

Chapter 11

Cultural Problems in Teaching and Learning of English as a Foreign Language in Tunisia

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ABSTRACT

Culture now becomes a key element in most educational systems, particularly in Higher education, where cultural Studies are an essential part of most language instruction. The aim of this chapter is to explore the cultural challenges that hinder the process of learning English in Tunisia and to suggest solutions for overcoming these. A questionnaire was used as the primary data collection material. It was found that lack of authentic materials, lack of cultural knowledge of the target language, poor textbooks, limited exposure to authentic culture environment and native culture interference are considered to be the main problems. The results also showed that these challenges can be remedied by using more authentic materials, revising the content of textbooks, the integration of technology and cultural awareness.

INTRODUCTION

Teaching English as second or a foreign language has become the focus of non-native teachers and researchers. They have tried to identify the problems and difficulties that can be face by second language learners at higher education level and the possible solutions to overcome these obstacles. Lado (1964) listed the goals of learning a foreign language, arguing that teachers should understand the target language. They should focus on both linguistic competence and culture. Lado further states that the main objectives of learning a second or a foreign language are “the ability to use it, understanding its meanings and connotations in terms of the target language and culture, and the ability to understand the speech and writing of natives of the target culture in terms of their great ideas and achievement” (p. 25).

The integration of culture in education is important. It affects positively the learning of the foreign language. Some researchers believe that teaching target culture during foreign language learning helps students to engage in realistic language situations. In the literature, we find varying views on the subject.

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There are four prevailing trends. The first trend (Byram 1990, Byram and Flemming 1998) perceives that culture should be taught with linguistic skills to help students get acculturated to English culture. The second (Kachru 1985, Kachru and Nelson 1996) views that culture should not be taught together with English, especially in the countries where English has institutionalized varieties.

The third view (McKay 2003, Kramsch and Sullivan 1996) argues that teachers should teach 'local culture' in English language. The fourth view (Alptekin 2005, Jenkins 2002, 2005) states that English should be taught in a 'culture-free context.' It seems that there is a disagreement about teaching culture but most of the researchers agree with its importance in foreign language classroom.

Although English has a crucial place in the educational system in Tunisia, students and teachers face a number of difficulties involving cultural problems. The present chapter sheds light on the importance of teaching culture in foreign language classroom.

LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

Definition of Culture

The term culture comes from the Latin "colere" that means "to cultivate" (Kramsch, 1998, p. 3). It is a complex phenomenon. William (1983) states that "culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language" (p. 76). It has various definitions. It is defined by Javadine and House (2001) as "a set of beliefs and values about what is desirable in a community of people and a set of formal or informal practices to support the values" (p. 292). Similarly, Matsumoto (2000) perceives culture as a dynamic system of rules, including attitudes, behaviors, norms etc shared by a particular group of people. Moreover, Duranti (1997) views culture as "something learned, transmitted, passed down from one generation to the next through human actions, often in the form of face to face interaction and through linguistic communication, its patently obvious that language a subpart of culture".

Matsumoto and Juang (2013) define culture as "a unique meaning and information system, shared by a group of people and transmitted across generations, that allows the group to meet basic needs of survival, pursue happiness and well-being, and derives meaning from life" (p. 15). In addition to this, Liddicoat, Papademetre, Scarino and Kohler (2003) define culture as a complex system of concepts, attitudes, values, beliefs, conventions, behaviours, practices, rituals and lifestyles of the people who make up a cultural group, as well as the artefacts they produce and the institutions they create (p. 45). Culture is a rich concept. It includes many constituents that are shared in common. Matsumoto and Juang (2013) also agree that culture is entity which involves a variety of components. They state that it is a "unique meaning and information system, shared by a group of people and transmitted across generations..." (p. 15).

When we speak about English as a lingua franca, we speak about global culture. This means that English is a mean of communication among speakers of different first languages and different cultures. Jenkins (2006) uses the term 'lingua-cultures' (p. 164) to highlight the close relation between language and culture and to show the need for different cultures and languages in communication. English, as an international language, has lingua-cultures. It includes many cultures because it is spoken by different people from different places.

Lingua-cultures have some problems. Rampton (1991) points to the issue of 'liminal moments' or 'crossings' (p. 167) to describe language users who are not part of a given language community.

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