



## TEACHING ABOUT CULTURE A TREND TOWARDS DEVELOPING ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

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### Abstract

This article mainly aims to show how incorporating teaching about culture can increase students' proficiency in English language and their awareness of its overall culture. This review is carried out with particular emphasis to English proverbs and idiomatic expressions. In this context, the article shows the difficulty of teaching culture in isolation from language and how this process can be replaced by teaching about culture. Also, within the overall aim of the article, the concurrent relationship between language and culture is illustrated.

Keywords: Culture; Language proficiency; Intercultural proficiency; Proverbs; Idioms.

### 1. Introduction

No one argues against the fact about language and culture as overlapping processes. Students' acquaintance with the English culture facilitates English language learning. However, an urgent question could impose itself concerning the feasible way for familiarizing students with the target language culture, in our case English language culture. As assumed by Cakir (2015), this question has constantly been argued by educators in the field. Some educators advocated direct and explicit instruction of culture in the target language classroom. Others, preferred an implicit instruction of culture in the target language classroom .

In order to develop English language learning, I believe it is difficult for non-native teachers to teach culture in isolation from the language itself. This difficulty can basically be attributed to non-native teachers' inadequate knowledge of English language culture. Furthermore, the separate teaching of culture may affect the allotted time for executing English

language syllabi. Then, to develop English language learning, teachers who are non- native speakers of English could integrate language and culture in the teaching process in a way or another. As indicated in the abstract, one way of integrating language and culture can be attempted by teaching about culture.

As mentioned previously, some educators preferred an explicit instruction of the target language culture, while others preferred an implicit instruction of this culture. I consider teaching about culture as an implicit way of teaching culture. It compensates for the explicit way of teaching and thus facilitates students' task to become more proficient in language use.

### 2. Language and culture

To start with, there is no certain or commonly agreed-upon definition of culture. In general, one can say, it is a way of life that encompasses inseparable elements of our daily routine like behavior, customs, knowledge, arts, beliefs, laws, etc. All the various definitions of

culture have something in common. They almost confirm the above mentioned idea of culture. For instance, Hoang-Thu (2010) defines culture as the ideas, customs, skills, arts, and tools that characterize people in a certain era.

Absolutely, what is encompassed by culture goes hand in hand with language because language is an effective tool for expressing behaviors, customs, knowledge, arts, beliefs, laws, etc. These cultural patterns, as stated by Esfandiari and Pourkalhor (2017), are reflected in language use. Chieh Lai and Mu Kuo(2006), similarly, raise a point of view that goes in line with this idea. They certify that cultural patterns like that of cognition and custom are often coded in language.

Societies are bases for cultural knowledge and culture can be described as a socially acquired knowledge. This culturally acquired knowledge is entirely interwoven with the systematic knowledge of language, i.e knowledge of language characteristics, grammatical structures, semantics, etc. Without doubt, first language speakers' knowledge of their culture is a good reason for their systematic knowledge of their mother-tongue. The same idea applies to the learning of English as a foreign language. It, again, confirms the essentiality of cultural background to the efficient acquisition of English language.

I suppose, within the process of traditional teaching, English language teachers, more often than not, try to strengthen a mechanical production of language through students' memorization of different structures and expressions. Hence, teachers focus on the correct formulation and production of language irrespective of its cultural significance. Muir (2007) provides an account about high culture, deep culture, and popular culture. He assumes that high culture includes politics, philosophy, arts, etc. Deep culture includes values, conduct and religion beliefs, while popular culture includes patterns of custom, patterns of formality, tea culture, football culture, etc. What is included within the three types of culture could be integrated as effective topics in English language syllabuses to develop cultural knowledge and, consequently, language proficiency.

It is particularly important to provide an account about the necessity of intercultural competence to the students who study English as a foreign language. As a matter of fact, every day, the world becomes more interconnected. Work and different factors compel people from all walks of life to come into contact with each other. Worldwide, this interconnectedness of people requires them to develop intercultural competence. Commonly, the concept of intercultural competence indicates people's capability to communicate, think, behave, and carry out different dealings in a proper manner across cultures.

Apart from English language teachers' endeavors to incorporate culture and language in the classroom, students should do their utmost to take themselves beyond the classroom in order to develop intercultural competence. As pointed out by Byran et al (2001), teachers should not always bring foreign language society or culture into the classroom. Instead, they can encourage students to investigate for themselves the other cultures around them.

So far, the task within this part of the article has been to give a briefing about how language and culture are interrelated and how cultural awareness of the target foreign language can contribute to language proficiency.

### **3. Teaching about culture**

#### **3.1. English proverbs**

There are many differently worded definitions of the word 'proverb' that ultimately give the same meaning. Generally, a proverb is an expression that indicates a widely agreed-upon obvious truth with cultural wisdom. Ahmed (2005) defines proverb as a metaphorical and alliterative saying which expresses a familiar truth ascertained by experience.

English proverbs are eloquent and concrete grammatical formulations which are characterized by the use of rhetorical phrases and literary devices. These proverbs are deeply rooted in the past and transmitted from generation to generation. They express unique attributes of

English people like endurance, dedication to hard work, and general hygiene. In fact, the meanings of proverbs relate to different aspects of life. Thalji (2015) maintains that proverbs carry relevant themes to professions, money, love, marriage, education, children, taxes, religion, etc.

As examples, I have selected some English proverbs from [www.english.com](http://www.english.com). Also, I have illustrated their implications and provided examples of the contexts in which they can be used:

- a. **Good things come to those who wait.** This proverb implies the value of tolerance as a good trait. Thus, if people have the merit of tolerance, they can eventually achieve success or good things will occur in their lives. One can say : Be patient and study hard to get full marks by the end of the term, good things come to those who wait.
- b. **Honesty is the best policy.** This proverb certifies the need for honesty as a righteous trait that should be available in people. Hence, people should be sincere, straightforward, frank and trustworthy. The following is an example : As they say, honesty is the best policy. You should be sincere in order to make others trust you.
- c. **Cleanliness is next to godliness.** This proverb emphasizes the essentiality of purity and tidiness. It implies the idea that God is clean, so people should be clean. Following is an example : You did not have a shower since last week, do not you know that cleanliness is next to godliness
- d. **Don't bite the hands that feed you.** This proverb refers to the good trait of loyalty. It gives a direction not to disappoint or harm people who do us favor. The following is an example : This is not the right way to repay your boss, he helped you to improve your career. As the proverb says, don't bite the hands that feed you.
- e. **The early bird gets the worm.** This proverb shows the necessity of being active. People who get up early have better chances of completing their work successfully. The use of this proverb appears in the following

example : I got up early. I was able to catch the first bus before the bus station becomes crowded with passengers. As they say, the early bird gets the worm.

Demonstrating English proverbs in such a manner, providing EFL learners with a chance to contemplate thoughts about them, and, above all, directing those students to use such proverbs in their own examples emphasize the implicit way of teaching about culture, mentioned within the introduction, and fosters English language skills.

### 3.2. English idioms

Like proverbs, collocations, phrasal verbs and prepositional phrases, idiomatic expressions are categorized as a type of formulaic language because they consist of fixed expressions to be learnt as units rather than as individual words. The words that make up an idiom give a specific meaning. It is not possible to decide what an idiom means by explaining the meanings of the individual words of that idiom. Algahtni(2014) confirms this idea by defining an idiom as a linguistic expression whose overall meaning cannot be predicted from the meanings of its constituent parts. That is, the literal meaning of an idiom can completely be different from its genuine meaning.

Within the inseparable relation between language and culture, Yagiz (2013) stresses the importance of idiomatic expressions as a conventionalized and persuasive language that reflects culture in real life. The meanings of idioms imply the same cultural aspects which were previously mentioned within proverbs. They include relevant meanings and words to religious beliefs, customs, habits, sports, etc. Yan (2017) provides an account showing how the British idioms express these cultural aspects. For instance, he states that British people invented some types of sports like soccer, rugby, tennis and squash. These sports have a privileged position in their lives. Therefore, idioms, as a mirror of culture, reflect these sports. For example, British people like horse racing, so, a number of idioms include words that relate to this sport like " get into one's stride " and " straight from the horse's mouth ".

McCarthy and O'Dell (2017) are the authors of a book entitled 'English idioms in Use'. Following are examples of some British English idioms taken from this book :

- a. **Kill two birds with one stone.** This idiom refers to doing just one action that produces two useful results. One can say : If you study well for final examinations, you will kill two birds with one stone. You will both graduate with honors and have a good job.
- b. **In the blink of an eye.** This idiom means in an extremely short time. The following example shows its use : He drove fast and was able to reach the airport in the blink of an eye.
- c. **Pass the buck.** This idiom gives the meaning of blaming somebody else for failure in doing something, or refusing to accept the responsibility of failure in doing something. The following is an example: I can't trust my brother with this task. He is always trying to pass the buck.
- d. **Stop acting the fool/goat** (stop acting stupidly). The following is an example : Some people are looking at you. Please, stop acting the fool.
- e. **A sore point/ spot.** This idiom refers to a subject which someone would not talk about because it may cause anger or embarrassment to people. The use of this idiom appears in the following example : Try not to mention baldness while he is here, it is a sore spot to him.

It is needless to say demonstrating English idioms in such a manner, providing EFL learners with a chance to contemplate thoughts about them, and, above all, directing those students to use these idioms in their own examples could be counted among the implicit ways of teaching about culture that fosters EFL students' language skills.

#### 4. Conclusion

To enhance language skills, the reasons that show the impracticality of teaching the British culture irrespective of English language have been clarified in the introduction of this article. The alternative choice is to teach about the British

culture by designing EFL course items with apparent cultural significance. In addition to English proverbs and idioms, EFL syllabuses can be enriched with various language items that carry cultural significance.

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