CULTURAL CONNOTATIONS
IN TEACHING VOCABULARY IN EFL CLASSROOM

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Abstract

This paper highlights the importance of embedding culture in teaching vocabulary in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classes. It discusses cultural aspects in foreign language teaching which can be used to select appropriate cultural materials for appropriate levels of learners. Furthermore, teachers need to take into account cultural connotations as one of the cultural aspects to be considered when teaching culture to EFL learners as a way of increasing their cultural awareness. Therefore, the implications of teaching vocabulary in terms of color names in EFL contexts through cultural connotations are presented and discussed.

Keywords: vocabulary, EFL contexts, cultural connotations

INTRODUCTION

We all know that understanding a language involves not only knowledge of grammar, phonology and lexis but also a certain features and characteristics of the culture. To communicate internationally inevitably involves communicating interculturally as well, which probably leads us to encounter factors of cultural differences. However, as the use of language in general sense is related to social and cultural values, language is considered to be a social and cultural phenomenon. Since every culture has its own cultural norms for conversation and these norms differ from one culture to another, some of the norms can be completely different and cause conflicts with other cultures’ norms.

Consequently, communication problems may arise among speakers who do not know or share the norms of other culture. To solve the communication problems in the target language in the EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classrooms, the learners need to learn the target culture within the syllabus, and the teachers should be sensitive to the learner’s fragility so as not to cause them to lose their motivation. Teaching vocabulary becomes an option for English teachers to insert culture to learners’ cultural knowledge. The lack of knowledge on this aspect of language may result in misunderstandings when learners make contacts with people from different cultural backgrounds.
This paper starts with some definitions of culture followed by how language and culture are connected. In addition, some cultural aspects in foreign language teaching will be introduced, and finally, the implications of teaching culture through language, particularly vocabulary, will also be presented.

WHAT IS CULTURE?

A variety of definitions of culture exist as culture means differently to different people. The definitions of culture started from the anthropologists' points of view to those of linguists’. Anthropologists define culture as 'the whole way of life of a people or group. In this context, culture includes all the social practices that bond a group of people together and distinguish them from others (Montgomery and Reid-Thomas, 1994 cited in Thanasoulas, 2001). According to Peck (1998) cited in Thanasoulas (2001), culture is all the accepted and patterned ways of behavior of a given people. It is that facet of human life learned by people as a result of belonging to some particular group; it is that part of learned behavior shared with others.

The scholars of language also share the definitions of culture. On a general level, culture has been referred to as 'the ways of a people’ (Lado, 1957 cited in Thanasoulas, 2001). Moreover, culture is defined as the way people live (Chastain, 1988 cited in Saluveer, 2004). Another definition is proposed by Brown (2000 cited in Cakir, 2006) who defines culture as a way of life including the ideas, customs, skills, arts and tools that characterize a group of people in a period of time.

Additionally, Goodenough (1981) cited in Thanasoulas (2001) summarizes the contents of culture briefly quoted below:

1. The ways in which people have organized their experience of the real world so as to give it structure as a phenomenal world of forms, their percepts and concepts.
2. The ways in which people have organized their experience of their phenomenal world so as to give it structure as a system of cause and effect relationships, that is, the propositions and beliefs by which they explain events and accomplish their purposes.
3. The ways in which people have organized their experiences so as to structure their world in hierarchies of preferences, namely, their value or sentiment systems.
4. The ways in which people have organized their experience of their past efforts to accomplish recurring purposes into operational procedures for accomplishing these purposes in the future, that is, a set of "grammatical" principles of action and a series of recipes for accomplishing particular ends.

Having taken a look at the definitions of culture above, it can be seen that culture is like the "glue" that binds a group of people together. It can be defined as a "blueprint" that guides the behavior of people in community and is incubated in family life (Cakir, 2006). Culture improves our skills in many ways, such as governing our behavior in groups, making us sensitive to matters of status, and helping us to know what others expect of us and what will happen if we do not behave as they expect. Therefore, culture helps us to know our responsibility as individuals and as part of a community.

With regard to types of culture, Hinkel (2001) cited in Sarigul & Ashton (2005) distinguishes between invisible and visible culture. Visible culture, more readily apparent, includes style of dress, cuisine, festivals, customs and other traditions. The far more complex invisible culture is shown through socio-cultural norms, world views, beliefs, assumptions and values. A similar view is given by Peterson (2004) in Rodliyah & Muniroh (2012) who argues that very often what people see as culture is only the surface of the culture. Comparing culture with an iceberg, the part people can observe of others' culture is usually the tip of the iceberg, which include the language, architecture, food, population, music, clothing, art and literature, peace of life, emotional display, gestures, leisure activities, eye contact and sports. There are still some hidden aspects like opinions, viewpoints, attitudes, philosophies, values, beliefs, assumptions, all of which cannot be perceived with our senses, but they are the foundation for what people see at the top.

LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

The relationship between language and culture is deeply rooted. It seems to be generally accepted that language learning and culture learning are linked. Learning a language therefore implies learning something about culture as well. This is certainly true for one's first language, but also for further languages acquired (Klippel, 1994).
Brown (1994) cited in Saluveer (2004) argues that a language is a part of 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 (p. 164). Similarly, Tang (1999) propounds the view that culture is language and language is culture. He suggests that to speak a language well, one has to be able to think in that language, and thought is extremely powerful. Language is the soul of the country and people who speak it. Language and culture are inextricably linked, and as such we might think about moving away from questions about the inclusion or exclusion of culture in foreign language curriculum, to issues of deliberate immersion versus non-deliberate exposure to it.

Furthermore, Smith (1985) cited in Saluveer (2004) adds that the presentation of an argument in a way that sounds fluent and elegant in one culture may be regarded as clumsy and circular by members of another culture. McKay (2003) cited in Saluveer (2004) contends that culture influences language teaching in two ways: linguistic and pedagogical. Linguistically, it affects the semantic, pragmatic, and discourse levels of the language. Pedagogically, it influences the choice of the language materials because cultural content of the language materials and the cultural basis of the teaching methodology are to be taken into consideration while deciding upon the language materials. For example, while some textbooks provide examples from the target culture, some others use source culture materials.

The importance of teaching culture in teaching languages has been recognized and widely discussed over centuries. These discussions have drawn language teachers' attention to the fact that languages do not exist in separation from culture and that knowledge of culture holds a key to understanding of a language. Thanasoulas (2001) summarizes the reasons behind this close relationship as follows:

1. Language acquisition does not follow a universal sequence, but differs across cultures;
2. The process of becoming a competent member of society is realized through exchanges of language in particular social situations;
3. Every society orchestrates the ways in which children participate in particular situations, and this, in turn, affects the form, function and content of children's utterances;
4. Caregivers' primary concern is not with grammatical input, but with the transmission of sociocultural knowledge;
5. The native learner, in addition to language, acquires also paralinguistic patterns and the kinesics of his or her culture.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CULTURE IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

In EFL classrooms, as we teach the language, we would automatically teach culture. When we introduce the forms of address, greetings, formulas, and other utterances found in the dialogues or models or present the learners some reading texts representing other culture, we also initiate the cultural knowledge to them. Their intellectual curiosity is aroused and satisfied when they learn that there exists another mode of expression to talk about feelings, wants, and needs. If language learners are to communicate at a personal level with individuals from other cultural backgrounds, they will need not only to understand the cultural influences in the behavior of others, but also to recognize the thoughtful influence patterns of their own culture on their thoughts, their activities, and their forms of linguistic expression.

If language is described as a mode of human behaviour and culture as “patterned behaviour”, it is evident that language is a vital constituent of culture (Chakir, 2006). Therefore, the reasons for familiarizing learners with the cultural components should be to (1) develop the communicative skills; (2) understand the linguistic and behavioral patterns both of the target and the native culture at a more conscious level; (3) develop intercultural and international understanding; (4) adopt a wider perspective in the perception of the reality; and (5) make teaching sessions more enjoyable to develop an awareness of the potential mistakes that might come up in comprehension, interpretation, and translation and communication (Chakir, 2006).

Tomalin and Stempleski (1993) suggest that the teaching of culture should have the following goals: (1) To help students to develop an understanding of the fact that all people exhibit culturally conditioned behaviours; (2) 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; (3) To help students to become more aware of conventional behaviour in common situations in the target culture; (4) To help students to increase their awareness of the cultural connotations of words and phrases in the target language; (5) To help students to develop the ability to evaluate and refine generalizations about the target culture, in terms of supporting evidence; (6) To help students to develop the necessary skills to locate and organize
information about the target culture; and (7) To stimulate students’ intellectual curiosity about
the target culture, and encourage empathy towards its people.

CULTURAL ASPECTS IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING

After figuring out why it is necessary to integrate culture teaching into language teaching,
teachers must take into account some cultural aspects which can be used to select appropriate
cultural materials for appropriate levels of learners.

Learners’ perceptions about culture

The aspect that needs to be taken into account in teaching culture is on how learners
perceive other things. Teaching adults and children takes different considerations. What adults
think of strange or foreign is not necessarily considered the same by children. Rogers (1978)
cited in Klippel (1994) summarizes his research on the child's perception of other people from
the area of developmental psychology. He argues that "the child, in common with the adult, will
react not to other people directly, but to his own impressions of those other people". Therefore,
as teachers, we need to understand how children make perceptions about others.

A number of studies used children's descriptions of other people as their starting point.
These studies suggest that the development of person perception moves through stages: Young
children at the age of six or seven describe others mainly in concrete terms, especially with
regard to their social role and their appearance; ten-year-olds are more concerned with other
people's behaviour; thirteen-year-olds refer to the behaviour of others and, increasingly, to
personality traits and attitudes. With increasing age, the children's descriptions move from the
concrete to the more abstract, and from a characterization of either simply pleasant or unpleasant
to a more differentiated picture (Rogers, 1978 cited in Klippel, 1994). When we want to consider
encounters with others in foreign language teaching we must not forget that children's and adults'
perceptions are not alike.

EFL learners cannot avoid having negative perceptions and attitudes toward the target
culture. When they assume that the target culture can be understood by using their own cultural
framework, and they perceive that the cultural phenomena differ, they give negative reactions
and perceive the phenomena as a conflict. As a consequence, this is the teachers’ responsibility
to make the learners understand their own culture before exploring the target culture and being
empathic towards the differences (Valverde, 2005). Either learners or teachers need to understand and be empathic towards both their own culture and target culture. The following section will deal with teachers’ knowledge, skill, and attitude when they are integrating culture in their teaching.

**Teachers’ knowledge, skill, and attitude on teaching culture**

Rivers (1981) cited in Sarigul & Ashton (2005) believes that teachers of a linguistic community need several attributes. First of all, they need informed insight into the culture to be taught and secondly, informed insight into the culture of the language learners. Everyone might agree that this is asking a great deal. Certainly, it means that linguistic teachers require further study to foster intercultural understanding and appreciation. Specialized knowledge of how a culture is organized, the value systems, institutions, interpersonal relationships, adaptations to the environment as well as greater understanding of visible and invisible manifestations of culture are necessary. If possible, a language teacher should try to live in the target culture for some time. If not, a teacher might compensate by disciplined reading, study of the media, including radio, TV, films, newspapers and magazines. Contact with native speakers can also be very useful, especially with discussions of all sorts of subjects, visits to their home and meeting with their families provides added education into cultural interpretation.

Sensitivity to students’ attitudes can also be developed to ensure respect and effective teaching strategies. The temptation to demonstrate superiority of any one culture over another should always be avoided. Teaching should not be prejudiced or approach invisible cultural convictions in a derogatory or discriminatory manner. Cultural content can be presented objectively, analytically and informatively. It is generally possible to find commonalities, universal themes and examples that also relate well across cultures.

Medgyes (2001) highlights perceived differences in teaching behaviors between NESTs (Native English Speaking Teacher) and Non-NESTs. Although non-native speaker teachers have many advantages, an ideal teacher is considered to have a combination of qualities, complementary to other teacher strengths and weaknesses and be able to collaborate in various ways in order to provide maximum benefit for students.
**Personal behaviors**

In terms of personal behaviors, learners need to be taught to distinguish cultural behavior between home and target cultures. This cultural aspect is very important to introduce to increase learners’ cultural awareness once they have to deal with another culture life. It is also a way of avoiding misunderstandings with other people. The following are some differences regarding behaviors in Indonesia and Britain.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INDONESIA</th>
<th>BRITAIN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Impolite to use the left hand to pass things or to eat</td>
<td>Both hands may be used</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impolite to show the soles of your feet to someone</td>
<td>No stigma attached to the soles of the feet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polite to dip your shoulder if passing someone of higher status</td>
<td>No physical reaction to people of higher status; a smile is enough</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People usually go straight into the house/room</td>
<td>Polite to wait for the host to say come in before you enter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polite to take off your shoes when entering a house</td>
<td>Only take off your shoes if it is your house, or if invited to do so</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When your hear something embarrassing, the usual reaction is laughter (in</td>
<td>More usual to look shocked, sad, surprised, etc; A smile is most inappropriate</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>When your hear something embarrassing, the usual reaction is laughter (in</td>
<td>More usual to look shocked, sad, surprised, etc; A smile is most inappropriate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polite to stare at some one</td>
<td>Impolite to stare; may provoke a violent reaction (what are you looking at?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impolite to ask for salt, etc, when eating at another person’s house</td>
<td>No problem with asking for salt, etc, when eating at another person; house</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Vocabulary and Spoken Expression Differences

Language teachers and learners should understand that there is a big difference in meanings of target culture vocabulary from their language. This is due to different cultural knowledge and perceptions brought by people from different cultures.

It is clear that the words of a language cannot be automatically incorporated into other languages. How they function and what kinds of meaning they come to have depend on culture and the use of connotative language and on many other influencing factors. Language is the most important medium reflecting the culture of its speakers. The expressions reflecting the culture of a nation may leave the learners hesitant. In order to avoid confusion and misunderstanding, the teacher should provide the learners with cultural atmosphere for those expressions and create suitable conditions to make the learners infer their meanings easily.

Sarigul & Ashton (2005) propose some aspects of culture to be integrated in teaching words and spoken language in order to raise cultural awareness of language learners when communicating with people from other cultures: (1) Languages cannot be translated word for word; (2) The tone of voice of a speaker’s voice carries meaning; (3) Each language employs gestures and body movements which convey meaning; (4) All cultures have taboo words and topics; and (5) In personal relationships, the spoken expressions may vary considerably among languages.

English Cultural Vocabulary

English language consists of cultural words and expressions, for example: hot dog, going Dutch, thanksgiving, BYO (bring your own). These words cannot be translated word for word as they have their own meanings based on the cultural contexts in English-speaking countries (e.g. USA, Australia). When a teacher has to teach vocabulary related to Thanksgiving, for instance, the teacher must find a suitable method to insert the American culture into her/his teaching. A semantic mapping might be one of the appropriate and practical techniques.

It is an undeniable fact that every language is rich in vocabulary for the people who use it. One language may lexicalize a meaning that is not lexicalized in the other. The vocabulary of our language in some sense reflects what we choose to name in our experience of the world. It would not be surprising to discover that there are few words for snow in equatorial Africa or that speakers of other languages do not categorize “snow” in the same way as do Eskimos.
Eskimo tribes commonly have many different words for snow to distinguish among different types of snow. These include specific words such as “falling snow”, “snow on the ground”, ”fluffy snow”, and “wet snow”. One consequence of cultural variability is that people from different cultures often misinterpret each other’s signals. People’s actions in different situations are greatly influenced by their culture.

**Cultural Connotations**

Every language has specific vocabulary items which are totally different in another language. The meaning of a word is strongly influenced by social conventions. The full meaning of a typical individual word is the result of experience that a person has with that word in the cultural setting where he has grown up. This supports the statement from Sapiro cited in Jiying (2012) who states that language is “perfect symbolism of experience” (p. 12). Because of this interrelationship between language and culture, it is difficult to establish an exact equivalent between words and expressions in two languages. Even if the words may correspond in denotative meanings, they connotatively and emotionally vary. For example, white, denoting a color, it often associates with “pure, noble, and moral goodness”.

In most western countries, the bride is dressed in white during the wedding. However, it does not happen in China where the bride must wear red in traditional wedding ceremonies. This is because, based on the Chinese culture, *Red* means “happiness, good luck, flourishing, and prosperous”, whereas, *White* is associated with “weak, pale, and without vitality” (Jiying, 2012). Thus, learning a language implies not only the knowledge of grammar rules and denotative meanings of words but also involves the cultural knowledge including habits, customs, the way of life, history, and everything in the culture.

**IMPLICATIONS IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING: TEACHING COLOURS WITH CULTURAL CONNOTATIONS**

Teachers of English have difficulty in teaching vocabulary items that reflect the cultural characteristics of the English language. Since color names, proverbs, idioms, compound words, and the use of lexical items in literary texts exhibit culture specific properties, language teachers may encounter some problems in teaching these items to their students. In the following, the teaching of colors can be presented in the classroom by inserting cultural knowledge.
Teaching colors

Although color names express more or less the same meanings in many languages, they may indicate different meanings among different cultures. Colors may convey different messages to people of different cultures. Due to the respective cultural background and tradition, some phrases containing color words have far surpassed their original meanings, forming different connotations in cultures. The difference of the connotation of the color between different cultures is determined by each different national and historical background, the different traditions and habits, the different peoples’ life experience, and aesthetic psychology of culture. It is a kind of permanent culture phenomenon.

The various connotations of colors possess an important position in the intercultural communication in the modern world. The different languages of different nations and peoples in the whole world are extensive and profound. The connotation of the colors is not only an important tool for intercultural communication, but also an important cultural and prominent component of the relationship between the cultural content, cultural form, between the interdependence and interaction. If a nation’s people do not understand other people’s specific connotation of colors, it is impossible to carry out effective and correct communication (He, 2009).

In the following table, various colors and their meanings across different cultures, according to Öktem (2000) cited in Hişmanoğlu (2012), are shown:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Color</th>
<th>Japanese</th>
<th>Latin American</th>
<th>Saudi Arabian</th>
<th>Chinese</th>
<th>American</th>
<th>Turkish</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Red</td>
<td>Blood, sun, flag, excitement, some terror</td>
<td>excitement, happiness, festivals</td>
<td>blood, bride, royal</td>
<td>happiness, good things</td>
<td>blood, danger, communist, Indian (redskin)</td>
<td>flag, hot, blood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yellow</td>
<td>foolishness, crazy people, unripe, pitiful</td>
<td>New Year’s Eve</td>
<td>envy</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>cheerfulness, cowardice, autumn</td>
<td>autumn, sickness, gold</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green</td>
<td>beginning, growth</td>
<td>spring</td>
<td>life</td>
<td>good luck, wealth,</td>
<td>unripe, young, spring, envy,</td>
<td>unripe, fresh, wish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>adultery</td>
<td>sickness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>-------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Blue</strong></td>
<td>sea, happiness</td>
<td>feeling blue</td>
<td>happiness, sky</td>
<td>purity</td>
<td>feeling blue, blue blood (noble)</td>
<td>sea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>White</strong></td>
<td>Happiness</td>
<td>Happiness</td>
<td>purity</td>
<td>mourning</td>
<td>purity, race</td>
<td>purity, bride</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Black</strong></td>
<td>formality, sadness, grief</td>
<td>Funerals</td>
<td>darkness, sadness, war, loneliness</td>
<td>mourning</td>
<td>funeral, race</td>
<td>Darkness</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As seen in the above table, the meanings expressed by color names, though similar in some cases, are culture-specific, that is, the way each culture views and values the world in relation to color names is different. When learning new words or expressions related with colors, students visualize these words or expressions and try to guess the meaning, depending on the color system of their mother tongue. In some cases, they make logical guesses and understand what is meant. However, in many cases, they become unsuccessful in getting the intended meaning due to being unfamiliar with the color system of the target language. In the following, color names and related meanings will be given to show the existence of semiotic elements in vocabulary items related with color:

1. **Black and Related Meanings**

Example 1:
According to the latest sales figures, things look very black for us. (Things are very bad or hopeless for us)

Example 2:
She gave me a black look. (She was angry with me)

2. **White and Related Meanings**

Example 1:
Her face was white with anger/fear. (pale in color)

Example 2:
Her face was white as a sheet. (pale with fear or illness)
3. Red and Related Meanings

Example 1:
Your account is in the red. (It is in debt)
Example 2:
Let's paint the town red! (to go out and have an extremely good time, usually to celebrate something.)

4. Yellow and Related Meanings

Example 1:
He is yellow. (not brave, coward)
He is yellow-bellied. (not brave, coward)
Example 2:
Have a look at the Yellow Pages to find out the telephone number of the company. (a book containing the telephone numbers of firms and similar organizations in an area, divided up according to the kind of business they do.)

5. Green and Related Meanings

Example 1:
She turned green when she smoked her first cigarette. (to become unhealthily pale in the face because of sickness, fear, etc)
Example 2:
You are pretty green for a smart guy. (young and / or inexperienced and therefore easily deceived and ready to believe anything.)

6. Blue and Related Meanings

Example 1:
I am feeling rather blue today. (sad and without hope; depressed)
Example 2:
Some of her jokes were a bit blue. (concerned with sex; rather improper)

7. Grey and Related Meanings

Example 1:
His face turned grey as he heard the bad news. (of a person's face of a pale color because of sudden fear or illness)
Example 2:
Life seems grey and joyless. (dull)

As seen in the above examples, color names and expressions made with color names bring about problems for students of English. By giving appropriate examples related to diverse meanings of colors, the language learners are expected to be able to decode those meanings and to have broader knowledge about the target culture so that they can avoid the misunderstandings conveyed by wrong perceptions.

CONCLUSION

As teachers of English our aim is to make our students both linguistically and communicatively competent since linguistic competence alone is not enough for learners of a language to be competent in that language. Language learners need to be aware of the culturally appropriate ways to, for instance, address people, express gratitude, make requests and agree or disagree with someone. They have to understand that, in order for communication to be successful, language use must be associated with other culturally appropriate behavior. Thus, learning a language will also involve learning the culture the language expresses.

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