

Some tips for raising cultural awareness in the English as a Foreign Language classroom

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ABSTRACT

This paper outlines the importance of developing English as a Foreign Language students' cultural awareness. It argues that cultural competence is central for the success of all types of foreign language learners in any communicative situation. Thus, in addition to developing students' linguistic skills, teachers need to help them become aware of intercultural differences.

After justifying the crucial role of this component through a short literature review, I will provide some practical strategies for raising English as a Foreign Language students' cultural awareness in the classroom, based also on my own teaching experience at the faculties of Philology and Translation and Interpreting. I will give special attention to its relevance in the cases of both types of students, future general English as a Foreign Language teachers and would-be translators.

Keywords: Culture, (inter)cultural awareness, English as a Foreign Language teaching and learning, class strategies

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the 80s the field of foreign language teaching has experienced a greater emphasis on students' acquisition of functional skills in the target language. With the consolidation of the communicative language teaching methodologies, it became obvious that the main purpose for us, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers, is to enable students to understand and express themselves in that language in an appropriate manner, in accordance with specific communicative situations and with the sociocultural parameters of the context.

As language users, we all know that “communication involves more than the words that are actually spoken” [1]. It is a fact that knowing the grammar and the vocabulary of the language does not mean that we can always correctly interpret the full meaning and communicative intent of the speaker. When Canale and Swain [2] proposed their concept of communicative competence, they stated that in order to master a language, it was necessary to master four interrelated sub-competences, namely, linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence. Later on, they added sociocultural competence and social competence, since social skills and cultural values are directly linked both to the language and to its use. This means that, as teachers of English, we must be aware that, at the same time that we introduce grammatical, lexical, and phonetic content in our language sessions, it is also important to bring students closer to the basics of the cultural elements in the Anglosphere.

In fact, the Council of Europe, by publishing the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment* [3] highlighted the relevance of a number of competences which are not purely linguistic, yet constitute crucial aspects for successful language teaching and learning. They are sociolinguistic competence, sociocultural competence and (inter)cultural awareness. Interestingly, this well-known document also highlights the major impact that cultural environments have in the construction of all the abilities students need to develop.

Accordingly, “the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) underlines the need to provide a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks, etc. across Europe.” Likewise, “it describes in a comprehensive way what language learners have to learn to do in order to use a language for communication and what knowledge and skills they have to develop so as to be able to act effectively.” It “also defines levels of proficiency which allow learners’ progress to be measured at each stage of learning and on a life-long basis.” Last but not least, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages also includes “the cultural context in which language is set” [3].

Following a qualitative approach, this paper intends to contribute to giving a clearer picture of the basic strategies that should guide our teaching performance in order to raise English as a Foreign Language learners’ cultural awareness. For this, I will start with a short justification of the need to promote intercultural competence as an important component of English as a Foreign Language university students’ communicative competence. Then, I will comment briefly on some resources that can help us raise cultural awareness in the classroom. These resources are based on recent research on the issue as well as on my own personal experience when teaching English as a Foreign Language at the Faculties of Philology and Translation and Interpreting.

2. THE IMPORTANCE OF CULTURE AND CULTURAL AWARENESS

Defining the term ‘culture’ is not easy. It is often thought that culture has to do with everything related to music, cinema, art, literature or history. Among the many meanings included in the Oxford English Dictionary online, there is one that defines culture as “the distinctive ideas, customs, social behaviour, products, or way of life of a particular nation, society, people, or period. Hence: a society or group characterized by such customs, etc.” As Jerrold Frank [4] put it, “the culture we belong to affects how we think, interact, communicate and transmit knowledge from one generation to another”. This author mentions anthropologist John H. Bodley’s [5] simple description of culture as “what people think, make and do” [4].

Nowadays it is commonplace that all languages are shaped by their cultural background, in such a way that those socio-cultural aspects not only constitute engaging didactic resources, but they can also help our students to go deeper in their learning process and in their knowledge of the foreign language. Kramsch [6] compared this learning process to the act of establishing what he called a “sphere of interculturality” (quoted in [4]). When trying to specify the elements of culture, Frank [4] makes reference to the document *Standards for Foreign Language Learning* [7] which provides a framework to help students to integrate “the philosophical perspectives, the behavioral practices, and the products – both tangible and intangible – of a society [7].” This has become known as the 3P model of culture, which includes the following elements:

- **Perspectives** (what members of a culture think, feel, and value)
- **Practices** (how members communicate and interact with one another)
- **Products** (technology, music, art, food, literature, etc.; the things members of a group create, share)

Much earlier, in the 70s Edward T. Hall [8] had proposed and developed what was called the “cultural iceberg analogy” whereby he compared the differences that can be readily seen “when we enter a new culture (the tip of the iceberg) and the imbedded aspects of the culture not readily visible (the submerged part of the iceberg)” (quoted in [4]). Food, literature, national costumes, traditional music and dance, specific holidays and celebrations would be examples of those cultural elements that can be easily seen, the *surface culture*; while aspects related to “notions of courtesy, body language, gestures, touching, eye contact, personal space, facial expressions, conversational patterns and the concept of time” would belong to the so-called *sub-surface culture*. Finally, there is also the *deep culture*, whose elements would be the most difficult to identify as they have to do with “unconscious values and attitudes” which tend to be “so far ingrained that people feel these are simply the ‘right’ and ‘normal’ way of doing things” [4].

Admittedly, deciding what specific approach to take in order to incorporate all these cultural elements is a real challenge for teachers, not only because most of us have not had any formal training on this particular aspect but also because “there is no universally accepted set of criteria that instructors can use as a guide” [9]. However, what is clear is that effective communication will require an in-depth knowledge of the characteristics of the culture to which a language is

linked, giving it a certain character, i.e., making it unique and differentiating it from other languages [10]. As Sagredo [10] explains, by incorporating elements related to the history and culture of the foreign language, a new dimension is being introduced into the teaching-learning process. Our teaching practice can be enriched and at the same time benefited from the integration into the curriculum of the historical and cultural aspects that surround the language. This can be done through the study of the press, the music, and the literature or even films, which will provide learning situations within a context, so that they become more natural and motivating. These cultural products will contribute to a more globalized teaching that will help our students to consider the linguistic reality as a whole made up of various parts, which perfectly fit together.

Likewise, in their seminal paper Miquel and Sans [11] also defend the intimate connection between language and culture, claiming that the fact that speakers possess certain cultural patterns generates a particular linguistic behaviour, and determines their choice of certain linguistic forms. This means that when we learn a language as a tool for communication we also learn, rather unconsciously, our social ways and cultural values. Therefore, the cultural component is an indispensable and inseparable element of our communicative competence [11]. In their opinion, cultural elements should not have a separate place in our teaching materials, nor should they be in a sort of special preserve. On the contrary, all didactic proposals that we bring to our classroom must be imbued, explicitly or implicitly, with the cultural elements. This way, students will be able to learn what exactly they are expected to say and do when using the foreign language. Needless to add that, because of its current role as the world's lingua franca, English is often used for communication between non-native speakers with very different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. This means that being culturally aware can help students worldwide to be more sensitive to possible misunderstandings and to cope with any performance difficulties in any communicative event. The key question, then, using Frank's words [4] is: "How can we incorporate cultural knowledge and understanding within the context of our English language classes?" In the following sections I will try to provide an answer.

3. TEACHING CULTURE IN DIFFERENT ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE SETTINGS

When teaching English as a Foreign Language we cannot forget the specific needs and the special setting where students develop their learning process. In my case, after teaching English as a subject in the UPGC faculties of Philology and Translation and Interpreting, I am aware of the debate that has been going on in recent years about some of the methodological differences that should be employed when teaching English in those two faculties. According to Hernández-Guerra and Cruz-García [12] when teaching English to Philology students, class activities tend to focus more on the grammatical and narrative aspects, more in line with the objectives set for this subject in the Faculty of Philology, whereas in the English applied to translation and interpreting classroom, it is the context of the text that is prioritized to a great extent, i.e., rather than working on the text from a grammatical and lexical point of view, the analysis is based on broader aspects, such as the function of the text, the participants in the communication process, as well as their relationship, and of course the context and the text's connection with other texts of similar characteristics.

Moreover, Hernández-Guerra and Cruz-García [12] illustrated how the same text can be exploited in different ways, recognising the fact that the objectives of both degrees differ from each other. Their findings reveal some of the differences that exist when working on an English short story with Philology students and with Translation and Interpreting students. These scholars, together with other authors [13][14][15] have claimed for the definition of a methodology adapted to students' training needs, based on the real circumstances surrounding their labour markets. In particular, they insist on "the distinguishing traits of language teaching/learning in translation training programmes" [15]. However, [12] others reclaim the legacy of philologists to the field of Translation, a sort of neglected heritage that is at the very core of this discipline, as Sabio-Pinilla [16] states, "drawing attention to the contributions that philologists have made to translation." Hernández-Guerra and Cruz-García [12] also admit that traditionally the teaching of foreign languages in the faculties of Philology and Translation and Interpreting has not always contemplated the defining features of the field. This is evidenced by the fact that the methodology employed in both faculties has often focused on oral and written communication in general contexts. In my opinion, it continues to do so in many ways, since one aim that both degrees share is the need for students to acquire the widest possible command of the foreign language. Of course, I agree with Cerezo-Herrero [14] that "both foreign and mother languages constitute a core competence in translator and interpreter training", but I also believe that the same can be said for a philologist. In addition, for both

types of students, becoming familiar with a variety of textual types will be extremely useful. Finally, knowledge about the elements of culture and cultural awareness are also crucial for learners in both faculties, which means that there is a variety of resources and strategies to integrate the cultural component in our teaching practice, which can be used in any learning context.

4. SOME RESOURCES TO INTEGRATE CULTURE INTO ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING

We all know that the Internet is a great source of information where we can find a large amount of teaching resources which can bring us closer to the diversity and complexity of English-speaking cultures. Among the wide range of possibilities that the world wide web offers I will mention here digital press, literary works, films and plays, music and historical and cultural documentaries.

4.1 The press

The great boom of the digital press has turned it into a resource that can be used both to encourage students to read and to help them become aware of the reality of the world in a practical and entertaining way. With just one click we can easily have access to national and world news. As a teaching resource the press can also help students to improve their critical spirit towards information in the Media. Sagredo [10] suggests the following activities that can be carried out in class by students working on a specific press article:

- Read an article and highlight the most relevant facts.
- Read a news item and summarize it.
- Develop a headline for the news item.
- Writing a news item with a previously given headline.
- Collect information from several newspapers to later create an article.

4.2 Literary texts

Literature constitutes an invaluable source of culture. Even though some literary texts may use an elaborate form of language, they can help students become acquainted with the cultural background that filters through them. By reading the literary works of great authors students can learn about many of the cultural, historical, social, economic and political aspects of a community or country. In sum, it is possible for them to travel in time, to the remote past or to an unpredictable future.

When using a literary work in the language classroom for its didactic exploitation, it is advisable or necessary:

- to use short texts whenever possible
- to introduce the topic in order to motivate students more easily and make them familiar with the content and the context (by presenting the historical and cultural context in which the plot in the literary work takes place).
- to provide information about the author, his/her nationality, literary movement, etc. so that students will be more receptive to the situations they will find in the text. As teachers we must elicit information, clarify doubts and create expectations.

Once students have read the literary text (individually and silently in class or at home) we can work on the four skills with tasks based on the chosen literary text in order to check if students have read and understood the text and the social, cultural and historical context in which the work is set. For instance, we can deal with universal themes such as jealousy, using Shakespeare's famous work *Othello*.

4.3 Films and plays

In much the same way, films and plays, or maybe short scenes taken from them, can be exploited in class for our teaching and learning purposes. The list of films with a historical setting is really huge and they constitute an excellent

choice to teach students, no matter their age, about British culture and traditions. One example is the movie *Paddington*, which tells the story of a Peruvian bear who arrives in London in search of a home. Through his adventures, students can learn about life in the city of London, the importance of afternoon tea and the tradition of Royal Guard hats. In addition, the film also addresses issues such as cultural diversity and the importance of family. Another interesting case is represented by the Monty Python movies, which address in a humorous way the British idiosyncrasy of the 1960s and 1970s. For instance, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* is a film dealing with the story of the legendary King Arthur and his knights who go in search of the Holy Grail.

4.4 Music

Music is considered to be a universal language, and research has shown that it is highly beneficial in multiple aspects for people's well-being. It can also improve language and literacy skills. In fact, songs are a great source of 'real-life' language that we can use in order to practice lots of different language skills. Most of all, songs are a fun way to learn the rhythm of English, how words are linked together in connected speech. It is very easy to find the song lyrics online, or find a music video-clip with subtitles. We just need to explore our students' preferences regarding music styles and also choose among the top-40 hits of the moment. Class activities that can be designed for our students to carry out in class include fill-in-the-gaps (once we have removed some words or expressions from the lyrics that we have delivered). We can ask them to summarize the topic the song deals with in their own words. Following the same lines as with the previous resources, it is also useful to ask students what they know about the singer or music group, and, if necessary, provide a short introduction to their style and/or biography. Both old and new songs and video-clips constitute a rich source of material related to culture because they act as an archive of world cultural evolution throughout history.

Among the activities that we can perform with songs or video-clips in class we suggest the following, which were taken and adapted from [17].

- Print out the song lyrics and cut up the lyrics into separate lines or verses; then ask students to guess the correct order. Finally, listen to the song to check if it is correct.
- Choose 10 words from a song and then choose four or five extra words that are not in the song. Write the words in a random order and give the list to students. Play the song and ask them to tick the words they hear.
- Print out some song lyrics. Change 5–10 words. Then listen to the song. Ask students to 'spot the differences.' For example, you could change some of the nouns or verbs for some synonyms.

4.5 Historical and cultural documentaries

Another interesting resource to bring students closer to the culture of the English-speaking sphere is by giving them access to material dealing with the British cultural heritage all over the world. Several documentaries are available in YouTube, focusing on the cultural traits and the different degrees of language convergence in former colonies of the British Empire. For example, students can learn about Australian aboriginal people and Māori people of New Zealand, their Māori language Te Reo, their traditional Haka dance or a typical Haka Wedding.

Finally, it is worth noticing that the British Empire also had important connections with the Canary Islands, so much so that the English language and culture have been present in our context since the 16th century. Some students may be unaware of the crucial role that the British colony settled in Gran Canaria and Tenerife played in the economic and socio-cultural development of the islands, especially during the 19th and the 20th centuries. Our English as a Foreign Language learners might be amazed when they discover the textual and audio-visual material dealing with this topic, thanks to local researchers like García-Pérez [18], González-Cruz [19][20][21] and Quintana Navarro [22], among others.

5. CONCLUSION

My main aim in this presentation has been to highlight the importance of culture in English as a Foreign Language teaching and learning contexts. By developing their cultural awareness, students will be able "to carry out communicative tasks and activities in the various contexts of social life with their conditions and constraints" [3], as well

as to “meet the challenges of communication across language and cultural boundaries” [3]. Using some of the resources that I have mentioned above in the language classroom can certainly help our students to raise their cultural knowledge and awareness.

On the other hand, it is obvious that “a translator or interpreter will be all the more competent in their tasks the better they know the systems of the languages they are working with,” as Clouet [23] states, but this is equally true for Philologists. Despite their specific training needs, students with both profiles share some common needs: it is essential for them to have a good command of the foreign languages they are studying and also a deep knowledge of the cultures associated to their speakers’ communities.

To conclude, I would like to remark my impression that these resources tend to have a positive impact on students’ learning experience and motivation, and, therefore, on their competence acquisition and language skills. Further research will obviously be necessary to prove this perception with quantitative data. It will also be helpful to ascertain whether some of the resources mentioned seem to be more effective and /or more preferred by students according to their degrees or not.

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