

## The Use of Target-Language Cultural Contents in EFL Teaching

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### Abstract

*English is one of the required subjects in Taiwan and students learn it from fourth grade in general. The teaching of culture has separately received considerable attention in recent years. However, English is not the mother tongue for Taiwanese teachers and students, so a target-language cultural model is often lacking. The paper will focus on the application of target-language cultural contents for English teachers and learners. The results show that the role of culture in teaching English as a foreign language is significant. Culture influences language teaching and learning. If teachers are able to spend more time experiencing and understanding target-language cultural contents, students will have better English learning while with the support of cultural knowledge.*

**Keywords:** Cultural contents, EFL teaching, English learning, language and culture

### 1. Introduction

Culture is relevant to information with regard to the target/foreign culture, including music, dance, human beings' way of life, festivals, geography, history, and vice versa (Baker, 2003). Culture has become a pivotal element of English language teaching in recent years and language and culture are inseparable. There are a variety of reasons pertinent to the language that combines wider social and cultural insights, and also the cross-cultural use of English. As a result, the study will demonstrate the multicultural use of English in Taiwan and the teaching of culture. Moreover, the paper will address the difficulties and challenges in teaching cultural materials outside of the English speaking countries.

### 2. The Definition of Culture

Culture refers to the beliefs, customs, way of life, and social organization of a group or country. It encompasses comparisons with a learner's native culture and the target culture they are learning. Baker (2003) proposes some concepts that teachers and learners should both know:

1. Language cannot always be translated from literal meaning. Individual words possess implications that cannot predict the meaning from the word itself. In English, the meaning may be positive, negative, or neutral and it depends on the situation. Therefore, when learning a foreign language, we learn the target culture as well and it is not simply explained from the dictionary.
2. The intonation of a speaker's voice conveys meaning. The Chinese language is a tonal language, so the intonation is different from the English language. Instead, English is opposite that each word has its individual syllables.
3. Cultures contain both acceptable and offensive topics. In terms of acceptable choice of topic, it is better not to ask family matters when two speakers are not familiar with each other. Regarding offensive conversation, it is impolite to ask, "What is your salary?" or "Are you married?"

## 2.1 Language and Culture

The role of culture in language teaching covers diverse cultural concepts from aesthetic, social, semantic, and pragmatic points of view (Mckay, 2002). It is a learning process to identify one's own culture and recognize and respect another. Each culture is relevant to "age, gender, ethnic background, and social class" (p. 83). On the other hand, cultural familiarity and prior background knowledge affect students' language learning, we need to realize the factors carefully and adjust our teaching curricula properly to fit students' cultural backgrounds and language differences (Droop and Verhoeven, 1998; Lin, 2002).

Gay (2000) claims a notion that "teachers need to understand different cultural intersections and incompatibilities and bridge the gaps between different cultural systems" (p. 12). Tseng (2002) provides some standpoints regarding culture: first, it produces diversities; next, it is not a collection of truth but a learning procedure; then, it can be discussed in a multilingual and multicultural environment. Educators need to know how to embed cultural materials in the curricula and classroom to expand students' global perspectives instead of confusing them. In addition, how to activate students' prior linguistic and cultural backgrounds to support their language learning is challenging for teachers. Simultaneously, Guest (2002) agrees that incorporating cultural knowledge into the classroom is beneficial. He offers insights to aid teachers to bring a balanced cultural awareness to the EFL classroom.

On the one side, Alptekin (1993) illustrates that systemic knowledge means the characteristics of language, entailing the semantic and syntactic factors. Schematic knowledge, at the same time, is learned socially and culturally. When learning the native language, "the child's schematic knowledge and systemic knowledge develop concurrently" (p. 136). Therefore, we can conclude that learners depend on their established schematic knowledge, a firm foundation and scaffold, to help comprehend new systemic knowledge in foreign language learning. Furthermore, the suggestions for teachers are to teach from familiar to unfamiliar contents step by step.

## 2.2 The Importance of Culture

When teaching a foreign language, culture cannot be avoided discussing and language and culture should combine together in order to reach a good understanding of target background. For example, garage sale from America is unfamiliar for nonnative English speakers and not related to their daily lives. However, if teachers can introduce and explain the function and purpose, students are able to guess and imagine what garage sale means. From this instance, we compare two diverse cultures: Taiwanese people do not have tendencies and preferences to buy secondhand or used products, because somebody already used it and it may not be sanitary. On the contrary, Americans may want to save money to buy cheaper items or simply get rid of old things from their houses. It will be a motivating topic discussed in the classroom. In short, cultural issue is interesting and necessary to embed in the courses.

## 2.3 The Examples

The research is divided into three parts separately to discuss holidays, customs, and offensive behaviors. The examples of holidays are the comparison between Lunar New Year and Christmas. The illustrations of customs are the two movies called "Wedding Banquet" and "My Big Fat Greek Wedding." The final section covers offensive behaviors to see whether they are proper or not.

### 2.3.1 Holidays (Taiwan's Lunar New Year versus Christmas)

The fact of holidays is associated with the rituals of celebration in our daily lives. In other words, holidays provide precious functions for societies because they reflect plenty of living styles and patterns in each country. Furthermore, "We characterize our holidays by symbols. Symbols are things or objects that we use or think of when celebrating a holiday" (McKinney, 1996, p. 1). These objects can refer to a person, concept, or an event. Holidays are the time for us to reflect on what we have done and show families or friends our appreciation. After knowing the reasons, we are capable of realizing why we celebrate. Lunar New Year and Christmas are well-known examples of holidays for Taiwanese students and most westerners to have mutual understanding of their cultures. Here are some instances of some symbols of holidays and their meanings.

## **Lunar New Year**

Of all the traditional Taiwan's festivals, Lunar New Year is the most joyous celebration. It is more family-oriented symbol for Taiwanese. Nowadays, as long as there are Taiwanese/Chinese communities, there will be celebrations during the first day of the lunar calendar. Therefore, the celebration usually lasts for one week or two weeks. Preparations for the coming of Lunar New Year usually start few months earlier. Having a tidy house and everything kept in order as the New Year comes is extremely important. The color of red designates happiness and fortune.

## **Christmas**

Christmas is the annual commemoration of the birth of Jesus Christ and now is widely known as the cultural day on December 25<sup>th</sup> for Christians. There are some key words and short stories that can provide some resources for English teachers on how to teach in EFL classrooms:

1. Christmas tree, which stands for good luck and hope, usually is displayed in front of the door.
2. Mistletoe is a plant with small berries growing on other trees and is often used as a decoration at Christmas. There is a tradition that people kiss under the mistletoe.
3. One of the traditions is to exchange gifts with the family. Also, the gift-bearing figure is red-dressed Santa Claus who is known for caring children.

After a series of descriptions with regard to Christmas, teachers can ask some questions to check if learners are able to create or think of other examples from their own cultural backgrounds. Questions consist of: 1. What other holidays do you celebrate in your home country? 2. What do they mean for you and is it related your own culture or belief? 3. What holidays are significant for you and why?

## **Findings**

Every culture is rich and full of similar needs even if having different backgrounds. Teachers can display interesting materials in the classroom, encompassing holiday ornaments, sculptures, pictures, or posters from different countries. The reason is to arouse students' interest or curiosity and to broaden their horizons. In brief, discovering various holidays is a great experience for students learning target-language cultural materials as well. Teachers can lead to further discussions in order to have strong foundation and scaffold. Learners are able to understand their connection to other people around the world.

### **2.3.2 Customs (“Wedding Banquet” versus “My Big Fat Greek Wedding”)**

Custom stands for groups of people's habitual styles that are transferred from one generation to another. Societies are changing constantly, and all customs are not eternal. If things last for a short period of time, they are better to be called fashions. Customs are relevant to human culture and ethics and vary among countries.

The researcher presents two movies that students are familiar with. One is “Wedding Banquet” directed by Ang Lee who is the Taiwanese director and the other one is “My Big Fat Greek Wedding” written by and starring Nia Vardalos who is a Greek Canadian and directed by Joel Zwick. Each of the movies represents most part of Taiwanese and Greek cultures. Even if they have diverse cultural backgrounds; however, they have the same characteristics, which are regarding marriage, tradition, and generation differences. The reason of discussing these two movies is that students are more related to both movies when talking about customs. Marriage is a part of human being's life for most people and belongs to the concept of custom. Also, movies make deep impressions for students to understand other cultures from cinemas, television programs, or magazines.

### **Wedding Banquet**

The story is pertinent to a Taiwanese whose name is Wai-tung and lives in Manhattan, New York. He does not meet his parents' expectations in one way- Simon is his lover meaning Wai-tung is a gay. Traditionally, Taiwanese/Chinese parents usually expect the marriage and grandchildren, and most seniors cannot accept homosexual orientation. In addition, the couple usually invites a lot of relatives and friends to celebrate at the wedding ceremony that is an important event in one's own life. As a result, Wai-tung's parents decide to visit his son in America. In order to comfort his parents and not to bring shame on his parents, he and Simon find a solution. Wai-tung marries his tenant whose name is Wei-wei to help her to acquire a green card so that Wai-tung has the pressure off. From this movie, we find there is a cultural and generation gap in Taiwanese/Chinese culture.

### **My big fat Greek wedding**

Compared to the Taiwanese movie, students in Taiwan may not be familiar with Greek culture unless they visit Greece before. It is a great opportunity to appreciate Greek movie so that students can access to foreign culture and teachers are able to incorporate target-language cultural materials in the classroom. In this movie, it has the same value as Taiwanese culture. Parents worry about their son or daughter's marriage, especially females who are more than thirty years old. If they marry foreigners from different cultures, they upset their old-fashioned parents. Even though social values change in recent years, there is still a case when facing this dilemma. On the other hand, there are huge differences from Taiwanese/Chinese culture in this movie. For example, Toula's family is talkative, crazy, and hospitable to friends with meat and wine; instead, Ian's family is quiet and serious. Furthermore, when Ian proposes to Toula, he needs to accept Greek culture and get baptized in the Greek Orthodox Church.

### **Findings**

"Wedding banquet" belongs to Taiwanese/Chinese culture facing the issue of marriage, cultural values, and beliefs. At the same time, "My big fat Greek wedding" brings a fresh topic to be discussed in EFL classroom. In summary, it is challenging to embrace another culture and keep its own identity as well. From "My big fat Greek wedding," teachers can lead to further discussions regarding Greek culture and be familiar with foreign customs outside of Taiwan. Students will have deeper perspectives and insights after watching the movie that the screenplay is written and starred by the Greek lady. It is a rare occasion to discuss other countries' customs and compare our own ones.

#### **2.3.3 Offensive Behavior**

Offensive behavior involves improper action that may hurt people in special events or occasions. Plenty of taboo words are associated with puns in each language. There are some examples of Taiwanese culture shown offensive behaviors that should be aware of (Government Information Office website):

1. The word "fish" is pronounced *yu*. In Lunar/Chinese New Year, fish is cooked and put on the table, but people do not eat completely. It symbolizes that the whole family will enjoy the fortune of the following year.
2. Concerning table etiquette, old generation such as grandparents or parents always remind us not to leave chopsticks stand up vertically. This behavior represents that people offer meals to their ancestors when they are at shrines. It will be like a curse when doing it in this way.
3. Do not send your family or friends the clock as a gift. The term "to give a clock" (*sung chung*), sounds like "to attend a funeral." It is quite impolite and improper way for someone. However, giving a watch is fine.

When compared to Taiwanese culture, there are some distinct and dissimilar perceptions different from other Western cultures.

1. When your friend gives you a gift, it is better to open it in front of them. However, it will be an impolite behavior in Taiwanese culture. Nowadays, some people have been influenced by western culture, so they may do the same way as westerners.
2. Shoes placed inside western houses are surprised by Taiwanese or Asians. It is not courteous to wear shoes walking inside of Taiwanese friends' houses; instead, they wear clean slippers inside.
3. Concerning humor and joke, most westerners are more humorous compared to Asian people. It may be the reasons of seriousness, so Asians are easily offended when foreigners, television shows, or movies make fun of their funny English or physical appearances. (Fischhoff, Franco, Gram, Hernandez, and Parker, 1999).

### **Findings**

When teaching the concept of offensive behavior, it is necessary for non-native English speakers to understand the target culture as well. If students are more familiar with the cultural background, they will acquire how to avoid taboo words or learn appropriate greetings in English when interacting with foreigners.

### **3. Teacher Training**

Teacher training for native and non-native English speakers (NES and NNES) should help them to cope with cultural conflicts in language teaching. For nonnative English-speaking teachers, a good understanding of their own culture and English culture will be essential if they can spend a period of time such as either one month or more than two months in an English speaking country.

For native English speakers, understanding knowledge of their students' culture will be precious. In addition, if NES and NNES teachers work together, it will lower their cultural challenges and difficulties they encounter. In this way, NNES teachers have interactions with NES coworkers to learn and realize their cultural backgrounds so that NNES will teach cultural contents vividly and practically.

#### 4. Conclusions

In this paper, we have discussed the role of culture in the teaching of English as a foreign language. We started by giving definitions of culture, focusing on the social structure that people have interaction with others. It is crucial to respect the diversity in our society so that each person obtains perspectives into his/her own culture. At the same time, culture should incorporate in the language semantically and pragmatically. In addition, cultural contents are interesting and inspiring in language teaching. We put emphasis on how cultural material is taught in EFL classrooms. First, contents should be practical so students are able to gain reflections on their own culture related to others in order to reach cross-cultural communication. Next, to examine what topics can be discussed and what issues are not proper to be mentioned in discourse communities. Finally, we may encounter cultural conflicts but try to respect and embrace other cultures through sharing interests. In summary, culture indeed impacts language teaching and learning in any language. If teachers handle cultural issues appropriately, students will benefit from them and reach the goal of enhanced cultural knowledge.

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