The presentation of Culture in EFL

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□ ABSTRACT □

This research deals with two different views on teaching the target language in relation to its own culture. The first view refers to the inevitability of teaching culture through language as there is a strong tie between the two issues. The second view points out that the cultural identity and values of EFL learners are threatened while acquiring a foreign language. These are referred to in this paper as the positive view and the counter-argument. Some suggestions are then presented concerning the use of cultural elements in classrooms. The last part discusses one task taken from a textbook followed by an option to modify them to become more culture-oriented.

Keywords: cultural identity, positive view, counter-argument

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تقديم الثّقافة من خلال تعليم اللّغة الانكليزيّة كلغة أجنبيّة

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⬜ ملخّص ⬜

يسلّط هذا البحث الضوء على فكرتين مختلفتين بما يخص تدريس اللّغة الانكليزية و علاقتها بتقديم الثّقافة الهدف. تشير الفكرة الأولى إلى حتميّة تعليم الثّقافة عن طريق اللّغة حيث توجد علاقة قويّة بين هاتين الفكرتين. أما الفكرة الثانية فتشير إلى أن هويّة متعلمي اللّغة   الانكليزية كلغة أجنبيّة و قيمهم تكون مهدّدة عند اكتسابهم لهذه اللّغة. تسمى الفكرة الأولى بوجهة النّظر الإيجابية، بينما يشار إلى الفكرة الثّانية كوجهة النّظر المعاكسة. يقدّم البحث بعد ذلك بعض الاقتراحات فيما يتعلق بتقديم الثّقافة في الصّف. أما الجزء الأخير من البحث،   فإنه يناقش تمرينا و من ثم يقدم بعض الإقتراحات لتعديله حتى يصبح أكثر ملائمة.

الكلمات المفتاحيّة: الهويّ الثّقافيّ، وجهة النّظر الإيجابية، وجهة النّظر المعاكسة

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1. Introduction

Teaching and learning are two sensitive cases, which demand a high degree of awareness and experience. Cultural issues are important aspects of classrooms that are worth noting. The relationship between language and culture is inevitable since language expresses cultural reality and embodies it. However, is cultural content a positive or a negative aspect that underlies language classrooms? To be more specific, one can enquire whether learning the English language constitutes a threat to learners' own cultures or not as it is the most widely spread language all over the world.

In this paper, I am going to discuss the idea of cultural identity and how it presents itself in classrooms. Then, two contradictory views which deal with cultural aspects in language teaching are introduced: the positive and the negative views. I proceed then to put forward some suggestions that seem appropriate to solve such problems in language classrooms. After that, I introduce a problematic task from a textbook with suggestions to modify it before concluding the whole paper.

2. Methodology and Material

I will first focus on the cultural identity of learners and how to preserve it. In addition, there are the positive and the negative attitudes towards culture in language classes followed by some suggestions and recommendations for teachers. After this theoretical framework of the research, I will refer to a problematic task in a textbook and analyse it to investigate its potential for developing students' intercultural competence. This task is followed by analysing another task that could replace the first as it presents culture more conveniently in class. So, analysing tasks and examining their content in terms of cultural and intercultural reference is the method of research.

3. Discussion
3.1 Learners' Values And Cultural Identity

There is a very strong relationship between language and culture. The inevitability of this relationship, as some researchers say, stems from the fact that the inclusion of culture cannot be avoided in the process of teaching a second or a foreign language. Other researchers even give priority to culture over language. In this respect, Crystal (2003: 7) considers that ' language has no independent existence.' Similarly, Wang (2008) believes that language teaching and culture teaching are the same.

Language learners are inevitably exposed to the culture of the target language they are learning (i.e. C2). Here, it is very crucial to introduce the concept of 'synergy' which means 'understanding the other culture, behaving appropriately in the other cultural environment, without losing one's original cultural identity' (Jin and Cortazzi, 1998: 117). This concept gives rise to two other concepts which are 'cultural identity' and 'intercultural competence'.

First, 'cultural identity' of the learners must be established throughout the teaching process, then learners can be exposed to other cultures to develop. Cortazzi and Jin (1999: 206) put a very important point to take into consideration:

> Regarding identity, there is an argument that until learners' first cultural identity is established it may be harmful to learn about other cultures. In this view, it is acceptable for younger students to learn EFL but not for them to learn about English-speaking cultures.

This point stresses the importance of not merging the two cultures in one. Moreover, it gives priority to the source culture (i.e. C1) to be established and then learners can be exposed to another culture.

'Intercultural competence', on the other hand, is the other face of the coin which should be considered as a part of the language teaching process. When a learner is able to be flexible in his/her behaviour when s/he is faced with the attitudes and values of a foreign culture, then s/he is said to have intercultural competence. (Cortazzi and Jin 1999). So, the intercultural speaker, or learner, is the one who knows about many cultures and at the same time, is able to develop intercultural interaction in spite of the cultural differences that s/he is aware of.

This idea is closely related to cultural awareness that needs to be enhanced in students. It means awareness of and knowledge about cultures other than the source cultures and personal beliefs of learners. It also means the ability to communicate across different cultures through having an idea about different values and perspectives as well as understanding different behaviours and ways of thinking.

3.2 Attitudes Towards The Inclusion Of Culture In Language Teaching

There are different attitudes towards the relationship between language and culture. Researchers view the inclusion of the target culture in the teaching process differently. Some like Rajabi and Ketabi (2012), Barrow (1990), Adaskau *et al* (1990) and Prodromou (1992) say that there is a positive aspect in it. Others such as Alptekin and Alptekin (1984) and Rao (1976) consider this step a threat to the cultural identity and values of learners.

3.2.1 The Positive View

Many researchers perceive the positive perspective that underlies the teaching of the English culture throughout teaching the English language. Rajabi and Ketabi (2012: 705) say 'the positive implications of including cultural associations of the target language into instructional materials are largely known and accepted.'

Barrow (1990) argues that the inevitability of this relationship is beneficial in classrooms in the sense that it helps students gain values and beliefs throughout the process of learning English as a second or a foreign language. He goes on to add that by having an idea about the target culture -let's say English- students will be able to compare and contrast it with their own culture or C1. This, as he says, is a great idea to promote learners' awareness of and ways of thinking about such differences and similarities without affecting their attitudes towards C1. Thus, learning English does not necessarily destroy learners' own identity; rather, it 'adds something to their inheritance' (Barrow 1990:8).

Adaskau *et al* (1990), in a study on the cultural content of a course for Morocco, have some similar views in this field putting forth many arguments to support their views. They cite Seelye (1974) saying that C2 is needed to foster international understanding. They also cite Byram (1986) arguing that C2 encourages learners to compare C1 and C2 to reach a better understanding of them both.

Prodromou (1992: 47) expresses his support to the idea that ' knowledge of the target culture remains an important part of language learning, especially at higher levels' providing two factors that defend this point. He argues that there is an 'intrinsic delight' when students are able to trace the differences between C1 and C2 because this will lead

to discover new facts and values for both cultures. Moreover, he introduces what is called the interpretation of discourse which indicates learners' competence or ability to infer meanings related to their cultural background. Here, it seems that it is the responsibility of the teacher to develop that sense of awareness of such knowledge in students in order to be able to interpret texts appropriately. Thus, his view supports the positive face of the coin; that is, the view which sees no harm in the inclusion of cultural facts and attitudes in the process of learning and teaching a target language.

3.2.2 The Counter-Argument

Not all researchers in this field believe in the positive aspect of the relationship between language and culture. Some see a serious threat coming out of the representation of the target culture through foreign or second language teaching, and they give many arguments to stress their point.

Alptekin and Alptekin (1984) defend their opposing stance by stating the effect of such patterns of teaching on the students. They say that sometimes, those who are unwilling to be bicultural (i.e. receive the cultural aspect of the target language) confront the threat of either quitting language learning as a whole on, or being alienated from their own culture and attitudes. It is apparent from this argument that in both cases students' learning process is threatened and the pedagogical aims are not achieved.

Rao (1976, cited in Alptekin and Alptekin 1984:15) expresses the danger of the submersion of C1 due to the effect of C2:

> Indeed, being at the receiving end of a virtually one-way flow of
> information from Anglo-American centres, the host country runs the risk
> of having its own culture totally submerged, and this imposes restrictions
> in educational and cultural domains to protect its way of life.

Submersion constitutes a threat to the C1 in general and to the learners' cultural identity in specific. As a result, it seems that EFL materials should include some traces of the local culture in order not to let a foreign culture dominate and this leads to bilingualism not to biculturalism.

Although Barrow (1990) has a positive attitude towards the previously mentioned point, yet he expresses its danger on children because they may be exposed to an imposition of C2 values. This may lead to a threat to children's cultural identities and perception of their own cultures.

4. Suggestions and Recommendations

The relationship between culture and language teaching is a problematic issue, yet the problem could be approached in different ways and many suggestions could be presented.

The first thing one can suggest to mitigate the influence of the foreign culture on the learner is building bridges between C1 and C2. This means attempting 'to bridge the cultural gap in language teaching' (Valdes, cited in Kramsch 1993: 225). This can be achieved by seeking universal patterns between the two cultures which leads to a better understanding of foreign values and lessens the shocks the learner may face due to the effect of cultural differences. To give deeper implications for the language classroom, I suggest as Swaffer (1992, cited in Kramsch 1993: 225) initially says that overcoming 'cultural distance' is so important and it seems part of bridging cultural gaps in teaching.

Giving learners foreign texts which are popular or 'predictable' can be one of the solutions. On doing this, students will be intrinsically motivated to look at texts even if they are alien to their culture and this, of course, will not threaten learners' perspective of their own culture. Alptekin (1993: 141-142) seems to have the same insight into this issue:

> EFL writers should try to build conceptual bridges between the culturally familiar and the unfamiliar in order not to give rise to conflicts in the learners' 'fit' as he or she acquires English. Such bridges can be built…through the use of comparisons as techniques of cross-cultural comprehension or the exploitation of universal concepts of human experience.

Second, although learners become bilingual through learning a second language, they should not become bicultural if their learning materials include traces of C2. Here, I suggest that teachers should be trained on how to give students an intercultural identity not a bicultural one. Teachers can broaden students' 'horizons' towards 'Global Education' by introducing them to international target cultures (Prodromou 1992: 49). This is very important because the focus will not only be on C1 and C2; rather, on C3, C4, C5, etc. Thus, there will be a larger scale of variation in the materials presented to students; moreover, there will be no opportunity for a specific culture to dominate or to be a threat because of this domination. Alptekin and Alptekin (1984:19) assert this point when they say that this could be achieved by 'understanding and appreciating cultural diversity and pluralism…while not losing sight of native norms and values in the process.' Jin and Cortazzi (1998) support this point saying that intercultural learning leads students to a better position in regard to both cultures. Cortazzi and Jin (1999) are in favour of this idea as well. They point out that international target cultures mirrored in EFL textbooks will enable learners to be in an intercultural situation in relation to the text. In any context, when EFL textbooks include only traces of C1 and C2, I suggest that they should be developed to mirror other international cultures in order to widen students' cultural perspectives in general.

Third, another useful point that might be hidden or not paid attention to in textbooks is teaching students how to be communicatively effective especially with native speakers (i.e. let us say the English or the American). Cortazzi and Jin (1999) express this idea giving English in Saudi Arabia as an example:

> There are reasons why it is the source culture that features so strongly in such textbooks. There is a need for learners to talk about their culture with visitors. A deeper reason is that such materials are usually designed to help students become aware of their own cultural identity.

It is apparent from this quotation that the textbooks should meet students' needs and also prepare them to be communicatively competent especially with visitors or native speakers. So, the aim is pedagogical to teach them language, and social to enhance their communicative abilities. However, there is a problem that arises from the fact that such textbooks contain only traces of C1 disregarding C2. It is true that this preserves their cultural identity; however, there must be a mixture of both cultures in order to make students competent not only in terms of linguistics but also in terms of

schematic and cultural knowledge. Schematic or top-down knowledge refers to learners' idea or background about what they are learning. Systemic knowledge deals with the linguistic aspect of teaching in terms of syntax, vocabulary and grammar. Alptekin (1993:136) explains that 'in native language learning, the child's schematic knowledge and systemic knowledge develop concurrently'. Giving an idea about types of knowledge presented to students in classrooms, one can say that there should be a balance between these two parts in order to reach a full view of the process of teaching and learning. Concentrating so much on fostering students' schematic knowledge-including cultural aspects- leads to a failure in the other aspect and vice versa. So, both language and culture should be equally paid attention to in designing language courses.

Next, I think that reflective approach to classroom materials is essential. McKay (2002: 95) emphasises the importance of this approach saying:

> One of the primary aims is to use English to explain one's own culture to others. Hence it is important to approach all cultural content in EIL materials reflectively.

This implies that the teacher should create a sphere of comparison and contrast in the class in order to motivate learners to consider their own culture in relation to other cultures presented in the textbooks. This, of course, leads to better understanding and comprehension of all the cultures involved. But how to create such a sphere? McKay (2002) answers this question by considering WHY and HOW the topic is being written about, and WHAT other ways of writing the material there are. If these questions, especially the WHAT question, are answered, then the cultural content is approached reflectively or critically.

Finally, a good point is raised by Cortazzi and Jin (1999) which I consider the most valid and most significant among all observations in classrooms. It says that it is not enough to pay attention to textbooks and the way they mirror different cultures; however, the way they are used in classrooms or the method through which they are introduced to students is what is decisive. So, cultural learning and developing learners' intercultural skills and awareness is dependent on classroom methodology as well as on the kind of interaction between the three related aspects: students, texts and teachers. This methodology of cultural learning and teaching is, therefore, closely related to EFL learning and teaching and here lies the point of meeting which is very sensitive for it summarises the whole matter of language learning management. As a result, teachers are considered one part of the 'three-party dialogue' with the cultural content; moreover, they are 'ambassadors of cultures' as Nayar (1986, cited in Cortazzi and Jin 1999: 210) calls them. This means that they are the mediators who must know appropriate ways of reflecting on language materials.

5. A Reference to a Textbook
5.1 A Problematic Task

In this section, I will introduce a task that I see as problematic or void of cultural content and intercultural sphere.

PRACTICE

1 Biographies

3 Work in pairs. Write similar tables of your own life. Ask your partner to match the events and the times to tell the story of your life. Correct any wrong times. (adapted from Soars, L. and J. Soars)

1 Here are some more events from Nancy Mann's life. Match a line in **A** with a time expression in **B** to tell the story of her life. Put a letter a–k in the box.

A

a She was born
b She went to boarding school in England
c She studied French and German
d She hasn't spoken Spanish
e She's worked in both eastern and western Europe
f She worked in Brussels
g She's worked for the BBC
h She hasn't worked abroad
i She married for the first time
j She's been married
k She married for the third time

B

☐ for the last five years.
☐ three times.
☐ from 1970 to 1977.
☐ at various times in her life.
☐ when she was twenty-one.
☐ when she was at Oxford University.
☐ in Argentina in 1959.
☐ for two years, from 1989 to 1991.
☐ last year.
☐ since her son was born four years ago.
☐ since she was in Buenos Aires three years ago.

2 T.49 Listen and check your answers.

Soars, Liz and John Soars. *New Headway English Course.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

This task deals with 'Biographies'. It presents certain events from the life of Nancy Mann and asks the students to match each event with a time expression and then to listen and check their answers. After that, students are asked to write certain events of their own lives.

I think this task ignores intercultural elements and dimensions. First, Nancy Mann is apparently a character from the target culture and the task focuses on the biography of this character only. It does not consider presenting another character from the source culture, for example. The second reason is that EFL students, and no wonder teachers, do not know who this character is. In other words, Nancy Mann is presented as if she is well-known, but in fact she seems to be fictional. This, I think, may trigger interest and curiosity on the part of the target culture people to know more about this character, but how about the source culture students? It sounds inappropriate for them because it may lead to alienation and marginalisation and thus it deflates their interest and inflates their opposition (McKay 2002). This idea is related to learners' schematic knowledge and familiarity with the materials presented to them. In the case of the two previous tasks, learners are unfamiliar with the content and this affects their acquisition and comprehension. Alptekin (1993:140) expresses this idea:

> Familiar schematic knowledge allows the learners to make efficient use
> of their top-down processing in helping their bottom-up processing in the
> handling of various language tasks. Needless to say, familiarity in this
> context refers to schemas based chiefly on the learner's own culture.

5.2 Suggestions for the Problematic Area

In this part, I would like to present certain suggestions to modify the previous task dealing with biographies.

I have mentioned above that this task depends solely on the target culture in the sense that it presents a fictional character from the target culture and this is a threat to our learners. I think that enhancing intercultural competence or interculturality in the class is a useful procedure to be taken and it is the teacher who should be aware first of the cultural significance of what he/she is teaching, and then of how to deal with such tasks. Interculturality, in this respect, could be defined as a 'reflection on one's own culture in relation to the target culture.' (McKay, 2002: 90). Byram (2000: 299) acknowledges the importance of intercultural competence and the necessity of teaching it to the students:

> Teachers need to discard their role as ambassadors of a foreign culture
> and the concept of a static, self-contained and strange culture. Instead,
> they must acknowledge the interactive nature and the social, political,
> the ethical implication of learning/teaching about culture.

The following tasks are one of the many possible solutions to deal with the problem of the presentation of culture in the previously mentioned task. The teacher could modify the problematic task in a way that suits the context such as directing learners' attention to biographies of similar people who they know, or who are famous in their own culture.

UNIT 1 1.8 1.9

A BIOGRAPHY

Read this short biography of Shakespeare.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE – PLAYWRIGHT.

William Shakespeare is without doubt the most famous of English writers and is probably the greatest playwright who has ever lived. His plays have been translated into most languages and every year thousands of people see his works performed. In spite of his fame, however, very little is known about Shakespeare, the man.

The first part of Shakespeare's life was spent in Stratford-on-Avon, where he was born on April 23rd, 1564. His father, John, was a glovemaker and a trader in animal skins and his mother, Mary, came from a well-known farming family. William went to a good local school, where he probably learned Latin and Greek. In 1577 John Shakespeare got into difficulties with money and William had to leave school to work in the family business. In 1583 the young man got married to a woman called Anne Hathaway, who was eight years older than Shakespeare. Together they had three children, Susanna, Judith and Hamnet.

Anne Hathaway's house.

In the late 1580s Shakespeare suddenly left Stratford-on-Avon and went to London. In the capital he joined a theatre company. He became famous as an actor and in 1592 he even performed in front of the queen, Elizabeth I. While he was working as an actor, he began writing plays. His plays first appeared in book form in 1594. Five years later Shakespeare and the other actors were able to build their own

theatre, which they called 'The Globe'. The young actor-writer had become rich and successful.

The Globe Theatre.

Shakespeare returned to Stratford-on-Avon in 1610 and spent the last part of his life there. In 1597 he had bought New Place, one of the best houses in the town, for his wife and children, but he did not live there himself until thirteen years later. His last plays were written there. Shakespeare died on his birthday in 1616 and was buried in the local church, where tourists still visit his grave. He had written over 150 poems and 37 plays by the time he died.

A scene from 'The Tempest', Shakespeare's last play.

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Linking past events

Adverbs

First	After that	Next
Then	Before that	Finally

It is possible to talk or write about past events by making a series of simple past tense statements linked by *and* and time adverbs. However, this can sound boring and repetitious. To add interest and variety to your account, you can use the conjunctions

Conjunctions

when   as soon as
while   before/after (*-ing*)

listed above to link some of your statements. When you do this, you will often have to change the verbs from the simple past to the past continuous, past perfect or present participle.

C The sentences in this exercise are from a short biography of Ibn Batutta, the famous traveller. Compare the sentences on the left with those on the right. Then combine the rest of the sentences using the words in brackets. Remember to make all the necessary changes.

Ibn Batutta finished his studies. After that he decided to make the pilgrimage to Mecca. → When he had finished his studies, Ibn Batutta decided to make the pilgrimage to Mecca.

Then he left Mecca and travelled on to Iraq and India. → After leaving Mecca, he travelled on to Iraq and India.

The Sultan of Delhi heard that Ibn Batutta was a judge. He offered him a job, which he accepted. (When)

Ibn Batutta was in Delhi for some time. Then the Sultan of Delhi received a present from the Emperor of China. (After)

Ibn Batutta travelled to China with a gift for the Emperor. On the way he visited many different countries. (While)

He arrived in China. He immediately sent a message to the Emperor. (As soon as)

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O'Neill, T. and Peter Snow. 1999. *Crescent English Course.* Garnet publishing Limited.

This task takes care of language development and cultural awareness concerning C1 and C2 as well. In the student's book, learners are given a short biography of the famous English playwright Shakespeare. In the workbook, the focus is on both language comprehension and intercultural matters. The language study concentrates on presenting adverbs and conjunctions in order to teach students how to link past events. The task also takes the cultural aspects into consideration. Students are given certain sentences to form a biography about Ibn Batutta, a traveller who is famous all over the Arab World. The next activity is a writing one which aims at introducing another famous Arabic character: Mohammed Al Idrisi who is also widely known for the Arabs as a geographer and map-maker.

In brief, the task aims at introducing students to such a character which is widely known all over the world: Shakespeare. Then, it intends to draw learners' attention to their own culture through well-known characters and this is an explicit reference to the source culture through the medium of similar cultural topics.

6. Conclusion

In the previous few pages, I have talked about the relationship between language and culture and how such a relationship affects foreign or second language teaching and learning. To be more specific, I have shed light on its effects on learners' cultural identity and local values and beliefs. Then, an argument about different attitudes towards the inclusion of the target culture in the teaching of the target language is introduced: the positive and negative stances. Suggesting some points for language classrooms was the following section before referring to a problematic task in a textbook and suggesting certain solutions. In the end, I would like to put forward the most impressive thing I have read about that inevitable relationship between language and culture by Alptekin and Alptekin (1984) saying that students will be exposed to a hollow language if it includes no traces of cultural aspects; and thus, students will not be able to identify with the English culture, and their learning will not be complete.

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