

Integrating culture in teaching English as a second language

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Abstract

This study focuses on integrating culture in teaching English as a second language and it attempts to identify its importance in second language acquisition. Research objectives of this study are:

Firstly, to give an overview of teaching culture in second language acquisition and bring together the most important ideas and suggestions about its benefits. *Secondly*, to examine how culture is taught in Albanian second language acquisition classes.

This study made use of quantitative method of data collection. The data were collected through questionnaires, conducted with 13 Albanian teachers of English and 120 high school students. This study was undertaken in Shkoder, Tirane and Vlore. Two questionnaires were designed, one for teachers and the other for students. Both teachers and students were also asked about the importance of teaching culture in second language acquisition.

The results of questionnaires revealed that both teachers and students considered teaching of culture an important tool in second language acquisition. This study revealed that, teaching culture should be an integral and systematic component of teaching in second language acquisition. According to results it is very important to incorporate culture in the classroom because language learners need to be aware of culturally appropriate ways of addressing people, expressing gratitude, making request, and agreeing or disagreeing with someone. They should know the intonation patterns that are appropriate in their own speech community but which may be perceived differently by the target speech community.

The main aim of integrating culture in teaching English as a second language is to develop student’s intercultural understanding and help

them in intercultural communication. Despite the importance of integrating culture in second language teaching, its use is limited. This is due to the lack of time, issues of designing a cultural syllabus and choosing appropriate techniques and presentation of culture related topics and teaching materials activities.

Keywords: *integrating, culture, teaching, English, second language*

Introduction

Second language teaching has a cultural dimension. A historical background of language teaching has distinguished different links between language instruction and culture teaching. Their relationship has depended not only on the goals of second language education but also on how the concept of culture has been interpreted. This study focuses on integrating culture in teaching English as a second language and it attempts to identify its importance in second language acquisition. Research objectives of this study are:

Firstly, to give an overview of teaching culture in second language acquisition and bring together the most important ideas and suggestions about its benefits.

Secondly, to examine how culture is taught in Albanian second language acquisition classes.

Literature review

Language and culture

"Culture and communication are inseparable because culture not only dictates who talks to whom, about what, and how the communication proceeds, it also helps to determine how people encode messages, the meanings they have for messages, and the conditions and circumstances under which various messages may or may not be sent, noticed, or interpreted... Culture...is the foundation of communication.(Samovar, Porter & Jain, 1981: 24)

Many researchers stress the close relationship between language and culture. According to Brown, "A language is a part of culture and a culture is a part of a language." Therefore, they cannot be separated without losing the significance of either language or culture. Culture is learned, transmitted, passed down from one generation to the next through human actions, often in the form of face to face interaction and of course through

linguistic communication. On the other hand, language is a subpart of culture, which plays an important role. Boudreaux has emphasized the importance of language not as socio-political processes. According to him, a language is a linguistic habit, a set of practices that imply not only a particular system of words and grammatical rules, but also an often forgotten or hidden struggle over the symbolic power of particular system of classification, address and reference forms, educational intervention rather than an educational goal in itself.

Language cannot be learned or taught without introducing the culture of the community where it is used. Together language and culture “reflects a current direction in language pedagogy. (Robinson Stuart)

As language teachers we must be interested in the study of culture .If we teach language without teaching at the same time the culture in which it operates we are teaching meaningless symbols or symbols to which the students attaches the wrong meaning.(cited in Brooks 1986)

Teaching of culture was considered to be supplementary to language teaching; nowadays is to develop learners’ ability to communicate with each –other across linguistic and cultural boundaries. As language and culture are closely related to each other, the teaching of culture is seen as an integral and organized component of language courses.

Teaching communication without teaching culture might be enough for survival and routine transactions but communicative competence is incomplete without cultural awareness and understanding.

Goals and principles of teaching culture

The main goals for teaching culture

The main aim of second language teaching is to develop students’ ability to communicate effectively in various contexts; the teaching of culture should facilitate intercultural communication and understanding.

According to Seelye, ”All students will develop the cultural understanding ,attitudes ,and performance skills needed to function appropriately within a segment of another society and to communicate with people socialized in that culture.

Teaching of culture has the following goals

- To help students to develop an understanding of the fact that all people exhibit culturally conditioned behaviors.

- To help students to develop an understanding that social variables such as age, sex, social class and place of residence influence the ways in which people speak and behave.
- To help students to become more aware of conventional behavior in common situation in the target culture.
- To help students to increase their awareness of cultural connotations of words and phrases in the target language.
- To help students to develop their ability to evaluate and refine generalization about the target culture in terms of supporting evidence.
- To help students to develop the necessary skills to locate and organize information about the target culture.
- To stimulate student's intellectual curiosity about the target culture and to encourage empathy towards its people.

Strategies for teaching culture

Understanding the general and specific aspects of culture and its dynamic character should help Educators in developing appropriate strategies for teaching it. Galloway (1985, as quoted in Hadley, 2001: 348) warns about the commonly used "Facts Approaches" to teaching culture, which result from poor preparation of teachers for teaching culture:

- "The Frankenstein Approach": A taco from here, a flamenco dancer from here, a Gacho from here, a bullfight from there;
- "The 4-F Approach": folk dances, festivals, fairs and food;
- "The Tour Guide Approach": monuments, rivers, cities, etc;
- "The 'By-The-Way' Approach: sporadic lectures or bits of behavior selected indiscriminately to emphasize sharp differences

Ways of teaching culture

Factors influencing the choice of methodology different approaches to the teaching of culture as well as activities and techniques associated with them have been suggested by several scholars. However, it is equally important to remember that the choice depends on many factors, the most important being:

- The situation in which the language is taught
- Learner's age and command of a second language

Stern distinguishes between three situations in which the teaching of culture can take place:

- Culture is taught in language courses, where students are physically and often psychologically removed from the reality of the second culture. In this case culture teaching provides background and context and helps the learners to visualize the reality.
- Culture is taught in a situation, which prepares a student for a visit or work in a new environment. Even though the student is physically far away from the culture, he /she is physically better prepared and more motivated.
- Culture is taught in the cultural setting (e .g to immigrants' students studying in a target language community). In this case, students need more help to come to term with the foreign environment to avoid cultural misunderstandings.

Methodology

The survey of research

Although the curriculum of Albania requires the inclusion of culture in the English syllabus, it does not define how it should be done. The main aim of the current research was to examine the situation of teaching culture in English classes in Albanian high schools.

This study made use of quantitative method of data collection. The data were collected through questionnaires, conducted with 13 Albanian teachers of English and 120 high school students. This study was undertaken in Shkoder, Tirana and Vlora. Two questionnaires were designed, one for teachers and the other for students. Both teachers and students were also asked about the importance of teaching culture in second language acquisition.

Two questionnaires were designed, one for teachers and another for students. Both teachers and students were asked about the importance of teaching culture. The common part was included in order to compare the teacher's and student's opinions. Both questionnaires were in English.

Participants

After having studied the works of several scholars on teaching culture, research was conducted among Albanian teachers of English as well as high school students to examine the situation of culture teaching in high school.

The participants of this study were 13 English teachers and 120 students from four high schools of Durres, Albania.

Instrument

The students' questionnaire

The student's questionnaire consisted of two parts. The first part included personal information of students and the second part aimed at finding out the student's opinions about the learning of culture. Students' questionnaire included seven questions. Questions 1, 2, 3, and 5 were multiple-choice questions while questions 4, 6 and 7 are opened-ended questions. The questionnaire focuses on the following questions:

- How important is the inclusion of the learning of culture and should it be taught in English classes?
- What ways (activities, techniques) do you consider the most useful for the learning of culture?
- What topics of culture are you most interested in?

The teachers' questionnaire

The questionnaire included five questions of different types. Open-ended questions were included to find out the definition of culture. Multiple-choice questions were used in order to find out how important the teaching of culture was for the teachers. They were also asked to define the ways/methods and techniques as well as topics for the teaching of culture. The teacher's questionnaire was designed to answer the following questions:

- How do you define culture and what importance do you attribute to the teaching of it?
- What methods and techniques do you use?
- What topics and which cultures do you consider important to teach?
- What teaching materials and other sources do you use?

Results

Teachers' questionnaire

The definition of culture

The question about the definition of culture was placed first in questionnaire. Some teachers find difficult to define the word culture so

nearly one third of the teachers left the question unanswered. Some definitions given were,

- Culture is custom, traditions, beliefs, and way of life of people in a certain country or area.
- The way of life of a nation, including traditions habits in all field of life.
- Customs, traditions, beliefs, behaviors.
- Culture traditions, customs, people, literature, art music etc.
- Generally then the way of life.
- Culture is the complex embracing not only arts (literature, music, and painting) but also the whole way of life.

It can be concluded that the teachers when answered the question defined culture by listing its various elements. Both the observable aspects of culture (arts, customs, way of life etc) and invisible features (beliefs, values, and attitudes) were mentioned.

Importance of teaching culture

None of teachers denied the importance of teaching culture. They considered it very important. Some teachers also believed that including culture issues increased student interest and motivation in language learning.

Ways of teaching culture

The teachers considered discussion cultural differences and similarities most useful for the teaching of culture. Projects were also rated highly followed by watching videos and talking about current events.

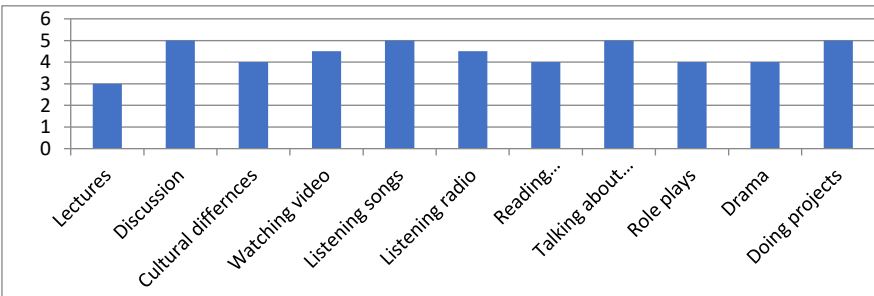


Figure 1: The teachers' scores about the way of teaching

Topics

Teachers were also asked to indicate which topics considered the most important to teach. The rule of behaviour was considered very important.

Customs and traditions also scored highly. Everyday life topics such as, education, food etc scored highly as well.

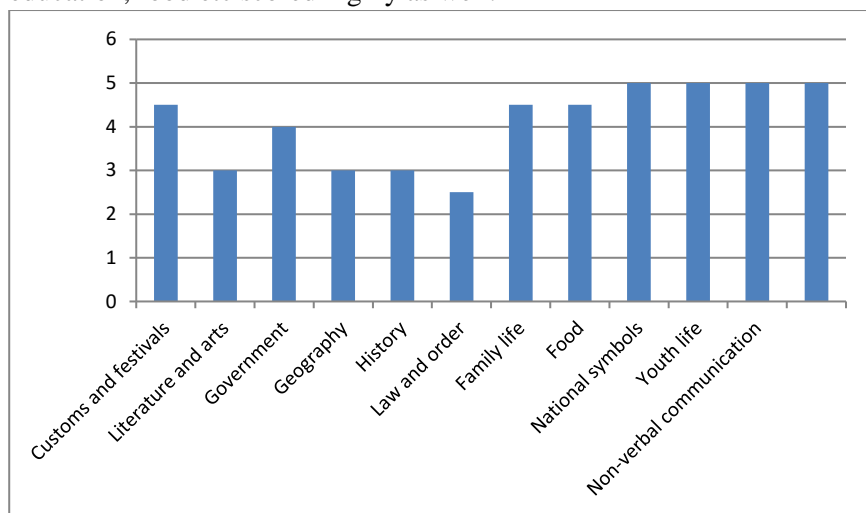


Figure 2: Teachers' scores about topics

Teaching culture materials

Although English language textbooks are the main source for the teaching of culture, the teachers make use of various other sources. After textbooks, the two most useful mentioned sources were internet and realia?

Cultural studies textbooks were used by 6 teachers .4 teachers claimed that they used newspapers and videos while only 3 of the teachers used recordings .There might be two reasons for this:

- First the CDs that come together with textbooks do not contain enough culture –related materials.
- Second, there are no conditions in practicing listening activities than developing the other skills.

The most mentioned sources added by the teachers themselves were connected with their personal experiences.

The students' questionnaire

Most students gave answers to all questions. Some students did not rank the ways of teaching the topics.

Importance of learning culture

Students considered learning culture important. 100% are very important. Most students thought that culture should be taught in English classes.

Ways of teaching culture

The students considered talking about current events the most helpful for understanding other cultures.

Discussion on cultural differences and similarities were also rated highly followed by watching videos. Projects were ranked fifth by the students. All students ranked highly songs. They think that songs could help to understand other culture. But the most frequently mentioned was travelling to the country where the language is spoken. Another aspect for the students was communication with people from other cultures.

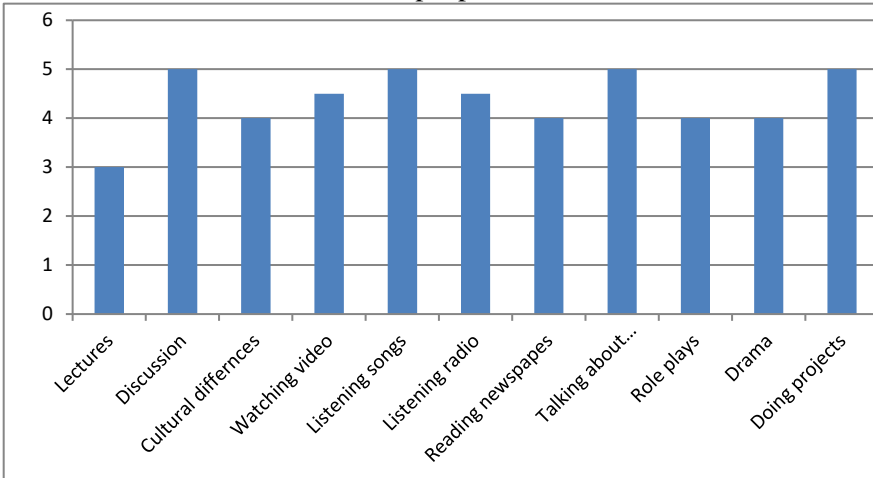


Figure 4. The students' scores about the way of teaching

Topics

The students were asked to assess the same list of topics, which was given to the teachers. As expected “youth life” ranked first followed by music, customs, and traditions, rules of behaviour. The topics, which gained the lowest scores, were law and order, government, and politician institutions, geography, history etc.

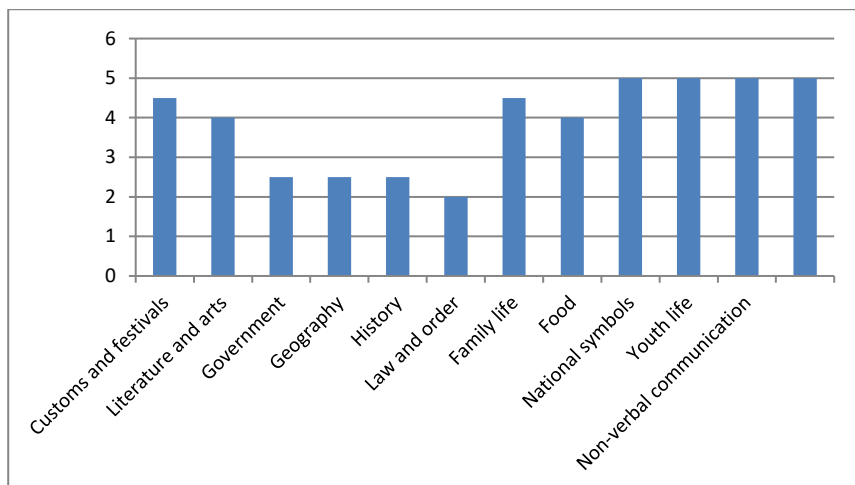


Figure 4. The students' scores about topics

Conclusions and discussions

The results of the questionnaires revealed that both the teachers and students considered teaching of culture important. However, when teachers were asked to define culture, they did not appear to have a very clear perception of the concept.

A major problem concerning the teaching of culture seems to be finding time to do it. As stressed by several scholars culture should be integral part of every language class. One of the main reasons why there is not enough time for integrating culture into language classes might be that the teachers mostly concentrate on developing the language skills.

Another reason might be that the teachers are not aware of appropriate techniques. There are some techniques that teachers should use in English classes such as drama, watching video and doing projects. So teachers do not deny the importance of teaching culture and integrate it from time to time into their classes. The teaching materials do not provide opportunities. Here, the teachers could rely on the students interest and ask them to do some research into the area. Student's research is a powerful tool as it combines student's interest with classroom.

Analyzing the scores for cultural topics it could be claimed that a shift from about to knowing of how has occurred in the teaching of culture. The teachers and students ranked the topics like youth of life and rules of behaviour very highly too. At the same time, very important aspects of the intercultural communicative competence, non-verbal communication received low scores from both the teachers and students. Customs and

traditions reveal a lot about the culture. From the teachers point of view they are also easy to teach and there is many materials available. At the same time, customs, traditions, and festivals, offers numerous opportunities for comparison between learner's own and other cultures.

Both the teachers and the students ranked geography, history, law and order lowest. Another interesting observation was that teachers gave much higher scores for all topics than the students. From the analysis above, it can be concluded that that the hypotheses concerning the teacher and student's opinions proved to largely correct. While the teachers and students generally shared opinions about the ways of teaching, there was a significant difference concerning the topics. The teacher's answers indicated that they used a wide range of materials for teaching culture. While textbooks were the most widely used sources, many other were mentioned as well with realia and the internet being the most popular.

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