge of the best of a culture’s civilization such as its art, music, or literature. These categories restrict culture and foster the concept of culture as static. Although both categories are important, they are incomplete. Culture is in constant change and requires a more in-depth approach.

Table 1 summarizes additional attempts to define culture. These can be categorized into two types of definitions. The first depicts culture as a set of prescribed rules of social conduct (e.g., see Brooks, 1997; Harris & Moran, 1979). This set of definitions focuses on human or social interaction as the key ingredient of culture. Culture identifies how the individual is expected to behave in various life situations. Thus, different cultures will prescribe different ways of behavior. The second type of definition focuses on culture as a filter of perception and cognition (e.g., see Frake, 1981; Gudykunst & Kim, 1984). In this sense, culture is not only a set of prescribed behaviors, but a way of perceiving and thinking. In other words, each culture has a common way of thinking and behaving.

Table 1
Definitions of Culture

| Researcher | Defiintion |
|------------------------------|--|
| Brooks, 1997, p. 23 | Culture “refers to the individual’s role in the unending kaleidoscope of life situations of every kind and the rules and models for attitude and conduct in them. By reference to these models, every human being, from infancy onward, justifies the world to himself as best he can, associates with those around him, and relates to the social order to which he is attached.” |
| Harris & Moran, 1979, p. 57 | “Culture is the unique life style of a particular group of people.” |
| Frake, 1981, p. 375-376 | “Culture . . . provides a set of principles for map-making and navigation. Different cultures are like schools of navigation designed to cope with different terrains and seas.” |
| Gudykunst & Kim, 1984, p. 11 | “Culture refers to that relatively unified set of shared symbolic ideas associated with societal patterns of cultural ordering.” |

Language and Culture

The idea that language and culture are interdependent has had a substantial impact on the field of second language acquisition. Learning the syntactic and semantic rules of the language is necessary but not sufficient for communication in that language (e.g., see Brown, 1987; Heusinkveld, 1997; Sapir, 1949; Seelye, 1984; Tseng, 2002). Byram and Morgan (1994) state that “knowledge of the grammatical system of a language [grammatical competence] has to be complemented by an understanding of culture-specific meanings [communicative or cultural competence]” (p. 4). Thus, to teach (or learn) a second language, one must teach (or learn) the culture of that language. In fact, disregarding aspects such as pragmatics and sociolinguistics in teaching foreign languages can only cause misunderstanding and lead to cross-cultural miscommunication. Thus, language is not an “autonomous construct” (Fairclough,

2001, p. vi), but a set of social practices. In other words, in order for communication to be successful, language use must be associated with culturally appropriate behaviors.

On the other hand, some scholars argue that teaching culture implicitly or explicitly to EFL students may have a negative impact (e.g., see Zaid, 1999). For example, Muslim EFL students always say *Inshallah* (God willing) whenever they talk about the future, and EFL teachers may correct students when they use this expression in speaking English as it is not used in native English-speaking cultures (Zaid, 1999). This is an instance in which the student's native culture conflicts with the target culture. Hyde (1994), however, disputes the notion that teaching the target culture "undermines the students' view of their own language and culture, or leads them to adopt a defensive mechanism or to reject their own cultural values" (p. 301). Chastain (1976) notes that "affinity for and commitment to a second culture is a personal matter that should remain in the realm of the student's own prerogative" (p. 384). Indeed, proponents of teaching the target culture argue that EFL students do not need to modify their schemata to acquire the new culture.

To avoid potential negative consequences of teaching the target culture, teachers should select materials and design activities which do not conflict with students' native cultures. The role of the language teacher is to promote understanding of the target culture, not to force it upon students. Chastain (1976) states that "if the teacher attempts to indoctrinate the students with attitudes from the second culture, he/she will most likely be rejected by the majority of his/her students" (p. 383). EFL teachers should find "ways of promoting positive feelings toward the L2 culture" (Savignon, 1983, p. 113), and to minimize possible conflicts that would negatively impact language learning.

A second possible solution is to nativize the second language (Hyde, 1994). With this approach, the transplanted language becomes independent of its own culture. For example, India created its own Hollywood for the film industry and named it Bollywood. Another example of this would be to allow EFL Muslim students to use the expression "God willing" when they talk about the future in English without being corrected or made to conform to L2 cultural standards of behavior and thought.

The Importance of Teaching Culture to Teachers

Byram and Risagar (1999) affirm that language teachers should act as mediators between learners and the target culture. They state that "it is the language teacher's capacity and responsibility to help learners to understand others and otherness as a basis for the acquisition of cultural and communicative competence" (p. 58). Stern (1983) states that since "language conveys culture, so the language teacher is also a necessity

to the teacher of culture” (p. 25). Language teachers are responsible for providing the cultural information that underlies the language (Zaid, 1999).

However, in practice, many foreign language teachers focus on grammatical competence and ignore teaching the target culture, and scholars disagree about what aspects of culture should be taught. Kramsch (1991), for instance, says that language teachers often reduce their culture teaching to the “four Fs: food, fairs, folklore and statistical facts” (p. 218). Mantle-Bromley (1997) asserts that language teachers need to go beyond the traditional definition of culture, which is limited to the fine arts. Seelye (1984) provides the most all encompassing suggestions for approaching culture. He believes that teachers should focus on helping students (a) understand how culture conditions behavior, (b) learn how social variables (i.e., age, sex, social class, and place of residence) affect the way people speak and behave, (c) become familiar with the conventional behavior of people in ordinary and crisis situations, (d) develop an awareness that culturally conditioned images are associated with many common target words and phrases, (e) demonstrate the ability to evaluate statements about a society, (f) demonstrate the ability to locate and organize information about the target culture from the library, mass media, people, and personal observation, and (g) demonstrate intellectual curiosity about the target culture and empathy for its people.

Language teachers must be aware of the target culture and be trained to teach it. Otherwise, negative consequences may occur which prevent cultural competence. For example, an untrained teacher may encourage cultural stereotypes. Stereotypical explanations influence students’ perceptions of and attitudes toward the new culture and language (Kramsch, 1998; Tseng, 2002). In addition, cultural stereotyping may create “cultural boundaries between [language learners] and others” (Kramsch, 1998, p. 80). Accordingly, a teacher must “avoid value judgments from without because of the danger of calling bad what is merely different, or calling good what is merely pleasing to the outside observer” (Rivers, 1981, p. 323). Chastain (1976) argues that “if the culture is presented in such a way that false impressions arise, the alternative of ‘no culture’ is preferable” (p. 405). In other words, teaching culture should promote tolerance, peace, and communication among cultures. Teachers need to approach teaching the target culture so as to overcome the stereotypical attitudes and negative perceptions of students.

The second negative effect of not teaching the target culture is the possibility of creating a third culture interpretation. Teachers’ unawareness of the target culture may lead students to create a third culture interpretation apart from the meanings approved by the target language community (Kramsch, 1993). Students cannot rely on only their own schemata to interpret the new culture. Zaid (1999) states that “schema theory holds that a culture develops its own schemata” (p. 112). For example, asking a student of

English to read about Thanksgiving without the benefit of background information about this holiday may cause that student to misinterpret the readings.

The last negative outcome of not teaching the target culture is the probability of exposing the language learners to culture shock (Ellis, 1985). Ellis (1985) defines culture shock as the “disorientating stress and fear, which a learner experiences as a result of differences between his or her own culture and that of the target language community” (p. 252). According to Brown (1987), teachers who are unaware of the target culture will not be able to help learners “step into the shoes of members of the foreign culture” (p. 38). Therefore, language teachers need to help students compare their native culture and the target culture to identify what is similar and what is different (Edgerton, 1971; Lado, 1964). For example, the use of inconsistent body language with words or expressions that are similar in both languages may confuse the receiver and cause misinterpretation.

Incorporating Culture in Teachers’ Training: Practical Considerations

The issue now is how to include culture in language teacher training to enhance awareness of the target culture. Admittedly, language teachers are themselves learners, constantly improving their own cultural competence (Byram & Risagar, 1999). Teachers must be made aware that there are no superior and inferior cultures, and that there are differences among groups within the target culture. Ellis (1992) states that teachers are “not in the classroom to confirm the prejudices of [their] students or to attack their deeply held convictions. He adds that the teachers’ task is to stimulate students’ interest in the target culture, and to help in establishing the foreign language classroom “not so much as a place where the language is taught, but as one where opportunities for learning of various kinds are provided through the interactions that take place between the participants” (p. 171). The following ideas can be used to elicit the fundamental aspects of the target culture. They provide teachers with opportunities to learn from their experiences, and develop flexibility in their teaching styles.

Teacher Travel

One of the suggestions that can be applied in teacher preparation programs is to provide opportunities for teachers to travel abroad for one semester or more to complete a degree or engage in further studies. This opportunity can lead to increased mutual respect and the enrichment and progress of culture teaching. Byram and Risagar (1999) report that “tolerance can only be developed if [learners] have personal contacts with people abroad, live with them, work with them, and so on” (p. 115).

Related to this travel opportunity, EFL teachers may be able to conduct an ethnographic study to explore and appreciate cultural differences. The use of ethnography in second language contexts is primarily a means of learning about small ‘c’ culture (e.g., see Robinson-Stuart & Nocon, 1996), thereby developing intercultural competence. An ethnographic study provides an opportunity for teachers to analyze and investigate their preconceived ideas about their culture and the target culture. For instance, teachers can compare topics such as marriage, race, or religion to identify differences and similarities in the home and target cultures. To do this, teachers would investigate a concept from their home culture by retrieving information, talking about it from experience, and expressing an attitude toward it. This stage takes place in the home country. Then, they examine the same concept, but in the target culture. In this stage, they need to interview and observe people from the target culture to see the cultural nature of the beliefs and behaviors associated with the concept.

In this way, teachers learn how to be critical and analyze information that may contradict their stereotypes. Living in the target culture gives teachers an opportunity to learn the practices and behaviors of the target culture from the inside and provides “a pedagogical tool to promote positive attitudes towards speakers of the language studied” (Robinson-Stuart & Nocon, 1996, p. 431).

Online Applications

Since many EFL teachers learn the target language and its culture within their own culture and cannot travel abroad, one way to develop their awareness and knowledge is to provide an opportunity to use authentic materials and to interact with them. This can be accomplished by establishing online courses or connections in which both nonnative and native speakers are enrolled. Trainers can include electronic discussions about teaching methods, require trainees to watch videos of English language classes from different parts of the world, and discuss classroom events and materials with their online classmates. Through these discussions, teachers can challenge their assumptions and understand the underlying significance of various cultural actions. This application can be available for teachers within a methodology course or as a separate tool for self-teaching.

In addition, EFL teachers can consider using online dialogue journals. Dialogue journals are often used to have conversations in writing in language and literacy classrooms. However, they can also be used for professional development purposes in order to extend interaction time between ESL and EFL teachers who cannot meet for reasons of time or distance. This activity provides a solution to possible time conflicts that are an issue with live electronic discussions as teachers can post their comments to their colleagues whenever they want.

Furthermore, the teacher preparation program can develop a WebQuest application. This application is an inquiry-oriented activity in which most of the information that learners interact with comes from resources on the internet. A WebQuest contains the following parts: 1) an *introduction* that sets the stage and provides background information, 2) a *task* that is doable and interesting, 3) a set of *information sources* needed to complete the task, 4) a description of the *process* the learners should go through in accomplishing the task, 5) *guidance* for organizing the information acquired, 6) a *conclusion* that brings closure to the quest, and 7) an *evaluation* form. WebQuest is designed to motivate and create an authentic atmosphere for the learners. It uses scaffolding or prompting which has been shown to facilitate more advanced thinking. This activity enables teachers to explore and research the culture and customs of American culture, learn information about different aspects of American culture, and develop a respect and tolerance of people from different cultures.

Another suggestion for utilizing the internet in a training program is to create a cross-cultural teacher listserv that is open to teachers around the world to share their experiences teaching the target culture to EFL students. A listserv is a mailing list program for communicating with other people who have subscribed to the same list, using e-mail. By subscribing to this online service, teachers are able to ask, post, and discuss their concerns about teaching the target culture with native and nonnative speakers. It helps them expand their vision beyond one solution or method. Through these activities, pre- and in-service teachers can expand their awareness and knowledge of the target culture.

Cross-cultural Communication Courses

Another suggestion for improving courses within a teacher training program is to consider the inclusion of a cross-cultural communication course in which sociocultural strategies are taught (e.g., see Savignon & Sysoyev, 2002). One of these strategies is the identification and interpretation of unfamiliar features of an L2 culture. Trainees need to investigate discourse patterns across cultures, analyze the assumptions underlying various language teaching methodologies, and evaluate their appropriateness for target learner groups.

Teacher Club

Another idea to promote cultural learning is for teachers in the training program to form a club and invite members of the target culture who live in their country to participate in club activities. These target culture guests could include English teachers working in the country or those employed in other sectors. The club is a place where English teachers can meet members of the target culture in a casual setting. The teachers

have the chance to ask questions about the target culture. Topics could be set for discussions, and club members can explore cross-cultural differences and similarities. In addition, they are able to make friendships with those from the target culture as they get involved in various cultural activities.

Based on the club activities, teachers can be asked to create an action log. An action log is a notebook used for written reflection on club activities. Teachers complete an entry in their log books after each meeting in which they record their discussion partners' name, the topic for their discussion, their comments about what they discussed, and what they think they achieved. At the end of the course, they can combine all their action logs to create one action log to be used as a reference for themselves and new trainees. By requiring teachers to evaluate their discussions and cultural exchanges, they can better understand and appreciate the target culture. In addition, they will be able to share what they have learned with each other.

Conclusion

Although researchers have declared the importance of teaching the target culture, few of them have addressed how language teachers can learn about it. In fact, language teachers may even encourage various problems such as cultural stereotypes, creating a third culture, and/or culture shock that hinder students from successful language learning and cultural understanding. To prevent frustrations and possible failures due to teachers' unawareness of the target culture, teacher education programs need to provide ways to familiarize future teachers with the target culture. Ideally, this can be accomplished by exposure to and direct experience in the target culture through teacher travel. However, if this is not possible, other possibilities can be used such as the internet for intercultural interactions or the inclusion of a cross-cultural communication course. Future English teachers can also learn about the target culture from native speakers who are living in the EFL environment. In these ways, teachers can gain a greater understanding of the target culture and overcome the negative outcomes that can result from a lack of awareness of the target culture.

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