

Integrating culture in teaching literary texts and cultural taboos: Foreign language students' perceptions and attitudes

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Abstract

Literature and culture intimately complement each other. Culture is a vehicle by which literary texts emanate values, social rules and beliefs. The connection between literature and culture must be tackled in foreign language classrooms for the ultimate objective of learning the target civilisation. The current research focuses primarily on the importance of bringing literature and culture into the classroom. The focal points of this paper are to shed lights on which cultures literature tutors ought to focus on, what kind of texts to expose students to, how best to lead teaching and which cultural themes need to be tackled. Classroom observational sessions are used for two academic years 2019–2020 and 2020–2021 with second-year students at Dr. Moulay Tahar University of Saida. The findings reveal that students do not favour texts that have cultural taboos. Thereby, using appropriate and interesting literature in the foreign language classroom would engage and motivate learners, as well as challenge their beliefs.

Keywords: Classroom, connection, culture, foreign language students, literature.

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1. Introduction

The necessity to combine culture and its teaching into a foreign language classroom is not a new work and numerous researchers have covered it. However, each study differs from the other depending on the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. Students need to be drowned in the target culture to be able to comprehend the assigned literary text, as well as appreciate the foreign culture. More importantly, when teaching literature, students will be accustomed to and exposed to a new civilisation, customs and traditions. Students of English at Dr. Moulay Tahar University of Saida are unaware of the relevance of the target culture and that sometimes it has some cultural taboos. The rationale objective that lies behind undertaking such a research paper is to show students various cultures via assigning different literary texts and driving them to compare the foreign culture with their L1 (mother culture). Therefore, this piece of work addresses the following research questions:

1. What kind of culture should be taught to EFL university students?
2. Do EFL students have cultural taboos?
3. Do learners see the foreign culture as a threat to their values?

1.1. Review of the literature

1.1.1. Why integrate culture into EFL classes?

It is remarkably known that literary texts are the prime authentic materials that are used in EFL classes. These texts tend to meet the students' language needs and requirements. Abbaspour, Nia and Zare (2012, p. 20) quoted Chastain (1988) who reported that culture must be taught along with language. Similarly, culture needs to be linked and instructed within the literary text and should not be taught inseparably, because it adds connotation to the text. Choudhury (2013, p. 22) quoted Tomalin who claimed that the profound need for English language and globalisation is two main factors that lead to teaching culture as a '*fifth skill*' after listening, speaking, reading and writing.

More importantly, using culture as an essential component in language teaching allows the learners to compare their culture with the target one. Sometimes they appreciate the foreign culture and find it indispensable and wish to have the same behaviour; other times students reject and disapprove foreign attitudes. Literature serves as a window to the native culture that shows EFL learners how native speakers ponder, utter and live. Although the novel or short story is an imaginary one, another world is created in literary texts which does not unveil only the author's culture but also discloses a cultural setting where characters interact and deeds take place (Tsai, 2012, p. 104). Additionally, readers would have virtual access to the native culture and depict the different ways characters view the world, thus leaning not only the language but also the historical, social, political and economic events that frame the cultural background.

Introducing the cultural aspect into the language classroom allows EFL students to negotiate, have a debate and argue when comparing both cultures. Therefore, the latter fosters the speaking skill and enhances the sense of conversation among learners. In this vein, Nguyen (2017, p. 146) quoted Robbin (2000), 'culture plays an essential role in language teaching with the goal of promoting communicative competence for learners. Language competence and culture are intimately and dynamically connected'. Additionally, comprehension has been emphasised in foreign language teaching as a prime instrument of knowing human social relationships and understanding the 'home culture' (Kitao, 1991, p. 285).

Culture needs to be the central part of language instruction as it makes students communicate to the fullest (p. 146). Lado (1964) explained that when teaching culture, students would not only know about others but would also enhance their understanding of their culture (cited in Nguyen, 2017, p. 146). Hence, culture has to be consolidated and instructed in EFL classes as it enables learners primarily to speak and write mainly when they are asked to scrutinise a literary text. Nevertheless, when culture and literature are intricately combined, students will be aware of social variables, such

as age, sex, social class and the setting, which influence the ways in which people utter and behave (Thanasoulas, 2001). For instance, when introducing the 'Flappers' in 'The Great Gatsby' by 'Scott Fitzgerald', students become aware of the flappers' attitudes, why they used to behave and dress so and the different social classes and accept the differences. Thus, understanding the target culture is part of understanding the assigned text.

2. Methods and materials

2.1. Aims and population

The main purpose of this piece of work is to show the relevance of intertwining culture within the EFL class. It is worth noting that foreign language learners are neither exposed to the target culture in middle school nor secondary school. Foreign culture is brought into light until university entrance; so, it is the role of the tutor to cover this subject matter and select suitable literary texts for his/her students that have deep cultural meanings. The participants are second-year students at Dr. Moulay Tahar University of Saida. In 2019–2020, the teacher-researcher experienced teaching the target culture and integrated it as a main component for instructing literary texts with 2 groups (25 learners in each group) and in 2020–2021 with 5 groups (each group comprising 20 learners).

2.2. Research instrument

The research tool adopted for this scientific work is exploratory and is based on a personal ethnographic classroom observational session. For the overarching objective of obtaining reliable, valid and rich data, the researcher taught culture with literary texts for 2 academic years to analyse qualitatively and quantitatively both second-year students who have different knowledge backgrounds, age and sex, and how are they are going to perceive foreign societies.

2.3. Observation

2.3.1. The experience of teaching culture in the EFL classroom

Reading intensively is not the same as reading extensively; reading a particular text in the classroom will have an impact on the way in which the text is read since it necessitates a particular comprehension depending on the lecture's requirements. To put it differently, it depends on what the teacher tends to transmit. The classroom represents a cultural setting in itself, since students come from different places and have varied cultural perspectives and various ways of understanding their surroundings (Matos, 2011, p. 7). Similarly, at Dr. Moulay Tahar University of Saida, students have different backgrounds; some are already teachers (some are old compared to the rest of the students), others come from different parts of Algeria; hence, they have a different understandings.

When introducing '30 Days Carrying My Wife' to second-year students at Dr. Moulay Tahar University of Saida, some participants, particularly those who are in their 40s (five students), seemed anxious and could not participate and collaborate as usual, whereas young students enjoyed the story and immensely interacted because it is romantic and a social short story. They debated and compared the target culture with their own, stating that the Algerian husband cannot accept to carry his wife because when a couple decides on divorce, they just divorce and the children pay the price.

Furthermore, the story does not have any cultural taboos except when the protagonist asked her husband to carry her from the living room to the bedroom because she was moribund and her man wanted to divorce her because he lost his heart to another woman. So, the husband accepted the agreement because it was for about 1 month. The wife asked for holding her for 1 month because she knew that she would die and she has a son who had exams and she did not want her child to see a broken marriage during the school examination. Hence, the fact that the husband carried his wife and then felt some intimacy, some students felt apprehensive because they did not interact in the

classroom as usual and a sense of anxiousness was remarkably noticed on their faces. As a consequence, EFL students have some cultural taboos towards the target culture.

Another example of experiencing teaching culture within a literary text is when introducing '*Things Fall Apart*' by 'Chinua Achebe', which is assigned in the classroom. Students read the designated part inside the classroom. Then, we read it together and explained some terms and expressions. As for tackling the African culture, students become aware of '*the Igbo culture*', the Nigerian culture during colonialism and their traditions.

First, it seemed weird for the EFL learners that Okonkwo had several wives and numerous children and liked the way Achebe described the protagonist as a huge man with bushy eyebrows. Furthermore, students also became aware of the characteristics of the '*African Leader*' who lived with the tribes and controlled all his areas. Most importantly, introducing the African culture helped students know that Africans were already civilised and always encouraged learning to become strong before the whites' invasion.

In brief, students liked to know more about the Igbo tribes and their attitudes towards each other. They felt the sense of belonging to 'Africa' and knew that 'Black Africa' had its civilisation. Students enjoyed '*Things Fall Apart*' because they are from the same continent, and more importantly, the story did not contain taboos as the target culture. So, they appreciated what they studied.

Another social factor that was elaborated in the classroom is a young woman fleeing home. The assigned text was '*Eveline*' by 'James Joyce'. First and foremost, second-year students relished the short story which was about a young lady who wanted to escape with her lover. The protagonist wanted to flee because of the oppression that she felt. Students did not feel odd as the attitude happens frequently in Algeria. Moreover, they provided several instances about different people who departed home. Hence, learners found that even 'Eveline' who was from Dublin and who came from a different culture had the same hurdles and problems that anybody from any part of the world can have. Most importantly, they reported that 'Eveline' could not escape from her realm due to the sense of assuming responsibility and because her mother asked her to take good care of her brother and father.

Similarly, students added that some teenagers elope as 'Eveline' wanted to do because they are eager for freedom and free from family problems and living under oppression. They stated that all these life problems drive toddlers and mainly girls to flee. They added that Algeria has greatly witnessed this behaviour recently. Consequently, the term '*elope*' drove the students into a classroom discussion and they started comparing the foreign culture with the mother culture.

'*Woman at Point Zero*' by 'Nawel Saadaoui' is regarded as part of African literature in which the writer tackled prostitution in Egypt, as well as in the Arab world. When the researcher was still a learner at Djilali Liabes University of Sidi Bel Abbes, the tutor selected this novel to be discussed in the classroom. Not all the book's chapters are analysed by the students, as well as the teacher, because of the novel's delicacy. The piece of literature was about an intelligent girl who is exceedingly successful in her school but suffers from poverty and then the death of her parents. The protagonist found herself married to an old man who has a facial deformity and abuses her.

'Firdus' is the main character who finds herself in the street practising prostitution at a cheap price to gather money for purchasing books. The events are not discussed in the classroom because of social taboos that are a real impediment. The student found that the novel has taboos because she read it extensively and discovered that the prime themes discuss sexuality in the Arab world. The students at that time could not interact and participate as usual. The teacher did not even try to cross the borders with the students and could not analyse the main events, because he was frightened of the students' reaction which could encompass anxiety, nervousness or timidity.

3. Discussion

Assigning short stories to EFL students has become an easy activity for the students as they show unwillingness and demotivation towards reading novels. Reading becomes a tedious and thorny task for EFL learners. On the other hand, short stories that have linkages with family, love and relationships would trigger the students' emotions and stimulate their attention. First and foremost, students show great importance in reading shorter stories because they are:

- Easy to understand;
- The language is clear and coherent compared to archaic language;
- Easy to analyse characters;
- Familiar cultural concepts.

Students became motivated as the teacher combined the native culture with the mother one. Second-year students interacted positively in the classroom and a debate was created amid them about different topics, such as divorce, wherein the way in which foreigners ask for separation is completely different from the one in the Arab society. Raising the issue of fleeing (taking the instance of 'Eveline') home immersed the students into a deep conversation in which they discussed the various factors that lead Arab teenagers to elope. Nevertheless, when tackling '30 Days Carrying My Wife', the teacher-researcher noticed that young students participated and enjoyed conversing about romance, betrayal and how the husband treated his wife, except for elder students (participants who were in their 40s) who ceased to interact and kept listening to the different opinions. The latter created a taboo but the tutor kept conducting the foreign culture as the sweeping majority were merged into the session.

Authors use their pens to write in English to transmit the message to different readers. The audience could be an Arab society, Europeans, Asians or Africans; as Chinua Achebe used his pen to write about his Nigerian community to unveil the different cultural, educational and political aspects, i.e., he showed the African civilisation. Chinua Achebe showed it through the protagonist 'Okonkwo' how strong the African man is who rises from zero to hero: 'He was talking about Okonkwo, who had risen so suddenly from poverty and misfortune to be one of the lords of the clan' (Achebe, 1994, p. 29). Okonkwo was an example of a hard worker who refused failure and had firm control of his wives and children.

The writer introduces the 'Igbo society' which is a sample that represents 'Dark Africa' and several African names are revealed for the readers, such as *Unoka, Osugo, Nwoye, Ojiugo* etc. 'Black Africa' is well depicted in Achebe's story as it is also well described in 'Heart of Darkness' by 'Joseph Conrad', albeit the African culture is completely different from those of the Algerian, Moroccan, Tunisian and the Egyptian ones. People from the centre of the 'Dark Continent' live in tribes and clans ruled by chiefs, which is distinctive from the north of Africa. In this regard,

Achebe's primary purpose of writing the novel is because he wants to educate his readers about the value of his culture as an African. Things Fall Apart provides readers with an insight of Igbo society right before the white missionaries' invasion on their land. The invasion of the colonising force threatens to change almost every aspect of Igbo society; from religion, traditional gender roles and relations, family structure to trade. (Kenalemang, 2013, p. 4)

Similarly, Scott Fitzgerald wrote 'The Great Gatsby' to portray a holistic picture of how Americans lived in the 20s. As an audience, we shall notice how Americans perceived the 'American Dream' and how EFL readers view the 'Flappers' and 'The Roaring Twenties', and how women behaved, uttered, laughed and dressed at that time. John Steinbeck on the other hand addressed 'The Grapes of Wrath' which showed how poorly the Americans lived after 'The Great Depression' in the 30s. Therefore, two different books from two different decades hold a wide range of information and details regarding the 20s and the 30s in which the audience would have a profound view of what happened and how people lived during these decades.

Literary texts play an eminent role in the EFL classroom by which various cultures, civilisations and beliefs are undertaken. Nevertheless, it is the tutor's role to select an appropriate text that meets his/her students' requirements and which culture s/he intends to reveal and for what aim. All the mentioned instances allowed us to drown in the target culture and compare it with L1 culture. To put it differently, literature is loaded with cultural perceptions, interpretations, languages and social behaviour, i.e., dealing with culture in an EFL class enables the students to discover different dialects, thoughts and societies all over the world and throughout time.

To sum up, integrating culture as a predominant part of the EFL classroom creates debate and negotiation among the participants. Each culture is distinguished from the other which would stimulate a hot conversation in the classroom, particularly when making a comparison between L1 and L2 cultures. For example, asking questions to each other and receiving feedback from peers are extremely necessary in the classroom wherein students express their thoughts and beliefs openly. This happens when the text is selective, purposeful and is suitable for their age. These text's features would trigger their attention and, therefore, develop the students' communicative competence.

'*Woman at Point Zero*' is full of taboos for which the teacher could not deal with all the important details and events, taking into consideration the students' reaction. This text was studied when the researcher was still a student and she read it to be able to analyse the work by the end of the semester (examination). After reading, she realised that the book could not be scrutinised as the other literary texts in the classroom because of certain social inhibitions that were not accepted by the students. This piece of literature is viewed as a sensitive topic by the tutor, as well as learners, at Djilali Liabes University of Sidi Bel Abbes.

Dealing with sexuality in EFL classrooms cannot be appreciated as we live in a conservative Arab realm. Sexuality is a real hinder for both students and teachers, albeit rape and prostitution are rampant worldwide and are discussed outside by people feeling no timidity. Nonetheless, tackling fragile topics in the literature inside the classroom are viewed as taboos that cause embarrassment and shyness. Hence, students may well disapprove the entire novel. Thus, the teacher chose to speak about how much the protagonist suffered in her life, her love for reading and how she gained respect for herself at the end of the novel.

4. Pedagogical implications

Some students feel a certain taboo because of the age; when s/he is older than the other participants, s/he would feel a particular impediment. Thus, the factor of age plays a relevant aspect when teaching authentic material. Nonetheless, any tutor has to keep the classroom safe, so that learners will not suffer from any obstacle such as finding a threshold that disables the student from interaction or thinking freely. Teaching culture entails being open-minded on both sides: the tutors and the learners. It necessitates a safe place so that free reflection on the text would be evoked.

When introducing a literary text that meets the students' needs, is not beyond their cognitive level and when the tackled culture is not vulgar, they will feel safe in the classroom; thus, they can express their thoughts freely. Accordingly, it is the role of the teacher to recognise the students' anxiousness when dealing with literary taboos, s/he needs to demystify the cultural perspectives and has to bring texts that are approximately close to the mother culture for the overarching purpose of not making the participants feel anxious or timid and, therefore, creates a cultural threshold or a taboo.

Integrating culture as a major part of teaching a foreign language fosters communicative competence, mainly when students start having a debate, argue, share knowledge, become autonomous and prompt their motivation. Similarly, Nguyen (2017, p. 147) quoted (Marczak, 2010), 'The intercultural communicative competence approach expects learners to develop their communicative skills which allow them to engage in interaction beyond the contexts of their own culture and the target language culture'. Likewise, Tevdovska (2016, p. 168) opined that the selected

text ought to introduce ideas and thoughts which are interesting and convenient for students and which would evoke beneficial discussion.

It is via literature that EFL students love learning the target community and investigate their values and attitudes without travelling. Even though teaching culture is not part of the curriculum at Saida University and there are no specific guidelines for tackling culture, a great emphasis is put by EFL tutors on integrating it as a prominent subject matter that facilitates students' understanding. It is worth mentioning that dealing explicitly with the foreign culture is through literary texts wherein students are provided with knowledge on major and diverse cultural issues on American and British communities, thus comparing both cultures with their own (Nunn & Sivasubramaniam, 2011, p. 87).

Blending culture within a literature is exceedingly crucial in which students will critically debate as revealed in classroom observational sessions, but it is also important to shed light on the type of selected text. Some cultural themes cannot be explored since we share the same religion and the same culture; therefore, as teachers and learners, we cannot cross the boundaries. Teaching a foreign culture that has no taboos will be fruitful and beneficial for EFL students as they enjoy, discuss, listen to each other and infer. In brief, EFL learners might not see the target culture as a threat to their values which answers the first and the third research questions. University students accept the foreign culture and appreciate it, particularly when it is appropriate and close to their mother culture. They feel uncomfortable and unsafe in the classroom when the text has some cultural and social taboos which answer the second research question.

Nasirahmadia, Madarsarab and Aghdamc (2014, p. 1327) quoted Collie and Slater (1990) who summed up several criteria for selecting a suitable literary text for EFL classroom as follows:

- The language teacher ought to take into account the learners' needs, motivation, interests, cultural background and, of course, their level.
- The text should be meaningful and amusing to raise an airtight effect on the learners' linguistic knowledge.
- A selective literary text immerses the students and arouses their interests.
- Books should be associated with real-life experiences, emotions and dreams.
- The language of the literary work should be simple which could facilitate understanding.

5. Conclusion

The findings reveal that students would feel reluctant and unsafe towards inappropriate texts that have some cultural impediments. They interact and participate in the classroom when the piece of literature is interesting and close to their mother culture. Integrating the foreign culture as a prime component in the EFL context provides learners in different academic settings the opportunity to compare the target culture with L1 culture (similarities and differences). They also develop the knack for 'cultural awareness'. It is also essential to provide texts which do not have cultural taboos as we are an Arab community. Thus, literature holds various cultures and opens the doors to different societies.

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