

A YEAR OF CELEBRATIONS: RAISING CULTURAL AWARENESS IN CLASS

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Abstract

The multinational nature of the English speaking community as well as the increasing use of English by non –native speakers, as it has become the lingua franca of our era, may lead to the assumption that the English language is not tied to any particular culture. This paper however suggests that teachers should choose a pluralistic approach with the ultimate goal of raising their students’ intercultural communicative competence. Thus, it examines both theoretically and practically, through extensive Needs Analyses, and a posteriori students’ evaluations, the appeal of a cultural awareness approach and the success of its implementation by means of a series of organized events. The Needs Analyses prove that the students are eager to learn more about the countries which they overwhelmingly consider a possible destination for studies and/or job (mainly US, UK, Australia, Canada and to a lesser extent Ireland). Celebrations, sports, local cuisines, as well as music and the film industry are absolutely cherished.

Their participation in events including British Tea Parties, Irish Saint Patrick’s Day presentations and distinctive American Thanksgiving and Halloween celebrations prove the merit of the cultural awareness approach in EFL. Thus Clarks’s objective “to learn by doing rather than by being taught” can be applied in conjunction with a modern intercultural communicative approach and a strategy of an English language contextualization. Hence, students embark voluntarily on a learning process, improving not only their language but also their research, organizational and communication skills, while achieving cultural familiarization with all English-speaking people. In order to achieve the aforementioned, the use of computer-based technology is a sine qua non since it offers flexibility and redefines the roles of the teacher and the learners as the teacher assumes the role of the facilitator/guide on the side, leading students to autonomy.

1. Introduction

Culture by its very nature ought to become the central axis of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching in the sense that cultural awareness facilitates language proficiency and language is a social practice; therefore language and culture are intricately interwoven. The major goal of EFL, and for that matter of any foreign language teaching, is the mastery of communicative competence. Therefore, learners of English ought to study its cultural backgrounds so as to acquire cultural frames of reference and understand the cultural contexts in which it is used (Alpetekin, 2002; Kramersch, 1993).

However, the multinational nature of the English speaking community as well as the increasing use of English by non –native speakers, as it has become the de facto international lingua franca of our era, may lead to the assumption that the English language is not tied to any particular culture. In practice, we suggest that teachers should choose a pluralistic approach like the one presented in this paper that encompasses the “big five”, namely the United Kingdom, Ireland, the United States of America, Canada, and Australia with the ultimate goal to take advantage of the English’s international character so as to raise their students’ intercultural communicative competence (Mao, 2009).

2. Reasoning

There are sound arguments supporting the integration of culture in language teaching. Firstly, cultural conflicts occur as a result of misinterpretations, ethnocentrism, stereotypes, and prejudice (Levine & Adelman, 1982). Secondly, meanings are lost because of cultural boundaries (Porter, 1987). Thirdly, “our students’ comprehension is frequently impeded not by linguistic features, but by cultural ones....” Thus, “language can never be divorced from culture” (Lazar, 1993). Actually, learners of English ought to be made aware that cultural awareness leads to a better understanding of the nuances of the language, of connotations, of cultural norms and contexts as well as to a better insight of native speakers’ way of thinking. Understandably, this knowledge would make them much more effective communicators (Stern, 1992 cited in Ghorbani –Shemshadsara, 2012). Furthermore, cultural learning is very effective in increasing learners’ motivation, which greatly affects every learning process. Culture classes contribute significantly to learner motivation because most learners like culturally based activities such as role playing, dancing, singing or doing research on other countries and peoples. Hammerly suggests that teaching about the target culture when teaching the target language entices and motivates students (Hammerly, 1982 cited in Purba, 2011).

Unfortunately, the score and certificate-oriented teaching of English in Greece wears the energy of both the teachers and the learners in drilling the skills that are examined, namely listening, speaking reading and writing leaving them no margin to cultivate a cultural consciousness that would have made the teaching and learning of English both entertaining and highly effective (Mao, 2009). The teaching of culture remains “insubstantial and sporadic in most language classrooms” (Omaggio-Hadley, 1993, p.357) despite the fact that cultural informed English teaching would benefit the students who learn more about the target cultures through movies, songs and the internet than their English Language classes.

Regarding the merits of the specific approach called “A year of celebrations” it is worth pointing out that it creates successive “Directed Motivational Currents” (DMC) which maintain and re-enforce student motivation throughout the academic year. It doesn’t perceive motivation as static and linear but as something dynamic, thus fluctuant. Therefore it strives to create motivational pathways so as students to be caught in a powerful flow of motivation that would impel them to engage in the learning process on their own volition and if possible on their own initiative (Dornyei et al, 2014). Instead of a sterile “chalk and talk” teaching method it offers a socially realistic and credible “language generating” series of activities not only for purposeful language use but also for encouragement of “acquisition” (Scrivener, 2005; Crookall, 1984). Actually a major objective is to put students in situations that they are first and foremost involved as individuals and the language is used as a tool for reaching a goal rather than a goal itself. Learning becomes personal, exploratory, and thus motivational as the principles of cooperative learning (CL), which is a highly effective instructional approach regarding small groups in order to achieve common learning goals via collaboration are utilized. Theoretically, CL has proven “superior to most traditional forms of instruction in terms of producing learning gains and student achievement, higher order thinking, positive attitudes toward learning, increased motivation, better teacher-student and student-student relationships accompanied by more developed interpersonal skills and higher self esteem on the part of the student” (Dornyei,1997, p.487). Students are divided into small groups and learning takes place through peer teaching, joint problem solving, brainstorming, varied interpersonal communication and individual study monitored by peers. All members, including the teacher, cooperate by exchanging ideas, information and providing constructive feedback.

Furthermore, it exploits the “soft power” of the English speaking countries, mostly their media, the xenophilic tendencies of the students which encompass a great curiosity for these cultures and peoples, a desire to broaden their horizons so as to avoid provincialism as

well as a desire for new stimuli and challenges (Dornyei, 1994; Ghorbani-Shemshadsara, 2012). Furthermore, the learners, through the various tasks and projects that this approach entails, acquire 21st century skills such as global citizenship, communication, collaboration and critical thinking for problem solving (Fullan, 2013).

3. From Theory to Practice

A needs analysis questionnaire administered in the beginning of the course provides the teacher with valuable data regarding the learning profile of the particular class, the students' likes and dislikes as well as their perceptions on a number of things. High school students may have no choice regarding their attendance of the classes but if their opinion is taken into consideration regarding the content and the form of the course even the most indifferent ones will warm up to it. The needs analyses we have administered the last ten years in different schools both in Athens and Thessaloniki show that students are eager to learn more about the English speaking countries for both intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Anything that has to do with celebrations, sports, local cuisines as well as music and the film industry is an attention magnet. Furthermore, regarding their preferred method of working pair and group work come first. Moreover they enjoy variety and the use of technology to either create or to conduct research. These results correlate with research findings which confirm that cultural learning is very effective to increase learners' motivation, something that greatly affects every learning process.

Based on the Needs Analysis, every September we present our students with a calendar of celebrations from almost all English speaking countries. We have chosen to employ the "4-F" approach to teaching culture focusing on festivals, fairs, food and folk dances (Ariza, 2007). Every month there are one or two celebrations, some accompanied with relative extra-curricular events and all of them paired with proper food motivators. Soon enough the students become aware that "cultural activities and objectives have been carefully organized and incorporated into lesson plans so as to enrich and inform the teaching content" (Purba, 2011, p.51).

The lesson always starts with a "teaser"; something that will attract the students' attention and act as a motivator. For instance, the students may be presented with objects like figurines, magazines or decorative items that originate from the target culture and they are challenged to find information either by conducting research or by being given clues to investigate. The realia add to the real world credibility of the celebration and help to engage students in authentic cultural experiences (Ariza, 2007; Frank 2013). Segments of movies are

used extensively as they are one of the most contemporary and comprehensive ways to encapsulate the look, feel and rhythm of a culture. Watching Jennifer Lawrence and Bradley Cooper taking a stroll while children go “trick or treating” in “Silver Linings Playbook” has proven quite attention catching. In the same vein, documentaries and advertisements are used so as students to get an insight, for instance, of the ambiance of a 4th of July parade and a Saint Patrick’s parade; they travel to the past through movies or documentaries on the Irish famine or the civil rights movement of African Americans (Purba, 2011).

Students in pairs or groups are asked to research particular aspects of each celebration so as to answer questions like: What traditional dishes are served in the United States on Thanksgiving, and what is the history behind them? Or what is the historic event celebrated at Guy Fawkes Night? The accumulated data may be used for a writing task, an oral presentation in class or a role play activity. Therefore, students participate in a range of “hands on” activities so as to make a “mind map” for every celebration aiming at grouping information from different sources. All this information would comprise a knowledge repository for the group. On every lesson leading to a celebration there will be a task related to it, while every effort is made for an interdisciplinary approach with the help of colleagues (Frank, 2013).

A multi-sensory approach appeals to all types of intelligence so every effort is made to include color, picture, body movement, sound and touch (During, 1997; Purba, 2011). Moreover game based learning is applied whenever possible. Two examples of this approach are the Halloween party and the Easter Egg Hunt. Regarding the Halloween Party the students have already carved pumpkins and played trick or treat during school hours so in the afternoon come to school dressed in costumes so as to have fun and play traditional games such as bobbing for apples under one condition: that they would communicate in English. The Easter Egg Hunt is a treasure hunt with clues, in English, that present linguistic and intellectual challenges that appeal to all age groups (Frank, 2013).

Another example of experiential learning is the traditional tea party that the students co-host so as to celebrate the Queen’s Birthday. They do research on tea and the traditional dishes such as the scones and the salmon and cucumber sandwiches, tea’s significance on the British culture, the history behind it and they present all these to teachers and parents who attend this party. Consequently, the objective is to integrate the aforementioned cultural elements in my language teaching using culturally sensitive and informed authentic tasks as well as opportunities for firsthand experience of a variety of cultural and linguistic stimuli (Sifakis & Sougari, 2003).

4. Cultural Awareness Implications

At this point it is worth highlighting that we strive to compare and contrast the dark aspects of the celebrations with the bright ones. For instance, when celebrating Thanksgiving, students research the treatment of the Native Americans by the Pilgrims. These celebrations can also be the starting point for research on contemporary issues. For example, on the occasion of the Martin Luther King Day students may look into incidents like the police shootings in Ferguson and elsewhere in the US, or into other types of discrimination like Islamophobia. Therefore, all these cultural activities can give students food for thought as regards much more serious issues (Ghorbani –Shemshadsara, 2012).

Another achievable result is the “cultural familiarization” with the British, Irish, American, Canadian and Australian cultures and how those cultures relate to the students’ own native culture. The learners in every occasion are asked to compare and contrast the particular celebration with a celebration or elements of their own country’s culture. Therefore, the ultimate goal is intercultural communicative competence in the sense that by raising the student’s awareness of their own culture they are also helped to interpret and understand appropriately the cultures of the English speaking countries (Frank, 2013). Thus Clark’s objective “to learn by doing rather than by being taught” (Clark, 1987, p.50) can be applied in conjunction with an intercultural communicative approach and a strategy of an English language contextualization.

5. Challenges

It would be an omission not to mention the enormous challenges such an approach presents. Firstly it is difficult to convince all stakeholders of its legitimacy. Secondly, there are challenges regarding the logistics, namely the preparations for each event. Thankfully, out of experience, the parents’ association very rarely fails to grant requests for volunteers or the provision of ingredients for food preparation. Last but not least, time management is of the utmost importance and considerable time is spent on fore planning so as everything to run smoothly.

At this point it is worth highlighting that the most important stakeholders, the students, are staunch supporters of this approach, despite the extra workload it entails. The vast majority of the students on an evaluation form filled anonymously on the last day of classes, comment on the level of enjoyment, knowledge and communicative confidence they acquired through this cultural journey. Furthermore, to skeptics who may argue that valuable

teaching time is spent on cultural endeavors rather than the important four linguistic skills, we refer them to the language output of students during simulations, presentations and role-playing. Moreover, all tasks assigned introduce students to relevant vocabulary. Thus, the learners use the language to achieve their goals and all this leads to implicit learning (Frank, 2013).

6. Conclusion

Concluding, we should highlight that the objective of this approach is to integrate cultural elements in our language teaching using culturally sensitive and informed authentic tasks as well as opportunities for firsthand experience of a variety of cultural and linguistic stimuli. Cultural informed English teaching would benefit the students who learn more about the target culture through movies, songs and the internet than the English Language classes as the focus is more on the mastery of the four basic skills. And this has to change. Otherwise we are selling our students short in the sense that we are not preparing them adequately for the real world. All the above contribute in the acquisition of a plethora of 21st century skills as they ameliorate the students' research, presentation, critical thinking and teamwork skills.

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