

## **Culture and Discourse-Syllabus based in EFL Teaching and Learning Classes: The Case of Second Year EFL Higher Education learners, department of English**

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### **Abstract**

In the EFL teaching and learning field, learners not only need the necessary rules of the language but the art to practice it meaningfully and correctly in social and cultural appropriate contexts too. As a key issue in “communicative language teaching”, this study focuses on the importance of culture and discourse in teaching English as a foreign language in the Algerian higher education context resorting facts which make languages overlap and different. This paper, sheds light on the role of teachers in implementing culture in the language teaching syllabus and courses. It aims at helping language learners to interact with native speakers and reflect on the target language culture and raising awareness on their proper culture as well. According to us, this will not only reinforce interaction and communication but will also set a social and cultural network between both actors. Therefore, the paper at hand is a two folds objectives: ways, techniques and strategies to access the cultural dimension in practical ways; and integrating and implementing intercultural dimensions and discourse as an EFL syllabus.

**Keywords:** language, culture, discourse, teaching, learning.

الملخص:

في مجال تعليم وتعلم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، لا يحتاج المتعلمين فقط إلى القواعد اللغوية اللازمة، بل أيضا إلى الطرق والوسائل لممارسة ذلك بشكل صحيح وهادف في السياقات الاجتماعية والثقافية المناسبة. بينما يعتبر "تدريس اللغة التواصلية" قضية أساسية ورئيسية، تركز

هذه الدراسة على أهمية الثقافة والخطاب في تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في سياق التعليم العالي في الجزائر باللجوء للحقائق التي تجعل اللغات متداخلة ومختلفة فيما بينها. تسلط هذه الورقة البحثية الضوء على دور المعلمين في إدراج الجانب الثقافي في مناهج تدريس اللغة والدروس. كما تهدف أيضا إلى مساعدة متعلمي اللغة على التفاعل مع الناطقين بها والتبصر في ثقافة اللغة من أجل رفع مستوى الوعي حول ثقافتهم الصحيحة أيضا. كما أن هذا الجانب- حسب رأينا- سوف لن يعزز فقط التفاعل والتواصل، ولكن يساهم أيضا في إنشاء شبكة اجتماعية وثقافية بين من الأطراف الفاعلة. ولذلك، فإن هذه الورقة البحثية تسعى في طياتها إلى هدفين هما تبيان الطرق والتقنيات والاستراتيجيات للوصول إلى البعد الثقافي في السبل العملية وكذلك دمج وتحقيق أبعاد متعددة الثقافات والخطاب باعتباره منهج اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية.

## **Introduction**

When two people talk to each other, they do not only exchange information they also learn about the way of how the other interacts because he belongs to a specific group. This includes a teacher and a student or a worker with his boss. That is, the social identities of speaking people cannot be avoided in their interactions. For that, the communicative competence concept gives a great importance not only to what a language as a system comprises. Rather, it gives importance to what is appropriate to language use. Thus, since the foreign language classroom has been considered as an ideal setting to raise the students' awareness about the cultures associated with the target language, teachers should not focus on the target language mastery only; but they should enable their students to develop inter-culturality notions and principles, and measure their abilities to understand the culture of the other vehicle through the target language too.

## **Insights into the main research paper fields**

### **Inter-cultural Competence**

Language is recognized as an important part to set dialogues between nations and people for mutual benefits in economy and security. Kramsch (1993) has noted that every time we speak, we perform a cultural act which implies that culture is embedded within the spoken language. Crozet and Liddicoat (2000) argue that the communicative approach to language teaching has failed to explicitly focus on the socio - cultural supporting of language. Hence, someone whose social identities include being 'a teacher' has to acquire the knowledge, values, and behaviors shared with other teachers through a process of socialization since an intercultural speaker needs some knowledge to deal with the different contexts. As a result, it is worth mentioning the major components of intercultural competence.

#### **-Crucial Constituents**

The backbone components of intercultural competence are knowledge, language skills and attitudes. Moreover, because individuals belong to different and varied social groups, the values and profiles they simultaneously reflect are of great importance too as they do impact on the communicative skills and reveal each community social identity and behavior. The aforementioned constituents comprise the following concepts:

- **Intercultural Attitudes:** which gather curiosity and openness, readiness to get rid of any disbelief about the learner's own culture and the culture of the other. It is actually a map route to figure out and accept one's own values, beliefs and behaviors, and fight against narcissism which would present each individual's attitudes as the most correct modals. We believe that sound intercultural attitudes are highlighted through the notion of

“acceptance and readiness to correct, cope with the other’s attitudes so as to build a sound community of interaction and agreement”.

- **Knowledge:** It refers to the amount of known information social groups share, their products and practices in their own and in their interlocutor’s country, and of the general processes of social and individual interaction. So, knowledge can be defined as having two major types: knowledge of social processes, and knowledge representing illustrations of some processes and products; the second includes knowledge apprehension of other people’s behavior

- **Skills of Interpreting and Relating:** It is the ability to interpret a document or event that belongs to another culture, to explain and relate it to documents or events from the appropriate culture.

- **Skills of Discovery and Interaction:** It is the ability to learn new knowledge of other cultures and cultural practices and the ability to practice knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction.

- **Critical Cultural Awareness:** It is the ability to evaluate, critically and on the basis of explicit criteria, perspectives, practices and products in person’s own and other countries’ cultures. The role of the language teacher is consequently based on developing skills, attitudes and awareness of values just as much as developing a knowledge of a particular culture or country. (Byram, Gribvoka, & Starkey, 2002)

### **Different Cultures and One Identity:**

Intercultural dimension in language teaching aims to develop learners as intercultural speakers or mediators to engage into complexity and multiple identities and to avoid the stereotype which accompanies perceiving someone through a single identity. Pauwels (2000) notes that many language learners have only limited access to real life situations where they can use the target language. As a result, she finds it difficult for learners to acquire intercultural understanding naturally. Therefore, she proposes that cultural knowledge should be implicitly integrated within language needs to be explicit.

In designing and enacting the curriculum that should be used as a key factor in making students aware of the intercultural dimensions, some interrelated questions should be asked:

1. What knowledge do we want learners to develop (valued / conceptualized)?
2. Which substance and process should we be teaching?
3. How can we measure the students' knowledge development? (eliciting their knowing, judging knowing, and warranting the judgments to be made)

## **Teaching English Culture**

### **Definition of Culture**

There is no exhaustive definition related to culture nor about the objective way that considers its meaning. Culture has been understood in different ways. Its definition has been related to products such as literature and the arts, history and institutions, traditions and customs, religion and beliefs, and practices such as festivals and popular phenomena (Liddicoat, 2004). In this context however, culture refers to “shared understandings and practices within groups of people” (Menard- Warwick, 2008: 622). This includes

products and practices; but more crucially, it contains “understandings”, or perspectives in addition to values and ways of seeing the world. Despite the fact that these practices, perspectives, and products are shared, they also display a host deal of group differences, and are continually in the process of change which make it difficult to find a static and exact definition of the term culture. Therefore, understanding both cultures; the learner’s own and the other’s is a “must be” as not all cultures are similar and easy to understand.

### **Cultural Awareness versus Inter-culturality**

Cultural awareness is attained when individuals learn about acknowledge, and focus on differences, while inter-culturality (Byram, 1997) includes a respect of these differences as well as the capacity to see oneself and one’s culture through the eyes of another (Kramsch, 2005). In other words, intercultural competence refers to “the general ability to transcend ethnocentrism, appreciate other cultures, and generate appropriate behavior in one or more different cultures” (Bennet, & Allen, 1999: 13).

### **Inter-culturality as teaching and learning class content**

The main objective of intercultural language teaching and learning is therefore to have users explicitly skilled in understanding connections and differences between their own culture and the culture of the target language. Intercultural language learning is dedicated to involve culture as an experience of personal growth and as a measurement support to any change in behaviors, attitudes and beliefs. The focus is directed towards the learner’s culture, then others’ culture highlighting the differences between them. Corbett (2003) describes a wide range of intercultural teaching strategies such as developing critical visual literacy (the reflective interpretation of images and

media), ethnographic approaches, awareness of genres and conversation modes. According to Liddicoat's (2004, p.20) statement: "we do not have descriptions of what intercultural competence looks like" makes it difficult to be precise in teaching others' cultures. Intercultural language learning is a language learning which develops an inside perspective on the target culture (Sercu, 2002). This can be achieved through;

- Skills in contextual knowledge of the target language and culture;
- A view on culture integration in as the target language teaching and learning;
- Reflective critical understanding of one's own primary languages and cultures;

Further suggestions provided by Scarino (2007) who describes the innovations of intercultural language teaching as:

- ❖ Positioning the student in authentic situations;
- ❖ The development of teacher questions which elicit student's analysis of usage and of meaning; and
- ❖ A shift from purely descriptive use of language to conceptual use.

Yershova, De Jeagbere & Mestenhauser (2000) argue that intercultural perspective and intellectual skills are both integral to developing intercultural competence. There are three major characteristics related to intercultural competence. There are skills, attitudes and values, key to understanding inter-culturality based on sharing, discussing, analyzing critically far from any prejudices and stereotypes, assessing, and being a risk taker while thinking and expressing ideas and feelings.

Moreover, practitioners are also to engage into a world of challenges as they have to respond cutely to their learners' reflections, make use of their experience of otherness in the righteous way. (Byram, Gribvoka, & Starkey, 2002).

### **Teaching Language versus Teaching Culture**

Whether this concerns teaching English as a foreign language or second language acquisition, language is basically related to cultural understandings (Kramsch, 1993).

We are, as teachers and practitioners, aware of the difficulties and the language micro and macro skills' importance to our learners especially when pointing at rules exceptions. Let us consider the regular and irregular plurals of the words as instances with concrete exceptions: a box – boxes; but a knife its plural is irregular: knives, alike for wife –wives, a mouse –mice. This situation might catch our learners in a real and pin heading situation and might also make it difficult for them to keep in mind all these rules of exceptions. Moreover, generalizing rules can lead to errors. This can be referred to as over generalizing, i.e., taking the rule from one language or one culture and applying it in any context and everywhere.

In addition to grammar and the host of rules that govern its mastery, generalizing also may occur in other various fields with an insight to the different cultures. For instance, meeting foreigners, may naturally rise some inquisitiveness and interest to observe their personal characteristics and behaviors likely to focus on the differences. The mental process during observation, help the observer form opinions and conclusions. In doing so, it is common to categorize the new information into similar types of groups already recognized.

Paige et al. (2003: 177) describe inter-cultural competence as:

The process of acquiring the specific culture and general knowledge culture, is based on skills, and attitudes required for effective communication and interaction with individuals from other cultures. It is therefore, a dynamic, developmental, and on-going process which engages the learner' cognitive, behavioral, and affective amount of knowledge.

Developing attitudes and skills which consider knowledge, information about other countries can mutually be taught and learnt. According to Byram, Gribvoka, & Starkey, (2002), skills are as important as attitudes and knowledge, and all of these concepts need equal consideration.

### **Learners' Behaviors in front of multilingualism's differences and similarities**

We strongly believe, on the basis of our EFL learners' behaviors, that the Focus on multilingual teaching and learning differences might likely reinforce negative stereotypes. A focus on similarities however, may help them identify similar points and concepts and may also promote understanding and empathy too. Therefore, on the basis of such a practice, there should be series of appropriate and well-structured activities to enable learners engage into discussions expressing their motives, opinions and sharing similarities about the different themes presented and draw conclusions from the demonstrated experience of the target culture; an outcome emerging from their reading, listening and speaking skills. The teacher, as a mediator and a provider of some factual and most conceivable information on the current cultural life-styles and patterns of the target languages as a comparative content with the learners' own cultural patterns, may

design various activities where the learners display and demonstrate their language skills as well as their ability for analysis and interpretation. For example, foreigners' views about the learners' country as represented in travel guides or in tourist brochures might be compared with the learners' own experience and views about their own country.

As a practical content for comparative studies and analyses, the learners would genuinely show the similar points in both brochures; but unwillingly would also point at the missing information regarding both documents. This ability to resort similarities and express differences although was not assigned, will, according to us, foster the main objectives of the designed activities, more, will provide the practitioner with ample data for measuring the rate of identifying, understanding and discovering new items related to the different cultural content based discourses, and the learners' acceptance extent of the other cultures.

The aforementioned class activities' strategy based on some systematic cultural analyses is directed to foster and cement the learners' linguistic skills as well as display and demonstrate their analyses, interpretations achievements, and their engagement into intercultural dimensions issues as well (Byram, Gribvoka, & Starkey, 2002).

### **Learners as Intercultural Speakers**

Intercultural learning not only helps EFL learners be aware of the target cultures differences and commonalities, know more about their own cultural identity, but develop multiple perspectives as well. Wierzbicka (2006) put it:

It is increasingly acknowledged that cross-cultural communication requires cultural learning, and that ways of speaking associated

with different languages and cultures need to be properly described, understood, and taught. (p. 735)

According to the author, intercultural competence is the achieved ability to understand hidden and contextual meanings and assumptions which are implicit in language and the faculty grasp it. It is actually the ability to analyze discourses and to critically analyze them. Pre-requisites are key elements to intercultural understanding of the target culture and the EFL learner's background culture relativity.

Kohler et al. (2006) suggests that effective language teachers not only develop learners to have positive attitudes towards the target language, cultural differences and similarities, and to language and culture in general; but promote a positive self-image in their students as users of the language and as performers of their own culture.

Scarino (2008) suggests that disregarding the content of language programs towards learners' needs and interests, a shift in focus is needed. The author suggests that there should be a focus on learners as creators of meaning through interaction, as mediators, and as intercultural speakers.

Through comparing the aspects of their culture with others' culture (the target culture), learners will discover and link an understanding of self with the target culture. So much so, the target culture and the taught and learnt language need no longer be viewed as a new and strange phenomenon. In doing so, the following tips may be useful to develop intercultural understanding:

- ✓ Explore definitions of culture;
- ✓ Discuss how language reflects 'micro-cultures' for instance, in a work place, a family or group of friends;

- ✓ Discuss culture explicitly as reflected in the target language;
- ✓ Promote tolerance of ambiguity & of difference;
- ✓ Explore cross-cultural similarities and focus on differences; and
- ✓ Understand that 'culture' can be used negatively to divide people and avoid doing so.

To improve these positive influences, teachers need to filter and monitor the language and attitudes elucidated to students. Exchanging oral messages, discussions is much more important than an opportunity to practice the language learnt in the classroom. It is a holistic learning experience which provides a host of opportunities to demonstrate intercultural skills and acquire new attitudes and values.

Language practice may be limited in case the language user is on a visit rather than when lively or indirectly exchanging discourses whatever their duration. Teachers, in such situations, need clear objectives, methods which consider the power of experiential learning with an eye to '*make the strange familiar and the familiar strange*' as mentioned by (Byram, Gribvoka, & Starkey, 2002).

### **The Procedure: Culture and Discourse-Syllabus based in EFL Teaching and Learning Classes into Practice**

Developing the ability of students to see the world differently is neither an easy task nor automatically and systematically practical. Therefore, teachers must play the contributors and facilitators role because their choice of words can affect their learners' way of learning to view other cultures. This may be done through equipping students with the skills to interpret the language and cultural images which are experienced outside the classroom. Since language teaching and learning develop critical thinking and learning,

learners should be able to develop tolerance towards the other and a better understanding of their own cultural environment. So, critical self-reflection and analytical skills should be part of learning the target language and its culture. The set of questions is asked to validate and measure the students' awareness extent in regard to cultural and intercultural dimensions of language learning and teaching.

**Research issues:** What is the importance and the role of cultural and intercultural dimensions in foreign language teaching and learning?

In which way can cultural and intercultural dimensions affect foreign language learners and the learning process?

On this basis which seeks answers to measure the foreign language learning and teaching process as well as the foreign language learners' ability to engage into a cultural discourse analysis and interpretation, we therefore hypothesize:

**Hypothesis:** If students are taught languages objectively they may be able to engage into a cultural discourse analysis and interpretation demonstrating full understandings of their own culture and the cultures of the others.

### **The Population Sample**

The sample consists of eighty (80) students, i.e., two representative groups of second year English students at the department of English, University of Bejaia. The sample is homogeneous and it fits the research standards because the whole number of second year students of English is about twelve groups with thirty five students per group. So, it is regarded a representative sample for the whole population. We believe the choice is quite adequate to our research case of study as at this level, students are more and more exposed to the English language and its culture. Moreover, a teaching and

learning credit on “the origins of languages and their cultural background” is actually part of their level syllabus which is blended by translation and its theories. These two credits are undoubtedly key issues to the practical part in the designed experimental test.

### **The Experimental Test**

Sentences comprising some proverbs, phrasal verbs and especially idioms have been the design experimental test assigned to our population sample. The focus has been mainly on the last category where students were taught the three types of idioms moving gradually from the simplest to the most difficult, i.e. from transparent idioms to semi-opaque to opaque where the understanding of the meanings becomes more and more difficult and needs a range of analysis, interpretation and understanding abilities.

The test has been composed of two activities; each of which has contained four idiomatic, quotation and/ or proverbial sentences. In the first one the students were required to translate the sentences from English into French far from using the dictionary. For the second task, the students were asked to find out more or less similar proverbs, citations or idioms to their own cultural ones and to give their equivalence in the designed table.

#### **Activity One**

1. He who brings Cola, brings life
2. You may say whatever you want; a tongue has actually no bones
3. Please, don't go bananas!
4. "The spoken word, the sped arrow, the past life, and the neglected opportunity are the four things that never come back".

#### **The translation:**

- 1- Il celui qui ramène le Cola, ramène la vie
- 2- Tu peux dire ce que tu veux, la langue n'a pas d'os
- 3- S'il te plait ne vas pas bananes
- 4- « Il y a quatre chose qui ne reviennent pas : la parole émise, la flèche décochée, la vie passée et l'occasion négligée. »

## Activity Two

English expressions	Algerian Expressions (translated into French)	French expressions
<b>To get cold feet</b>	Mes pieds tremblent de peur	J'ai le trac
<b>When pigs have wings.</b>	Quand les poules auront des dents	Quand les poules auront des dents
<b>It's raining cats and dogs.</b>	Il pleut un fil du ciel	Il pleut des cordes
<b>“The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy”</b>	Ce n'est pas un homme celui qui dit mon père était ; mais celui qui dit m » voilà	Un homme ne se mesure pas à sa force ; mais à sa sagesse.

## The Results

The results revealed that the students have more or less succeeded in translating the first part of the first task. More or less scale reveals two important realities: the learners succeeded in translating the second proverb as it is purely taken from their own cultural context. Whereas for the others, they simply failed as they demonstrated through the answers provided that they ignore any idiom and proverb used by natives and by any English speaking country, the case of the Nigerian writer “Chinua Achebe”.

As far as the second activity, our population sample succeeded in finding some of the idiomatic, quotation and proverbial expressions ; although most of

them are actually nearer to French than English. This matter of fact shows how deep the Algerian in general are profoundly influenced and close to the French culture than any other especially in the northern regions. In a nutshell, our population sample has proved through the results obtained that concerning the main research theme, they are novice and need to be more integrated and versed in such an adventure mainly when this concerns the English language and its culture. They need to know that the use of idiomatic expressions is authentically cultural and basically related to the English language learning and teaching process.

### **Recommendations**

Teaching culture as a full part of the EFL teaching and learning process should put its substantial theorization into practice. For this to come true, teaching second year students of English at a higher level both culturality and inter-culturality means to replicate a professional potential through practice, observation, exchange, analysis and interpretation, all of which should be concretely contextualized.

### **Conclusion**

So much so, practitioners do not exclusively need to have gained experience or be experts in the target language culture. The most adequate strategy comes through questioning, analyzing and interpreting real situations.

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