The Teaching of English Culture in Algerian Secondary Schools: The Case of Second Year Classes

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Abstract:

The present study aims to get insight into the current ways culture is introduced in teaching English as foreign language (TEFL) to Algerian secondary school learners. This issue is investigated with reference to the relevant theoretical background, the teachers' opinions and the second year secondary school textbook "Getting Through". The results obtained from the teachers' questionnaire demonstrate that the teaching of culture is rather limited. The majority of teachers stated that the only source used is 'Getting Through' textbook; however, they assumed that most of the topics included are general and offer little opportunities to discuss culture related topics. Consequently, students have few and in some cases have no opportunities to learn about culture related activities especially discussions on cultural differences and similarities concerning social habits, values, use of idioms and slang, non-verbal communication, and the importance of appropriate choices for conversations in English. Based on the theoretical ground and empirical research findings, a set of suggestions are provided to offer useful ways for teachers to focus more on cultural content in English lessons, as well as to supply textbooks with cultural elements.

Key words: culture, EFL classes, culture related activities, EFL textbooks, intercultural communicative competence.

Introduction

Recently, language research increasingly acknowledges the cultural and intercultural dimensions of language teaching, it is now broadly accepted among language educators that to be able to interact appropriately in a language, learners have to learn the rules of language use and the cultural context within which the language is spoken (Scollon, 1999). Culture learning can; therefore, be considered one of the central aims of second and foreign language education in the 21st century (see Kramcsh, 1993; Fantini, 1997; Byram and Fleming, 1998; Hinkel, 1999; Lazar, 2001). Unfortunately, despite the recognition of the importance of culture for successful communication, there is still a gap between academics and practitioners in the sense that foreign language teachers and teacher educators seem hesitant to integrate these theories into pedagogical practice; only few empirical studies have implemented intercultural learning in classrooms (Lazar et al., 2007).

Taking into account the importance of culture in communication and in foreign language teaching; the secondary school English syllabus issued by the Ministry of Education (2006) underlines the importance of encouraging positive attitudes towards other cultures, and puts emphasis on making students open their minds for discovering the values of English speaking countries.

While the recognition of the importance of teaching culture in EEL classes, is quite noticeable in both influential publications and actual official documents such as the national syllabus, it is quite apparent, form the researcher's experience as an EFL teacher at the secondary school, that English teaching is extremely exam-centred, and since exams do not usually test cultural knowledge, teachers mostly focus on skills needed for taking exams. Thus, only linguistic competence is taken into account; culture related activities are often relegated to the end of language teaching unit, or taught implicitly. Therefore, students lack the basic knowledge of English speaking countries such as the names, the location on the map, main towns and even forms of greetings and farewells. Thus, there tends to be a gap between declared objectives in the syllabus, on the one hand, and classroom practice on the other. This, in fact, raises the following questions:

1- How much importance do EFL teachers at secondary schools attribute to the teaching of English culture **?**
2- How often are activities for teaching culture included in English lessons at secondary schools **?**
3- Which role does the textbook play in the amount of cultural content conveyed to secondary school EFL learners**?**

I. Review of Literature

   I.1.Definition of Culture in Foreign Language Teaching

As a matter of fact, coming out with a workable definition for culture, as far as foreign language education is concerned, is a necessity for the present study. Accordingly, Richards and Schmidt (2002) in their dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics offer the following definition:

> The set of practices, codes, and values that mark a particular nation or group: the sum of a nation or group's most highly thought of works of literature, art, music etc. A difference is sometimes made between 'high' culture of literature and arts, and small 'c' culture of attitudes, values, beliefs, and everyday lifestyles. Culture and language combine to form

what is sometimes called 'discourse', i.e. ways of talking, thinking, and behaving that reflect one's social identity. (p. 138).

Two main aspects of culture are highlighted by the above definition: one is referred to as "high culture" which is synonymous with knowledge of literature, history, and art; and the other as "small c culture" which is synonymous to everyday lifestyle including knowledge of social habits, values, attitudes, beliefs, ways of behaving, use of idioms and slang, and non-verbal communication.

The different levels and aspects of culture outlined from various perspectives, here, show that our understanding of what culture means in FL education is varied . This provides the possibility for language teachers and learners to stress various dimensions of culture at different levels of language proficiency

I.2.The Importance of Culture in Communication

Language as means of communication makes it possible for individuals to interact with each other in a society. Conversation between people do not take place in a vacuum, but at a particular time and place, and their behaviour is indicated by that particular situation. Communication behaviour is essentially a matter of convention, the thing that makes it specific to a given culture, and what proves effective is one culture may be ineffective in another. (Corder, 1993).

On her perspective Hall (2002) claims that language is used to indicate the individual identities, their interpersonal relationship and membership in their social groups and communities. Seelye, (1997) shares both opinions by highlighting that the way people speak indicates their sex , age , social class, and place of residence, and often conveys information concerning their religion, occupation, and interest. In other words, since any linguistic communication occurs in context, it must be appropriate to the context in which it is used.

According to Devito (2006), culture influences communications of all types, and cultural differences exist across communication from the way of using eye contact to the way to develop or dissolve a relationship.

Consequently, many cultural differences may prevent understanding, or may develop negative opinions between native and non-native speakers. Bennet (1997) claims that a fluent fool is someone who speaks a foreign language well, but doesn't understand the social and cultural content of that language; the thing that can be avoided by understanding the cultural dimension of language.

As far as Foreign Language Teaching is concerned, these perspectives reflect the growing interest on the importance of culture in teaching methodologies presented in recent works in the field (See for example Byram 1997; Byram & Fleming 1998; Kramsch 1993; Seelye 1997; Cortazzi & Jin 1999, etc.), who all agree that learning a foreign language for whatever purposes cannot take place without introducing the culture of the community where it is used.

I.3.Objectives of Teaching Culture

Integrating culture in English lessons can always be in the benefit of the learner, Kramsch (1993) stresses that cultural awareness and the learning of a second culture can only aid the attaining of second language proficiency (cited in Hinkel, 1999,p.6).

In a foreign language setting, objectives should be clearly set; Seelye (1997) has suggested six instructional goals for teaching culture based communicative competence, he sees that culture teaching should have the following goals:

Goal 1- *Interest*: the student shows curiosity about another culture and empathy toward its members.

Goal 2- *Who:* the student recognizes that role expectations and other social variables such as age, sex, social class, religion, ethnicity, and place of residence affect the way people speak and behave.

Goal 3 -*What:* the student realizes that effective communication requires discovering the culturally conditioned images that are evoked in the minds of people when they think, act, and react to the world around them.

Goal 4 –*Where and when*: the student realizes that situational variables and conventions shape behaviour in important ways.

Goal 5- *Why* : the student understands that people generally act the way they do because they are using options their society allows for satisfying basic physical and psychological needs.

Goal 6 – *Exploration*: the student can evaluate a generalization about a given culture in terms of the amount of evidence substantiating it, and have the skills needed to locate and organize information about a culture from the library, the mass media, people, and personal information. (Seelye, 1997, p.25)

I.4.The Most Common Approaches to Teaching Culture

Including culture in English lessons requires the choice   an approach that would help in the selection of adequate material, techniques, and activities to achieve the set of objectives. Risager (1998, p.242-252) describes four different approaches to teaching culture:

The foreign cultural approach, is based on the concept of the single culture associated with a specific people and a specific language. It focuses on target countries where the language is spoken and does not deal with the learners' own country, nor with relation between the two. This approach was dominant until the 1980' s and is criticized nowadays because of the lack of comparison between cultures .

-***The intercultural approach*** is based on the concept of comparison. The intercultural approach deals with both the target culture and the learners' one . The aim is to develop an intercultural and communicative competence, a competence that enables the learner to function as a mediator between the two cultures. Since 1980's, language teaching has become increasingly influenced by the intercultural perspective.

-***The multicultural approach,*** is based on the idea that several cultures may coexist within the same society. It focuses on the cultural and linguistic diversity of the target country or countries as well as learners' own, and the relation between the two. The aim here also is to develop intercultural communicative competence, but at a partly different level; it is a competence enabling learners to use the target language as a lingua franca, speaking with people who belong to the society where the target language is spoken e-g France, but belong to another culture , e.g. Moroccan culture, and who may speak another language as their first language, e.g. Moroccan Arabic. (Risager, 1998,p.247). This approach is increasingly gaining popularity.

-***Trans cultural approach***, it views that cultures in the modern world are interwoven by virtue of globalization . It is also reflected by the fact that many people speak foreign languages as lingua franca (i.e. used in situations where none of the speakers has the language in question as his or her first language). Its main aim is to teach learners to use it for international communication.

Depending on their course objectives, course designers and teachers are going to select the most appropriate approach that can serve as a framework that guides them to achieve better results

I.5.Material for Teaching Culture

Many sources such as textbooks, stories, interviews, maps, songs,   music, are used in foreign language teaching, these materials are primary designed to facilitate language teaching. Moreover, Corttazi and Jin (1999) maintain that EFL textbooks are expected to reflect a range of cultural contexts and to include intercultural elements, besides materials are expected to enable learners to communicate effectively and appropriately in a variety of communicative contexts. Surprisingly, none of these are necessarily what happens. In most textbooks , the focus is still on developing the four language skills, and cultural elements are often given as background or supplementary information.

I.5.1.The Cultural Content in EFL Textbooks

Although, there is usually a cultural content within textbooks (via photographs, texts, biographies etc.), these latter vary in their approach to culture. Depending on their cultural content, textbooks can be classified according to how language and culture are related to each other.

On their view, Corttazi and Jin (1999,p.204.210) distinguish between three types of textbooks depending on the cultural information presented:

-Textbooks based on the source culture: are produced at a national level for particular countries, that focus on the learners' own culture, rather than target cultures. Students are expected to learn English to talk to visitors to their country, rather than prepared to encounter other cultures .In such textbooks ,learners see members of their own culture, in their own context, who are not different from themselves, except that they all speak English. Such textbooks help students to become aware of their own cultural identity. However, they do not develop students'   intercultural awareness.

-Textbooks based on the target culture: focus on target cultures (e.g., the United Kingdom, the United States …). It is easy to assume that textbooks should reflect the target culture, however, such textbooks are considered to be commercial.

-Textbooks aimed at international target cultures: include a wide variety of cultures set in English speaking countries, or in other countries where English is not a first or second language, but is used as an international language. The rational for such international target cultures is that English is frequently used in international situations by speakers who do not speak it as a first language .

Broadly speaking, the cultural information included in textbooks should be correct , recent , and reflect background cultures of the target countries, it should also include visual aids to help students understand the cultural information .

However, if textbooks fail in providing material for teaching culture, educators have proposed a varied range of resources and activities for both inside and outside the classroom which can support culture learning .

I.5.2.Other Sources and Activities for Teaching Culture

In order to get a comprehensive picture of the target culture from many angles, teachers should vary their sources; they need to present students with different kinds of information.

Peterson and Coltrane (2003) provide some useful ideas for presenting culture:

-Authentic Material: sources from the native speech community can include films, news broadcasts, television shows, websites, photographs, magazines, newspapers, and travel brochure. Teachers can adapt the use of these materials to suit the age and language proficiency level of the students. The teacher might supply students with a detailed translation or give them a chart to complete. After viewing the segments, the teacher can engage the students in discussion of the cultural topics that might include non-verbal behaviour(e.g., the physical distance between speakers gestures, eye contact, societal roles, and how people in different social roles relate to each other.

-Proverbs: discussions of common proverbs in the target language could focus on how the proverbs are different from or similar to proverbs in the students ' native language. Using proverbs as a way to exposure culture provides a way to analyse the stereotypes and misperceptions of the culture represented in the proverbs of their native culture .

-Literature(drama, fiction, poetry): literary texts are often rich with cultural information and evoke memorable reactions for readers.

Peterson and Coltrane (2003) claim that texts should be selected carefully for the given group of students and with specific goals in mind, so that they can be helpful to acquire insight into the target culture.

II. The Current Situation of Culture in Algerian EFL Secondary Schools
II.1 Research Methodology

The researcher conducted the study with EFL teachers at Kais secondary schools during the school year (2006/2007). Since the aim of the research is to examine the importance attributed to the teaching and learning of culture in relation to teachers and textbooks, the descriptive method seems to be the appropriate one .

A total of ten teachers participated in the study. All the teachers have BA degree as their highest degree and their teaching experience varies from eighteen to five years. In order to achieve the previously stated objectives, the teachers were asked to fill in a questionnaire (see appendix 1) that is used to collect data concerning the activities used to teach culture, and their frequency in their classes, as well as the material used. The teachers were also asked to give their opinions about the cultural content within "Getting Through " textbook . The intention is to examine the extent to which "Getting Through" textbook includes a focus on each of the following areas:

- Cultural content: that is the inclusion of historical, geographical, and social information about the target language society .
- Cultural awareness: that is raising students' awareness towards differences between the target culture and their own.

II.2.Findings and Discussion

Teachers' questionnaire was designed with the purpose to collect as much information as possible about the current situation of teaching English culture in secondary schools, it was intended to investigate three main issues:

1-The teaching of English as a foreign language at Algerian secondary schools (TEFL).
2-The teaching of communicative competence, the importance attributed to culture, and the activities frequently included to teach culture.

3-Material for teaching culture: this section is intended to investigate teachers' general view about the cultural content included in the students'   textbook "Getting Through", as well as their opinions on the most useful materials for teaching culture.

   After the analysis of the teachers' responses to the questionnaire items, the researcher came with the following results:

Section one **:** this section is concerned with the TEFL at secondary schools in general. The results obtained show that teachers see developing the learners' communicative competence as the overall aim of instruction, and this would be achieved according to them, through the communicative approach. Teachers' unfamiliarity with the competency based approach led them to choose the communicative approach.

However, teachers still focus mainly on written skills in their instructions since they are the only skills tested in tests and exams. They qualify current classroom activities as not offering enough opportunities to students for real-life communication**.**

   Through the analysis of the teachers ' responses , it is quite clear that they consider their students as unaware of the social and cultural differences between their native language and the target one. Teachers also admit that some of the major difficulties they face are the unavailability of didactic aids, the difficulty to access to authentic material from one hand, and the students' linguistic deficiency (grammar based needs and their limited range of vocabulary) on the other hand. This leads them to emphasize mainly on developing the learners' linguistic competence .

Section two: This section was set to investigate the issue of culture teaching at the secondary school. From the data obtained, it seems that the majority of teachers 8/10 (80%) view communicative competence as mainly information exchange using correct grammatical statements.

As far as culture is concerned, for 9/10 (90%) of teachers, culture is defined by citing its different elements such as literature, art, believes, music, life-styles, history, religion and institutions.

Despite the fact that the majority of teachers consider integrating the teaching of culture into EFL classes as important, and in some cases as very important, they also admit that students will be more motivated to learn the language with some background knowledge about its culture; the results obtained from items concerning the integration of culture related activities in English lessons reveal that:

The only activity teachers incorporate most often in their lessons is based on short stories, poems or extracts from English literary works, in addition to songs, famous sights or posters from the target culture. Yet , these two activities are often incorporated in English lesson by just (5/10) and (4/10) respectively.

As far as the remaining activities are concerned, the findings demonstrate that these activities are rarely included:

Teachers chose dealing with activities based on teaching appropriate ways of conversations as well as ways of complaining , requesting , criticizing , and thanking in English as often included by (4/10)of them .

The majority of teachers (8/10) admit never incorporating activities based on discussions of cultural differences, as well as differences in rituals of greetings and leave taking .

Furthermore a total majority of teachers 100% assumes never including activities based

on discussions of differences in non-verbal communication such as differences in gestures , eye contact and personal space among cultures in their English lessons .
From the data obtained, it is quite clear that:
  - Teachers include very few culture related activities in their English lessons. Moreover, the activities frequently used are mainly based on literature this means that the focus is mainly put on capital "C" culture .
  - Students have little opportunities and in some cases have no opportunities to learn about little "c" culture activities such as non –verbal communication and the importance of appropriate choices for conversation in English.
  - Besides, the results obtained indicate that activities leading to intercultural communicative competence are less popular and less frequently incorporated by teachers in English lessons.

Section three: this section is mainly concerned with the cultural content of "Getting Through" textbook and the material used to teach culture**.** The data obtained from this section indicate that teachers rely completely on the students textbook "Getting Through" as the main source for classroom input. This fact was revealed by 100% of the teachers. This result confirms Hinkel's (1999) notion that textbook are the main material used in language classes, they may be the teacher, the trainer, the authority, the resource, and the ideology in the foreign language classroom .

However, the results obtained from the teachers' opinions about the cultural content within this textbook indicate that teachers are dissatisfied with the cultural content included in this textbook since (7/10) revealed that "Getting Through" textbook offers little opportunities to discuss culture related topics.
  - Nearly the majority of teachers (8/10) have agreed that the role of "Getting Through" textbook in preparing students to behave adequately when in contact with native speakers to be very limited as the most common answers to the questions was either "very little" or "to some extent".
  - None of the teachers was fully satisfied with the amount of the cultural content within "Getting Through" textbook .
  - The majority of teachers (9/10) assumed that most of the topics included are general, they concern all humanity and are not specific to any particular culture.

Teachers' suggestions, as far as the topic is concerned, came to support the view that most of them are aware of the importance of including cultural elements into their lessons and argue that there will be always something missing in learners' language proficiency and use, if culture is left out in their language learning. However, they often fail to do so due to reasons such as: lack of time, overloaded curriculum, fear of not knowing about the target culture, and shortage of material.

II.3.Suggestions and Recommendations

Since the ultimate goal for EFL teaching is developing learner' communicative competence, EFL teachers and learners need to take steps to increase their cultural awareness; thus, culture should be integrated into the foreign language textbooks and classroom practices. Here are some suggestions for EFL teachers on how to incorporate culture into their lessons so as it will be taught systematically:
  - Teachers should set clear objectives and successful instructional techniques to put culture teaching into practice and to establish an intercultural understanding in the classroom, this entails:

- Using cultural context for target language practice activities; teachers should try to create situational activities and through role playing explain and demonstrate the differences in language use between the students' culture and the target one in similar situations to improve their communicative competence .
- Making good use of textbook illustrations and photos and have students analyse their cultural significance .
- Teaching students about the connotative meaning of new words when teaching vocabulary and including cultural elements in tests and exams.
- Teachers should use authentic material; this could be achieved through the availability of didactic aids such as tape recorders and videos .
- As far as the textbook is concerned, even if the textbook in most cases is represented as authoritative and definitive, teachers can start from the themes in the textbook and then encourage learners to ask further questions and make comparisons (Byram, et.al., 2002)
- Teachers should encourage students to do projects about the target culture topics. They may check the school library or the internet to look for interesting aspects of the target culture .This would develop their research skills and raise their cultural awareness.
- It is essential to mention that EFL teaching curricula at universities should include methodology of teaching culture. Besides, working teachers should benefit from in service training.

Conclusion

This study was set to investigate the issue of English culture teaching in Algerian EFL classes at secondary schools. The literature review demonstrated that since the early 1970's , the widely held belief among applied linguists is that it is essential to teach the foreign language with its culture in order to be successful in communication in real life situations. Therefore, EFL teachers and learners need to shift their focus in the process of EFL teaching and learning from linguistic competence to communicative competence.

The analysis of the teachers responses revealed in the questionnaire indicated that the teaching of culture is rather limited. Nonetheless, teachers still consider integrating the teaching of culture into EFL classes as important. They also admit that students will be more motivated to learn English with some background Knowledge about its culture.

Although currently used textbooks may not include the target language culture, it is the teachers' responsibility to find practical solutions to this problem. And it would not be reasonable to assume that EFL learners will later on be exposed to the target culture after they reach the mastery of linguistic features of the language. It is worth mentioning here that, teachers should have opportunities for adequate training in teaching culture methodology throughout pre -service as well as in-service training .

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Appendix A

Teachers' Questionnaire

Dear colleagues,

This questionnaire aims at getting insight into the situation of English culture teaching in EFL classes at secondary schools.

Please, choose the answer you find appropriate, or make full answers whenever necessary.

Background   Information

1- Gender   Male

                   Female

2- Your qualification.

                   License; BA or equivalent

                   Study for MA

3-How many years have you been teaching English at the secondary school?

………………………………………………………………………………

Section one: The Teaching of English as a Foreign Language at Secondary Schools (TEFL).

1- What do you think should be the overall aim of TEFL at secondary schools ?
   - To enable students to use correct English structures.
   - To enable students to communicate using English in different real life situations
   - To enable students to interact effectively and appropriately in English with members of its culture .

2- What method or approach do you think is the most appropriate to achieve this aim ?
   - The audio-lingual method.
   - The communicative approach.
   - The competency based approach.

3- To what extent do you qualify current classroom activities as offering opportunities for students to use English in real life communication ?
   - Not at all.
   - Very little.
   - To some extent.
   - Very much.

1. How do you rate the importance of   developing the students' communicative skills in English?
   - Very important.
   - Important.
   - Not important.

2. Do you think that the correct use of the formal systems of grammar and   vocabulary only, ensures the effectiveness of communication ?

                   Yes.   No.

If ' no' what do you think students need to be aware of in order to communicate effectively ?

………………………………………………………………………………

3.   To what extent are your students aware of the social and cultural differences between their language and English ?

            Not at all
            Very little
            Very much.

4.   Please, mark some of the difficulties you meet in TEFL at secondary schools.

……………………………………………………………………………………………………

Section Two: Culture Teaching and Communicative Competence.

1- How would you define culture?

……………………………………………………………………………………………………

2- How would you define communicative competence?

……………………………………………………………………………………………………

3-Do you think that communication can be developed out of its sociocultural context ?

      -Yes.   -No.

  If ' no' how do you rate the importance of integrating the teaching of culture into EFL classes at secondary schools is ?

               -Very important.
               -Important.
               -Not important.

    4- Do you think that students are more motivated to learn English with some background knowledge about its culture ?

          - Not at all.
           - Very little.
          - Very much.

5-How often do you include the following activities in your English lessons:

Types of culture –related activities	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Always
a-Discussions on cultural differences and similarities (social habits, values, idioms,)				
b-Differences in rituals of greetings and leave taking between English and Arabic				
c-Discussing the appropriate choices for conservation in English (formality/ informality)				
d-Appropriate ways of complaining, requesting , criticizing , thanking, in English.				
e-Variations of non-verbal behaviour in different cultures (gestures ,eye contact….)				
f-Differences of personal space among cultures				
g-Posters of famous sights and English people				
h-Songs with information about the singer and lyrics .				
i-Short stories, poems or extracts from English literature				

Section Three: Material for Teaching Culture

1.Does the textbook "Getting Through " help you teach the issues listed earlier ?

        - Not at all
        - Very little.

-To some extent.
-Very much.
2. Do you use other sources?

Yes

No

3.Please, answer the following questions about the cultural content within "Getting Through " textbook:

Questions	Options
a.To what extent does the content serve as a window into learning about the target language culture (way of life, families, schools, employment, religion, history, geography) **?**	Not at all
	Very little
	To some extent
	Very much
b.To what extent does "Getting Through" textbook teach students linguistic /paralinguistic means to express their communicative needs (formal/informal language, non-verbal behaviour , slang, idioms…)**?**	Not at all
	Very little
	To some extent
	Very much
c. Does "Getting Through" textbook prepare students to behave adequately when in contact with members of the target culture**?**	Not at all
	Very little
	To some extent
	Very much
d. To what extent are the texts and activities in "Getting Through" authentic**?**	Not at all
	Very little
	To some extent
	Very much

4-What other sources do you think would be most useful for teaching the target culture?
....
5- With the current educational reform, do you think that the cultural dimension in language teaching is given more importance ? Justify.
…………………………………………………………………………………… Further Suggestions
……
………………………
                    Thank you for your cooperation
                        The researcher