

Difficulties that Student Encounter When Learning the Culture of Target Language (English)

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Abstract

Nowadays students are expected to be prepared for the 21st century. It has been widely accepted that culture is a very important element in learning a foreign language. It is impossible to learn a new language without tackling its culture. Learning a foreign language should not be focused only on grammatical issues, or on the vocabulary of target language but it should be combined with the culture as well. Students should be taught to have a successful communication with individuals from different cultures. They should understand that they belong to different cultural backgrounds, accept and respect others' culture. This article analyses the difficulties they encounter in learning the culture of target language. Here is provided a detailed analysis of what should be taught.

Keywords: culture, students, curricula

1. Introduction

When learning a foreign language we start unconsciously to pick up its culture. In order to have an efficient communication it is important to learn the culture of the target language as well. Knowing to speak a language at its highest level does not mean that one has the proper social and cultural competences for an efficient communication.

All of us, without exception, have travelled abroad and might have gone through different cultural problems that have led to conflicts, prejudices and misunderstandings. Each individual belongs to a definite cultural group and at the moment they face individuals of different cultures can encounter difficulties to adapt and communicate. Cultural differences can cause cultural confusion and misunderstanding. Learning a foreign language implies talking and understanding it and without a proper use of the target language in the respective cultural context we cannot achieve a good communication.

By learning to respect, accept and appreciate the individuals belonging to different cultures we can also learn how to be good citizens in a pluralist society. Culture is taught by the family, friends and community where we live and affects the way we act and think. Currently, English is the top used language in the world. People all over the world learn English for definite aims.

Following different studies it results that students encounter many difficulties in adapting and learning the culture of target language. This is due to academic curricula which do not provide teaching of intercultural competence. Students do not have the right capacities and knowledge on how to learn the target language culture.

2. Data description

To give answer to these questions were distributed a questionnaire to the students at Bedër University. The questionnaire was adopted by Lies Secu (*An international investigation*) but with a few changes in order to be adoptable to the students. An estimated amount of 80 students in Bachelor Degree answered a series of questions with regard to intercultural competence. Answers are taken from different students of first, second and third year of Bachelor Degree. Within the questionnaire were included questions with alternatives and open questions. This is a qualitative study to learn more on the opinion, attitudes, problems etc. that students encounter during the teaching of English culture.

3. Problemes encountered by the students.

In Albania, students have many difficulties in learning the culture of English-speaking countries and cultural differences that exist can cause problems during the teaching classes of foreign language. Use of words in English is defined by the linguistic and cultural context. When learning a word we should also learn about the cultural background of that word to have a correct meaning. During the questionnaire it came out that information of students on English-speaking countries comes mainly from the internet, movies, music etc. meaning that information received at school is very little.

Some of the problems they encounter are:

- Students have a tendency to use grammatical knowledge of mother language and apply them to the target language.
- Students have a tendency to transfer their cultural knowledge in order to understand the context of target language.
- They have very limited opportunities to communicate and interact with individuals from English-speaking countries.
- They are not given the opportunity to learn the jargon.
- School materials are very few.
- In school curricula learning of culture is a third-hand element.
- Serious lack of approaches on how to solve cultural conflicts or to adapt to individuals of different cultures.
- Serious lack of practical skills.
- **Cultural differences affect:**
 - in the communication between individuals starting from greetings, giving or taking of presents, meals etc.
 - way of perception of the message.
 - in what students expect hear.
- **Why is it necessary to be taught:**
 - better understanding a language.
 - learning a new culture makes you reflect on your culture.
 - learning a new culture gives you an opportunity to make a comparison between your culture and target language culture.
 - affecting the increase of interest and motivation to learn English.

By noticing the difference among Albanian and English, we should understand that when learning a foreign language we should not simply learn vocabulary or grammar, but also the way of thinking and of structuring the sentences that is dependent on English language features. Students need to learn how to communicate and how to discover their own world. For this reason, each academic topic should be organised in a way to develop interpretative and analytic abilities. Of course, grammar and vocabulary have a special importance but should not stop simply at this.

Nowadays, the teacher is not the only person responsible to encourage the teaching of culture but it is required a collaboration between students and teachers. A good way is to conduct dialogues and debates on the topics provided in school texts or they can be found in other extra materials. Dialogues and debates help in gaining insight on students' perspective, experience exchange.

4. Analysing some of the data from the questionnaire regarding the difficulties in learning the culture.

In this questionnaire are predicted some questions regarding the difficulties and the students' opinion regarding the culture of English language.

The first sections of the questionnaire are general data and a very important question: ***How is distributed the teaching hour for 'teaching of language' and 'teaching of culture' in the subject of English language during this academic year?*** This question is important to understand the amount of time dedicated to culture within an hour of lesson. From the answers of the students it is quite clear that most of the time is dedicated to teaching of language because most of the students have chosen the options 80% language teaching - 20% culture teaching or 60% language teaching - 40% culture teaching. From the students' answers we can understand that culture is mentioned very little during a class and the main objective remains teaching of language. According to the answers of the students they have interest to know more about target culture but unfortunately it is not dedicated much time by the lecturers.

90% of the students do not travel to the English-speaking countries. This may come because there are no exchange programs for the students in the English-speaking countries, but also because of the economic conditions of the families. These two factors may not allow contacts with individuals of target culture. None of the students have ever done a language course in English-speaking countries. Going on language courses in the English-speaking countries helps a lot to understand the target culture by being in direct contact with it. Both exchange programs and language courses in the country of target language, will help to create a positive image and attitude towards other cultures.

Regarding the contacts with media (through newspaper, television, radio) we can say that a very low number of 15.5% watch TV from the English-speaking countries. In fact, watching TV or reading the newspaper helps to make comparison with their culture, and in most of the time it effects to be open-minded and to accept other cultures.

In order to understand how much knowledge they have regarding the English culture, they were given several questions to choose one of the alternatives that they consider more appropriate (1. A lot 2. Sufficient 3. A little 4. Not at all). The topics offered are:

1.	History, geography, political system
2.	Different ethnic and social groups
3.	Common life and routine, living conditions, food, beverages etc
4.	Youth culture
5.	Education, professional life
6.	Traditions, folklore, touristic attractions
7.	Literature
8.	Other cultural aspects (music, drama, art)
9.	Values and religious beliefs
10.	International relation (politics, economic and cultural), of the students with students from other countries

The results show that students are not equipped with the necessary knowledge regarding the culture. The topics which they have very little information are: *Values and Religious beliefs and Different ethnic and social groups*. The topic which they have sufficient information: *Common life and routine, living conditions, food, beverages etc*. The reason why they may have more knowledge in this topic is because they are dealt in their English books.

Regarding the question how often are in contact with foreign culture/people/country related to English language they were given 5 questions to choose one of the alternatives (often, rarely, not at all) they consider as more appropriate for them.

1.	Contacts with media (through newspapers, television, radio)
2.	Visit at the cultural institutions that represent the foreign state in my country
3.	Contacts with people with origin from the foreign country but who live in my country
4.	Contacts with English professors at your education institution.
5.	Contacts with lecturers or foreign students who visit my school

The data clearly show that they have not at all contacts with cultural institution that represent the foreign state in the country. Regarding the contacts with English lecturers, the university offers the opportunity to have contacts with foreign lecturers because of the exchange programmes for the lectures, but these are limited.

In an open question they were asked to specify other contacts they already have. Some of them have mentioned:

“Our university organizes every year the International Day, where we students present different cultures, and one of them is the English culture”

“Contacts with non Albanian friends from the social website”

“I have contacts only with my English lecturers at my university”

“Very rarely I encounter tourists in the street and I create somehow contacts with them”

“Through the conferences that our schools organized I have the opportunity to meet people from other countries”

“My cousins are married in UK and I have contacts with their friends”

“My best friend lives in UK and I have opportunity to meet other English people”

“I work in a Travel agency and we have English assistants”

These were some of the answers the students while the rest of the students don't have contacts at all. Having contacts with other individuals gives the students the opportunity to do research on their own regarding their culture in order to have a successful communication.

Conclusions

As a result of globalization, the mobility of people from one country to the other for different reasons such as work, school etc. people encounter individuals of other cultures. In order to have an efficient communication is not enough just to speak the target language but also to be able to understand target culture. What do the data suggest? It is very necessary to make changes in the curricula, where it is dedicated more time to the culture than 20% or 40% as it resulted from the data. There is a need for integrating culture and language at the same time in the curricula.

Secondly, these data show that students have lack of knowledge regarding the culture of English-speaking countries; it is now time to bring innovation in the methodology of teaching, and language and culture to be interrelated within the teaching hours. Professors need to work hard on the topics that the students have lack of knowledge. The professors are the one that should encourage comparison between cultures, to analyse them independently and to bring different ideas in the classroom.

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