



Cultural issues in Syrian EFL classrooms

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Abstract

Whether we should teach culture or not when we teach English as a Foreign Language has been great concern for a long time. Which one should be contained in EFL course books? The culture of the target language or the own culture of EFL learners? Regarding this issue, many researchers have a diversity of opinions, however; this study was conducted having resource to descriptive research design, in that it aims to understand the perspectives of the Syrian EFL students on cultural elements in their course books. A questionnaire and an interview, which were administered to 103 Syrian EFL students, were used in order to gather the required data. SPSS(v20.0), a Statistical Program for Social Sciences was employed in order to analyze the collected data. As a result of the findings, it was found out that Syrian EFL students had generally positive perspectives on the cultural elements of the target language contained in their course books.

Keywords: Culture; culture and language; teaching culture; Syrian students; English as Foreign Language.

1. Introduction

Culture is the cumulative programming of the brain which distinguishes each individual of a group from another one (Hofstede, 1994, p.5). Spencer-Oatey (2008, p.322) points out that culture is an obscure pile of basic inferences and values, adaptations to life, beliefs, policies, measures and behavioural conventions that are owned by a crowd of individuals, and that affect (but do not decide) each individual's behaviour and his understandings of the 'definition' of other people's behaviour.

It is widely known that language is a part of culture and it owns a very significant portrayal in it. The lack of language would push culture beyond the bounds of possibility according to some social scientists. Language concurrently mirrors culture, and is affected and framed by it (Jiang, 2000, p.328). That's to say, language and culture are two unified phenomena which is the reflection of a society (Bada, 2000, p.100). A number of students and some teachers see language only as a conversation tool – a way people employ to express matters and opinions of their environment or society. According to this perspective, a language means a group of words connected to each other by rules, and learning a foreign language is the basic means of switching words and rules to reach the same meaning with a different tool. This attitude may cause a person to be a "fluent fool" which means somebody speaking a foreign language fluently but does not comprehend the social structure of that language. Such people may be in complicated social contexts where they cannot see the events profoundly. Consequently, fluent fools may form negative views of the native speakers whose language they perceive but whose beliefs and values puzzle them. In order to refrain from being a fluent fool, one must comprehend the

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cultural aspect of language more effectively. Language is a way of communication but it is also an order of portraying thinking and consciousness (Bennett, 1997, p.16).

From another point of view, Önalın (2005, p.231) suggests that culture and language are interlaced and when we teach culture, it should be in a way to enhance consciousness and to give data for better conversation, instead of dictating objected cultural norms or forcing learners to alter their own values. Besides, he adds that cultural data about English culture or American culture should neither be introduced nor be employed as another language rule that EFL learners should know, but rather as a stimulating tool which will rise enthusiasm in the learners and build effective English language learning atmospheres. For EFL teachers, the matter is, "How can cultural knowledge and comprehension be included within the context of English language classes?" Clearly being only familiar with the grammar, syntax and phonetics will not supply students with the authentic awareness as to the nuances of the daily lives of those whose language is desired to be spoken. When a man lives in a culture, the language of that culture is everywhere. He is circled by it as well as being submerged inside it. He hears it on the road, in the films and etc. He watches its scene in grocery and bazaar, and also in the bus. He smells it in cafes, restaurants, coffee shops. EFL learners in a new culture start to take in the new language by listening to it and employing it in real atmospheres. When they grasp how language and culture are integrated and mirror each other, they are more conscious of their surroundings and are able to see how it influences their second language progress (Wintergerst and McVeigh, 2011, p.27). A culture class is considerably useful in terms of language skills, raising cultural awareness, changing attitudes towards native and target societies, and contribution to the teaching profession (Genc and Bada, 2005, p.81).

Any language is ingrained in a specific culture and upon learning a language one surely learn about its hidden culture. Yet, the issue is different for English for it has become a lingua franca. While including 'culture' in the curriculum and employing course books owning cultural content, teachers should know the factors like as socio-cultural information, learners' needs, stereotypes, generalizations and intercultural communication (Kilickaya, 2004, p.38).

Transmitting meanings in a foreign language includes systematic and schematic knowledge. Systematic knowledge refers to formal features of language including syntactic and semantic dimensions while schematic knowledge is socially structured. Kids form schematic and systematic knowledge conjoined while acquiring their native language. So, the educational materials of foreign or second language carrying the cultural ingredients of the target-language or presenting the systematic data are inclined to intervene with this natural proneness (Alptekin, 1993).

Having a deep look on the issue and taking all the mentioned researchers' views into consideration, this study seeks to identify the perspectives of Syrian EFL students, who take refuge in Turkey caused the war in Syria, on the function of the target language's culture contained in their course books.

2. Importance of the study

The function of culture when teaching or learning a foreign language has been of great interest for the researchers. Learning a culture or learning about a culture - either the own culture or a diverse one - in EFL classrooms could make language learning more successful for students who want to learn the target language in very natural dimensions. The use of cultural elements in EFL atmosphere stimulates students to learn English more efficiently. So, this study figures out the function of cultural elements in EFL course books through discovering the desire to learn English culture and the reason behind it, the extent of cultural elements contained in the current course books, cultural problems students have, and whether there stands loss of national identity

when learning a different culture. To sum up, the significance of cultural elements in English Language course books was tried to be examined in this study.

3. Purpose of the study

The aim of this study was to find out the perspectives of the Syrian EFL students on the effect of the culture of the target language. With this in mind, the research seeks to answer the following question:

What are the perspectives of the 8th class Syrian EFL students taking refuge in Turkey on the function of target language's cultural elements in their EFL course books?

4. Method of the study

This study was designed as a descriptive research since the aim was to find out the perspectives of the participants on cultural elements. A questionnaire was employed to discover the students' opinions about the function of culture in their EFL course books. The questionnaire was about the ideas of the students on the cultural extent in their EFL course books. The questionnaire (adapted from İltar and Güzeller, 2005) was filled in by 103 8th class students while the interview questions were answered by 15 students within the same group of 103 students at Mehmet ZahitKotku Imam Hatip Middle School in Adana, Turkey. At the school, the students use their own curriculum, program, course books and other materials with their own Syrian teachers. The questionnaire and interview were translated into the students' mother tongue - Arabic and they were applied with the help of their teachers.

5. Limitations of the study

This study is limited to a middle school situated in Adana, Turkey, as well as being limited to 103 EFL students in the 8th class. A broader study may be conducted with a larger population, as well.

6. Data Analysis and Results

6.1. Desire to Learn the Target Culture

In terms of the item Desire of learning English / American culture while learning English the findings in Table 1 were found out. You should provide sufficient detail to allow the work to be replicated. Methods already published should be indicated by a reference. Only relevant modifications should be described here.

Table 1
Desire to Learn the Target Culture

	f	%
Yes	60	58.3
No	21	20.4
Sometimes	22	21.4
Total	103	100

A high number of students (58.3%) declared that while learning English language, they wanted to learn English / American culture as well. However, 20.4% of the students stated that they didn't want to learn the culture of the target language while 21.4% of them sometimes wanted to learn it.

6.2. How the target Culture is Learnt

Regarding the item *If you want to learn English / American culture, how do you want to learn it ?* Table 2 represents the following data:

Table 2

How the students want to learn the target culture

	f	%
Only in the reading passages about the target culture.	9	8.7
Just like my own cultural values.	23	22.3
A little bit to understand the target language.	71	68.9
Total	103	100

Most of the students (68.9%) stated that they wanted to learn a little bit of culture to understand the target language, while 22.3% of them wanted to learn it just like their own cultural values. On the other hand, 8.7% of the students put forward that they wanted to learn the target culture only in the reading passages.

6.3. Unfamiliar Words about the Target Language's Culture

Table 3 represents the frequency of the words which the students don't understand about target language's culture. In other words, the following findings were tabulated as to the item *Do the words which you don't understand about target language's culture bother you?*

Table 3

Unfamiliar Words of the Target Culture Bother the Students

	f	%
Yes	19	18.4
No	37	35.9
Sometimes	47	45.6
Total	103	100

Majority of the students (45.6%) are sometimes bothered by the words which they don't understand about target language's culture, while 18.4% of the respondents are bothered by them. Yet, 35.9% of the participants are not bothered by unfamiliar cultural words.

6.4. Contributions of Different Cultural Values

Table 4 mentions the rate of the kinds of contributions the students will get by learning different cultural values.

Table 4

Kinds of Contributions Cultural Values Provide

	f	%
It gives us different point of view about the world we live in and life.	54	52.4
It develops my critical thoughts.	49	47.6
Total	103	100

A high number of the respondents (52.4%) are in the opinion that cultural values give them different point of view about the world they live in and life, while 47.6% of them think that cultural values develop their critical views.

6.5. Loss of National Identity While Learning a Different Culture

Table 5 shows the findings of the students' responds to the item *While learning different culture, do you think you will lose your national identity?*

Table 5

Loss of National Identity While Learning a Different Culture

	f	%
Yes	2	1.9
No	99	96.1
Sometimes	2	1.9
Total	103	100

A large number of the students (96.1%) do not think that they lose their national identity while learning a different culture. Besides, 1.9% of the students sometimes think that they lose their national identity, while 1.9% of them are in the opinion that they lose their national identity when learning a different culture. That's to say, almost all the respondents are in the view that they do not lose their national identity when learning the culture of the target language.

6.6. Cultural Problems Faced While Learning a Foreign Language

Table 6 reveals the cultural problems faced by the students while learning a foreign language. Namely, the findings of the cultural problems are represented in Table 6.

Table 6

Cultural Problems Faced While Learning a Foreign Language

	f	%
British - American course books wanted to teach only their culture.	31	30.1
They don't give importance to Syrian culture.	27	26.2
They only try to teach English spoken countries' cultural elements.	45	43.7
Total	103	100

Most of the participants (43.7%) are in the opinion that the course books only try to teach the cultural elements of English spoken countries, while 30.1% think that British - American course books wanted to teach only their culture. Furthermore, 26.2% state that course books do not give importance to Syrian culture.

6.7. Interview Results

Quotations, codes and frequencies from answers of the students to the interview questions were given in Table 7.

Table 7

Views of Students Related to Culture and Course Books

Codes	Frequency	Quotations From Remarks of Students
Desire to learn English culture and the reason behind it	13	<i>I want to learn English culture because I gain different point of views about the world I live in.</i>
The extent of cultural elements contained in course books	10	<i>They only try to teach only their own culture – English culture. We should also see a little bit Arabic culture as well.</i>
Cultural problems students have	9	<i>I have hard times understanding the unknown cultural words.</i>
Loss of national identity when learning a different culture	1	<i>I lose my Arabic culture.</i>

By looking at the interview results we can easily see that most of the interviewed students want to learn English culture, but they also ask for a bit of Arabic culture as well. Regarding their cultural problems, most of them have hard times understanding the unknown cultural vocabulary. Lastly, most of the students interviewed do not think that they lose their national identity.

7. Discussion and Conclusion

There are several studies focusing on the relationship between culture and language (Lambert, 1973; Ochs, 1988; Kramsch, 1993; Lazear, 1995; Jiang, 2000), besides the studies examining the cultural elements in course books (Rajabi and Ketabi, 2012; Ulum, 2014; Roshan, 2014; Ulum and Bada, 2016). It is easily understood from this specific study that Syrian refugee in Turkey learning English have a tendency of learning different cultures. On the other hand, they state that their EFL course books contain only English spoken countries' cultural elements. Besides, let alone having loss of national identity they even believe in gaining different point of views as to the world they live in and life as well. Nevertheless, they also want to see a little bit of their own culture in the course books. As a result, rather than only containing the cultural elements of the target language, having a cross - cultural approach in course books may be more sensible.

Having an understanding of cultural values and societal features do not necessarily force the students to conform to them; however, they exist to refine the self in order to take a more universal and less egoistic form (Bada, 2000, p.100). So, through the integration of cross - cultural elements in course books, the students will be more aware of both their own cultural values and the values of the target language as well.

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Appendices:

Part I

Interview Questions

Please answer the following questions sincerely. You don't need to write your name on the paper.

Class:

Gender:

1. Do you want to learn culture? Why?
2. What kind of cultural elements do you face in your EFL course books?
3. What kind of cultural problems do you have when learning English?
4. Do you think you lose your national identity when you learn a different culture?

Part II

Students' Ideas about Target Languages' Culture

1. While learning English, do you want to learn English / American culture?
a) Yes b) No c) Sometimes

2. If you want to learn English / American culture, how do you want to learn it?
a) Only in the reading passages about the target culture.
b) Just like my own cultural values.
c) A little bit to understand the target language.

3. Do the words which you don't understand about target language's culture bother you?
a) Yes b) No c) Sometimes

4. What kind of contributions will you get by learning different cultural values?
a) It gives us different point of view about the world we live in and life
b) It develops my critical thoughts.

5. While learning different culture, do you think you will lose your national identity?
a) Yes b) No c) Sometimes

6. What kind of cultural problems do you usually face while learning a foreign language?
a) British - American course books wanted to teach only their culture
b) They don't give importance to Syrian culture
c) They only try to teach English spoken countries cultural elements

(Adapted from İlter, BinnurGenç., Güzeller, CemOktay. 2005. Cultural problems of Turkish students while learning English as a foreign language. *Modern Language Journal*, 89/2, 456-461)