The Role of Cultural Components in Shaping the L2 Learner's Identity and Intercultural Competence

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Abstract

In most countries in recent years, English textbooks and course materials used in language programs were not designed specifically for the learners of those countries. The cultural components involved in those textbooks did not reflect the learner's *Mother Tongue Culture* (MTC). Therefore, an attempt was made to use new textbooks reflecting the local customs, linguistic usages, and cultural backgrounds in their context so as to suit the psyche of the local learners and enhance their *Intercultural Competence* (ICC). That includes perceptions of self, perception of others, as well as the process itself of becoming aware of the intercultural relationships in culture and identity.

1.   Introduction

It seems that a great deal of human relationships is based on cultural ties and cross-cultural understanding. Being aware of these complicated processes within which we all act as individuals and as groups, is a civilized matter which leads to better survival within our communities. Therefore, cultural awareness imposes itself as one of the pillars to our existence as social beings. This research is an attempt to show the impact of incorporating the cultural component in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) syllabus to illustrate the benefits of being aware of the learner's linguistic and cultural background. The research also employs tactics in helping teachers improve their students' overall output in the target language and focus more on the importance of *Cross-cultural Competence* (CCC) among EFL learners. This is essential, given the nature of language learning in and of itself, which has the chief aim of communicating with other cultures.

Besides the idea of culture and identity, the study will also address the following questions:

a) What is a 'Cultural Component'?
b) What is 'Culture'?
c) What does the term 'Identity' stand for?
d) What is 'Intercultural Competence'?
e) How can the integration of culture help the EFL learner's intercultural competence?
f) To what extent should the focus be on First Language (L1) or Second Language (L2) culture?
g) How can the integration of culture help the EFL learner's intercultural competence?
h) How can cross-cultural awareness in the target language help shape the learner's identity?

2   Clarification

Before addressing this issue, a definition of the most important terms re-occurring in this topic seems vital.

2.1   What is a 'Cultural Component'?

A 'Cultural Component', often referred to as a 'Cultural Element' in the literature related to EFL textbooks and culture, is a broad term that needs to be defined. Moreover, cultural components are the number of cultural elements manifested or represented throughout a textbook (when dealing with language teaching). However, cultural 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, 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

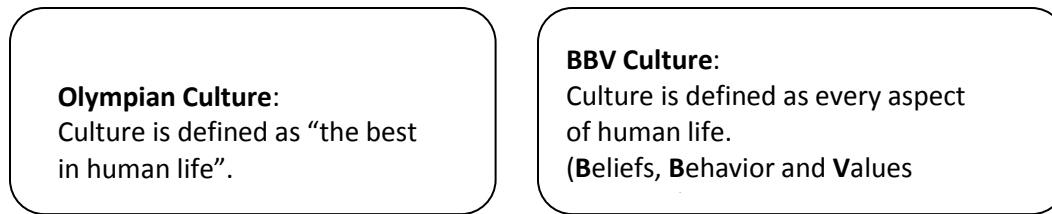one gain/lose power*; identity and pride; prejudices; shared history; geography; monuments;* and so on.

It is evident that the list can be longer than that stated above, and the definition of culture is definitely broader than that scope (for a broader list of components, see Benahnia (1992), for example).'

2.2   What is 'Culture'?

According to Chamberlain (2005), 'culture' represents "the values, norms, and traditions that affect how individuals of a particular group perceive, think, interact, behave, and make judgments about their world" (p197). In other words, culture is more ancient than civilization, i.e. culture began when language began, and this could have been more than a million years ago; whereas civilization began when agriculture began, probably not more than a few thousand years ago. The opposite of culture then is death and "annihilation"; whereas the opposite of civilization is "… savagery" (cited in Lafayette, 1976, p22).

O'Neil (2006) stated that the word 'culture' has many different meanings. For some, it refers to an appreciation of good literature, music, art, and food. For a biologist, it is likely to be a colony of bacteria or other microorganisms growing in a nutrient medium in a laboratory Petri dish. However, for anthropologists and other behavioral scientists, "culture is the full range of learned human behavior patterns" (p1). We have to note here that since Tylor's time, the concept of culture has become the central focus of anthropology. O'Neil also argues that "Applied linguistics is an interdisciplinary field of study that identifies, investigates, and offers solutions to language-related real life problems". Some of the academic fields related to applied linguistics are education, linguistics, psychology, anthropology, and sociology. Critiques to this naturalized approach to culture include Hall's (2002) view that culture should be perceived socio-culturally meaning both social and cultural factors should be involved. Socio-cultural practice is not a set of pre-defined descriptors about a group of people. Therefore, based on this argument, O'Neil believes that from this standpoint, culture "emerges in people's social lives, and consequently particular cultural groups should not be seen as well-defined, homogeneous, and static entities whose members share fixed meanings" (ibid). Along the same lines, Street (1993) has claimed that 'culture' is a verb (i.e. it "is an active process of meaning making" (p25)) and consequently, according to O'Neil (2006), research should focus not on what culture is, but on what it does as regards people's ways of making sense of the world (including their perceptions of the self and others)." This also includes the process itself of becoming aware of the relationships in culture and how they are interwoven. Moreover, Williams et al (1983) admits that culture is "one of the most complicated words in the English language" (p87), especially when moving beyond the mainstream focus of culture learning as information about the other. The meaning of culture can also be summarized in the following definition given by Nelson Brooks (1975) and stated in Lafayette (1976):

Fig. 1 Brooks' (1975) definition of 'culture':

> **Olympian Culture**:
> Culture is defined as "the best in human life".

> **BBV Culture**:
> Culture is defined as every aspect of human life.
> (**B**eliefs, **B**ehavior and **V**alues

Brooks' definition seems very comprehensive, but, as mentioned before, it is not the only definition that applies to EFL teaching. However, it can serve as a great guideline in structuring the distribution and frequency of the cultural elements while developing EFL textbooks or curriculum.

2.3   What does the term 'Identity' stand for?

One of the common definitions of the term 'Identity' stated in Merriam Webster Learner's Dictionary, '*Identity*' reads as follows:

> The qualities, beliefs, etc., that make a particular person or group different from others. As children grow, they establish their own identities.

The definition goes further to elaborate that we can also say that it refers to a person who insisted on having his or her own *identity* [on being known for his or her own qualities, achievements, etc.].

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. Moreover, on various occasions, we hear people, for example, saying "his/her art reflects his/her cultural/racial identity". Karl Perera, the owner and author of more-selfesteem.com website summarizes the notion of identity in the following eight questions and notions:

1. Who are you?
2. What makes you unique?
3. What are your values?
4. Your physical identity (what you think you look like to others) also known as body image.
5. Your internal identity (who you think you are in terms of your personality and character, values, etc.).
6. How you see yourself in relation to others?
7. How you identify yourself in terms of your job?
8. Your personal goals.

Additionally, another aspect of identity is what probably ties a person to his or her community or nation.

In other words, the notion of identity becomes broader once it is associated with one's tribe, nationality, or country. Language teachers are often exposed to issues related to identity, especially when it comes to academic writing. During the early stages of EFL learning, you might notice the over-use of the pronoun "I" in the writing of your students. Literature in this regard shows that this phenomenon of the over-use of the pronoun "I" is much more apparent in some nations more than others, and it is more common among male learners than female, i.e. nations that are male dominated, such as in some countries of the Middle East (see John & Tang, 2009, for example). Moreover, we must note that identity formation is a complex process by itself, especially in target language (TL) learning situations, as it is explained by Norton (1997): "In the case of L2 learning, the identity process can be complicated by the facts that learners are under the influence of two cultural systems whose values can be extremely different from each other. Moreover, the construction of identity cannot be separated from identity negotiation in which an individual seeks for the answer to the question, 'who am I' and for his/her relationship to the world" (cited in Lin, 2009, p44).

2.4   What is 'Intercultural Competence' all about?

Fantini (2000) views 'intercultural competence' as "transcending the limitations of one's own world view" (p31). For some other scholars, such as Antoinette Camilleri-Grima (2002), 'cultural competence' refers to "an ability to interact effectively with people of different cultures" (ibid).

In addition, cultural competence may also be associated with diversity. In other words, if we look at diversity within an organizational community, cultural competence would seem vital to every employee to ensure work continuity and survival. From the perspective of real communication among employees and administration, a diverse culture understanding would be a necessity for the entire institution. Diversity must be prevalent and valued before one may be considered culturally competent or before we may say that we do have a diversity competent organization. We have to note also that due to the nature of the modern world and technologies we live in nowadays, cultural competence is becoming increasingly necessary for work, home, as well as community social lives.

Historically speaking, it is not surprising to note that the healthcare profession was the first to promote cultural competence in its field. Poor medical procedures and prescriptions could result in bad consequences due to lack of cultural misunderstanding.

Diversity Training University International (DTUI) isolated four cognitive components related to intercultural competence, which in turn has direct impacts on the individual's identity: *awareness, attitude, knowledge,* and *skills*.

Bearing in mind the above-mentioned characteristics, it can be said that developing cultural competence results in an ability to understand one's own culture and other cultures, to communicate with other people, and to effectively interact with people across cultures. Attitude as well as knowledge and skills seem to be crucial for the existence of intercultural competence. Resistance to accepting and dealing with people from other cultures will definitely impede the process of knowledge and skills acquisition. One may ask the following question: What happens

in case of absence of intercultural competence? The answer is that this leads to negative consequences and impacts at different levels which may take place. One of them is what may happen in the world of business. For example, the lack of cultural competence might damage an individual's self-esteem and career, "but the unobservable psychological impact on the victims can go largely unnoticed until the threat of a class action suit brings them to light" (Martin & Vaughn, 2007).

Taking the above-mentioned argument further, not all people possess the skills and talents of how to deal with people from other cultures. By the same token, not all members of a community tend to be aware of their own identity characteristics. Yet, there might be a large segment of the population in each community that were born with this innate faculty or ability of understanding other cultures well and communicating with people across cultures, as stated by Mercedes Martin and Billy E. Vaughn:

> While a few individuals seem to be born with cultural competence, the rest of us have had to put considerable effort into developing it. This means examining our biases and prejudices, developing cross-cultural skills, searching for role models, and spending as much time as possible with other people who share a passion for cultural competence. The term multicultural competence surfaced in a mental health publication by psychologist Paul Pedersen (1988) at least a decade before the term cultural competence became popular. Most of the definitions of cultural competence shared among diverse professionals come from the healthcare industry. Their perspective is useful in the broader context of diversity work.
>
> (Martin & Vaughn, 2007)

It seems evident then to admit, at this point, that there will be no culture without communication, as Ngugi (1986) advocates:

> Communication creates culture: culture is a means of communication. Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through speech and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world.
>
> (pp. 15-16)

To conclude this section, let us not forget that intercultural incompetence is a severe problem that might have negative impacts on the individual's personality, attitude, achievement, and communication with others. In the case of an intercultural incompetence situation, the individual might face the following feelings on his/her behalf, or might notice it in his or her interlocutor: *surprise, discomfort, irritation, shock, anger, losing face, humor, fear,* and *intimidation*.

2.5   Culture and Language Teaching – how can the integration of culture help the EFL learner's intercultural competence?

The main argument of this section is based on a case study (done on six EFL/ESL textbooks used in Morocco; three ESL textbooks from the UK and three EFL textbooks from Morocco). The research shows that L2 textbooks can – and should – become key elements in classroom conversations about culture as they offer great potential for fostering learners' reflections about the components of their cultural identities (Williams et al, 1983). In fact, until recent years in most countries, including Morocco, English textbooks and course materials used in language programs were not designed specifically for the learners of those countries. However, an attempt was made to use new textbooks reflecting the local customs, linguistic usages and cultural background in their context so as to suit the psyche of the local learners. The study also shows that the home-made EFL textbooks reflect a fair distribution and frequency of the cultural elements involved in those textbooks as well as a fair amount of international, cultural and cross-cultural issues and references. One of the main conclusions then is that textbooks are one of the keys that can help the learners improve their cultural competence and realize their own identity. Textbooks and materials can lead to a high degree of meta-linguistic, meta-cognitive, and other meta- capabilities. That, in turn, may lead to a better development of intercultural competence and awareness of self identity, as stated by Williams et al (1983): "L2 textbooks can – and should – become key participants in classroom conversations about culture as they offer great potential for fostering learners' reflections about the components of their cultural identities" (op cit, p87). Moreover, they may help the learner and enable him or her "to develop an enriched, more complex personality and enhanced capacity for further language learning and greater openness to new cultural experiences"(CEF mentioned by Camilleri-Grima 2002 , p. 43).

As known, foreign language learning is comprised of several components, including grammatical competence, communicative competence, language proficiency, as well as a change in attitudes towards one's own or another culture (as stated by Thanasoulas (2001)). Lin (2009) argues that L2 learning is not just a matter of code switching between two languages. He also states that Pierce (1995) mentioned the idea that language is not a neutral medium of communication, but is "understood with reference to its social meaning" (cited in Lin (2009), p44). Thanasoulas (2001) also argues that overall, for the majority of scholars and laymen alike, cultural competence, or in other words, the knowledge of the conventions, customs, beliefs, and systems of meaning of another country (or as Brooks (1976) calls it 'BBV' (Belief, Behavior, and Values) is, with no doubt, an integral part of foreign language learning. Therefore, many teachers have seen cultural competence as their goal, and hence were able to incorporate the teaching of culture into the foreign language curriculum in order to achieve a real intercultural proficiency based outcome. However, the argument is why many educators are more and more interested in the issue of culture teaching. The answer is very simple: **language teaching is by default culture teaching**. In other words, it is almost impossible to separate language from culture (for further details regarding this point, see Benahnia, 1992). Furthermore, the language curriculum somehow must reflect the culture of the language being taught because this process in turns helps in the process of shaping the learner's identity as Thanasoulas, (2001) explains below:

It seems like we are long past an era when first language acquisition and second or foreign language learning were cast in a "behaviouristic mould," being the products of imitation and language "drills," and language was thought of as a compendium of rules and strings of words and sentences used to form propositions about a state of affairs. In the last two decades, there has been a resurgence of interest in the study of confidently conducted negotiations between mother language and TL. However, considerably few studies were undertaken to understand how the learner's mother cultural identity facilitated their pragmatic awareness.

(p. 44)

2.6 At which level should each type of culture be stressed more and why?

According to the following diagram drawn up by the author, foreign language (FL) learners at the beginning level should not be fully exposed to the target language culture. On the contrary, they should be exposed mostly to their L1 culture or Mother Tongue language culture. The reason behind that is to give them self-confidence and ability to talk to other people about their own cultural elements and issues related to their surroundings. L1 culture knowledge should start at an early age (Benahnia, 1992). The more the learners navigate up to the next levels in their FL learning, the more the scope of the TL culture gets larger, giving the learners a wider chance to explore in depth the wide range of the cultural elements carried out via TL. This hypothesis can be better illustrated by the following diagram:

Fig. 2 At which level should each type of culture be stressed more?

| Preparatory and Elementary Level | Intermediate Level | Advanced Level |
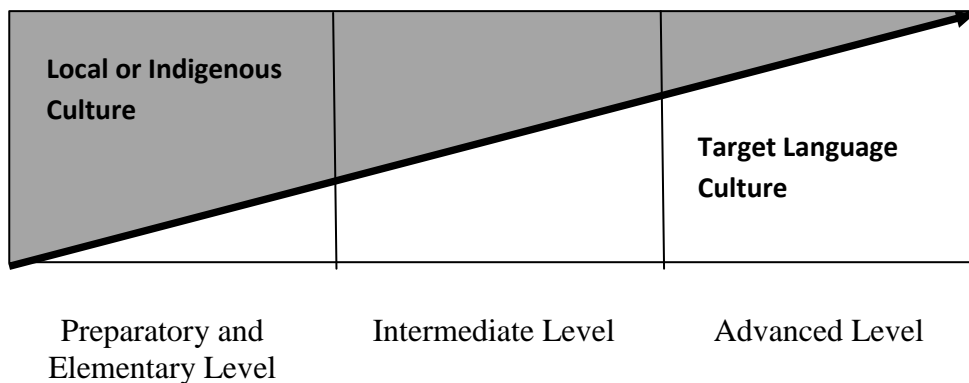
(Benahnia, 1992)

3 Conclusion

In conclusion, knowledge about culture seems vital in the foreign language teaching/learning field. However, teachers should be adequately trained on how to deal with cultural issues and how to integrate the cultural elements in their teaching activities. It is also crucial to know which culture to focus on (i.e. L1 culture, or L2 culture?) and how much of that culture should the learner be exposed to, and at which level?

One more important point is that intercultural competence (ICC) should be considered as the driving vehicle towards a better understanding of one's own culture, the culture of others, and it can also help the learner in shaping his or her own identity. Moreover, ICC is NOT an approach to changing our natural behavior, but rather shapes it and gears it towards better communication and understanding across cultures. An 'interculturally competent' person, as mentioned by Camilleri-Grima (2002), **should also have the capacity to interpret another way of life and to explain it to those who live another**. We, as FL teachers, should always bear in mind that we should advocate the theory and practice of integrating ICC in our curriculum and syllabi because (as stated by Willems, 2002, p.19), *through an education for ICC*:

a) We open up to other ways of thinking and other methods of reasoning.
b) We find a tongue in which we can speak our humanity to each other.
c) We learn to see that our own view of the world is just one among many.

A final point should be made here. Let us not forget that ICC is NOT one single competence BUT a sophisticated combination of global competences, and that the essence of intercultural competence is the caring you have to share for others, respect of other cultures, and the adoption of different cultural aspects that might be beneficial to your own identity without losing faith in the constituents of your own cultural boundaries and characteristics. However, as language teachers, we should not only focus on comparing, but contrasting the cultural differences between the learners' L1 culture and the L2 culture because this will enable the students to correctly judge the appropriate uses and causation of language idiosyncrasies. Moreover, textbook writers should focus more on content that would facilitate the acquisition of cultural competence, i.e. when writing a language textbook for Arab learners, for example, it would be more appropriate to expose the learners to the difference between the laws governing a Muslim wedding, for example, and the laws governing an English wedding. Not only that, but simple exposure and explanation related to certain cultural behavior or characteristics, such as ways of entertainment, negotiation, or even types of food and drinks and what they represent to a society or community, many trigger intercultural competence and awareness of self-identity among learners.

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