International Journal of Applied Linguistics & English Literature
E-ISSN: 2200-3592 & P-ISSN: 2200-3452
www.ijalel.aiac.org.au

Towards Critique: The Place of Culture in English Language Teaching

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history
Received: November 28, 2020
Accepted: February 06, 2021
Published: March 31, 2021
Volume: 10 Issue: 2
Advance access: March 2021

Conflicts of interest: None
Funding: None

ABSTRACT

This study explores in a descriptive way the overlapping relation between culture and English-language teaching. It lays out the different points of view and interpretations of linguistic researchers about the hot debate of the importance of introducing culture into ESL/EFL classrooms. While some believe that the current age of globalization needs us to expose our ESL/EFL learners to foreign cultures in their ESL/EFL learning, others disagree and deny the importance of doing so. Some go more radical and consider it as linguistic imperialism that should be excluded. The current study also discusses the opinions and views of researchers on the integration of language teaching and culture with some empirical studies.

Key words: Language and Culture, ELT, TESOL, Cultural Content

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between language and culture has always been a complicated one since it is very difficult to understand one without knowledge of the other. The importance of teaching culture in English as a Second Language (ESL) or English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes has been appreciated by many researchers; some even believe that culture and language cannot be separated (Byram and Fleming, 1998). However, others are cautious about introducing foreign culture to their ESL/EFL learners (Alptekin, 2002; Modiano, 2001). Between support and rejection, the hot topic of the relationship between culture and language, especially in ESL/EFL learning, is gathering more diverse interpretations and understandings among researchers. Hence, the aim of the current study is to present in a descriptive approach the debate among researchers about the relationship between culture and English language teaching (ELT). It reviews the literature that deals with this topic. In addition, it discusses the identification of an appropriate definition of culture, globalization and its effects on culture and ELT, the nature of cultures that could relate to global English language teachers' views, and opinions towards introducing culture into ELT, including the view of linguistic imperialism.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies on introducing cultural content into ESL and EFL classrooms and its relation to language have produced many different opinions and views of agreement and disagreement towards this hot topic. Among views supporting and rejecting which kind of cultural content to be introduced in course books, this debate on the relationship between language and culture is still unresolved and considered to be a conflict among researchers. Adaskou et al. (1990), for example, summarize the following arguments for having foreign cultural content in EFL/ESL learning:

1- It can promote international understanding.
2- It expands an understanding of one's own culture.
3- It facilitates learners' visits to foreign countries.
4- It motivates ESL/EFL learners to learn English.

Jenkins (2000) finds it a phenomenon that has become the subject of considerable debate during the past few years. This debate on the appropriate cultural content evolved about twenty years ago when different researchers from different countries raised the question of "role and ownership of English language" in the globalized world, or the "small village." It was only in the 1990s that this issue came to the surface, with essays, books, surveys, and conferences trying to explain how English can become a truly global language, what the consequences will be if it happens, and why English became the main candidate for an international language (Crystal, 2001). This resulted in different views and opinions among researchers, which have created different schools of thought. This will be explained in detail in the next section. Some of their views and opinions were supported by empirical work, and some were only theoretical.

Definition of Culture

The researcher thinks it would be very important to define what *culture* is before he goes further into this study. In this

Published by Australian International Academic Centre PTY.LTD.

http://dx.doi.org/10.7575/aiac.ijalel.v.10n.2p.28

regard, Bayyurt (2006), in her article on non-native English language teachers' opinions on culture, highlights the significance of the dynamic nature of culture and how difficult it is to give a simple definition of the term.

Similarly, both Nemni (1992) and Street (1993) believe that it is not easy to answer the question of what the word culture means, particularly in an increasingly globalized world. A long time ago, Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1954) discovered more than three hundred definitions of culture in their study, which merely emphasizes the difficulty of understanding the issues that are involved in culture and teaching about culture.

Among the various definitions of culture is the one developed by Spardley (1980), who defined culture as consisting of three basic features of peoples' experiences: what they do (cultural behaviour), what they know (cultural knowledge), and the things they make and use (cultural artifacts).

Furthermore, the notion of *culture* is generally something that most people implicitly understand but cannot define precisely. Many scholars have tried to introduce a comprehensive and useful definition of culture, including Hinkel (2007), Peck (1998), and Adaskou et al. (1990).

Hinkel (2007) believed that the popular definition of culture refers only to the parts of culture that are visible can be easily discussed. This could consist of the literature, folklore, architecture, art, styles of dress, cuisine, festivals, customs, traditions, and history of a particular people.

According to Peck (1998), culture refers to the acceptable and attractive behaviours of a certain group of people. It is that facet of human life that people learn because of belonging to a particular group; it is the part of learned behaviour that is shared and joined in with others.

A very useful definition of culture is the one developed by Adaskou et al. (1990), which outlines four senses or dimensions of culture: the aesthetic sense, the sociological sense, the semantic sense, and the pragmatic or sociolinguistic sense.

Globalization and the Contemporary World

Almost all researchers would agree that globalization is a multidimensional process that takes place through the spread of products of the growing global economy, politics, technological developments (particularly media and communication technologies), environmental change, and culture.

For example, Tomlinson (1999) suggests that one simple way to define globalization, without giving causal primacy or precedence to any one of these dimensions, is to say that it is a complex, accelerating, integrating process of global connectivity. Understood in this rather abstract, general way, globalization refers to the fast-developing and crowded systems of interconnections and interdependencies that characterize material, social, economic, and cultural life in the modern world. In other words, globalization is quite simply a result of these networks, their implications and the flow around them and across international boundaries of virtually everything that characterizes modern life: money, products, people, knowledge, information, ideas, crime, pollution, modeling, beliefs, images, etc.

Because globalization has affected most nations around the world, some sort of worldwide lingua franca is more necessary than ever. The scale and extent of global cross-cultural contact have increased in every area, from pop culture to politics. Ultimately, many people around the world now need to communicate on a broader scale, with a larger variety of people. The predominance of the English language around the world has nominated English as a lingua franca.

One of the important characteristics of a lingua franca is that it is independent of native speakers, their Englishes, and their ownership of English, which is used by more non-native speakers nowadays than native speakers. Thus, as long as English is learned as a lingua franca, the method should not come from the inner circle of countries where English is the native language.

Nature of Cultures that Could Relate to Global Englishes

As known to most researchers, it is no longer the case that the English language is used by non-native speakers mainly to communicate with native speakers, such as the Americans, the British people, or the Australians. English is increasingly used as a means of communication among non-native speakers themselves. One could find a Turkish person talking to a French person in English or an Indian person talking to a Saudi person in English. As presented in the BBC documentary The Story of English, English is frequently used among speakers when no so-called "native speaker" of English is present.

Non-native speakers come from different cultural backgrounds and have cultural differences. Examples of differences could be in conventions of politeness, grammatical structure, sentence patterns and processes of word formation, sounds, rhythm, idioms, and metaphors.

Regarding conventions of politeness, we find that, in one culture, it may be inappropriate to ask questions about where a person is going, whereas in another culture, it may be the formulaic greeting, as in the state of Nagaland in India (Krishan, 1990).

In English-speaking countries, it is more polite to use an interrogative form to make a request, e.g., "Could you close the window?" However, in South Asian English, a direct imperative form could be accepted as equally polite if it is preceded by indicators such as brother/sister/uncle, e.g., "Brother, close the window!" (Kachru, 1998a; Sridhar, 1991).

Another example is in Senegal in West Africa, where the people of Wolof perceive a direct request as more polite than the use of hedges and indirect requests (Toomey and Cocroft, 1994). Thus, the phrase "Give me a drink" is perceived to be a much more polite expression than "I wish to have a drink."

Regarding grammatical structure, particularly sentence patterns and word formation, an example is the Arabic language, in which the verb "to be" does not exist, in contrast to most languages. So, the sentence "Mohammad is a teacher" could be said in Arabic as "Mohammad teacher." This unique grammar can affect Arabic speakers when speaking with others by omitting the verb "be" from their speech.

For sounds and rhythm, there are patterns of stress, pitch, and loudness that suggest specific meanings. Some are universals, e.g., a high level of pitch and increased loudness suggests happiness and pleasure (Chafe, 1972). Others are culture-specific. For example, loudness may convey emphasis in one culture, but aggression in another. A high pitch may be a must in speech for certain groups of speakers in one culture but may be perceived as "childish" behaviour in another.

Regarding idioms and metaphors, in some languages such as Arabic, describing a person as a wolf or a camel could be something positive and a compliment. In other languages, it could be an insult and could lead to serious consequences.

In order to avoid misunderstanding and misinterpretation of the previous examples and to prepare their citizens to communicate in English in ways that would ensure their success, governments could introduce their countries' cultural diversity in its EFL textbooks as topics to be taught and learned.

Language Teachers' Views and Opinions Towards Teaching Culture

Although Stapleton (2000) believes that there is a shortage in research studies regarding ESL and EFL teachers' opinions and views and towards teaching culture in their ESL/EFL classrooms, he cited three significant studies involving this issue: Lessard-Clouston (1996), Adamowski (as cited in Lessard-Clouston, 1996), and Duff and Uchida (1997). He thinks these studies show that most of the participating ESL teachers support the teaching of a variety of representative samples of cultures found internationally in their ESL/EFL classrooms and are also aware of the significant role of culture in English language learning. However, these studies claim that most of them lack the experience to teach it and the strategies and techniques of introducing it to ESL/EFL learners. At the end of his research, Stapleton (2000) highlighted the need for further empirical studies exploring language teachers' views and opinions on the abovementioned issue.

In his study in Japan, which involved 28 university-level EFL teachers who answered questionnaires and gave comments about the amount and nature of the culture they were currently teaching, Stapleton (2000) discovered that most of the participants realized the significance of including international cultures in EFL course books and the process of teaching culture in EFL classrooms. On the other hand, his study found out that most of them need to know the strategies and methods of how to teach international cultures and what to teach. Using these strategies and techniques is necessary because they have randomly chosen their cultural content (materials) with no preparation. He added that this experience of teaching a range of representative examples of cultures found internationally could play a secondary role in EFL/ESL learning. Furthermore, he found out that most of the Japanese EFL teachers preferred to teach the overt culture, such as music and songs, rather than covert culture, such as customs and beliefs. When they were questioned about the meaning of the international cultures they meant in their responses, most of them explained that they were a mixture of different cultures: American and British in addition to other cultures of different nations and regions among the world, such as China, Russia, Middle Eastern countries, and South Asia.

Lessard-Clouston (1996) conducted an interesting survey in which 16 Chinese EFL teachers were interviewed to investigate their attitudes and views about teaching culture. He found tremendous support among EFL teachers for including culture in their classrooms but also discovered a need for more understanding ways of introducing culture into the classroom context.

Adamowski (as cited in Lessard-Clouston, 1996) conducted a study on eight ESL teachers in Canada to investigate and explore their attitudes towards teaching culture and its role in language acquisition. His study showed that the majority of ESL teachers supported teaching a range of representative examples and samples of internationally oriented cultures because of their importance in ELT. Part of his study involved asking the participants about what the terms "culture" and "international culture" mean to them. Almost all of the participants answered that "culture" signifies all aspects of daily life, such as work, transportation, family, relationships, and friends.

Risager (1998) did very useful research on Danish EFL teachers and their meaning of culture. In their definitions of culture, most provided answers relating culture to one's country, people, and society. This nationally oriented definition of culture has originated, as she states, because of the fact that "foreign language teaching has a long tradition of conceiving culture in terms of nationality and national history, connecting nation, people and language closely with one another" (p. 253). Another explanation for that situation is that Danish EFL teachers teach English far from its culture, which results in a casual understanding of foreign cultures.

Also, in this respect, Mckay (2003) conducted a very interesting study in Chile to investigate and explore EFL teachers' opinions and views towards the sort of cultural content that should be taught and introduced in the country. The majority of teachers were in favour of introducing international cultural content, which contains the host culture within it. The study also showed that the national Chilean EFL teachers were very self-confident to be EFL teachers preferring themselves on native language teachers for being bilingual and more experienced in their own culture.

Furthermore, and regarding EFL teachers' views and opinions on the importance of teaching culture, Byram and Risager (1999) did a study from 1992 to 1994. It took place in Denmark at the University of Roskilde and in the UK at the University of Durham. It involved 212 teachers from England and 653 Danish teachers, who filled in questionnaires. In addition, 18 teachers from the University of Durham and 30 Danish teachers were interviewed. They explained that the results of their studies clearly showed evidence that EFL teachers are completely aware of the inseparability of language and culture. Furthermore, they added that EFL teachers believe that any attempt to separate culture and language is artificial. In their study, they discovered that

most of the EFL teachers supported the teaching of culture as a very important task; however, they supposed that teaching linguistic aspects is more important. They concluded that the results of their studies were optimistic because the majority of EFL teachers in Denmark and the UK showed awareness of the importance of teaching culture.

Linguistic Imperialism

Linguists and language researchers became interested in the theory of linguistic imperialism in the early 1990s, especially after the publication of Phillipson's (1992) book *Linguistic Imperialism*, which has resulted in significant disagreements about the theory. On a general level, linguistic imperialism can take place when the English language becomes a gatekeeper for education, employment, trade and business opportunities, and popular culture, as well as when indigenous languages are marginalized.

Phillipson's theory presents a great critique on the historical spread of English as an international language and how it has continued its dominance, particularly in postcolonial countries such as India, Pakistan, Uganda, Zimbabwe, etc., and also increasingly in non-English-speaking European countries. Phillipson believes that the "language spread of English can be analyzed as an expression of linguistic imperialism," (P.20) and that the universal spread of English is a result of "17th-, 18th-, and 19th-century British success in conquest, colonization, and trade" and "the emergence of the United States as the majority military world power and technological leader in the aftermath of World War II."

Some researchers, including Phillipson, maintain that English language teaching (ELT) nowadays in non-native English countries is a clear continuation of such imperialist practices, and suppose that the promotion of English is a form of domination over developing countries. For Phillipson:

"The dominance of English is asserted and maintained by the establishment and continues reconstitution of structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages" (P.47).

He also explains that the concept of linguistic imperialism occurs if "the lives of the speakers of a language are dominated by another language to the point where they believe that they can and should use only that foreign language when it comes to transactions dealing with the more advanced aspects of life" (P.56).

He goes further in arguing that the main tenets where English is introduced nowadays support linguistic imperialism. The first tenet is the preference of teaching English monolingually, called "the monolingual fallacy."

The second tenet, according to Phillipson, is the concept of native speaker teacher supremacy, or "native-speaker fallacy," which considers the native speaker teacher as the ideal and perfect teacher of the English language. Chomsky (1965), for example, believes that the native speaker teacher is superior, as he or she is an authority on the language. However, there is a great debate about the status of native-speaker practitioners among linguists and language researchers.

Canagarajah (1999), for example, thinks that language teaching is a very complicated practice that requires pedagogical skills. For that reason, the concept of the native speaker practitioner becomes problematic and challenging as "not all speakers may make good teachers in their first language" (p.4). Furthermore, Auerbach (1993) explains that bilingual instruction in his country appears to be more efficient and successful for second language learning.

The other tenets for Phillipson include the belief that if English is introduced in the early stages, the results would be more encouraging than if it were introduced in later stages, which he calls "the early start fallacy." Also, the idea that the more English is taught, the better achievement would be gained is shown in "the maximum exposure fallacy." Finally, the notion that the standard of the English language will go down if other languages are used a great deal comes up in "the subtractive fallacy." Phillipson believes that the final argument is the one that helped justify the continuous British existence in the postcolonial countries.

CONCLUSION

It is to be concluded that understanding the relationship between language and culture will have a definite positive impact on English language teaching. Although many researchers recognize the significance and the importance of culture in ESL/EFL learning and believe that a foreign language cannot be taught if isolated from its native culture, others become suspicious and see it as linguistic imperialism or a Trojan horse that would have negative impacts on ESL/EFL learners' national identity.

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