

THE INCORPORATION OF TEACHING CULTURE WITH TECHNOLOGY ENHANCES LEARNING ENGLISH AS A FL

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to highlight 1) the importance of culture in learning/teaching EFL, 2) the importance of technology competency in language teaching/learning, and 3) enhancing learning/teaching English through integrating teaching culture and technology. Though culture and language learning/teaching are inseparable, culture was underestimated during the past decades. But recently, the role of culture in language learning/teaching has changed a lot. It has become an integral part of language learning, considered by some scholars as the fifth language skill. To be successful, it is vital to make students able to appreciate culture of those people who speak that language. This paper will try to give answers to the following: how, when, how often, what, why ... do teachers teach cultural issues; how they integrate teaching culture with the use of technological tools; to what extent media technology is incorporated in teaching culture; etc. All these are discussed among student-teachers, at “A. Xhuvani” University of Elbasan, Albania, NIU students and students from 9-year schools. Due to different opinions and various perceptions gathered from questionnaires, interviews, fieldwork, observations and simulations, this paper provides ideas about how to help student-teachers face challenges of their future profession. This is a challenge not only for student-teachers and in-service teachers, but for educators, who deal with teacher preparation as well. Finally, this study indicates the need for further additional research on the interaction of culture and technology in teaching and learning English as a FL and at the same time it indicates the need for technology teacher training.

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Introduction

“Language is the road map of a culture. It tells you where its people come from and where they are going” (Rita Mae Brown).

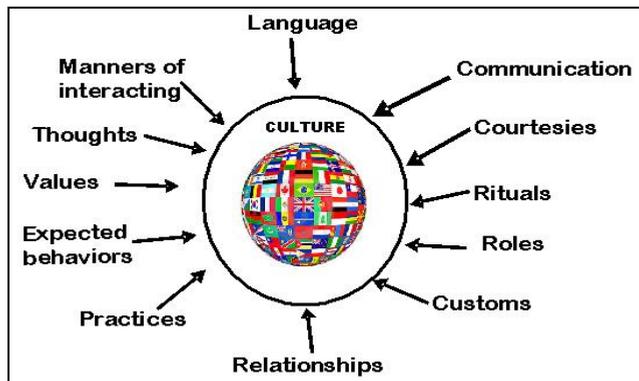
There are different perspectives and approaches to learning/teaching culture through the use of technology. One of the views circulating is that, language learning comes first, and culture learning second. The debate goes on and on, there are a lot of pros and cons about this. At the same time, today, EFL classrooms are experiencing a rapid growth in integrating cultural issues with technology. This integration is directly affecting classroom organization and classroom learning. After examining the relationship between teaching target culture and technology, the paper explores some essential components of cultural teaching methodologies and technological competency, providing some cultural activities and samples. It is necessary that Albanian students learning English should learn some tips of English cultures to be accommodated with the language and culture of those people who speak that language.

Goals and Objectives of this paper are:

- To highlight the importance of culture in learning/teaching a FL
- To integrate learning language and culture with technology
- To bring some insights and data about how teaching English through culture differs between Albanian students and some students of NIU, USA
- To identify different strategies teachers in Albania use to teach culture, and how they incorporate them in the lesson

Literature review

We cannot go on with this study without giving the definitions of: teaching culture, technology competent and integration of culture and technology. A thorough study of some scholars about language learning and teaching through culture and technology has been reviewed. Culture is defined as an integrated pattern of human behavior that includes thoughts, communications, languages, practices, beliefs, values, customs... and the ability to transmit the above to succeeding generations. (Goode et al., 2000, p. 1, Cited by Tafani & Vavla, 2015).



“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).

‘Culture’ includes everything people learn to do. It is everything humans have learned. Culture shapes our thoughts and actions, and often does so with a heavy hand“.

“Culture, in general, is a broad concept that embraces all aspects of human life” (Seelye, 1997). It is a crucial part of foreign language learning. "A language is part of a culture and culture is part of language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture." (Brown, 2009, Cited by Tafani & Vavla, 2015). From this quote it is understood that without learning about the culture of the English-speaking countries, language students lack an important component of the language learning process. Target culture helps in understanding better English language, its nuances and uses.

Alongside with the understanding of the importance of culture in language learning, the preparation of technology competent teachers is of great importance. Our new teachers should be multi-cultural competent, with technological knowledge, skills, and practices.

Several papers and articles have been studied about the above issues and there have been gathered a lot of interesting insights.

Methodology

This paper would have not been accomplished without the use of mixed research methods combining some elements of Comparative Approach, Descriptive Method and instruments to realize the aim of the study. First of all there have been abundant literature review, discussions, feedback and considerations drawn from interviews with teachers of English and questionnaires conducted with student-teachers. This study focuses on gathering both quantitative and qualitative data. The questionnaire was about various situations, behaviors, attitudes, greetings, etc. The first part of the questionnaire was conducted with 35 students of Northern Illinois University, USA; the whole questionnaire was done with 37 student-teachers of university of Elbasan and 50 students of a 9-year school in Elbasan, Albania. The participants were asked to tick, 'Yes', 'No', and 'Comment'. It aimed at collecting data about how cultural issues are perceived by students.

Interviews with teachers of English (adapted, Lazar, 2003) are carried out on how teachers choose cultural topics, how much time they devote to 'cultural corner'; how they teach students to express gratitude non-verbally in the target culture; how they deal with American and British holidays; how they use technology when they want to introduce any target cultural issue, etc. Besides these there were a lot of class observations, field work, project work, etc. about using both culture and technology in English classes.

Discussions and Results

1. Understanding the importance of culture in teaching/learning EFL

Literature review helped a lot in understanding the importance of culture in teaching & learning EFL. In our country, though culture and language learning/teaching are inseparable, target culture was neglected, not to say forbidden, before the 90's. The only aim was learning the foreign language, the structure. Culture was considered a taboo. But after Albania opened, the role of target culture in language learning/teaching has changed a lot. According to the literature, lots of scholars stress that culture should be considered the fifth language skill that goes alongside with reading, speaking, listening and writing. It has become an integral part of our English language classes, enhancing communication. It is often said that language learners need to be aware, for example, of the culturally appropriate ways to address people, express gratitude, make requests, and agree or disagree with someone, celebrate holidays, etc. While learning/teaching English learners/teachers understand that certain behaviors and intonation patterns that are appropriate in their own

community culture may be perceived differently by members of the target language community. All these have been noticed while teaching and observing English classes in elementary schools in Elbasan, Albania. If we compare our observations of 1990s with those of nowadays, we notice a lot of differences. When the Albanian borders opened, there were a lot of foreigners coming to our country. Kids who knew some English immediately started to ask them: What's your name? How old are you? Are you married? How many children do you have? How much are you paid? What is your salary? Income? Etc. Of course, these sounded strange to the foreigners, but to our culture, it's normal. Gradually, the attitude of our students changed. When the teacher thanked the students for answering questions or for explaining something, the students seemed surprised? Why? Of course, because they were not used to this. In our culture in general we do not thank a lot or praise for good work. The questionnaire brings a lot of insights of the students about the attitude towards the target culture.

No	Questions of the survey	NIU Yes %	NIU No %	AXH Yes %	AXH No %	9- year Yes %	9- year No %
1	When meeting and greeting someone, the usual response to 'How do you do' or 'How are you' is the absolute truth	22.5	68.5	13.5	70	35	40
2	Men always kiss women's hands when greeting them, at the first meeting	20	62.8	5.4	81	6	70.5
3	Asking direct personal questions, e.g. Are you married? How much is your salary? A new acquaintance is considered insulting and impertinent	85	2.8	60	18.1	50	30.5
4	Hands gestures are made with elbows close to the body to indicate modesty and respect	60	11	40	31	10.5	70.1
5	Sharing gossip, positive or malicious, is considered normal behavior	5.7	66.7	22	67	30	30.5
6	People respect calm conversations. The silence is considered positive.	77.1	5.7	59.4	16.1	50	30.1
7	Asking for the price of a personal item is considered very reasonable and also asking where it was purchased is normal. People often share this type of information freely.	20	62.8	27	54	60	22.4
8	People are quite comfortable when they are sitting very close to another person.	14.2	60	21	56.2	40	37.5
9	Touching people while talking is considered a sign of friendliness and esteem.	17.1	57.1	31.4	44.1	55.2	30

Note: The remaining percentages refer to the students that did not give any answer for that question.

The data gathered from the above mentioned questionnaires were interesting and helpful to build up strategies and activities to incorporate language learning/teaching and culture. Recently, culture has become an increasingly important component of foreign language teaching. It is widely acknowledged that languages and culture are closely connected, that knowledge of culture holds a key to the understanding of a language. Cultural issues as: Which cultures to teach, how to teach culture, show clearly the relation between language and culture. Nowadays, more emphasis is being given to intercultural awareness, approaches and strategies related to language pedagogy, and the learning of a non-native language and its culture as a whole. It is often said that language learners need to be aware, for example, of the culturally appropriate ways to address people, express gratitude, make requests, and agree or disagree with someone, celebrate holidays, etc. While learnin/teaching English learners/teachers understand that certain behaviors and intonation patterns that are appropriate in their own community may be perceived differently by members of the target language community. All these have been noticed while teaching and observing English classes in elementary schools in Elbasan, Albania.

From the feedback received from the questionnaires conducted and discussions with teachers of English it is perceived that the study of language can't be separated from the study of culture, and vice-versa, they go together hand in hand. However, teachers are expected to integrate cultural components because language teaching has been influenced a lot by different perspective on culture itself.

Furthermore, in order to translate teaching culture into classroom practice, we need to modify and use specific strategies and techniques to integrate culture and language through lectures, inviting native lecturers, using audio-taped materials, authentic videos, readings, realia, proverbs, etc. for cross-cultural understanding.

2. Understanding technology competency

Today technology has become a tool improving language learning. It offers students a new learning opportunity. It promotes communication and collaboration by allowing students work in small groups on projects or open-ended creative tasks on the computer. This promotes creativity, collaboration, discussion, working in peers, and problem-solving. Due to the lack of computers we invite students work in pairs. This way of working has its own advantages. It would help peer interaction, collaboration and sharing ideas in accomplishing a certain task.

Technology may also promote independence and self-confidence. This can be reached through individual practice and personal learning, giving various homework. But again this might be efficient for those students that do have computers at home. In our

case, as we are preparing teachers of English for elementary schools, who may work in a village or in any poor area, have to focus more on collaborative learning, trying to use computer as a creative tool for small group work in the classrooms.

3. Integrating teaching culture and technology enhances EFL

Teaching culture through technology is not simply a cliché, its aim is to develop students' communicative competence, which is the main national goal for EFL learning. We should pay attention to helping students use new technology through which they may receive cultural knowledge. So, it is a necessity that university teachers must not only be culturally competent, but also technology competent and to know how to best develop these competencies among pre-service teachers. In our teacher preparation Master Program we offer:

- Computer skills course: basic computer terminology and computer applications; practical knowledge of computer hardware, including -CD-ROM, word processing, etc.
- Method course: various methods, strategies, techniques used for this issue, creating lesson plans and activities on cultural issues, comparing cultures, etc.
- Teaching English culture through technology course (teach students to do research through technology, choose and use videos, create cultural classroom activities, etc.

Educators should not be satisfied with merely developing technology literate teachers but also must prepare EFL future-to-be teachers for the challenges of the profession by integrating technological and cultural expertise, providing them with field work and samples of cultural activities with the help of computers to use them in the future. Students are required to log on/sign in to access and collect information about cultural issues. Another way of using technology is Google classroom, where students post their research; assignments, share ideas, questions and answers, as well as comments are welcome, from both teachers and students.

Today, through technology and some changes in the national curricula, and due to having relatives living in English speaking countries, our students' life and attitude towards target culture have changed a lot.

Our students have started organizing and participating in a wide range of cross-cultural experiences as Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas Day, baby shower, etc. All these changes have been possible due to watching videos, using software, mobile applications, movies, which offer accent, real situations; updated information. "Activities such as these, when coupled with journals, diaries, and group discussions,

lead future teachers to reflect on their feelings, expectations, observations, and learning" (Chisholm, 1994).

Working with technology, using apps effectively help teaching the target culture and at the same time help the teachers to add new dimensions to their teaching. The new technology has brought a big change to the traditional teaching (Athmane, 2016).

In the questionnaires student-teachers raise the need of becoming competent in how to research about cultural issues in Internet and bringing videos and movies in the classroom to illustrate their cultural activities. Another comment was that the most strategies and techniques used to teach culture are: Media/visuals, culture videos, Mini-dramas, Cartoons, Celebrating festivals, etc. Of great interest were activities about American and British Holidays; food, life style, attitudes, behavior, etc. Many teachers claim they use authentic materials, mostly taken from technology to incorporate culture in their lesson.

In their questionnaires the teachers mentioned some strategies and techniques teachers use to teach culture.

- Media/visuals, Mini-dramas, Culture clusters, Culture quiz, Cartoons, Celebrating festivals, Cultural islands, Critical incidents/problem solving, Kinesics and body language, Personalization, Cultural consciousness-raising, etc.
- Activities about American and British Holidays; food, sports, life style, add a lot to language learning and cultural issues and facilitate better understanding of both.
- Many teachers claim they use authentic materials to incorporate culture in their lesson
- They declare that the program and the textbooks allow them to deal with cultural issues more than they had the possibility to do before
- Role play, reading stories or tales, showing short videos or allowing students to listen to native speakers live or on CDs, are techniques or strategies they mostly use to deal with culture in their classes.

The university is paying great attention to provide pre-service teachers with ways of integrating new technology and the needed information about cross-cultural verbal and non-verbal communication; traditional holidays, food, etc. cultural values and expectations; family roles and family values across cultures the history and contributions of many people to human society;

This paper puts forward these challenges for teachers and student-teachers of English:

- Incorporating computer technology into teaching language through culture

- Creating simulations, samples, scenarios, real life cultural activities for student-teachers to develop their teaching skills of the target language to use with their future students
- The need for further research on the interaction of English-speaking communities' culture and technology in the EFL classroom (adapted from Chisholm, 1994).
- Besides knowing a lot about culture of English speaking countries, teachers of English as a FL, need to transmit and transfer this knowledge to the students, this can be done mostly via technology, planning and practicing activities which they can use in the future.

Conclusions

Culture is one of the key components of foreign language teaching and learning. Having plenty of knowledge of cultural perspectives, cultural contents and cultural practices, an individual can learn a foreign language to a desirable height and level. Foreign language learning is a part of intercultural learning, which is often identified with the growth of internationalism. In order to learn a foreign language in a certain environment, a learner must pay attention to the cultural component of the foreign language so as to become a world citizen in this new millennium. The cultural component of EFL will be beneficial for learners in terms of language skills, cultural awareness, and attitudes.

Language and culture are integral to one another. Language is the means through which culture is transmitted. One particular important aspect of culture that can affect teaching and learning has to do with the ways teachers use language during teaching. Because teaching and learning depends on clear communication between teacher and students, the communicative success of teacher-student interaction is crucial. Teachers play an important role in this direction, especially teachers of FL. There are numerous examples that teachers made a difference in students' lives.

Activities about American and British Holidays; food, sports, life style, add a lot to language learning/teaching and cultural issues and facilitate better understanding of both.

Culture is indispensable in order to fully understand a language, its nuances and appropriate uses. Aside from understanding the linguistic side of language, culture is a key component in giving the student a well-rounded education in the chosen language and provides a context for understanding one's own culture. Incorporating language and culture learners will have the ability to react appropriately in a social situation

describe a pattern in the culture; predict how a pattern is likely to apply in a given situation, etc.

As university teachers preparing future teachers of English, we have to be responsible for this mission, by providing information, relevant experiences, and opportunities for exploration and reflection, strategies and techniques about cultural issues using technological tools, and how to implement them in their classrooms when they become teachers.

Accordingly, our Master Program offers pre-service teachers multiple and varied experiences. These direct experiences are an integral part of course work and field experiences. But most of them are provided by teachers' experiences and textbooks. Ideally students could spend extended periods abroad where they would experience various cultural events. But this is not the case with us. We have to find other ways, simulate, mock activities, watch videos, etc. instead.

Navigating Internet, talking to native speakers, reading a lot, and all the above mentioned cultural activities have accomplished the mission: Learning English language, which serves as a communication means between peoples and cultures.

Some more conclusions drawn from the study are:

- Albanian students claim that in theory they know what is polite, but in their everyday life people do not practice politeness as much as they theorize
- Teaching English through culture is a very effective strategy which allows students to learn more about both aspects at the same time
- Authentic materials, stories, tales, role plays and videos are very effective tools used by the teacher to integrate culture in their English classes

In the future we should help the student-teachers to find ways to incorporate culture in the English language classrooms through the use of technology. It is important to raise the awareness of some teachers about teaching English through culture as a strategy for active and effective teaching and learning and linking it with technology. Alongside with the above, we should train in-service and pre-service teachers to use different strategies and techniques for teaching culture through technology use.

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