Incorporating Culture in Teaching English as a Lingua Franca between Intercultural Awareness and *Cultura Franca*: A Reading in the Literature[1]

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Abstract

This review of the literature on incorporating culture into English language teaching aims not only to revisit the need for intercultural awareness, which focuses on understanding the differences between cultures and appreciating them, but also to highlight the importance of foregrounding and endorsing similarities and commonalities, which can be found among different cultures. This will bring the students in a multicultural English language classroom closer when they realize how cultures can also be similar in certain aspects. Similar to the widely used term of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), this paper uses the term *cultura franca* to refer to the common grounds upon, which many cultures meet according to the recently published study of anthropologists Curry et al. (2019). Although the interpretations of the cultural behaviors or norms can differ from one culture to another, the core of these behaviors or norms are the same. Knowing that we as humans share a number of values, regardless of the cultural background we come from, is important to overcome our fear of the Other, of the person who is different.

Resumen

La presente revisión de la literatura sobre la incorporación de la cultura en la enseñanza del idioma inglés tiene como objetivo no solo revisar la necesidad de la conciencia intercultural, que se enfoca en comprender las diferencias entre culturas y apreciarlas, sino también resaltar la importancia de destacar y respaldar las similitudes y puntos en común, que se pueden encontrar entre diferentes culturas. Esto acercará a los estudiantes a un aula de inglés multicultural cuando se den cuenta de cómo las culturas también pueden ser similares en ciertos aspectos. De manera similar al término ampliamente utilizado de English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), este documento utiliza el término cultura franca para referirse a los terrenos comunes en los que se encuentran muchas culturas según el estudio publicado recientemente por los antropólogos Curry et al. (2019). Aunque las interpretaciones de los comportamientos o normas culturales pueden diferir de una cultura a otra, el núcleo de estos comportamientos o normas es el mismo. Saber que los seres humanos compartimos una serie de valores, independientemente del origen cultural del que provengamos, es importante para superar nuestro miedo al Otro, a la persona que es diferente.

Introduction

The widespread reach of the English language has raised its status from a language of a specific country or nation to a professional skill that can add much value to one's curriculum vitae all over the world. Proficiency in English is an important characteristic of a qualified professional, and it can improve the chances of being hired worldwide, whether in the Middle East (Kochen, 2003; Schaub, 2000), in China (Pan & Block, 2011; You & Dörnyei, 2016), in Latin America (Bohn, 2003; Cronquist & Fiszbein, 2017; Kaiser, 2017), or in Europe (Sazdovska et al., 2014).

Learning a language is not only about learning its words, grammar rules, pronunciation, or language skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking), but it is also about learning the culture that is associated with the language. It is believed that learning a language is inseparable from learning about its culture (Choudhury, 2013; Purba, 2011) since culture and language affect each other to make meaning (Garner, 2013; Grein, 2017; Keshavarzi, 2012; Liddicoat, 2011; Wintergerst & McVeigh, 2011). Yağiz & Izadpanah (2013) support this argument and further explain that graduates of language programs cannot effectively engage in real-life day-to-day communication because they do not know how to integrate the element of culture into the language they speak even though they may have a high level of language proficiency .

Therefore, it is important for English language professionals to have an understanding of what is meant by culture, which culture they need to integrate in their classrooms, and how to integrate that culture in their teaching. The purpose of this literature review is to examine how English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) teachers can prepare their learners to be aware of a culture as a part of the language. Teachers should incorporate intercultural awareness in their teaching by comparing different cultural behaviours, practices, and norms. In addition, they should embrace what can be called a *cultura franca* that emphasizes similarities between

[1] Received: 7 October, 2020. Accepted: 3 October, 2021. Published: 23 April, 2022.
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different cultures. A *cultura franca* is one that is owned by all users of English in international contexts in the sense that no culture is dominant over the other.

Teachers should guide their students not to try to impose their cultural beliefs or be defensive about them as they interact with students who come from other cultural backgrounds. Teachers should help students find common grounds upon which they can build mutual acceptance. The concept of *cultura franca* highlights commonalities between cultures and how, starting from these common grounds, people can interact respectfully with each other. Hence, this paper brings forward the argument that teachers should understand their learners' cultural needs, foster critical thinking toward cultural stereotypes, build awareness of intercultural communication, and achieve an understanding of the *cultura franca*. In this paper, I will begin by trying to define culture, contextualize it within the frame of English as a lingua franca, and explore the stages that lead to emphasizing cultural similarities – what I call *cultura franca.*

Culture in Teaching English as a Lingua Franca

Defining culture

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines culture as "the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group" (Merriam Webster, n.d.). Baker (2017) highlights the nineteenth and twentieth century perception of culture as "the whole way of life of a particular people" (p. 48). Li et al. (2012) define culture as "a way of life of people, including the shared behaviours, beliefs, values, traditions, language, and knowledge that are passed on through written or oral communication from generation to generation" (p. 23). This definition draws the tight connection between language and culture by considering language as a cultural construct.

Kramsch (2013) differentiates between culture with a small *c* and Culture with a big *C.* According to her, culture with a small *c* usually refers to daily practices of a group of people, which include food, behavior, and traditional practices. On the other hand, Culture with a big *C* refers to bigger narratives in a society, which include literary works, artistic production, and musical forms. She claims that the context of teaching determines whether students should be taught the big or small *c* (i.e., students may want to learn English for business, travel, or scholarly purposes), and, for each purpose, they will need a different kind of culture learning.

Culture in ELF Contexts

With the English language being used by more non-native speakers than native speakers worldwide (Büchel, 2013; Hilliard, 2014), the question of language ownership arises (Fang & Baker, 2018; García, 2013) and, consequently, the question of which/whose culture(s) should be integrated in English language teaching follows (Otwinowska-Kasztelanic, 2011). Even the native speaker culture(s) is at free play because the first diaspora of British immigrants to the USA, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand (Galloway & Rose, 2015) resulted in the emergence of pluricentric cultural forms to represent the English language. Moreover, as Jackson (2014) suggests that "after World War II, . . ., [witnessed] an influx of immigrants from Asia and other parts of the world" (p. 39), the question of whether the second and third generations of these immigrants who were still living in English-speaking countries were considered native or non-native speakers of the English language, and whether their adapted cultural practices were considered native or non-native to the English culture.

International business communication in English does not have to abide by the rules of the British or American cultures (Coskun, 2010) because, as Baker (2017) mentions, it is fluid in nature, and shared interests which imply that power is dynamic and mutually divided. In their examination of what international employers, particularly European ones, look for when hiring graduates regarding language skills, Sazdovska et al. (2014) argue that the use of English in international businesses does not require non-native English speakers to identify with the native speaker cultural or social model(s).

In the academic world, the use of English as a medium of instruction is more rigorous. Stricter linguistic and cultural rules are applied due to the nature of scientific/formal language, which has to be clear and accurate (Islam & Park, 2015; Murray, 2010; Scott, 2015). A large number of universities around the globe are delivering their courses and programs in English as they aim to increase the number of their international students, which would result in bringing more money (Ammon, 2011) and in getting their scholars and future graduates to publish in English peer-reviewed journals, on the other hand (Xu & Li, 2018). This also

suggests that English is used by academics to facilitate the exchange of knowledge, rather than to use the language as an end in itself.

Therefore, the use of English in international contexts, where it is mostly used by non-native speakers, deconstructs the binary opposition of native/non-native culture in the communication process. Seidlhofer's (2011) definition of English as a lingua franca as "any use of English among speakers of different first languages for whom English is the communicative medium of choice, and often only option" (p. 7) complicates the issue of culture since no definite culture is involved in the interaction in the sense that every participant in such communication would bring his/her own culture to the discourse.

For House (2010), ELF learners are those who learn English to use it in contexts where in general there are no native speakers involved in the communication This approach is dissimilar to other English learning contexts, such as English as a second language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL). Nevertheless, Galloway and Rose (2015) offer a broader perspective that even when native speakers of English interact with non-native speakers, they make their language more intelligible, adapting it to a form of ELF. This understanding aims to decentralize English and disconnect it from any particular people.

Hence, integrating culture in the ELF classroom is not only concerned with the culture(s) of English-speaking countries, but it is more about intercultural interaction and the ability of the interlocutors to understand and appreciate the culture of each other (Baker, 2017; Coskun, 2010; Frank, 2013; Niżegorodcew, 2011). Jackson (2014) asserts that an intercultural communicator is someone who asks as many questions as needed to make the communication clear for both parties. For her, this interaction is based on non-judgmental and mutual understanding between individuals who come from different cultural backgrounds. Since language is connected to the culture(s) of its users, regardless of whether they are native or non-native speakers of English (Dogancy-Aktuna & Hardman, 2018; Macías, 2010), no culture would be marginalized or subordinated, but all the involved cultures would be treated and regarded equally. The dynamic nature of a culture opens the doors for negotiation, and this is what learners need to learn in their ELF classroom (Mahboob, 2018; Shemshadsara, 2011).

Culture and the English language teacher

The element of culture is still neglected, or is in need of more attention in many contexts of teacher education programs worldwide (Good et al., 2010; Juan-Garau & Jacob, 2015; Murray, 2010; Van Canh, 2012). Byrd (2014) stresses the importance of including culture teaching in the curriculums and syllabi of English language teacher education. This lack of training in culture leaves teachers incompetent and clueless about how to incorporate culture in their teaching (Gonen & Saglam, 2012; Soureshjani, 2012; Tran & Dang, 2014). Hence, it is not sufficient to prepare language teachers to only teach language skills and systems since they also need to have a thorough understanding of culture and be equipped with the relevant skills and knowledge in order to integrate culture in the material they are teaching (Good et al., 2010).

Since culture is a very complex and such a broad term it is very difficult to implement it in the English language classroom (Choudhury, 2013; Otwinowska-Kasztelanic, 2011). English language teachers use coursebooks as the source of cultural guidance in their teaching to direct them in the process of integrating cultural elements in the background of their language teaching (Yildirim, 2012; Weninger & Kiss, 2013). Teliousi et al. (2020) give the example of gender-based career stereotypes in Greek coursebooks may affect students' future career choices as they noted that the books of grades 4, 5, and 6 include more working men than working women, which could be very suggestive. However, the debate on which culture should be integrated in the ELF classroom can be somehow considered unsettled between research and the professional practice since researchers call for intercultural awareness (Frank, 2013; Juan-Garau & Jacob, 2015; Li, 2007; Villacanas de Castro, 2015) whereas in actual classrooms, there is often a dominant culture that prevails over the other(s). In most cases, the dominant culture is from an English-speaking country's culture (Baker, 2011; Coskun, 2010; Snodin, 2016).

The Role of the Teacher

As a result of all the debate presented above, it is important for the English language teacher to be trained to facilitate the incorporation of culture in language teaching (Byrd et al., 2011) through understanding his/her learners' needs in respect to culture (Coskun, 2010), as well as fostering intercultural awareness (Baker, 2011) and adopting *cultura franca* as a starting point for international communication.

Understanding learners' needs

Understanding the needs of learners is the key to designing English language courses/lessons and their objectives (Li et al., 2012). Teachers who are not well-trained to accommodate the needs of international learners in their teaching practices in terms of both language and culture are faced with the challenges of improving their students' real language proficiency (Russell, 2012; Villacanas de Castro, 2015). Although learners may produce linguistically correct structures, they may not be able to make meaningful sentences in English if they do not frame these structures within their sociolinguistic contexts (Üstünel & Öztürk, 2014). When students translate idioms, which are acceptable in their first language/culture, into English, these idioms may not mean anything to the English listener. An example of this is when an Arabic speaker says, "could you please take on you?" This literal translation of the Arabic sentences does not have the same communicative function in the English sentence "Can I sit here?". The phrase 'take on' varies in meanings and usages, but it does not fit syntactically or semantically in the target context of use.

However, as argued earlier, the lack of preparation in terms of culture teaching in teacher education programs is usually regarded as an obstacle that teachers face even when they identify the needs of their learners in respect to culture (Good et al., 2010) and possibly with respect to assessing these cultural needs. This deficiency of setting language within a cultural framework, as a result, affects the chances of learners performing well in their future academic or professional uses of English (Murray, 2010).

The complex and problematic nature of integrating culture in the ELF discourse stems from the fact that different English language learners would require knowledge of different cultures (Baker, 2011), depending on where, when, and how they will use the language in their real lives. For example, a Moroccan tour guide could learn a little about the cultures of the prospective tourists who would visit Morocco; meanwhile, a Mexican purchase officer who works with Chinese suppliers should get to know more about the Chinese culture to be able to communicate effectively with the tourists/suppliers respectively. Moreover, covering all the elements of culture in the English language classroom is a challenging task due to class time limitations (Byrd et al., 2011). Nevertheless, given the diversity of international and national cultures that learners may encounter in international communication, identifying learners' needs is the first step toward the appropriate integration of culture, so that teachers can select what elements are to be included to help their learners perform well (Knutson, 2006).

A different perspective on the integration of culture in teaching emphasizes the need for learners to understand the essence of culture, so that they can respond more effectively to diverse cultural interactions by themselves. Awareness of the essence of culture and discovering otherness in the classroom is echoed in Dogancay-Aktuna and Hardman's suggestion to implement a meta-cultural paradigm in ELF classes, where learning is directed towards understanding the concept of *culture*, rather than a particular culture (2018). This may respond more broadly to learners' needs as they can recognize how cultures operate and how cultural identity is formed (Knutson, 2006), thus, learners can be more open to appreciate difference(s).

Promoting intercultural competence in the ELF classroom

Adopting intercultural awareness

Baker (2011) has stated that recent years have witnessed an increasing interest in implementing intercultural awareness in ELF classrooms (Baker, 2017). Baker (2011) defines intercultural awareness as "a conscious understanding of the role culturally based forms, practices, and frames of understanding can have in intercultural communication, and an ability to put these conceptions into practice in a flexible and context-specific manner in real time communication" (p. 5). Jackson's (2014) definition of intercultural awareness, on the other hand, as being the "knowledge of one's own personal identities cultures and understanding of how cultures differ" (p. 359) draws the relationship between the first culture of the learner and *culture* as a concept.

Intercultural awareness starts from the learners' first culture(s) and helps them create awareness and appreciation of it, so that they can share their own experiences and then compare them to other cultural experiences (Frank, 2013; Islam & Park, 2015; Villacanas de Castro, 2015). This would, in turn, allow learners who will use English as a means of international communication with both native and non-native English speakers to have a broader sense of intercultural or cross-cultural understandings (Weninger & Kiss, 2013). Through the awareness of the culture, students would learn to explain their culturally-driven actions and feel less intimidated by other people's reactions to their beliefs. To achieve this goal, Baker (2011) and Galloway and Rose (2015) call for negotiating cultural understanding among ELF communicators to ensure the flow of communication.

Teachers can highlight how different cultures differ in certain instances and, consequently, emphasize the importance of appreciating differences without being judgmental (Hammond, 2015). In this sense, learners become global citizens who are capable of interacting with people from other cultures without biases against them to embrace otherness as a natural phenomenon (Jackson, 2014).

Being a culturally responsive teacher

Hammond (2015) defines culturally responsive teaching as "the process of using familiar cultural information and processes to scaffold learning" (p. 156). In Villacanas de Castro's (2015) study, none of the investigated teachers were trained on integrating culture in the language classroom although these same teachers showed various levels of culture awareness. Durgunoglu and Hughes (2010) found a lack of communication between the US teachers and their learners who came from different parts of the world. A typical example of this would be the disparity in learning styles among learners coming from different educational systems. Byrd (2014) explains that this lack of communication could be due to the lack of intercultural preparation in their teacher education program. Unlike the US pedagogy which is learner-centered, some Chinese or Middle Eastern pedagogies, for example, are considered teacher-centred, so that the students coming from these settings are used to being silent in the classroom (Derderian-Aghajanian & Cong, 2012). Therefore, teachers would be interculturally communicative if they were able to adopt differentiated approach to respond to the various culturally informed styles of learning. Teachers can, for example, adopt a non-judgmental approach to students' beliefs and cultural identities, allowing respectful discussions that do not underrate any values or viewpoints.

However, this approach may pose another problem associated with the discreetness and the variety of cultures in the classroom. Teachers may have classrooms filled with learners coming from a number of different cultures, which makes it harder for the teacher to be responsive to each and every one of these cultures. Hammond (2015) responds to this issue by suggesting an understanding of "cultural universal patterns" which she calls "cultural archetypes" (p. 25) because she believes that if we dig deep in cultures, we will find many similarities in their essences. She further argues that teachers can start from the two most important archetypes of collectivism, cultures that focus on groups like China, and individualism, cultures that focus on the individual like the United States, as well as the oral and written traditions of the learners' backgrounds. Baker (2017) echoes this understanding of universal cultural constructs, which are concerned with "what is shared by all humans... to create culture and what it is about culture that distinguishes human from other animals" (p. 49).

Appreciating the interference of the first culture

The influence of the first culture on the discourse produced by learners in the target language does not mean that the product is not at-level; it rather means that it is produced differently from the way a native speaker of the target culture would produce it. Although this concept might be obvious and understandable in speaking, it should also be stressed in writing in English. Wang and Machado (2015) give the example of Chinese students who are influenced by their first culture writing style when they write academic English papers and suggest that this is rather a matter of influence than a lack of skill. Hence, according to the decentralized understanding of ELF, varieties of writing styles or spoken utterances that are affected by the first culture of the learners should be adopted and appreciated by both language teachers as well as content teachers/professors.

Fostering critical thinking of stereotypical images

Teachers should be careful when teaching a culture(s) in the English language classroom as learners may build stereotypical images of the target language culture, and of other cultures. Stereotyping is defined as "a strong tendency to characterize people from other cultural backgrounds unfairly, collectively and usually negatively" (Jackson, 2014, p. 387), which makes it imperative to avoid teaching misleading, generalized narratives about other cultures.

It is important that students are given enough space to critically reflect on the direct/implicit references to cultural components in their course books (Weninger & Kiss, 2013). For this reason, Coskun (2010) suggests that teachers should use activities that promote students' awareness of stereotypes, such as asking students to identify stereotypical images in a recorded listening activity between a Polish and a German speaker in English or in a reading passage about appropriate behavior during a trip abroad. Teachers, in this way, can focus not only on language elements being used or practiced via exposure to recorded conversations or reading passages but also to cultural issues that these recordings and passages raise.

Course books usually generate ideal images of other cultures; and for this reason, sometimes hyperreal models become more accessible than reality (Baudrillard, 1981, 1994), in particular regarding western cultures (Villacanas de Castro, 2015). Hilliard (2014) asserts that course books generally "represent a Western viewpoint and Western values from the overly positive perspective of a tourist . . . [, which] can give the students a false and superficial impression of the target language's culture" (246). This, on the other hand, could affect the learners' image of their own culture when they compare it to how the target or other cultures are represented (Baker, 2017; Galloway & Rose, 2015; Phillipson, 1992). In other instances, these cultural texts/images might be considered as offensive to the first culture of the students (Jiang, 2011). To avoid such unwanted results, students' awareness of the values of their own culture, as well as their conscious and critical analysis of the representation of other cultures in their course books, should be sought out by teachers.

Another significant issue that teachers should be aware of is that some course books may reinforce negative images of other cultures, particularly locally designed books. Lu (2011) gives an example of a negative cultural image in a Chinese English language coursebook, which has a reading passage depicting divorce in the target culture as the only one representation on the topic of marriage. This could, as Lu argues, result in learners developing a negative, stereotypical generalization about marital relationships in the British culture. Hence, the teacher's role at this point is to provide supplemental materials to learners showing marriage customs and ceremonies, for example, and explain that like anywhere else in the world divorce happens, and that this reading passage presents an example of an individual case.

It is noteworthy to mention that in some cultures students tend to take things at face value without critically thinking about the validity of the presented argument(s) (Lun et al., 2010; Xu & Li, 2018). Here again comes the role of the English language teacher to encourage students to question any cultural image/text in the course book in order to ensure that students are not drawn to make generalized assumptions about other cultures

Achieving an Understanding of *Cultura Franca* by Means of the English Language Culture

When students are made aware of their own culture, as well as of possible differences, they may encounter when interacting with people from the other culture(s) and are taught to avoid stereotyping, it is the perfect opportunity for the teacher to prepare them for *cultura franca* by foregrounding the theory of English as a lingua franca (EFL). The flexibility and open-mindedness toward the other are able to foster a comforting atmosphere of respect for the interlocutors participating in communication (Galajda, 2011). While intercultural competence is built around the idea of difference (Jackson, 2014) in the sense that learners are made aware of cultural differences, which can enhance their ability to interact with people from other cultural backgrounds, the core task of ELF is to find overlapping similarities to enable efficient communication (Baker, 2017). Although the users of ELF realize the variations, and sometimes discrepancies, in their linguistic skills, they can approximate meaning to make it intelligible to their listeners (Coskun, 2010). Similar to the concept of the lingua franca, the purpose of the use of *cultura franca* is to find shared norms/common grounds to be the starting point of communication even when the communicators are aware of their variations/differences.

Anthropologists Curry et al. (2019) conducted the largest survey so far (University of Chicago Press Journals, 2019) on 60 cultures from all around the world, and concluded that all these cultures have seven shared morals, which are as follows: (1) helping family, (2) helping group, (3) returning favours, (4) being brave, (5) deferring to superiors, (6) equally distributing resources, and (7) respecting others' possessions. These cultural patterns can be taught in the ELF context to emphasize how people from different cultures operate in some forms, which can be a starting point of communication. Learners can use these patterns to facilitate their communication with people from other cultures when they work together on a team or under the supervision of a mentor, for example. Teachers can use simple methods to highlight these commonalities, such as Venn diagrams to showcase how different cultures meet even when approaching them can be contextually/socially responsive.

Implications and Concluding Remarks

Teaching English as a lingua franca is not only about the language features and structures, but it is also about facilitating an awareness of learner's own culture and how this culture can be negotiated in international communication (Baker, 2017). It is also about finding common grounds for cross-cultural interactions among users of the language who do not share the same culture(s), so that the people involved in the communication start from two points: (1) appreciating difference(s) through intercultural awareness,

and (2) understanding culturally shared values through the *cultura franca* of the Englishes spoken in ELF contexts.

There is an agreement that cultural preparation in teacher education programs must be given more emphasis to ensure that teachers can prepare their learners to operate beyond the classroom setting, so that these learners are equipped with what it takes to be global citizens (Baker, 2011).

Moreover, understanding what culture is and how it is developed in different parts of the world is an important step toward appreciating otherness for learners (Baker, 2017). Learners who are prepared to learn the mechanisms of culture are those who can appreciate why people from different cultures behave or react differently, which, as a result, reduces cultural gaps and assumptions.

The teacher, being part of the intercultural awareness process, should be responsive to the cultural norms of his/her learners (Hammond, 2015). This is particularly important for native English speakers in the field of TESOL who should not only rely on the knowledge of their own English language culture, but also acquaint themselves with other cultures, so that they are able to respond to the cultures of their learners.

Furthermore, teachers should help their learners to avoid stereotyping other cultures. Instead, they should enable their learners to appreciate a *cultura franca* that will help them use the English language in multi-cultural contexts. This can be achieved by implementing the understanding that no culture is superior to the other and by emphasizing that many of the values of most cultures come from similar roots.

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