
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Place of Culture in EFL Teaching: A Succinct Overview

Mohammed HAKIMI¹, Samir BASSAOUI² and Bani KOUMACHI³

¹Doctoral Candidate, Language and Society Laboratory, Faculty of Languages, Letters, and Arts, Ibn Tofail University, Kenitra, Morocco

³Associate Professor, Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Languages, Letters, and Arts, Ibn Tofail University, Kenitra, Morocco

Corresponding Author: Mohammed HAKIMI, E-mail: hakimi.contact01@gmail.com

| ABSTRACT

The incorporation of cultural elements in a foreign language (FL) classroom has been a subject of interest for many scholars over the past decades. The literature clearly demonstrates the widespread recognition of culture's inevitable emergence in foreign language instruction. Nonetheless, there is a belief that culture should be instructed in the same way language is. Therefore, this short review provides operational definitions of culture within the field of education while shedding light on the distinction between objective culture and subjective culture. Furthermore, it explores the inseparable connection between language and culture. This paper stresses the significance of teaching culture alongside language, highlighting its natural emergence in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) setting and the need for a purposeful and structured approach to teaching it. Moreover, the review suggests techniques and methods for instructing cultural aspects in an EFL classroom, particularly in the context of today's interconnected world.

| KEYWORDS

Teaching English as a Foreign Language, Culture in TEFL, Education, Applied Linguistics

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

ACCEPTED: 01 December 2023

PUBLISHED: 01 January 2024

DOI: 10.32996/jeltal.2024.6.1.1

1. Introduction

Integrating culture into an FL classroom has become a necessity. It is a dispensable skill that should complement the traditional four skills of language, namely reading, writing, listening, and speaking. In fact, culture is considered not only as a separate skill or a fifth skill, but rather as one that naturally and unavoidably arises while teaching any of the aforementioned skills. As laconically articulated by Kramsch (1993):

culture in language learning is not an expendable fifth skill, tacked on, so to speak, to the teaching of speaking, listening, reading, and writing. It is always in the background, right from day one, ready to unsettle the good language learners when they expect it least, making evident the limitations of their hard-won communicative competence, challenging their ability to make sense of the world around them. (p. 1)

That is to say, culture permeates foreign language teaching, surfacing at any moment during the teaching of the four language skills. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to shed light on the definitions of culture and its aspects, the symbiotic relationship between language and culture, the importance of integrating culture into an EFL classroom, and lastly, to briefly suggest some of the methods and techniques through which teachers can effectively incorporate culture into the EFL classroom alongside language instruction.

Copyright: © 2024 the Author(s). This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC-BY) 4.0 license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>). Published by Al-Kindi Centre for Research and Development, London, United Kingdom.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Definition of culture

Numerous attempts have been made to define culture, a concept described as “notoriously difficult to define” (Byram, 1989, p. 80) and the most challenging, according to Williams (1976). Among these endeavours, Kroeber and Kluckhohn’s (1954) have come up with almost three hundred definitions. Its complexity is due to the diverse perspectives that have sought to define it, rendering it “an omnibus term” (Kaplan and Manners, 1972, as cited in Byram 1989, p. 80). In reality, defining culture has been a major concern for sociolinguists and anthropologists.

Liddicoat et al. (2003) describe 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 instructions they create” (p. 45). In a similar vein, Richard et al. (1992) view culture as “the total set of beliefs, attitudes, customs, behaviours, social habits, etc. of the members of a particular society” (p. 94). It is, in other words, a repertoire of a shared experience; “a stock of knowledge about the world that other people share” states Kramsch (1998, p. 3).

Lado’s (1957) comment, deemed as effective as any definition of culture and the most concise, “‘Culture,’ as we understand it here, is synonymous with the ‘ways of a people’” (as cited in Valdes, 1990, p. 22). Kramsch (1998) asserts that culture is not a natural manifestation but rather a human intervention. She divides it into three layers, namely, diachronic, synchronic, and imaginative. The first one deals with the history of the culture. The second one focuses on the current state of culture. The third deals with the imaginings of how culture manifests in the future. She adds that culture is heterogeneous, meaning that several cultures may exist within a single community, displaying its inherently non-static nature.

In the field of language teaching, culture is characterised in terms of ‘Big C’ and ‘little c’ cultures. Lafayette (1997), in his suggested seven goals for teaching culture in a foreign language classroom, places the ‘Big C’ in a category that includes recognising and explaining “major historical events, major ‘artistic’ monuments (architecture, arts, and literature), major institutions (administrative, political, religious, educational, etc.), and major artistic monuments” (p. 123). In contrast, ‘little c’ culture includes recognising and explaining “‘active’ everyday cultural patterns (eating, shopping, greeting, people, etc.), and ‘passive’ everyday cultural patterns (social stratification, marriage, work, etc.), and act[ing] appropriately in common everyday situations” (p. 123). In retrospect, this distinction corresponds closely to what Brooks (1968) refers to as formal culture and deep culture. In a similar vein, Bennett (1998) associates the ‘Big C’ culture and ‘little c’ cultures with objective culture and subjective culture, respectively. Furthermore, Adaskou et al. (1990) have suggested four meanings (senses) of culture that foreign language teaching may involve. The aesthetic sense (Big C), the sociological sense (little c), the semantic sense, and the pragmatic (or sociolinguistic) sense.

2.2. The relationship between language and culture

The interdependence of language and culture is a given. Mitchell and Myles (2004) observe that “language and culture are not separate, but are acquired together with each providing support for the development of the other” (p. 235). On the inseparability of language and culture, Brown (2007) points out that “a language is a part of a culture and a culture is a part of a language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture. In a word, culture and language are inseparable” (p. 165). Many scholars have referred to this relationship as linguaculture (Kramsch, 1989; Fantini, 1995), languaculture (Agar, 1994), or language-and-culture (Byram et al., 1994). Moran (2001) adopts the latter term throughout his article. He states that language-and-culture “conveys both unification and separation” (p. 35). Meaning that this fusion may be dealt with in a separate or collective way. Moran summarises language-and-culture according to the five dimensions of culture, namely, products, practices, perspectives, communities, and persons of culture. The selected table comes from Moran (2001, p. 36), in which he describes the cultural dimensions alongside the nature of language-and-culture:

Cultural dimension	The nature of language-and-culture
Products	The language used to describe and manipulates cultural products.
Practices	The language used to participate in cultural practices.
Perspectives	The language used to identify, explain and justify cultural perspectives.
Communities	The language used to participate appropriately in specific cultural communities.
Persons	The language individuals use to express their unique identity within the culture.

Based on what has been shown and discussed, language and culture cannot be separated from each other.

On the one hand, language is often regarded as the reflector of culture, while on the other, culture is considered the influencer and shaper of language. Interestingly, Jiang (2000) showcases the relationship between language and culture, presenting three new metaphors: philosophical view, communicative view, and pragmatic view, as sketched out in her work (2000, pp. 328-329):

From a philosophical view:

Language	+ Culture	→a living organism
Flesh	Blood	

From a communicative view:

Language	+ culture	→swimming (communication)
Swimming skill	water	

From a pragmatic view:

Language	+ culture	→transportation (communication)
Vehicle	traffic light	

In her depiction of the first metaphor, Jiang (2000) likens language and culture to the body, portraying language as the flesh and culture as the blood, coupled together to form a living creature. She argues that “without culture, language would be dead; without language, culture would have no shape” (p. 328).

In the second metaphor, the author likens language and culture to swimming, equating language with swimming ability, culture with water, and swimming with communication. In light of this, she adds that “without language, communication would remain to a very limited degree (in very shallow water); without culture, there would be no communication at all” (p. 329).

Regarding the final metaphor, she likens communication to transportation, where language acts as the vehicle and culture as the traffic signal. In this respect, Jiang (2000) concludes that “language makes communication easier and faster; culture regulates, sometimes promotes and sometimes hinders communication” (p. 329). These three aforementioned analogies collectively underscore the inseparability and symbiotic relationship of language and culture.

2.2. The integration of culture into the EFL classroom

Lessard-Clouston (1997) sketches out the historical evolution of culture in education during the previous century. Traditional approaches and methods of foreign language teaching largely focused on literature and the fine arts. Initially, the Grammar-Translation method (or Classical Method) played a crucial role, albeit inadequate, in promoting culture in the foreign language classroom. It solely focused on the ‘Big C’ culture, considering literature as the main source of information (Lessard-Clouston, 1997). Additionally, it emphasised facts, figures, institutions, and the life of the target culture (Neuner, 2003).

Subsequently, the Direct method has been preoccupied with the history, geography, and daily life of the target language country (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). Remarkably, to some degree, the Direct method focused on both and Big ‘C’ culture and ‘little c’ culture. The former was appropriate in the elementary stage, whereas the latter was relevant to the advanced one (Long-Fu, 2001).

With the introduction of Audiolingualism, emphasis shifted from culture for literature to culture for language learning purposes (Brooks, 1968). The scope of culture in education broadened, focusing not only on “‘culture of the elite’ or ‘Big C’ culture but also ‘culture of the people’ or ‘little c’ culture” (Kramsch 2006, p. 13).

In Humanistic teaching methods such as the Silent Way, Suggestopedia, and community language learning, there was a modest focus on specific elements of culture. The cultural dimension occasionally emerges in the fine arts and everyday lives of people in the target language (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011).

Communicative language teaching ended the reigning era centred on literary text, placing ‘little c’ culture at the centre of attention in foreign language teaching. According to Finocchiaro and Brumfit (1983), a major characteristic of the communicative approach is that “it provides for the teaching of everyday, real-world language use in a variety of socio-cultural situations in which features of pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and culture are selected and graded according to their priority in actual communication” (as cited in Long-fu, 2001, p. 46). However, the communicative approach is seen as inadequate from a cultural and intercultural

standpoint. It requires learners to emulate native speakers, overshadowing their cultural identity. Similarly, Byram (1997) criticises this method, identifying two problems: linguistic and cultural.

Having shed light on the historical development of integrating culture into the foreign language classroom, several subsequent studies have explored the integration of the target culture in an EFL context. Moore (1995) provides an overview spanning three decades of debates regarding the inclusion of culture in foreign language teaching. The vast literature related to incorporating culture into the EFL curriculum consistently stresses its unavoidability. Valdes (1990) notably underlines its inevitability, as reflected in the title of his article. Furthermore, the content of a language classroom never escapes the fact that there is something cultural about it. Valdes (1990) confirms this, adding that every language lesson is about a certain topic, and that topic is inevitably cultural. Additionally, he draws attention to the significant role of the teacher in integrating culture alongside language instruction. According to Valdes, privileged students are those whose teacher is "cognizant of the cultural nature of what he is teaching and adds interpretation, explanation of underlying values, along with word order, tense, and aspect" (Valdes, 1990, p. 22). Similarly, teachers are expected "to present and elicit cultural information, coach and model cultural behaviors, guide and conduct cultural research and analysis" (Moran, 2001, p. 138).

Nonetheless, culture should be taught in the same manner that language is. That is, despite its inevitable emergence in a foreign language classroom, it is advised that it be taught in a planned and systematic way. Byram (1989) emphasises the necessity of deliberate planning in foreign language courses, in contrast to Goodson and McGivney's (1985) assumption that culture emerges naturally during foreign language instruction. The proper presentation of cultural information is equally as crucial as the presentation of linguistic information, because cultural information learned naturally by students is usually incidental, culturally biased, and distorted. According to Kramsch et al. (1996), the educational systems in the US, France, and Ireland are congruent with the previously discussed idea of "culture as language and language as culture" (p. 99). They present three arguments for their viewpoint. First, despite culture being inherently submerged in language teaching, explicit instruction of culture is preferable, requiring much more effort than teaching language and communication. Second, tacit instruction of culture may lead learners to develop stereotypical views towards the target language culture; consequently, clear and well-defined instruction is essential. Last, an explicit instruction of culture in a foreign language curriculum is beneficial for teachers as well as students; that is, it facilitates the teacher's job and the student's learning process. As Lessard-Clouston (1997) rightly states, "a laissez-faire approach is not adequate. Just as we are intentional in terms of what grammatical structures we teach and how, we must also be systematic about our culture teaching" (p. 6). Therefore, the teaching of culture has to follow the same criteria as the teaching of grammatical structure, which implies that it should be based on purposeful sequencing to ensure a systematic method of imparting cultural elements to learners. He adds that "our learners benefit most when our culture lessons and the cultural aspects of our language teaching are well planned and developed" (p. 6). As far as the instruction of culture is concerned, Stempleski's (1993) seven goals of cultural instruction, which are an adaptation of Seelye's (1991), may serve as a useful guideline to teach culture in an EFL classroom.

2.3. Suggestions to teach culture in the EFL classroom

There are various methods and techniques to teach culture in an EFL classroom. To begin with, nowadays, individuals excessively depend on the internet in today's globalised society. Therefore, the use of technology to teach culture is highly favoured. Many academics and researchers have underlined the necessity of employing technology to teach a foreign language in general and culture in an EFL classroom in particular. Moore (2006) highlights the use of technology so students may become more involved with authentic cultural content inside and outside the classroom, enabling continuous learning. Levy (2009) stresses that "simply accessing an L2 Web site can expose learners to numerous aspects of the target culture" (p. 776). As a matter of fact, even traditional methods and techniques of teaching culture have been re-evaluated, updated, and digitalized, such as films and audiobooks. For instance, while exploring a novel or a short story, teachers may screen an adapted movie in the classroom, giving pupils a visual experience of the literature they are learning. In general, literary works may be beneficial in enhancing learners' understanding of the target culture. Corbett (2003) emphasises the importance of utilising literary texts to promote cultural awareness. Drawing on Pulverness' comments on novels and plays, he argues that their practical educational usefulness resides in the fact that "they can vividly illustrate aspects of an entire society, from the rich to the poor, and show... the lived relationships between the classes." (p. 173). In reality, due to technology, movies and audiobooks of literary works may be valuable inside and beyond the classroom walls, enabling both the teacher and learner to see additional facets of literary works. Moreover, it is now simpler for both teachers and students to obtain authentic cultural resources with a few clicks, thanks to the availability of technological tools. Authentic materials may also help inspire and motivate students to learn about the culture, particularly those that are visual.

5. Conclusion

The major objective of this paper has been to review the literature related to the importance of culture in an EFL classroom. Culture is a concept that has been defined quite broadly, given its multifaceted and comprehensive nature. In language teaching, however, culture has been described in terms of well-known dichotomies, which have been labelled differently, namely formal culture and deep culture (Brooks, 1968), 'Big C' culture and 'small c' culture (Lafayette, 1997), objective culture and subjective culture (Bennett, 1998), and the aesthetic sense (Big C), the sociological sense (little c), the semantic sense, and the pragmatic (or sociolinguistic) sense (Adaskou et al., 1990). This review has also shed light on the inseparability of language and culture. The literature has established that language and culture are closely interwoven, making it difficult to separate language and culture without reducing the importance of both. Furthermore, it has underlined the need for incorporating culture in an EFL classroom and the necessity to teach it purposefully and systematically in the same way as language instruction. This paper has also offered ideas for instructors to integrate it in an EFL classroom, making use of technology.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

ORCID ID:

Mohammed HAKIMI: 0000-0002-0317-7624

Samir BASSAOUI: 0009-0008-0773-8274

Publisher's Note: All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers.

References

- [1] Adaskou, K., Britten, D., & Fashi, B. (1990). Design Decisions on the cultural content of a secondary English course for Morocco. *ELT Journal*, 44(1), 3-10.
- [2] Agar, M. (1994). *Language shock: Understanding the culture of conversation*. New York: William Morrow.
- [3] Bennett, M. J. (1998). Intercultural communication: A current perspective. In M. J. Bennett (Ed.), *Basic concepts of intercultural communication* (pp. 1-34). Yarmouth, Maine: Intercultural Press, Inc.
- [4] Brooks, N. (1968). Teaching culture in the foreign language classroom. *Foreign Language Annals*, 1(3), 204-217.
- [5] Brown, H. D. (2007). *Principles of language learning and teaching*. New York: Pearson Education.
- [6] Byram, M. (1989). *Cultural studies in foreign language education*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- [7] Byram, M. (1997). *Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- [8] Byram, M., Morgan, C., & Colleagues. (1994). *Teaching-and-learning language-and-culture*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- [9] Corbett, J. (2003). *An intercultural approach to English language teaching*. New York: Multilingual Matters.
- [10] Fantini, A. E. (1995). Introduction-language, culture and world view: Exploring the nexus. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 2(19), 143-153.
- [11] Finocchiaro, M., & Brumfit, C. (1983). *The functional-notional approach from theory to practice*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- [12] Goodson, I. F., & McGivney, V. (1985). *European Dimensions and the Secondary School Curriculum*. Brighton: Falmer.
- [13] Jiang, W. (2000). The relationship between culture and language. *ELT Journal*, 54(4), Pages 328-334.
- [14] Kramsch, C. (1993). *Context and Culture in Language Teaching*. Oxford University Press.
- [15] Kramsch, C. (1998). *Language and Culture*. Oxford University Press.
- [16] Kramsch, C. (2006). Culture in language teaching. In H. L. Andersen, K. Lund, & K. Risager (Eds.), *Culture in language learning* (pp. 11-26). Aarhus: Aarhus University Press.
- [17] Kramsch, C., Cain, A., & Murphy-Lejeune, E. (1996). Why should language teachers teach culture? *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 9(1), 99-107.
- [18] Kroeber, A. L., & Kluckhohn, C. (1954). *Culture: A critical review of concepts and definitions*. New York: Random House.
- [19] Lado, R. (1957). *Linguistics Across Cultures*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.
- [20] Lafayette, R. C. (1997). Integrating the teaching of culture into the foreign language classroom. In P. R. Heusinkveld. (Ed.), *Pathways to culture* (pp. 119-148). Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, Inc.
- [21] Larsen-Freeman, D., & Anderson, M. (2011). *Techniques & Principles in Language Teaching*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- [22] Lessard-Clouston, M. (1997). Language learning strategies: An overview for L2 teachers. *The internet TESL journal*, 3(12), 69-80.
- [23] Levy, M. (2009). Technologies in use for second language learning. *The Modern Language Journal*, 93(1), 769-782.
- [24] Liddicoat, A.J., Papademetre, L., Scarino, A., & Kohler, M. (2003). *Report on intercultural language learning*. Canberra ACT: Commonwealth of Australia.
- [25] Long-Fu, X. (2001). *Teaching English cultural background: Introducing the target culture in the Chinese secondary school English classes [Ph.D. Thesis]*. Helsinki: University of Tampere.
- [26] Mitchell, R., & Myles, F. (2004). *Second language learning theories*. London: Hodder Arnold.
- [27] Moore, Z. (2006). Technology and teaching culture: What Spanish teachers do. *Foreign Language Annals*, 39(4), 579-594.
- [28] Moore, Z. T. (1995). Teaching and testing culture: Old questions, new dimensions. *International journal of educational research*, 23(7), 595-606.
- [29] Moran, P. (2001). *Teaching culture: Perspectives in practice*. Boston: Heinle & Heinle.
- [30] Moran, P. (2001). *Teaching culture: Perspectives in practice*. Boston: Heinle & Heinle.

- [31] Neuner, G. (2003). Socio-cultural interim worlds in foreign language teaching and learning. In B. M. (Ed.), *Intercultural competence* (pp. 15-62). Strasbourg: Council of Europe.
- [32] Neuner, G. (2003). Socio-cultural interim worlds in foreign language teaching and learning. In B. M. (Ed.), *Intercultural competence* (pp. 15-62). Strasbourg: Council of Europe.
- [33] Richards, J. C., Platt, J. T., & Platt, H. (1992). *Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics*. London: Longman.
- [34] Seelye, N. (1991). *Teaching culture: Strategies for intercultural communication*. Stokie, IL: NationalTextbook.
- [35] Tomalin, B., & Stempleski, S. (1993). *Cultural Awareness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [36] Valdes, J. (1990). The inevitability of teaching and learning culture in a foreign language course. In B. Harrison (Ed.), *Culture and the language classroom: ELT documents: 132* (pp. 20-30). London: Modern English Publications.
- [37] Williams, R. (1976). Developments in the Sociology of Culture. *Sociology*, 10(3), 497-506.